

REFLECTIONS

A Fistful of Papers: Two Doctoral Journeys

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The acquisition of a doctoral qualification has become increasingly important for academics at the tertiary level. Unlike some countries, such as the UK and Australia, Japanese tertiary institutions generally do not cite a doctorate as a condition of academic appointment. However, for academics seeking to enter higher-level faculty positions, a doctorate is a common requirement and possessing one can enhance access to funding opportunities. These benefits have led to an increased demand for doctoral qualifications. Responding to this change, developments in the job market, and a diversifying student cohort, a greater range of doctoral pathways have emerged (Peacock, 2017). Among these, public works doctorates are an increasingly popular route to acquiring a doctorate, alongside taught doctorates and research doctorates (Mason et al., 2024).

In a public works doctorate, the candidate assembles a portfolio of their public works, which can range from peer-reviewed papers and book chapters through to works of art and business management projects, and then writes a short thesis, which may be referred to as a critical review, critical commentary, or context statement. These are typically between 10-30,000 words, depending on the program, and serve to contextualize the candidate's public works and demonstrate that they form a coherent body of work which contributes to the relevant field. The coherent nature of the public works may be clear from their content, with the candidate discussing and extending the themes found within them, or it may require the public works be problematized to identify and draw out the themes that underlie them.

Between 2020 and 2025, we embarked on public works doctorates by distance learning at different universities in the UK. As we have a shared body of published works as well as our own individual portfolios, we felt we were in the unusual position of being able to evaluate how our doctoral theses progressed, highlighting their similarities and differences. We chose to present our journeys using a dual-narrative approach to illustrate how, despite being based in the same tertiary institution in Japan, having a shared body of publications, and both pursuing public works doctorates, our experiences were distinct. We believe that this approach allows readers to compare and contrast our doctoral journeys and gain insights that can inform their own doctoral journeys.

The Programs

As public works doctorates (also known as PhDs by Publication or PhDs by Published Works) have become more widely available and well-established (Frick, 2016), candidates have more choice. However, as each program and route has different benefits and drawbacks (Bury, 2024), deciding which program to apply to can be difficult. Each candidate will have different priorities, and various factors, including time constraints and financial limitations, inevitably play stronger or weaker roles in the decision-making process.

Anthony: I enrolled as a candidate in a Doctorate of Professional Studies by Public Works program. While all public works doctorates critically review the public works to generate new learning, a DProf by Public Works places emphasis on the candidate's professional context and how the public works serve as inflection points in the candidate's professional development journey as well as how they contribute to the field and professional practice.

This focus on the candidate's professional development journey means that a DProf by Public Works can allow a greater range of public works to be considered than might be entertained in a PhD by Public Works, such as professional projects that have not undergone peer review, but which are central to the candidate's professional practice. These can include computer programs, reports prepared for public bodies, translations, collections of artefacts, audio-visual records, musical scores, and diagrammatic representations (Middlesex University London, 2025).

This was important for me as I write textbooks alongside my research, and I wanted to be able to discuss the impact of my textbook writing on my professional development and career.

However, while a DProf context statement contains considerable contextual richness, this also means that they can be longer than other public works doctorates (up to 45,000 words at my institution).

James: I enrolled as a candidate in a PhD by Published Works program. These programs are often completed in a shorter time frame and are less expensive than traditional PhD programs.

The program allowed me to partition my PhD into smaller, more manageable pieces of work by combining my published works with a context statement to earn the PhD award.

This was important to me as I was able to work with more flexibility and autonomy than would have been possible on other programs.

Public works can encompass more than published academic papers, and a prospective public works doctoral candidate should reflect carefully on their career and interrogate their resume to identify any potential public works they may be able to include.

Application Process

Having identified the best programs for us by evaluating the practical suitability, the connection of our research to that of the university departments we entered, and the suitability of potential supervisors, we needed to embark on the application process. While each university has its own application process, for a public works doctorate many ask for a full résumé or curriculum vitae which includes all the candidate's publications and research outputs, a brief summary of the publications they intend to include in their doctorate (this will usually be provisional), and a statement which includes the proposed title of the work and contextualizes the selected publications, demonstrates their coherence, and identifies their contribution to the advancement of knowledge in their chosen area of research. Most will also require a candidate to attend an interview to discuss the content of their research and public works before deciding to admit them as a doctoral candidate.

Anthony: The application process for my DProf program had three stages.

The first stage required the submission of a complete curriculum vitae, including references to my public works, so that my suitability for the program could be assessed.

The second stage was submitting the application form, copies of and/or links to my public works, a matrix which summarized my public works, my contribution to them and their impact in the field, and a justification statement (roughly 1,000 words) which outlined who I was as a professional, the relevance of my public works to my field, the public works I intended to review in the context statement, and the themes I wished to explore and develop in the context statement.

The third stage was an interview with two members of the DProf team to discuss the program and my proposed project.

The application process was complex, but various resources and guidelines were made available by the university. It is essential to follow these carefully to maximize the likelihood of a successful application.

I also found it useful to visit the university's doctoral repository and review the context statements of previous successful candidates when preparing my justification statement.

James: After I had selected the university and program that I thought fitted my goals and research background best, I formulated a basic proposal which included my résumé and the main aim of the PhD. I then drafted a list of my publications that I felt best represented the journey I had undertaken to reach the aim outlined in the proposal.

After this, I contacted the program director and discussed the proposal before submitting it formally. While I did not have an interview before joining the program, the initial discussions via email were very helpful in clarifying my aims. The interactions were also key in checking whether my choice of university and program were suitable and they helped all of the people involved to better understand each other's philosophies and approaches at an early stage.

While the application process can be daunting, carefully considering the course requirements and having open and honest interactions with potential supervisors and course leaders at this stage is essential in ensuring the successful completion of a doctoral program.

Selecting the Public Works

According to Maxwell and Kupczyk-Romanczuk (2009), "the focus of professional doctorate work is upon the community of practice, as opposed to the community of academics" (p. 138). This is a useful guideline when considering which public works should be incorporated into the final work as each potential selection of works will present your professional journey and practice in different ways. Consequently, deciding which public works should be included in a public works doctorate is a core part of the process.

However, choosing both which public works and how many to include can be very challenging. Mason and Merga (2018) found that the average number of public works included in a public works doctorate was 4.5, with a range of three to 12 publications, and this helps place some constraints on the selection. In addition, 99 percent of candidates included at least one peer-reviewed journal article and 40 percent of candidates submitted at least one sole-authored article. Furthermore, they found that the majority of submitted articles were co-authored, with the vast majority (85 percent) listing the candidate as the lead author of the public work, and six percent listing the candidate as a co-author.

Anthony: As I had amassed nearly 40 public works, created for varied reasons, over a 25-year teaching career when I began my doctorate, deciding which and how many public works to include left me nonplussed initially.

Mason and Merga's (2018) analysis was helpful as it gave me the confidence to include a publication for which I was not the lead author, but which had particular significance to my career.

I originally selected 11 public works but, on the advice of my supervisors, reduced this to nine, for which I was the sole author of one, the lead author of seven, and co-author of one.

To select which of my public works I would include in my context statement, I adopted an iterative process, with the criteria at each iteration serving as an ever-finer sieve, until the final set of public works to be included was determined.

When selecting which public works to include in my context statement, it was important to consider which of my public works represented key inflection points in my career, as well as their impact in the field, and their contribution to the underlying theme of the context statement.

The relative ranking of the journals I submitted my research articles to seemed to be of less importance than their value in illustrating my professional development journey. In my oral examination I was not asked to justify where I had submitted my articles, but was asked to justify my methodology and epistemology, particularly my preference for collaborative work, which was a key theme of my context statement.

James: The publications included in a PhD by Publication can take many forms, but I only included research articles as I felt that they best represented my journey towards the aim of my PhD.

I submitted ten articles for which I was the sole author of four, lead author of five, and co-author of one. Most institutions emphasize quality over quantity, and one of the issues that the examiners highlighted regarding my submission was the inclusion of too many publications.

For the publications of which I was not the sole author, it was necessary to outline my precise contribution, in terms of both the contribution percentage and the details of the tasks I undertook.

To help with this task, when writing and publishing articles, it is important to keep well-labelled records of article drafts as determining and agreeing on authorship and level of contribution at a later stage can be problematical (Paltridge & Starfield, 2023).

When I was selecting which publications to include, it was important to identify which had made the most substantial contribution or impact. The articles' relevance to the overarching theme and their importance as exemplars of my journey as a practitioner-researcher were also significant factors.

The ranking of the journals in which my articles had been published was not questioned during the development of my context statement. However, in my oral examination I was asked to justify why I had submitted my research to particular outlets.

A candidate's public works are like a set of building blocks, and each assemblage of them reveals a different facet of the candidate's career journey. One of the central challenges of a public works doctorate is to overcome the temptation to use them all, and instead to select the smallest set of public works that can adequately delineate a coherent narrative of the candidate's career journey.

Supervisors

The relationship between a doctoral candidate and their supervisor(s) is an important one as it is through this relationship that the development of the candidate's thesis is guided.

High-quality supervising provides candidates with the informational, emotional, instrumental, and co-constructional support that they need (Anttila et al., 2023). For distance education candidates, their relationship with, and frequency of feedback from, their supervisor(s) may be their only connection with the university. Consequently, it is important for candidates to get the most out of these sessions and for their supervisor(s) to encourage and scaffold independent learning and inquiry (Mullen, 2020).

While each doctoral candidate traditionally had a single supervisor, it has become common for a candidate to have multiple co-supervisors (Pyhältö et al., 2023). Co-supervision allows candidates to benefit from diverse perspectives and can create multiple opportunities for learning but can also lead to communication and scheduling issues. Olmos-López and Sunderland (2016) report that harmony among supervisors, especially in their feedback, is a key issue of concern among doctoral candidates.

Anthony: I had three supervisors, all from different countries and with different educational and teaching experiences. This meant that we could learn a lot from each other.

However, while my supervisors were all education experts, none had experience teaching in Japan or in teaching EFL. A result of this was the frustrating, but ultimately rewarding, process of having to make my tacit knowledge of living and working in Japan explicit.

My supervisors also challenged me to systematize and problematize my knowledge and philosophical position, as this is an important part of the construction of a professional doctoral thesis. This was difficult, and sometimes left me doubting myself, but forced me to clarify my thinking so that I could clearly state and justify my positions.

One downside of working with such a diverse range of supervisors was that our different contexts and backgrounds meant that we sometimes found ourselves talking past each other. This could be extremely frustrating (for us all) but, when the source of confusion lay in my writing, it forced me to reformulate what I had written to ensure clarity of communication.

Feedback from my supervisors was mostly harmonious, in that they tended to identify the same areas needing more work and pointed in much the same direction, which was extremely useful and valuable in guiding my writing. However, I also feel that some of the most interesting developments in my writing came from when their feedback differed and was disharmonious.

Unfortunately, my doctorate spanned a period of significant upheaval in the UK tertiary education sector, which placed great stress on my supervisors and resulted in one of them being made redundant.

James: I had two supervisors, and I was very lucky that we were able to establish a good working relationship early in my candidacy. I had actively read potential supervisors' publications before making a formal application and this helped me understand the research of my selected supervisors and some of their perspectives before working together.

I felt comfortable being open about my ideas and concerns, and my supervisors were willing to give me the space I needed to develop my ideas autonomously and in a way that fitted in with my work and family schedule.

It was also beneficial that my supervisors had worked together before as this helped us work better as a group of three. Therefore, I strongly recommend considering the research backgrounds of potential supervisors, the style of their publications prior to appointment, and their previous co-authors and collaborators, before applying to enroll in a program.

A public works doctoral candidate's relationship with their supervisor(s) is a key factor in

their overall success. It should be viewed as a relationship between peers and establishing a good rapport based on mutual respect as equals is essential. In addition to a candidate's supervisor(s), the value of a critical friend cannot be overstated. Having a peer with whom you can discuss ideas, share frustrations, and who can proofread your work, can help to alleviate stress, keep you grounded, and result in better overall work. This can be even more the case when undertaking a public works doctorate since a critical friend who was a collaborator on those public works can have even greater understanding and insights to offer you.

Structure and Style

While doctoral dissertations can come in many formats, public works doctoral theses commonly take the form of an introduction and conclusion sandwiching the public works, which are linked together by an explanatory narrative that provides context, accompanied by appendices of varying volume (Solli & Nygaard, 2022).

Anthony: As I wanted to include one or more of my textbooks as public works in my context statement, I chose to put my public works in the appendices. As I was pursuing a DProf, with its emphasis on my professional development, this freed me to write a narrative that contextualized and critiqued my public works, and developed the themes underlying them, which read more smoothly than if I had interrupted its flow with the long public works I was discussing.

While it was relatively straightforward to group my chosen public works into the themes I had identified in my justification statement, locating my work in the field and demonstrating its contribution to the field was considerably more difficult, requiring me to critically review my work and my assumptions.

My context statement became a critically reflective piece of work providing detail of the professional and educational contexts in which my public works were embedded, the themes they represented, and identifying the centrality of reflective practice and practitioner research in my professional development journey which bound those themes together.

My final context statement contained nine sections:

1. Introduction
2. Educational context
3. Theory, Practice, Methodology, and Ethics (focusing on my philosophical and theoretical development, the methodology used to select my public works, and ethical issues arising from my research)
- 4-8. Themes 1-3 (where my public works were critically reviewed)
9. Conclusion (focusing on theoretical, methodological, and pedagogical contributions, recapitulating themes and conceptual threads, and considering future directions).

James: I was initially unsure in which voice my context statement should be written. I began writing in the third person as that is what was used in the majority of articles that I included, but after realizing that I was documenting my own personal journey, I found it more apposite to write in the first person.

The most challenging part of writing the context statement for me was demonstrating the originality and unique contribution of the articles, instead of simply introducing them and setting the context. To do this, it was essential to not only establish a coherent overarching theme, but also reflectively critique my approach to the research I was including.

For my thesis, I felt it was important to detail the educational context and the background to how the teaching interventions included in the articles were developed, explicitly state the

contribution to knowledge, outline my journey as a practitioner-researcher, and critically reflect on the significance of the included articles.

To cover those points in sufficient detail, my final context statement contained eight sections:

1. Introduction
2. Educational context
3. Background to interventions (i.e., the research projects discussed in the articles)
- 4-6. Research themes I-III
7. Discussion (focusing on practical, theoretical, and methodological contributions)
8. Conclusion.

A public works context statement describes the candidate's personal career journey. Therefore, there is flexibility in both structure and style. However, it is important to remember that it is not a simple narrative, but a critical review in which the public works are problematized to clarify how they represent a coherent body of work and identify the contributions to theory and practice they make.

Examination and the Viva Voce

While public works doctorates are becoming more well-known, they are much less common than traditional thesis-based prospective doctorates. Consequently, examiners may have limited experience in assessing public works doctorates and there can be considerable variation in what they consider to be acceptable as a thesis (Kemp et al., 2013).

Anthony: My program had an independent internal progress panel interview midway through the DProf. This consisted of a 20-minute presentation followed by a 90-minute Q&A session. This was an important inflection point in the DProf program since it determined if I would be able to continue with the program and was also useful preparation for the oral examination.

After submitting my context statement, I prepared for the oral examination by planning for a 15–20-minute presentation, attempting to predict questions that the examiners might ask, and having several practice examinations with my supervisors.

My submission was assessed by two external examiners who were experts in the thematic areas my context statement examined but did not have experience of living or teaching in Japan.

The viva was tough (and punctuated by someone inadvertently shutting down the Zoom session 45 minutes in) but intellectually stimulating and interesting, and I quite enjoyed the experience.

However, while some of my predicted questions were asked, the examiners identified areas in my context statement that they felt needed greater depth and contextualization. The result was the requirement for major revisions and expansions to my context statement, and I was given a year to revise and resubmit it, after which it was re-assessed by the same examiners, approved, and the DProf awarded.

James: My submission was assessed by one internal and one external examiner. The level of input candidates have on who is approached to examine their work may be limited, but it is common for their opinions to be sought.

The examiners may be leading authors in the field, which can be intimidating, but it is important to remember that if they accept the offer to assess your work, it is usually because they are genuinely interested in what you have produced.

Once I had written and submitted my context statement, I prepared for the oral examination by planning a 2-minute and a 5-minute introduction to my work and predicting potential questions that I may be asked. This preparation was invaluable in the oral examination, not just because two of my predicted questions were asked, but also because it gave me the confidence to know that I was as well versed with my work and the connected concepts as possible.

Thanks to the generous approaches of my examiners and the support of my supervisors during my preparations, I enjoyed the viva experience, and I encourage others to view it as a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity that should be cherished.

Following the oral examination, the examiners required minor revisions to my submission, which is the most common outcome. Once the suggested changes were made, the revised thesis was approved and the PhD awarded.

A viva voce is something few people do more than once, and each is a unique experience. As the candidate is presenting their work, the importance of thorough preparation cannot be overstated. However, while it is an examination, a viva voce should also be seen as being a collaborative exercise in which the candidate works with the examiners to produce an improved final context statement.

Final Thoughts

Undertaking a doctorate is one of the most intellectually challenging and rewarding things you can do. It represents a rare opportunity to deeply explore the topics that interest you and learn more about yourself. However, it is a major undertaking and one that should not be entered into without full consideration of factors such as financial pressures, time constraints, support networks, and the balancing of studying and writing with paid work.

When considering which kind of doctoral program to embark on, it can be easy to assume that a public works doctorate is an easier route. However, a public works doctorate is no less challenging than the other doctoral routes, if for no other reason than that the public works must be produced before the program is begun. While the journey toward gaining a public works doctorate can be destabilizing and uncomfortable, the opportunity for deep self-reflection, the chance to draw previously published research together into a single body of work, and the great satisfaction gained when finally receiving the award can make it a rewarding process overall.

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