1. CONTINUING ISSUES IN DOCTORAL STUDY

Having acknowledged the complex and sophisticated nature of learning at the level of the doctorate, a number of issues concerning the relevance, appropriateness, quality and diversity of doctoral study programs remain. What should be made of the contemporary nature of research – and of knowledge production – in reconceptualising the notion of doctoral study?

1.1. The Nature of the Award

These questions address the need, more pressing than ever before, for reconceptualising doctoral study programs and the doctoral award itself. How can institutions support doctoral programs that are closely attuned to the intellectual and professional communities that, in addition to the students themselves, have a stake in their outcomes? The market demand for credentials has to be acknowledged, but to date the doctorate signifies a wide range of academic achievements with an assumed equivalence of standards. The third wave of the Bologna Process has raised the spectre that this assumption is not robust. The student market increasingly requires doctoral awards that can be articulated across different systems and countries. As a result, national systems must demonstrate the equivalence of their doctoral awards with those of other countries. Once European Union countries have reached agreement through benchmarking processes, it will be difficult to market doctoral awards that are not demonstrably equivalent, or do not have the same cache as those offered elsewhere.

Higher education systems are now faced with some difficult questions and associated challenges. Should a doctorate represent one kind of intellectual achievement or different kinds of intellectual achievement? Should there be reliable standards that the title ‘doctor’ represents? If so, how might standards be determined and different kinds of awards distinguished? How can, or should, institutions support the largely tacit nature of learning at the level of the research doctorate? Who should accept responsibility for improving the doctoral experience and making it more relevant: individual students; supervisors, departments, graduate schools, universities or governments? These are complex questions for which there are no simple answers; accordingly they are the subject of this final chapter.

1.2. Satisfaction and Relevance

A study by Harman (2002) found that only 56% of Australian PhD students were satisfied with their experience of research supervision, a finding that does not
reflect well on attempts over two decades by governments, systems and institutions to improve the quality of the doctoral experience. Harman argues that those who were satisfied were more likely to be working in collective research cooperatives in applied science fields. Harman’s findings are a worthy pointer to the satisfaction among collective, applied fields of science with established, normative research cultures. However, the findings also point to considerable dissatisfaction with research supervision outside this narrow definition, which of course includes research in the more individualistic fields of the humanities and social sciences. Indeed there are implications for transdisciplinary and applied research fields to say nothing of the applied professions – all areas whose profile and importance to the community generally is increasing, as many researchers have observed.

On the one hand, there is currently a need to design doctoral study programs with the needs of a broader range of stakeholders, including career professionals, industry, commerce, community groups and government in mind. This extended broader group of stakeholders has particular expectations about the skills and capacities that study programs should foster in graduates. On the other hand, there is the desire of governments to make doctoral study relevant, effective and cost efficient. Efficiencies are often achieved by concentrating the research enterprise into key areas and centres where doctoral students are co-located in teams mimicking those of the natural sciences. Whether these enclaves fostering doctoral research are improving completion rates and times in non-science fields is yet to be demonstrated, however. In this context we have seen how the doctoral experience is quite naturally a longer process, for epistemological reasons, in individualistic fields of study. Should candidature times in these fields be limited? If scholarships and stipends for doctoral study are constrained by the norms in science, as they are in some national systems, the implications for the maintenance of standards will inevitably come into question.

To begin to address these questions, the nature and purposes of contemporary doctoral study need to be clarified. It is also necessary to draw together some features of doctoral study that do or should transcend national boundaries, and to speculate a little on where developments seem to be heading.

1.3. Social Settings for Learning

Henkel (2000) has identified a central issue. It concerns whether it is possible or indeed desirable to apply to other disciplines those opportunities for learning disciplinary features, explicit and inexplicit, that have been found to prevail relatively successfully in the natural sciences. In the preceding chapters, we have noted the marked differentiation in disciplinary values, aspirations and socialising opportunities in which doctoral students are immersed. Particularly striking is the growing awareness among doctoral students of the need to acquire a certain disciplinary savvy whose social and epistemological elements are highly specific to their specialisms. Yet Becher and Trowler (2001: 21) observe how postgraduate education, along with other areas of academic endeavour, have largely been homogenised to suit managerial imperatives: