

How to build value into the doctorate – ideas for PhD supervisors



*PhD graduates make valuable contributions to society and its organisations. But what of the value of the doctorate to the graduates themselves? **Kay Guccione** and **Billy Bryan** questioned how graduates, as individuals, experience benefit from their doctorate and how they perceive its value. Findings reveal that graduates do consider their doctorate to have been worth it – in ways beyond the skills accrued or the intrinsic worth of holding the qualification, such as the friendships, colleagues, and networks they established, or the positive impact on their views of themselves and their identities as people in a globally connected world.*

Supervisors are understandably mindful of reconciling timely completion of the research project with the freedom to explore and engage more widely but there are a number of pointers that may help to frame an allied approach to value-building in the doctorate.

In the UK, PhD graduates make [positive social, cultural, and economic contributions](#), and universities, as sites of knowledge creation, play a key role in enabling those contributions. The transfer of graduates from university to business is [central to that concept](#) and graduates' collective knowledge, skills, networking, and prestige bring benefits to employers – making them [assets of significant value](#) to organisations. But what about the value to the individual?

The doctorate: pros and cons

Although the vast range of skills gained through doctoral study are well-documented in the literature, we wondered if, when pros are weighed against cons, graduates feel that doing their doctorate was actually “worth it”.

There is a downside to pursuing a doctorate. A doctoral degree [does not offer substantial financial reward, especially for women](#). It can even represent a negative financial investment. It is a period “off the pay ladder” during which tuition fees may be paid, prior study loans are not repaid, and pension contributions are not made. Hidden costs such as an unpaid “writing-up” year and associated fees can compound financial stress – and interest.

A doctorate may also bring negative psychological outcomes. [Poor academic career prospects](#), being “[overeducated](#)” (doctorate not required for the subsequent job role), and [occupational stress](#) caused by the research environment have all been shown to impact negatively on the health and wellbeing of postgraduate researchers.

The personal value of doctoral study

[Our research](#) questioned whether doctoral graduates, as individuals, experience overall benefit from their doctorate, and how they perceive its value. We used semi-structured interviews organised around open-ended questions about doctoral and postdoctoral experiences to collect in-depth data from 22 doctoral graduates. Our conceptual model of doctoral value is below, and shows how the four tenets of doctoral value (inner circle) are tempered by the four factors most influencing that value perception (outer diamond).

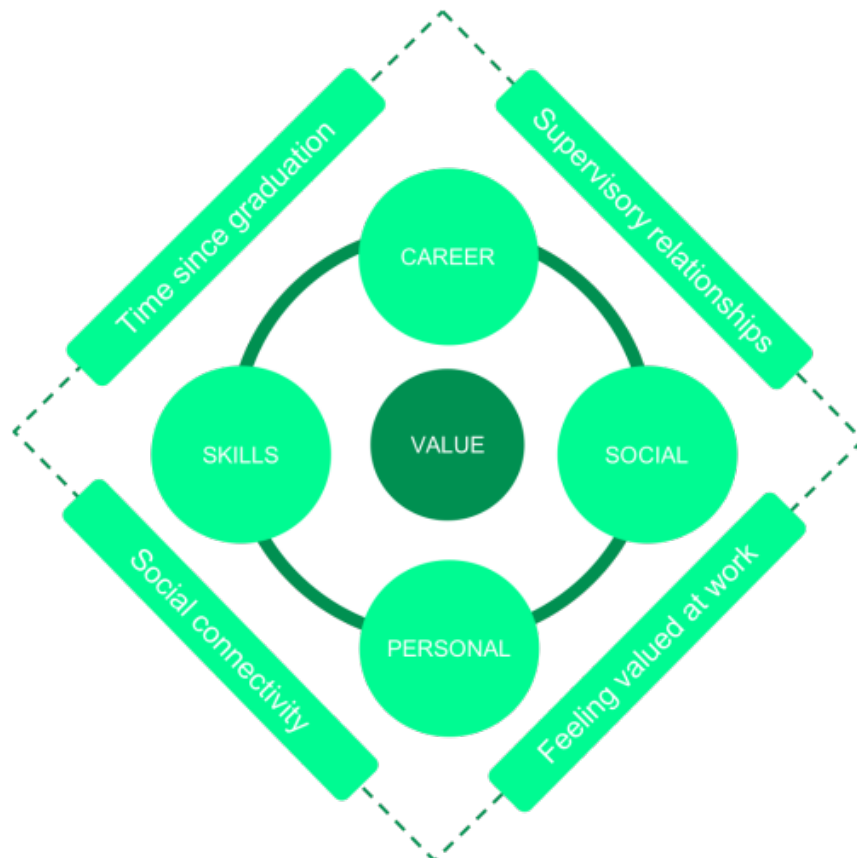


Figure 1: Doctoral value model. This figure originally appeared in “[Was it worth it? A qualitative exploration into graduate perceptions of doctoral value](#)”, published in *Higher Education Research & Development*, and is licensed under a [CC BY-NC-ND 4.0](#) license.

We found that graduates, regardless of whether they had an overall positive or overall negative experience, consider their doctorate to have been worth it. They experienced this in many different ways, not confined to the intrinsic worth of holding the qualification. Nor can we reduce a doctorate’s value to simply the skills that are accrued. Our participants talked us through many treasured and realised benefits on their career, experiences, and attributes; for example the friendships, colleagues, and networks they established, and the positive impact on their views of themselves and their identity as a person in a globally connected world. When participants did talk about skills, they told us that it was the “extracurricular” opportunities they valued most.

Is there *time* to add value to the doctorate?

It’s increasingly common for UK funders to require a postgraduate researcher (PGR) to engage with value-adding activities such as workshops, public communication activities, or internships. Our study showed that graduates agree that these things are worth doing. Universities and academic supervisors have an obligation, then, to ensure that PGRs graduate with an appropriate blend of different experiences.

We fully understand the difficulty supervisors face in trying to reconcile timely completion of the research project with permitting PGRs the freedom to explore and engage more widely. Recent calls for clarity from the Research Councils about their expectations for “submission within the funded period” and [renewed speculation](#) about the future of the “writing-up year”, have meant that existing worries about supporting PGRs to finish within their time limit have become further strained in recent months.

We offer some ideas for supervisors that we hope will help to frame an allied approach to value-building in the doctorate:

- Project work and professional development activities can be complementary, not conflicting. Look for ways one

can strengthen the other.

- Agree what's reasonable so assumptions aren't being made. What time proportion should be spent on professional development? Set expectations as well as deadlines.
- Help them assess their actual learning needs and choose opportunities to match them, rather than collecting courses or certificates. In all universities there is too much on offer for one person to do. We don't expect them to engage with everything, just what they need.
- It's not all about "training". Most professional development occurs outside courses or classroom-based events. What are the "real-world" opportunities to learn? How can you include your PGRs in new learning experiences?
- You are a role model to your PGRs; how do you engage with or speak about your own development? Teach them how to self-evaluate, set priorities, and keep track of their progress. Enable them to understand when they can afford time out, and to make good decisions.
- PGRs attend professional development events to meet new people. In doing so they compare themselves to others, and come to a better understanding of the "norms" of the research culture.
- Your PGRs may be attending workshops, networks, clubs, and events because that is where they feel listened to and valued. It may be easier to encourage them to spend more time on their research project if you also offer those things.
- Trust your PGRs to do what's right for them; build a relationship where they feel they can talk to you about how they spend their time, not hide it from you.
- Placing your trust in them builds trust both ways, meaning PGRs will be more inclined to seek your views and heed your advice. Conversely, checking up on them, surveillance, or forbidding them professional development opportunities breaks trust.

We hope these points will help you to evaluate your approach. In the next phase of our research we are analysing long-form survey responses collected from 270 doctoral graduates in different job roles, so we can contribute more to the global discussion about the value of the doctorate.

For further, detailed examples of the value of a doctorate in gaining and succeeding in careers other than university research, see [these weekly post-academia career profiles](#).

*This blog post is based on the authors' article, "[Was it worth it? A qualitative exploration into graduate perceptions of doctoral value](#)", published in *Higher Education Research & Development* (DOI: 10.1080/07294360.2018.1479378), and also draws on the report, "[Trust Me! Building and breaking professional trust in doctoral student supervisor relationships](#)", available for download from the Leadership Foundation for Higher Education.*

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