The role of the Doctor of Business Administration (DBA) in Australia in enhancing career capital, professional and lifelong learning

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ABSTRACT: *This paper explores individuals' motivations and goals for undertaking a Doctor in Business Administration (DBA) and the skills, competencies and reflective practices developed during the Australian DBA course of study by the candidates.*

Twenty-seven current DBA alumni and candidates from four Australian universities participated in the research. Candidates were in different stages of the DBA program and represented different genders, age ranges and business disciplines.

Findings suggest the DBA acts as not only as a pathway to career enhancement but is an important element of professional development and identity, personal fulfilment and lifelong learning. The research also establishes that human, social and career capital exert an influence on the participants' lifelong learning trajectories.

INTRODUCTION

Traditionally, the doctoral journey has been associated not only with preparation for an academic career but also with adoption of a new role and professional and/or personal identity (Bourner, Bowden, & Laing, 2001; Hockey, 2004; Larkin, 2009). However, as candidates in professional doctorates, such as a Doctor of Business Administration (DBA), are, most often, already mid-career professionals, their emerging identities relate more to their roles as *researching professionals* within the world of business or the professions rather than in the more traditional career path as *professional researchers* in academe (Fenge, 2009; Wellington & Sykes, 2006). Their career and lifelong learning trajectories are thus worth exploring.

Emerging research on the DBA has established its relationship to increased career capital. For instance, Scaringella and Vidal (2011) in their study with the DBA alumni of one French graduate school found satisfaction with the program was related to the return on investment in terms of greater earning power. However, other factors such as peers' recognition, new job finding and job efficiency could not be established as significant. Wellington and Sykes (2006) found a clear link between

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achieving a DBA and career progression. They also found alumni reported a different approach to their work as a result of their studies; more akin to professional development or lifelong learning. This is an area less explored in the scholarship on doctoral studies and to which we turn our attention in this paper.

Professional and lifelong learning are central to the broader higher education discourse and can be described as learning which may continue across the career or lifetime of an individual and leads to the renewal of knowledge, skills and attitudes in relation to changing conditions of all aspects of modern life with the end objective of enhanced professional practice and/or self-fulfilment (Shacham & Od-Cohen, 2009). It includes both formal and informal learning opportunities and embraces employability in addition to active citizenship, social inclusion, and self-actualisation (Shacham & Od-Cohn, 2009).

This paper first sets the context of the professional doctorate and its potential role in professional and lifelong learning. It then overviews theoretical perspectives offering insight into doctoral learning trajectories, outlines the methodology of the study reported here and analyses findings. Finally, the authors offer suggestions for further research.

The Professional Doctorate Context, Universities and Professional and Lifelong Learning

Professional doctorate programs may be seen as a part of the formal aspect of professional or lifelong learning. In this paper the focus is on the Doctor of Business Administration (DBA), however we acknowledge there exists worldwide a range of professional doctoral programs such as the EdD, DEng and DPsych designed to offer practitioner-oriented doctoral study and qualifications. While the DBA was initially developed in the USA in the 1920s, there are now around 250 DBA programs offered worldwide (Graf, 2014). Today Australia has 21 DBA programs with over 1,000 students (Wallace et al., 2015) and is arguably, the largest professional doctorate program in the country. In Australia the research-based professional doctorate includes coursework, typically at the start of the program with a two-thirds or more thesis component. In Australia, the DBA is now regarded as a level 10 qualification under the Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF) and is thus deemed equivalent to a PhD (Australian Qualifications Framework Council, 2013).

The emphasis for professional doctorates, including the DBA, is 'professional practice' and we suggest the skills and competencies the DBA develops in its candidates relate to a critical understanding in an area of learning (often discipline based), development of specialised research skills and reflexivity and contribution to professional practice. We also acknowledge that attaining a DBA or any other higher education qualification is a formal component in the rich tapestry of professional development and lifelong learning. This concept is elaborated below.

There is emerging literature indicating an emphasis in post-graduate studies on lifelong learning may be shaping the way the university sector views the concept of traditional development of professionals. Shaw and Green (1999) distinguished between professional development and lifelong learning. Lifelong learning, they emphasised involved both the process and product of learning and described as

> …continuity throughout life, of broader knowledge and intellectual skills as well as vocational skills, on ownership by the learner (rather than just the employer) through personal fulfilment and on a wider set of social and economic benefits beyond merely those of employment (Shaw & Green, 1999, p. 1).

Their research established that mature, experienced professionals wanted to combine the goal to enhance their existing qualifications with work based activities or solutions to problems. Therefore, whilst the pursuit of doctoral level studies, including the DBA, is most often seen as a pathway to career enhancement, we postulate these doctoral studies can also be an element in professional development and lifelong learning. Furthermore, our previous research has discerned some differences between DBA and PhD candidates in the Australian context. Australian DBA candidates tend to be older, predominantly male and possess a much wider range of life and work experiences (Wallace et al., 2015). As will be seen below, this affords them greater social, human and career capital. They are also in all senses of the word, adult learners (after Knowles, Holton, Elwood, & Swanson, 1998) as they are highly motivated to learn, their learning has been self-initiated and is self-directed (with a supervisor as guide), they choose to research their own or others' workplace issues, relating their research to their own experiences and seek practice-based outcomes from their research.

THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES

There are a number of theoretical perspectives through which we attempt to understand the phenomena of career and professional development and lifelong learning in relation to professional doctoral students, including social, human and career capital, and motivation theory. Although there is considerable research on the contributing factors and benefits of lifelong learning there is less on the impact of human, social and career capital in explaining or predicting participation in lifelong learning (Knipprath & De Rick, 2015) and even less in the professional doctoral setting. Professional doctorates have tended to be defined in terms of structure rather than the centrality of the candidate in terms of how their professional experience, current activities and future professional development define or influence their participation in and practice of lifelong learning both during and after the doctoral program (Stephenson, Malloch & Cairns, 2006).

Social, human and career capital

The concept of social capital is used to describe the resources an individual has access to by virtue of his or her inclusion in mutually supportive and influential networks, social connections and class membership (Bourdieu, 1986). Human capital refers to the knowledge and skills acquired by an individual through schooling, training, higher education and experience, which are instrumental in shaping their learning trajectory (Bourdieu, 1986). The relationship between social capital and lifelong learning is complex (Knipprath & De Rick, 2015) and the extent to which social capital impacts on educational participation and the acquisition of human capital may evolve over the lifetime of an individual. Thus, it is not always apparent whether the acquisition of social capital predicts participation in lifelong learning or whether social capital emerges as a result of lifelong learning.

Agency factors such as self-efficacy, skills, preferences and abilities are typically important variables in an individual's inclination to lifelong learning. Simply put, in sociology agency refers to the capacity of a person to act or engage with social structures and make decisions. According to Shacham and Od-Cohen (2009) successful lifelong learning depends on the individual's motivation and capacity to engage in self-directed learning. Thus, metacognition — the knowledge or awareness an individual

has of his/her thought processes and learning styles, and how they regulate those processes for more effective learning throughout their lives, is an essential first step in developing lifelong learning.

Knipprath & De Rick (2015) assert human capital, labour market position and other individual characteristics are more important predictors of lifelong learning than social capital. Whilst their research did not include doctoral level students, who are typically older and assumed to have considerable social and human capital, their research suggests those who already have significant human capital (skills and knowledge) are likely seek to increase their human capital through lifelong learning. Building on theories of social and human capital, Duberley and Cohen (2010) propose a concept of career capital, where social and human capital support career advancement, which becomes a form of capital in itself. In their model, career capital is viewed as an agentic position whereby individuals are motivated by self-interest to develop the forms of career capital which offer them the best return on their investment. Of interest to the authors is Duberley and Cohen's (2010) concept of domestic capital, whereby family life and the domestic sphere act as enabling or disenabling forces in relation to career capital and, we posit, instrumental to the lifelong learning trajectories of doctoral candidates.

Motivation, doctoral students and lifelong learning

Consistent with the theory of andragogy (Knowles et al., 1998) adult learners are usually intrinsically motivated to learn and their learning is derived from an inner need to develop. Yet, they may also be goal oriented and seeking tangible outcomes simultaneously (Shachum & Od Cohen, 2009). Guerin, Jayatilakab and Ranasingheb (2014) suggest five factors motivating individuals to undertake doctoral studies and all are pertinent to lifelong learning. Family, friends and peers offer encouragement, emotional and practical support (social capital). Commitment to learning for its own sake, interest in research and the personal affirmation of achievement and enhanced credibility are intrinsic factors (human capital). The mentoring of lecturers or significant professionals are also factors that motivate (social capital). Previous research or other positive learning experiences instil confidence in taking the next learning step (human capital). Finally, for some, career enhancement or progression is a strong factor (career capital).

Thorne (2001) suggests four forms of motivation in relation to doctoral studies. These depend on a person's life/career/personal/developmental stages in life. *Extrinsic Professional Initiation* relates to employability in current work or in early career stages. *Extrinsic Professional Continuation* relates to career development while *Extrinsic Professional Alteration* relates to preparation for career changes. *Intrinsic Personal/Professional Affirmation* relates to enhanced credibility and learning for its own sake as well as identity enhancement or forming of a new learning identity. Wellington and Sikes (2006) identified motivations including a 'need' for theory and deeper insight into their professional practice. They further distinguished between those at the start of their careers viewing the professional doctorate as a catalyst to further career development, and those candidates who were well established in their careers and who perceived the doctorate as 'professional continuation' which or may not lead to career development or promotion.

Callary, Werthner & Trudel (2012) observe that the doctoral experience is a period of considerable development and learning both professionally and personally and support Jarvis's (2006) position that the doctoral experience is a process of lifelong learning typified by learning, changing and reflecting. Callary et al., (2012) underscore the role of identity in learning decisions, pointing out mid-life or mid-career learning is often a time of identity change and the connections between various roles or identities (for example, doctoral candidate, employee, spouse and so on) and specific experiences will influence an individual's learning trajectory.

Learning beyond the DBA

The literature is clear on the benefits of undertaking doctoral studies from both professional and personal learning perspectives, for example developing higher order thinking and research skills, addressing a work issue or achieving a personal goal (Elsey 2007; Guerin et al., 2014). Such outcomes support or strengthen a candidate's social, human and career capital. One skill appearing to both motivate adult learners and serve them well in terms of lifelong learning is reflective practice. Reflexivity involves stepping back from an experience and evaluating or analysing not only the factual but the emotive content of the experience. It can also involve critical thinking and questioning of dominant paradigms or accepted practices (see Rushton & Suter, 2012) and theoretical perspectives on

reflective practice including Kolb (1984) and Carr (1995). In the experience of the authors, all of whom have supervised or engaged with DBA candidates, a workplace problem is typically a key motivation and it is through the application of theoretical perspectives and research methods they can problematise, reflect on and present possible solutions. Further development of a critical refection mindset becomes part of the portfolio of professional and lifelong learning skills.

METHODS

The research was conducted between March 2013 and September 2014. The overall aim of the research was to gather primary qualitative data from DBA candidates, supervisors and university program directors in up to eight Australian universities to inform and test a conceptual model for assessing the socialisation process for DBA candidates. The project was led by Southern Cross University, one of the largest providers of the DBA in Australia and three partner universities; University of Canberra, University of Western Sydney and Deakin University, who also deliver DBA programs. The results reported here are from the initial qualitative phase, in which we interviewed 27 candidates and recent alumni.

Research undertaken in 2003 (Sarros, Willis, & Hardie, 2004) identified four categories of higher education institution in the Australian DBA space (the Group of Eight, University of Technology, Second Tier, and Regional). This research drew on a small sample from each tier, capitalizing on existing connections within the Project Team and the Reference Group. The universities had a significant number of DBA candidates and access to candidates was assured by their DBA Directors/Directors of Research Training who had responded positively to initial qualitative data gathering and when asked for further involvement in the project. Candidates and recent alumni were invited to participate in the research resulting in twenty-seven respondents. Agreement for access was sought from universities through the Heads of Business Schools. All participants were volunteers; however, we did aim as much as practicable for a spread of candidates from early to late candidature/graduation. The research had Southern Cross University Ethics Committee approval.

Candidates were asked a range of questions pertaining to their perceptions of the purpose of the DBA, their motivations for undertaking a DBA and the impact of the DBA on their learning trajectories.

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Questions also related to the impact of their studies on their professional learning. The questions were generated for this specific research project but drew from Gardner's (2008) DBA framework which has the candidate's socialisation process at its centre. His three step process from admission, integration to graduate represents progressional phases toward acquiring the resources needed for membership to the DBA graduate community (Gardner 2008). The design of the questions also drew on Scot, Brown, Lunt & Thorne's (2004) four modes of knowledge for the Professional Doctorate (disciplinary, technical, dispositional/transdisciplinary and critical knowledge). The following specific questions were asked of each candidate interviewed.

1. Why did you enrol in your DBA course?

2. How did your previous experience prepare you for your DBA research?

3. What is the purpose of your research in terms of the outcomes you are seeking?

4. What were you expecting from your DBA course when you enrolled?

5. Have your expectations been met or not?

6. What were you expecting from your supervisor/supervisory panel when you enrolled?

7. What has your experience actually been?

8. How were you introduced to your DBA course by the University?

9. What types of relationships have you found important since you started your research?

10. How has undertaking your research changed your perception of your DBA?

11. How would you describe your research process and has it changed?

12. Bearing in mind what we have discussed, what kinds of things have been the most helpful or unhelpful during your DBA research and what would you change if you could?

The interviews were transcribed and content analysed through coding by two raters. Content areas pertinent to this paper were current occupation, previous educational experiences, motivation to enrol,

personal development and ongoing impact of the learning. In this paper we report on candidates'

responses in order to elucidate their individual motivations and goals associated with undertaking the

DBA. We also explored the skills developed during the course of studies by the candidates and

articulate how this learning contributed to their life trajectories. Findings were analysed through a lens

of motivation theory (see Schunk & Zimmerman, 2012), social capital theory and concepts of lifelong

learning.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Candidate profile

All candidates had an MBA or equivalent degree accompanied by undergraduate degrees and

considerable professional experience. Of the twenty-seven candidates, more than half were between 50

and 65 years of age and nineteen were male. As DBA programs are preponderantly full-fee paying

(approximately AUD50-60,000 per course), seniority would also be a factor in ability to pay full fees.

In addition, there is no mandatory retirement age in Australia and, in contrast to the early retirement

aspirations of many Australians in the 1990s, many are now working longer or are expected by

government to participate in the workforce into, at least their late 60s (Commonwealth of Australia,

2015). Lifelong learning, career continuation or renewal are now very much to the fore of thinking in

Australia.

Motivations for undertaking the DBA and goals

Table 1 has utilised Thorne's (2001) typology to analyse the range of motivations for undertaking a

DBA through a content analysis of direct quotes from participants. It should be noted the categories

are not mutually exclusive; some candidates expressed a number of reasons for undertaking their

doctoral studies.

Insert Table 1 here

No responses fitted the *Extrinsic Career Initiation* category in Thorne's (2001) typology. This is not

surprising as the candidates and alumni interviewed were mature, generally mid-career professionals.

Those whose responses fitted the first category of *Intrinsic Personal and Professional Affirmation* tended to be more senior in their current roles while those whose responses fitted the *Extrinsic Career Continuation* were generally younger and more focussed on a career trajectory. Professional development was also cited as both a motivator and an outcome that may include career progression in the same field or horizontal rather than vertical career moves. There was no pattern of age, profession or seniority in relation to responses which may be regarded as indicating *Extrinsic Career Alteration.* In fact, some participants discussed embarking on another career post-retirement from their current occupation.

Thus, a candidate may have several motivations to enter the DBA and, as will be seen below, the pursuit of lifelong learning by DBA candidates can be seen to satisfy both their intrinsic and extrinsic motivations. Candidates were seen to have an internal locus of control, high tolerance of ambiguity and great perseverance in the face of frustration:

> You have to be incredibly self-motivating. You have to get out of bed in the morning and go
> to your study and sit there for 12 hours and work (Male, professional, mid-career)

Learning and development with impact during and beyond the DBA

Table 2 offers a snapshot of the skills and personal development reported by participants as occurring during candidature and where their doctoral studies are situated in their learning trajectories. Development included academic skills (for example, mastering an extant body of knowledge and research methods), thinking and personal development (for example, critical analysis and reflection) and lifelong learning (for example, opening up other learning opportunities, self-realisation and self-actualisation).

Insert Table 2 here

Some candidates described specific professional projects or changes to their work responsibilities which they attributed to their enrolment in a DBA, and enhanced abilities for productive and critical reflection and analysis. Thus, the impact of a professional doctorate on their professional life involves

solving an existing 'burning' problem and cognitive and affective growth. We surmise this may be especially so for those pursuing a professional doctorate requiring problematizing and reflecting on practical and professional experiences.

As can be seen in Tables 1 and 2, the process of undertaking the doctorate was also seen to offer socialisation into the genre of the academy and its attendant emphasis on academic rigour. Doctoral studies thus introduced the candidates to critical and reflexive thinking and offered the means to participate in the production of knowledge rather than simply espousing the received knowledge of others. In terms of career and human capital, participants viewed their studies as offering them not only career affirmation or progression but also new identities in terms of enhanced credibility, authority and skills to analyse the world in different ways (social capital).

In addition to development of human, social and career capital, a number of alumni and candidates discussed the support of spouses or partners (domestic capital), for instance:

> The only reason I got it completed was that at the start of 2012 my wife and I sat down and said, "This is the year we're going to call Team Doctorate". And we designed every week, every month with the doctorate in mind. The most important thing is to have a partner. I would have risked failure if I hadn't had my wife who made sure I got over the line. (Male, CEO).

As is seen in Table 2, some candidates also reported what may be regarded as transformative experiences enabling them to examine their workplace and own realities in different ways. The 'product' of the thesis was seen as tangible evidence of personal and cognitive growth; a starting rather than end point.

CONCLUSION

There are limitations to this study relating to the number of candidates interviewed. All were volunteers and so as successful alumni or current candidates with high levels of self-efficacy may have self-selected; had we interviewed those who had left the DBA program early or who were struggling

with their studies we may have received different responses. Self-reports are also a limitation and triangulation with interviewees' peers, families or managers may have garnered different information.

These limitations indicate that further research on the professional and lifelong learning trajectories of mature adults undertaking high level formal education is warranted. A broader survey of DBA or professional doctorate alumni in Australia or across a range of countries could elicit further information. In addition, qualitative research on life narratives regarding the role of formal and informal learning in a lifetime could offer nuanced and rich information regarding how DBA graduates apply their learning after completing their study. This may include the application of knowledge and research skills in professional contexts, evidence of personal growth and the extent to which the DBA process 'kick started' further professional or personal learning opportunities. Longitudinal research into the impact on workplaces, civil society and in personal lives of the doctoral research would also be enlightening.

This research, however, has made a start on examining the role formal doctoral learning with a practical intent and its place within individuals' learning trajectories. The research illustrates the DBA acts not only as a pathway to career enhancement and personal fulfilment but as an important element in the rich pattern of professional and lifelong learning. By starting, engaging in and completing the DBA, candidates are renewing their knowledge, skills and attitudes in relation to the changing conditions of modern life. In addition, the candidates interviewed in this research affirmed their motivations for entering the program, their personal and professional goals including employability and active citizenship and the personal fulfilment realised at the conclusion of their studies.

Our research has established human and social capital exert an influence on the lifelong learning of candidates in professional doctorates and the professional doctorate in focus here, namely the DBA, also has had a profound effects on the learning trajectories of the candidates/alumni. The participants were changed in their skills, thinking, world views and identities by their DBA experiences, resulting in practitioners and citizens who could even more fully engage in lifelong learning and contribute to their own self-actualisation and to the betterment of their workplaces and society.

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Table 1: Motivations for Undertaking a DBA

Motivation	Quote
Intrinsic Personal and Professional Affirmation	(The DBA is) for my own personal gratification. I have three degrees and I'd finished a stressful role as a chief executive…I was looking to do something for me instead of for somebody else. (Male, senior executive)
	I did the DBA for personal reasons, rather than career reasons. I didn't do the DBA to look for another job, or a different career path I wanted to challenge myself intellectually. (Male, manager)
Extrinsic Professional Continuation	I had this massive desire to do some real research and I felt I needed the imprimatur of the DBA at least to give some authority to the research I ended up doing. (Male, manager)
	I work with other accountants who are very appreciative of the contribution this study is making. (Male, professional)
Extrinsic Professional Alteration	I wanted to do further study. It was something I'd thought about for a long time and then circumstances presented. I was at a bit of a cross roads, in a self-directed style of career, so the timing was right and coincidentally I came across this emerging area. (Female, professional)
	I am expecting that I will be able to diversify my range of employment, there will be a lot more opportunities, such as senior roles in transport policy development that would have been closed to me previously. (Male, manager)

Table 2: Skills and Personal Development – Learning Domains

Learning domain	Quote
Academic Skills	We have an internal newsletter and as the CEO I write an article to start off with. Last week one of my suppliers said, "This is a fantastic article, we should put this in a blog" and it lifted my spirits. I spent time thinking about it, reading about it, before I came to the central premise of what I was writing about. I wouldn't have done that five or six years ago. (Male, CEO)
	I came with preconceived ideas but these changed through reading the literature. (Female, professional)
Thinking and professional development	The best thing I got from my doctorate was a reminder, and a sense of capability that there are some things you can do here to increase the odds. One of them is to bring a bit of discipline to your thinking. (Male, professional)
	Because you see the whole scientific method in action I think that helps you to apply that to your own life. It sharpens your thinking in certain areas. (Male, manager)
Lifelong learning	You learn more about yourself once you are in the middle of it [the DBA] than what you ever knew about yourself. It's a real journey of self-discovery. It teaches you to be incredibly self-reliant and self-resilient. (Male, manager)
	As soon as you let your brain stop, then you're on the path down. I believe in lifelong learning. I don't expect to be stopping … (The DBA) probably makes me more explorative and I've thoroughly enjoyed the process. (Female, manager)