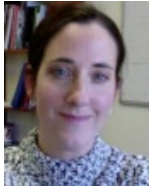# A PhD by publication is a great way to build your academic profile, but be mindful of its challenges

*The PhD by publication is an option increasingly available to doctoral candidates. This model can be a great way to build an academic profile but has unique challenges of its own too. **Shannon Mason** and **Margaret K. Merga** anticipate and offer answers to some of the questions candidates considering this model might ask; including advice on co-authorship with a supervisor, time management, coping with rejection, and capturing the evolution of your understanding of your research.*

Peer-reviewed publications are the bread and butter of the academic world. The quantity and quality of papers a researcher publishes can influence job applications, grant applications, performance reviews, and promotions. Unfortunately, the craft of writing academic papers and facilitating their publication is not typically a focus of doctoral education.

To help better prepare candidates for the realities of academia, universities increasingly allow the option to complete a PhD by publication, a model which encourages candidates to publish during their candidature, and to include their publications as, or within, their final submission. Jørgen Carling has previously outlined the benefits of completing the PhD by publication. While we agree there are many advantages to adopting this model, there are also challenges that need to be considered to ensure success.

We understand many of these challenges, having both completed a PhD by publication in the past five years. In our field (education) and location (Australia), the traditional thesis dominates, and while that is slowly changing, we encountered a range of problems for which there was little advice or support available at the time. Here we anticipate some of the many questions candidates may ask, and offer possible answers based on our experiences and research.

How many papers should I publish?

There is no one correct answer! Regardless of the thesis mode, the goal of doctoral study is to make an original and significant contribution to a field. How many papers it will take to meet this goal will depend on many factors. We found that the average number of papers included in Australian theses was 4.5, but this ranged anywhere from one to 12 papers. Publishing in itself is not a guarantee of conferral of your degree, and quality may be more important than quantity.

Should I co-author with my supervisor?

Doctoral candidates often publish with their supervisors. Supervisors have always assisted their students in the development of their traditional thesis, to differing degrees, but in the past this has gone relatively unacknowledged. Most university guidelines will require candidates to declare each author's contribution to a paper, and thus a higher level of authorial transparency is achieved. Co-authoring papers gives doctoral students an apprenticeship in writing journal articles, as well as experience in collaborative writing and working in research teams – a regular part of an academic's job.

Early and frank communication is important. The three co-authored papers in Shannon's thesis were written in the beginning stages of her candidature when more hands-on support in the process of writing and publishing was needed. She was then well-equipped to write the remaining four papers alone. Margaret's thesis was unusual as all included papers were sole authored, which was only possible as she had already co-authored two peer-reviewed papers prior to candidature.

We strongly recommend establishing clear mutual expectations between candidate and supervisor as early as possible.

How can I publish everything in time?

The process of preparing a manuscript, submitting to a journal, waiting for reviews, attending to requests for revisions, copy editing, and final publication can be extensive in some fields. This can be very frustrating for candidates who are working to a doctoral submission deadline. It is important to check journal guidelines for their average turnaround times. Once a paper is under review, don't be afraid to follow up politely once this time has passed.

It is also important to check your PhD-by-publication guidelines, because many universities allow the submission of papers at various stages of production, such as those still under review. This allowance is particularly helpful to ensure the inclusion of papers developed in the later stages of your candidature.

What if my paper gets rejected?

For doctoral candidates just developing their new identities as researchers, rejection can be difficult to take. The reality is that even experienced academics deal with rejection at some time, perhaps more often than they might like to admit! The important thing to remember is that rejection is a normal part of the process. The decision is not always about the quality of the paper, but its fit within that particular journal at that particular time. It is important to become familiar with any journal that you intend to submit to, including the theories and methods that are favoured, and the type of academic voice appropriate for that journal.

What if my papers don't flow as a thesis?

There are particular difficulties in developing a single submission based on multiple publications, each with their own focus, style, and format, and, as we recently explored, there are a number of favoured options for structure. Nikander and Piattoeva offer useful advice on how to use the integrating chapter to connect papers together.

There are also other issues that might arise from the transformational nature of doctoral study, where students learn while doing. For example, Margaret began to question her use of one of the informing concepts she had used in her early papers. In her subsequent work, she challenged her own simplistic use of this concept. Rather than become discouraged by the discovery of earlier flaws in our work, we understand that as researchers, we will continue to grow and cast a critical gaze over our past knowledge base. We both used the integrative chapter of our theses to highlight these limitations, but also to make explicit the evolution in our understanding; as such, it was a very enjoyable chapter to write!

Conclusion

We found that completing our thesis by publication offered rewards and challenges that were in many cases unique to this thesis mode. That we both emerged as advocates for this thesis type would suggest it is well worth undertaking for those candidates who want their findings to translate quickly and disseminate widely.

To see the authors' research in this area, please go to their project page on ResearchGate: "Publishing during PhD candidature".

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