A decade of change in Australia’s DBA landscape

Cathy J Byrne

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A decade of change in Australia’s DBA landscape

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to examine the dynamics of the Doctorate of Business Administration (DBA) in Australia through the lens of a changing higher education landscape. The paper reflects on issues raised in a previous analysis of DBA programmes undertaken a decade ago, and highlights persistent challenges and emerging opportunities for professional Doctorate programmes in the Australian context.

Design/methodology/approach – Interviews were undertaken with higher degree research directors, deans of graduate schools, and DBA programme directors from all 18 Australian institutions offering the DBA in 2013. Quantitative data on enrolments, accreditation requirements, course structures; and demographics are contextualised within a qualitative view of programme purposes, student and institutional motivations, rationales and concerns. Particular focus is given to perceptions of the difference between traditional research doctorates (PhDs) and professional doctorates, especially the DBA.

Findings – In the decade from 2003 to 2013 DBA enrolments are down but enquiries are up, indicating unmet demand. There is a shift in the players, with some smaller, regional universities dramatically increasing their enrolments, and larger, traditional institutions exiting the space altogether. Significant changes in accreditation criteria have generated a perceptual shift: where DBAs previously suffered from “academic snobbery” regarding their legitimacy, this perception is being challenged by standards which require DBA equivalence with a PhD. This shift in standards has also created some confusion amongst supervisors and candidates.

Originality/value – There is limited research into the DBA award or its candidates, and academic literature is generally silent on DBA supervision. This piece of research, one of very few that specifically examine the DBA, reflects on the past decade, analyses the present context and identifies emerging issues for the delivery of DBA programmes in Australia.

Keywords Australia, Professional doctorate, DBA, Research standards,
Doctorate in business administration, Quality control, Research supervision

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Professional doctoral education has been offered by Australian universities since the mid1990s, but the landscape has recently changed in significant ways. The Australian

This research was funded by the Australian Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations’ Office of Learning and Teaching.
Qualifications Framework (AQF) now describes a research professional doctorate as equivalent to a PhD at AQF level 10 (Australian Qualifications Framework Council (AQFC), 2011, 2013). Furthermore, the number of international and transnational students entering undergraduate and postgraduate higher education in Australia has dwindled since 2009 (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2011; Boston Consulting Group, 2013) which may have affected DBA enrolments. Concurrently, there is a national need for more qualified researchers within business and professional environments (Access Economics, 2010). Recently the Australian Government identified doctoral degrees as essential for developing skills for an innovative future. A research workforce strategy has been developed to position Australia’s research workforce to meet the Government’s 2020 vision (see, e.g. Australian Government, 2011). Workforce projections suggest that the most challenging task for Australia in the future will be to meet increasing demand for research skills.

The most comprehensive analysis of the DBA in Australian universities (Sarros et al., 2004) mapped the field a decade ago and highlighted a number of issues with DBA education. Given the significant changes in the higher education sector outlined above and discussed in more detail below, it is thus timely to examine DBA education again.

The research reported here forms part of a larger, two-year Australian study of candidate needs and supervision styles in Doctorate of Business Administration (DBA) programmes, funded by the Australian Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations’ Office of Learning and Teaching. This paper provides both a snapshot of Australian DBA courses and enrolments in 2013 and examines deeper issues regarding perceptions of the degree, its consistency and quality. It compares the 2013 picture and issues with those from a decade earlier (Sarros et al., 2004) highlighting persistent challenges and emerging opportunities.

We commence with an overview of the development and growth in Australian DBA education and discuss the role of the DBA in relation to the national need for research-qualified professionals. We then examine the changing higher education landscape, particularly in relation to standards in professional doctoral education and highlight the relative dearth of recent research on DBA education. Our research questions and method are presented along with our findings, both quantitative and qualitative. Finally, we discuss the issues, identified in earlier research, that continue in the contemporary scene and identify new issues in DBA education.

Doctoral education in Australia and the growth of the DBA

Doctoral education has grown in Australia since higher education underwent a major expansion during the late 1980s. The subsequent period from 1998 to 2008 saw Australian higher degree research (HDR) completions grow by 41 per cent, with 44,520 doctoral candidates enrolled in 2009 (Australian Government, Department of Innovation, Industry, Science and Research, 2011, p. 10). Most of the growth in Australian HDR enrolments has occurred in traditional research (PhD) programmes which are supported by the Australian federal government. To illustrate, there were only 836 PhDs awarded in 1980, but by 2010, this figure had climbed to 6,053 (Group of Eight, 2013, p. 9).

The ability of universities to offer full-fee paying programmes was also a factor in this period of growth (Maxwell and Shanahan, 1996). In 1989, Australia’s Higher Education Council (HEC) identified that only one-third of PhD graduates were taking up academic appointments, with most finding work in other public or private sectors, or going overseas (National Board of Employment, Education and Training (NBEET), 1989). These findings
questioned the ability of doctoral courses to meet the needs of future employers and, as such, a recommendation was made that the potential for the establishment of professional doctorates be investigated (Neumann and Goldstein, 2002). At the same time, the HEC made clear that there would be “no further expenditure in the employment education and training portfolio to cover new policy proposals” (NBEET, 1989, p. viii). From this, the potential for full-fee professional doctorates was recognised and a number of universities considered offering professional doctorates in a range of disciplines.

The professional doctorate was singled out as particularly relevant to business disciplines as numbers of academic staff with PhDs were low in those areas (Neumann, 2005). Professional doctorates in business and education were developed as alternative and “fast track” (two-year) HDR programmes by a number of universities in the 1990s. These aimed to give practitioners the opportunity to gain doctoral-level qualifications and contribute specialised, applied knowledge to workplace challenges (Neumann and Goldstein, 2002). Maxwell and Shanahan (2001) found that Australian professional doctorate programmes increased from one in 1990 to 48 in 1996, to 105 by 2000. By 2001, 131 professional doctorate programmes were on offer, a 25 per cent increase in just one year (McWilliam et al., 2002, p. 14).

Though only recently adopted in Australia the professional DBA programme was originally developed by Harvard Business School in the USA in 1922. Now there are more than 250 professional DBA programmes offered worldwide (Graf, 2013). Australia’s first DBA programme was offered at Victoria University of Technology in 1993. However, despite steady growth in the number of DBA programmes in the late 1990s, in 2000 just 20 completions were recorded in professional business doctorate programmes compared with 142 business-field PhD completions in that year (Evans et al., 2005, p. 28). Speculative reasons given for this lack of success include: candidates underestimating the work required; problems with programme management; limited workplace understanding of the DBA’s value; and poor quality candidacy. However, there is only anecdotal information to support these theories.

In contrast to PhDs, some Australian DBA programmes maintained significant coursework components until 2003. The coursework focus was part of the professional doctorate appeal and opened a pathway for a large pool of masters of business administration (MBA) students to continue their studies (Sarros et al., 2004, p. 448). Several Australian universities identified opportunities to sell the DBA into a growing and potentially lucrative Asian market. Additionally, some institutions offered advanced standing in their DBA programmes to MBA graduates who did not necessarily have significant research experience. However, the coursework focus raised issues of legitimacy within the HDR context, resulting in the professional doctorate being unfavourably compared to the traditional PhD (Sarros et al., 2005, p. 42). This view arose despite pressure on the PhD to “become more industry focussed” (McWilliam et al., 2002, p. ix) and accommodate a more diverse student body (Group of Eight, 2013, p. 18).

Nevertheless, the DBA did offer a pathway to doctoral studies previously denied to potential candidates who did not have an Honours or research masters background. Arguably, such a step may be regarded as a democratisation of doctoral education.

**Need for the DBA in Australia**

Recent Australian government reports signal a range of workforce needs for the next ten years, including the aspiration that:

Australian firms have access to the research skills and experience that will enable them to […] be globally competitive; Australia’s public sector research organisations have a sufficient
research skills base to support their diverse roles; Australia’s [...] HDR graduates have the skills and attributes to both engage in world-class research and make productive contributions; Australia [...] facilitates participation in and engagement with the research workforce (Australian Government, Department of Innovation, Industry, Science and Research, 2011, p. viii).

The proportion of Australians with doctoral qualifications moving to industry and non-university-based research positions is increasing. In a 2007 study examining employment outcomes for PhD graduates, undertaken by the University of Queensland Social Science Research Centre, 82 per cent of 1,028 respondents identified themselves as professionals (Group of Eight, 2013, p. 26). Australia’s Group of Eight (Go8) universities recognise that this trend has implications for the success criteria used to measure all doctoral students: “the non-academic jobs that PhD graduates move into [...] will often require a set of attributes different from those that characterise a good academic” (Group of Eight, 2013, p. 26). Access Economics (2010) predicts that demand for research-qualified people is set to grow at a faster rate than overall employment demand in the Australian economy over the decade to 2020, with the number of employed individuals with a doctorate by research qualification alone expected to rise by 3.2 per cent per annum over this period. A practice-focused rigorous DBA programme appears to be what is needed by industry.

The changing higher education landscape

There have been many changes in higher education in relation to standards and quality since Sarros et al. (2004) undertook comprehensive analysis in 2003. First, in 2004, the Australian Business Deans Council drafted guidelines on professional doctorates which, with further development in 2007, were endorsed by the Australian Deans and Directors of Graduate Studies (Evans et al., 2007). The guidelines were incorporated as new accreditation requirements in the AQF with the aim of raising standards for all higher research degrees. In 2011, a government report noted that there were only “a small number of fields where professional doctorates qualify as research doctorates under the ‘two-thirds rule’”, where at least 66 per cent of the course must be original research (Australian Government, Department of Innovation, Industry, Science and Research, 2011, p. 5).

The subsequent introduction of the revised AQF (AQFC, 2011) placed professional doctorates on a par with PhDs at AQF level 10, albeit with a different emphasis within the degree. This framework defines the Professional Doctoral Degree in the following terms:

The Doctoral Degree (Professional) qualification is designed so that graduates will have undertaken a program of structured learning and independent supervised study that produces significant and original research outcomes culminating in a thesis, dissertation, exegesis or equivalent for independent examination by at least two external expert examiners of international standing (AQFC, 2011, p. 52, 2013, p. 65).

The Australian Universities Quality Agency (AUQA), and the more recent Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA), have played major roles in evaluating higher education programmes. Increasing emphasis on standards and quality, allied to new public sector management practices of top-down control, targeting efficiency and “measurables” (Carvalho and de Lourdes Machado, 2011; Göransson, 2011), have led to increased scrutiny of DBA programmes from fiscal, quality and completions perspectives. However, research on the impact of these
changes is not available. Previously prominent researchers in the field have claimed that “professional doctorates have been in decline in terms of enrolments and that their viability is either in question or they have been terminated” (Evans et al., 2005, p. 29). This assertion is tested in this research.

AUQA reports from some institutions comment on problems with DBA supervision; the quality of partner institutions; management of the DBA programme outside of the HDR Committee; differences between PhD and DBA enrolment processes, thesis submission requirements and examiners’ reports; and a lack of clarity over what constitutes a DBA (e.g. AUQA, 2008a, b). As captured by our research, such external scrutiny of standards, quality and processes have implications for the universities offering DBA programmes.

**Lack of information on the DBA**

Literature reveals several studies which have examined DBA programme issues: assessing the DBA degrees developed in the UK in the 1990s (Bourner et al., 2000; Ruggeri-Stevens et al., 2001); comparing the DBA to the traditional PhD (Neumann, 2005); and the recent comparison of the DBA in the USA, UK, Canada and Australia (Kot and Hendel, 2012). However, much less attention has been devoted to empirical research on the DBA experience and its supervision, particularly in Australia.

The DBA has developed into an option for senior practitioners looking to develop or cap their professional careers. Thus, a diverse profile of candidates makes up the majority of DBA enrolments in Australia. However, there is scant and mostly anecdotal information about the demographics of DBA students. Available statistics report only doctoral student numbers and completions and do not differentiate between professional doctoral students and traditional PhDs (Australian Government, Department of Innovation, Industry, Science and Research, 2011, p. 5).

This is starkly illustrated by the May 2012 research report, *The Research Education Experience* (Council of Australian Postgraduate Associations, 2012), where DBA research is not mentioned and DBA candidates appear not to be included in the sample of doctoral students surveyed; where candidates undertaking PhD by thesis, publication and artefact/exegesis are the focus. While the recommendations from that study may well apply to supervision of DBA candidates, they do not appear to recognise the significant industry and managerial experience brought by the average DBA candidate to research; the often part-time, distance or transnational elements of candidature; and the more applied, industry-relevant nature of the knowledge generated by DBA research.

Other research on doctoral candidates either fails to identify those that are DBA candidates, or ignores them altogether. Pearson et al’s (2011) study of doctoral candidates indicated that only 4 per cent were undertaking professional doctorates, but did not denote how many of these were DBA candidates. Other studies have focused mainly on PhD students (e.g. Malfroy, 2005; Morris et al., 2011; Pearson, 2005a, b; Pearson et al., 2008).

The relatively small volume of research focused on DBA programmes includes: why the programmes have evolved (Erwee, 2004; Pearson et al., 2008; Sarros et al., 2004); the motivation for entry (Fenge, 2009; Wellington and Sikes, 2006); how they are defined (Bakeham et al., 2000; Hay, 2004; Morley, 2004; Neumann, 2005); off-shore[1] DBAs (Galvin, 2004); and how they are examined (Perry and Cavaye, 2004). The various authors’ definitions of the DBA are surprisingly uniform, with most agreeing it should reflect a balance of contribution to theory and practice. Diversity in
this discussion centres on university interpretations of the definition rather than the
definition itself. There are gaps in knowledge regarding the demographic diversity
among DBA candidates, their learning needs compared to PhD candidates’ needs,
required supervision styles and factors that support timely completion.

In comparison with professional doctorates, previous studies show that PhD
candidates typically have less industry experience, are more socially and culturally
integrated into the institution, and are motivated by academic, rather than practitioner,
career aspirations (Bourner et al., 2001) but there is not a similar body of knowledge
about DBA candidates. The unique nature of the DBA, the nature and experiences of its
candidates and supervisors along with the supervisory models used by Australian
universities, have been generally overlooked in previous research.

The most recent comprehensive analysis of DBA programmes in Australia (Sarros et al.,
2004) found that Australian DBA programmes were inconsistent in their structures and
standards, creating confusion as to their value. In a further analysis, Sarros et al. (2005,
pp. 41-42) commented that: “misconceptions and misunderstandings […] are […]
frustrating the ready acceptance of professional doctorates as a new form of research
degree, equivalent to but different from the PhD”. To address the confusion, Sarros et al.
(2005, p. 43) called for identification, clarification and “frank disclosure” of the differences
between PhD and DBA programmes and frameworks. It should be noted that their
research was undertaken well before the recent changes in the AQF.

This general dearth of contemporary information on the DBA led us to our overall
research questions:

RQ1. What are the current DBA enrolments (and trends) across Australia?

RQ2. What are the structures and delivery methods of DBA education?

RQ3. Who are the current DBA candidates?

RQ4. Why are these candidates undertaking DBAs?

RQ5. What are the attrition rates, exit reasons and management processes for DBA
candidates who do not complete?

RQ6. How are the DBA and other Professional Doctorates differentiated from the
PhD?

RQ7. What are the emerging issues?

Method
The research reported here is framed within a mixed methods approach that uses
a sequential exploratory design (Creswell, 2009). The initial qualitative phase aimed to
establish a baseline of knowledge on the DBA in Australia in 2013. For this phase
we examined the postgraduate pages of the web sites of all forty Australian public and
private universities to ascertain which currently offer DBA programmes. We then
undertook telephone interviews, in April 2013, with HDR directors, deans of graduate
schools or DBA programme directors from all 18 Australian institutions identified as
offering the programme.
The interviews, each of approximately 20 minutes’ duration, included four areas of enquiry: programme characteristics (enrolment, trend over the previous three to five years, structure and delivery modes); candidate demographics (requirement and acknowledgement of prior learning, private or public funding, age, gender, occupation, location and nationality); candidate motivation (enrolment motivation, completion and attrition issues); and programme differentiation with the PhD (supervision, the availability of other professional doctorates and institutional perceptions). This research had ethics approval from the Southern Cross University Expedited Ethics Committee. Content analysis revealed a number of common themes as well as issues which differentiate particular institutions. We report on the numbers of DBA candidates in programmes and programme structures on a university basis, however, issues and concerns have been aggregated to de-identify individual programmes.

Findings
In 2013 DBA programmes remain on offer at 18 of the 40 Australian public and private universities or accredited business schools; a slight decrease since Sarros et al. (2004) reviewed the field. Now, only one of the Go8 universities offers a DBA programme and several institutions report that they are reviewing their programmes with the view to possibly discontinuing them – especially in relation to transnational (off-shore) offerings. In 2013, the total candidate cohort is 955, a decrease on the 2004 figures. A general downturn in international student enrolments, due to a high Australian dollar and increased visa restrictions, may offer some explanation for this decrease. Table I provides a listing of Australian universities offering the DBA classified by type of university for the 18 institutions, and compares the present findings with those reported by Sarros et al. (2004).

Using the same categorisation offered by Sarros et al. (2004), Table I exhibits the shift of market share that has occurred amongst DBA providers over the last decade. The Table also provides information on whether the market share shift is due to new entrants, to the abandonment of existing players (e.g. market leavers) or a combination of both. Furthermore, in terms of market players, the market has shrunk by 19 per cent, with 11 institutions leaving the DBA market while only seven entered it in the period 2003-2013. The highest concentration of DBA programmes is currently provided by regional universities at 41.2 per cent (relative to 33.3 per cent in 2001), followed by the second-tier universities with 35.3 per cent of offerings (33.3 per cent in 2001). Notably, only one of the Go8 Universities has remained active in the DBA market. This could be because the “growth in domestic doctorate by research commencements has stalled since 2004 and both domestic masters by research commencements and completions have undergone a steady decline over the last decade” (Australian Government’s, 2011, p. 13, Research Skills for an Innovative Future). Hence Go8 universities might have chosen to focus on maintaining their PhD programmes which were thought to provide more rigorous training and align with their scholarly research positioning.

Trends in domestic demand are not mirrored by international student demand as “international commencements of doctorate degrees increased by 93 per cent over 2001-2008 and completions more than doubled over this period, indicating growing international recognition of and strong demand for our research degrees” (Australian Government’s, 2011, p. 27, Research Skills for an Innovative Future). This may be because second-tier universities have heavily invested in international offshore
programmes to generate income and build a solid international profile. Notably, the strongest growth in international student enrolments in Australian universities is in offshore programmes (Reserve Bank of Australia, 2008, p. 17) where second-tier universities appear to have centred their efforts. This situation highlights the need for more research into the reasons why Go8 universities have relinquished the DBA programme.

Figure 1 shows the composition of the market with regard to the number of DBA candidates currently enrolled. It can be observed that the second-tier institutions hold half of the market share, followed by the regional universities with 34 per cent, while the universities of technology, Go8 and other universities hold approximately 16 per cent of the overall market share.

An analysis of market concentration is reported in Figure 2, wherein the x-axis reports the institutions in order of descending market share, while the y-axis reports

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Source: aAs per Sarros et al. (2004)
the cumulative market share. It can be seen that the first five universities control 79.0 per cent of the market share. The Herfindahl Index (which measures market concentration in relation to the size of firms in that industry) was also estimated and produced a value of 1,645, which indicates a moderate concentration in the DBA market place.

Three universities, namely, the University of Newcastle, Victoria University and Southern Cross University, appear to have the largest number of candidates and completions. However, the consolidated figures do not tell the whole story. The numbers speak partly to a repositioning of the DBA rather than a simple reduction in its appeal. This snapshot reports on shifting enrolment trends, variant perceptions, rising standards and emerging strategic directions.

**Recruitment, structure and outcomes – rising expectations**

Entry requirements for the DBA programme are inconsistent. Some universities draw from a large pool of MBA graduates – many of whom work in middle or upper-level
management and possess significant work experience. Several institutions offer some advanced standing for a completed MBA while others see the DBA as an “end-to-end” degree only after the MBA is complete.

Initially, some Australian business schools had minimum requirements for entry into DBA programmes and university reputations were perceived to be at risk. The idea of the DBA as “less rigorous” than a PhD persists in some universities, but this appears to be changing in light of AQF standards.

Some institutions recognise a major shift in their own programme standards. As our respondents report: “In the past we were overly generous in admitting candidates that would not be admitted now. Now we can be confident in the skills and capacity of our graduates [...] Now we have DBAs taking out the University Medal”. However, completion rates are still of concern – as in any programme with part-time students who have work and family responsibilities.

There continues to be tension in the potential compromise of the doctoral pathway being offered to students who are willing to pay, but who may not be high-quality candidates. Further, the fiscal benefits of this full-fee programme may not be great. Respondent comments include: “The DBA programme is a loss-leader aimed at developing partnerships with off-shore Universities”; “The potential revenue looks good – but costs and cash flow need better management for the programme to make economic sense”; “It’s definitely not a money spinner”.

In addition, the repositioning of professional doctorates as commercially viable and valuable (for individuals and employees) is beginning to address this prejudice. Perceptions of DBA workload (for both supervisors and candidates) vary. Representatives from some institutions offered a variety of views. Comments include: “A DBA adds up to more than a PhD”; “The marketplace, the academy, and the students themselves perceive that a PhD is a step up”; and from an alternative perspective, “A PhD is less valuable because it is too theoretical”.

In 2013, only two universities required a thesis component of < 60 per cent of the award. The remainder view the first full-time equivalent year (33 per cent) of the DBA as a time for coursework that scaffolds the skills needed for the thesis component. Coursework typically covers research methods and philosophy; research planning; data gathering and analysis; approaches to reviewing literature and research proposal writing. During the final two full-time equivalent years (66 per cent) of study, candidates undertake a research project and produce a thesis (usually 50-60,000 words compared with the PhD standard of 80-1,00,000 words) which demonstrates the candidate’s contribution to both theoretical knowledge and professional practice. Similar to the PhD, a DBA thesis must contain original research and pass evaluation by external academic examiners.

Varying rationales for having, keeping or winding down the DBA programme
Although many business schools inherited the DBA as a standard offering from Graduate Business Schools during the 1990s, rationales from participants for continuing to offer a DBA include:

- The uniqueness of the degree and its appropriateness for practitioners: “The DBA links complex problems in the business world with high-level research qualifications”; “It is suited to particular interests and relates directly to professional work life”; “It’s an applied Doctorate which gives people a solid
foundation in research skills”; “It provides people who are already business professionals with theoretical and empirical understanding, to enable them to resolve business challenges”.

- The DBA’s contribution to the research culture: “It revitalises the research culture to link with and engage with real-world commerce”; “Our DBAs have good publication outcomes”.
- Its fiscal benefits to the university: “DBAs meet a strong demand in the commercial market place and complement our suite of graduate programs”. One university only offered the DBA because an industry partner in a particular field sponsored a viable cohort.

Several Australian institutions have noticed increases in DBA applications. This may be because the discontinuation or pauses in enrolment of some programmes has led to an increase in enquiries for others. However, most programmes are constrained by their capacity to provide supervision. Institutions that moved early to become AQF compliant articulate an opportunity for growth: “Now that high standards have been set for the DBA, we are building our capacity to serve increasing enquiries from overseas”. Others have yet to meet AQF standards but have seen both enrolments and attrition rates increase: “We don’t have to market the programme, but we do have to better understand the market and take better care of our students”. At the same time, other institutions have identified that: “The programme was designed to be less onerous than a PhD – it was aimed at practitioners”; “The programme was a high risk but lucrative option”. Some go so far as to say that quality control is “an embarrassment”, a “cat case for the research office” and a “dog’s breakfast for administrators”.

Regarding the comparison between DBAs and PhDs, attitudes are shifting but there is also a blurring between the degrees. Comments included: “Good students will do a PhD. We are removing the Professional Doctorates, since there is not a big difference to the PhD”; “The DBA suffers due to negative comparison with PhDs”; “Currency in the market is a PhD, many people haven’t even heard of a DBA”; “The Academic Board was confused over the value of the Prof Docs – whether they had real currency or were just crap”. The concern is whether the title of “Dr” is easier to get to via the DBA and, therefore, devalued. There does appear to be some academic snobbery around the PhD. However, some PhD programmes now offer coursework; others actively attempt to equate both pathways in the minds of candidates: “We often mingle DBA and PhD students together to create a unique research culture for the business school”.

Another concern raised by interviewees was the lack of academic research into the perceived value of the DBA in industry: “We don’t get feedback from the market”; “The DBA might work well for the consulting marketplace […] ‘Dr so-and-so’ signals credentials, but I suspect industry more broadly doesn’t even know what a DBA is”. Like other areas of higher education, the DBA suffers from continual changes in the sector: “We are continually being re-structured, rearranged, dissected, dismembered […] continual turbulence is not the best foundation to evaluate the success or potential of a programme”.

Although there have recently been wide discussions among academics on the impact of research evaluation and training, and on changing higher education policy, these factors were not raised during participants’ reflections on their DBA programmes. This will be an area for future research.
Candidate demographics
In this phase of the research we asked directors about the demographics and perceived motivations of their DBA candidates. The following summarises their responses:

- Ages generally ranged from the late 30s to late 40s.
- 50-80 per cent male with a great variety in gender balance across programmes.
- Generally admitted with an MBA or similar qualification, although a few universities require only a bachelor degree.
- Declining numbers of international and transnational candidates.
- Main countries of origin for non-domestic candidates are Singapore, Vietnam, Hong Kong, Nigeria, Sri Lanka, Saudi Arabia, Philippines, USA, Canada, Thailand, Indonesia, Iran, Tonga, Bhutan, Kenya, Switzerland and Germany.
- Increase in ratio of domestic candidates within a general decline in numbers since 2002.
- Anecdotal information indicates that motivations to undertake a DBA include: to progress learning further than an MBA; career advancement; or to consolidate experience in a systematic way. Informants speculated that motivation greatly depended on individual’s age and position in their career cycle.

Discussion
While numbers in DBA programmes have declined since the Sarros et al. (2004) study and some programmes have closed, it seems that there is a re-evaluation of the DBA in the market place. On the one hand, quality imperatives have led to a decrease in transnational offerings, a looming issue that was identified in previous research, and the position of the Australian dollar may also have discouraged some potential international candidates. On the other hand the clarification by the AQF of the status of the DBA appears to have prompted some universities, at least, to view their DBA programme as a different but viable doctoral pathway well suited to practitioners. Some revised and relaunched DBA programmes may occur, while other universities see little differentiation between the DBA and PhD now that both are AQF10 and are moving out of the DBA market altogether.

There are other issues identified in this study which need further exploration. First, some academics’ perception that the DBA is a lesser award than the PhD; continuing differences in examination and management processes between the DBA and PhD; lack of ability for DBA candidates to access some HDR grants; a lack of understanding of the DBA’s applied but rigorous nature; and lack of input from industry to DBA programmes. Starkly missing from the literature is the lack of a commercial perspective on the value and potential of the DBA in the market place.

Second, is the importance of supervisor training in relation to handling the DBA’s practical emphasis but also to ensure equity in HDR standards. Questions which may guide enquiry include: what supervisor registration, training, management and capacity targets need to be considered? Are “traditional” supervisors experienced enough in industry matters to supervise a DBA? Does external co-supervision enable entrepreneurialism or invite inequity? Are retired “emeritus” style supervisors effective? What intercultural issues and cultural
nuances need to be considered – particularly around quality standards, study as a commercial exchange, and ethical research requirements? What programme offerings promote innovation?

Third, as PhD programmes adopt coursework components or become more applied so as to accommodate Australian workforce demands, the conundrum regarding the difference between the DBA and PhD may remain. Little is known about the enrolment motivation, professional skills and background of those undertake a DBA instead of a PhD in business.

Fourth is the perennial issue of candidate attrition. In 2013, one-third of Australian institutions reported 30-50 per cent of DBA candidates dropping out. The most common reason given by HDR programme directors was the candidate’s underestimation of the time involved – not a lack of skills or motivation. Given the lack of evidence regarding the perceived value of this offering in the commercial world, and the possibility that candidates may receive limited support from their employers for such a time-consuming activity, universities may benefit from further data gathering from the employers of DBA candidates.

Finally, issues with external offerings, including those in off-shore locations, and questions relating to the quality, capacity and appropriate styles of DBA supervision, remain and need to be further explored.

Limitations and further research
This report is based on a small sample, but it does represent all universities in Australia offering DBA programmes. The data are based on the reports and perceptions of directors of research or DBA programme directors and, as such, it is subjective. Further research should include DBA alumni, candidates and supervisors, as well as current and prospective employers. Additional comparisons also need to be made between the DBA and other professional doctorate programmes. More work needs to be undertaken on policy recommendations and guidelines regarding the DBA, especially regarding how such programme offerings are described to potential applicants, supervisors and examiners. Further work is also needed to investigate the impacts of the changing higher educational policy landscape. It is the authors’ intention to progress these areas of research.

Conclusion
The clarification by AQF of the equivalence of the DBA with the PhD has initiated change in the professional doctorate space in Australian universities. Some national consistency appears to be developing regarding enrolment requirements, programme offerings and standards criteria. However, some institutions continue to manage and examine the DBA thesis outside of their HDR committee processes; some allow advanced standing in the DBA course for MBA graduates while others do not; some grant programmes remain open to PhD candidates only; and the perception that a DBA is not equivalent to a PhD remains. Some higher education institutions have revised their perceptions and now see the DBA as a “differently rigorous Doctorate”. Some Australian universities are beginning to see value in flexibility with students able to move horizontally between Professional Doctorates and traditional PhD programmes, rather than viewing these movements as “upgrades” or “downgrades”. Importantly, industry perspectives are still not generally part of the reflective research process. This continuing oversight needs to be addressed.
Note

1. Off-shore programmes are those offered in an international location. Programmes to off-shore students may have different models whereby Universities offer degrees through their own off-shore campuses or cater courses through one (or more) of their international partners. The interested reader may refer to Galvin (2004).

References


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