Exploring Non-University Doctoral Alternatives for Scholar-Practitioners: An Autoethnographic Account

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Abstract

This paper explores non-university doctoral qualifications as an alternative doctoral pathway for scholar practitioners and industry professionals transitioning into academia. Through an autoethnographic approach, the author reflects on their personal journey pursuing a UK-based Level 8 diploma, providing an insider perspective on motivations, barriers, and perceptions encountered. The study reveals limited awareness and academic bias against these qualifications, despite their flexible, practice-oriented design that aligns well with the needs of mid-career professionals. Findings highlight the potential of non-university doctoral qualifications to support professional development, also identifying the need for greater standardisation to improve their legitimacy and comparability with traditional doctorates such as the PhD and DBA. This work contributes original insight into a rarely examined doctoral route, broadening discussions around professional doctorates and advocating for inclusive academic recognition of industry-informed expertise. By linking lived experience with broader educational structures, the study challenges dominant credential norms and calls for cultural shifts in academic perception.

Keywords: Autoethnography, professional identity, professional doctorate, work-based learning, research culture, academic perception.

The traditional Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) has long been considered the pinnacle of academic achievement by the Higher Education (HE) community (Mattijssen et al., 2020). However, there is a growing demand for alternative, more flexible options, due to the increasing number of mid-career professionals, labelled "nontraditional doctoral students," or NDSs for short (Zhuchkova & Terentev, 2024), seeking doctoral-level study. For them, balancing work, home life, and academic commitments can make the traditional PhD less feasible, and alternatives may offer similar benefits without the constraints of the traditional route (Mirick & Wladkowski, 2020; Williams et al., 2021). Non-traditional routes are a topic considered in the works of Coughlin (2024), Horta and Chan (2023), and Servage (2009) to name but a few. However, existing research tends to focus upon other routes typically available within Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), notably online doctoral programmes, ODPs for short (Dunlap, 2024; Lee et al., 2022) such as the Doctor of Business Administration (DBA). The aim of this paper is to explore an alternative seldom discussed: practice-based qualifications. In the United States and Canada, doctoral-level study is university based, however, in the author's native United Kingdom, non-university doctoral qualifications are also recognised - by the Office of Qualifications and Examinations Regulation (Ofqual), a non-ministerial government body, at Level 8 in their Regulated Qualifications Framework (RQF) (GOV.UK, 2024). Ofqual Level 8 qualifications broadly align with doctoral-level descriptors in the Canadian Qualifications Framework, which recognizes PhDs as Level 10. Herein, these will be referred to as "non-university doctoral qualifications" (NUDQs).

This exploration is particularly pertinent to "pracademics" – mid-career industry professionals who opt to transition from industry to academia - since achieving doctor status can unlock career progression in the academic setting (Blackler & Miller, 2021; Owens, 2017). Subsequently, this paper utilises the methodology of autoethnography to explore the personal experience of the author, as a pracademic, in their undertaking of a NUDQ as a lesser-known alternative doctoral pathway. Autoethnography, a method that connects personal experience to broader cultural contexts, allows for a reflexive examination of the motivations behind pursuing a NUDQ, the barriers encountered, and the perceptions within academia regarding such achievements (Adams & Manning, 2015; Chang, 2016). Ultimately, the objective is to challenge traditional boundaries of academic recognition (Blackler & Miller, 2021; Owens, 2017).

In positioning this work, it is important to acknowledge the broader educational landscape marked by the modernisation and commodification of higher education (Ball, 2012; Brown et al., 2011). These transformations influence how qualifications are structured, perceived, and valued within knowledge economies. The concept of "credentialism" (Collins, 1979) further explains how academic qualifications become proxies for competence and employability. Such frames provide critical context for exploring NUDQs as not just educational pathways but market-embedded credentials subject to contestation. In summary, this paper seeks to address the following research question: *How do non-university doctoral qualifications support scholar practitioner professional development, and how are they perceived within the context of higher education's credential culture?* This question informs the autoethnographic exploration, providing a critical lens through which personal experience intersects with broader sociocultural and institutional forces.

Literature Review

Identity and Barriers

In business as a discipline in particular, there is a growing demand for alternative, flexible options to the traditional PhD, (i.e., ODPs), to address a shortfall of doctorate holders (Mirick & Wladkowski, 2020). Due to the emergence of ODPs, the unique characteristics of online doctoral students (ODSs) and their experiences have been of interest to researchers, although the focus of such studies tends to be the exploration of pedagogic strategies and processes to better support this group (Lee et al., 2022), as opposed to personal experiences.

Exploring ODS characteristics, it is noted that they may sometimes be referred to as "nontraditional doctoral students," or NDSs (Zhuchkova & Terentev, 2024). ODSs are typically mid-career adult learners (Williams et al., 2019) who seek a practical pathway to achieving the goal of a doctorate (Dunlap, 2024). They are usually indirect pathway students because they have not transitioned immediately from master's degrees and can be categorised as interrupters (those with less than a 5-year gap since last study), or returners; those with more than a 5-year gap since last study (Zhuchkova & Terentev, 2024). In both cases, they are often reported to be under-prepared, under-resourced, or time- and resource-pressured for the study they are about to engage in (Berg, 2016). This may be due to their work and family obligations (Williams et al., 2021), such as having a full-time job, being married, and having children (Zhuchkova & Terentev, 2024). Forty-one percent take more than the recommended 5 years to complete their programme (Watson et al., 2024), likely as a result of their home circumstances, but also due to other factors outside of their control. Lee et al. (2022) and Williams et al. (2021) note the layer of complexity due to the technology-mediated nature of ODPs, and the reliance on online interactions due to ODSs being at a distance from their institution and faculty supervisor - all potential challenges for an ODS.

Motivation

Horta (2018) points out that the main motivation for most traditional students to enrol upon and study a doctoral programme is to go on to work in academia, either as a lecturer or researcher. This is a stark difference from the motivations of nontraditional students, who are fuelled in the pursuit of the doctorate pathway for one or more of three reasons: the quest for self, the intellectual quest, or the professional quest (Skakni, 2018). Underpinning this is Ryan and Deci's (2000) self-determination theory (SDT), as the aforementioned "quests" can be linked to the three innate psychological needs of autonomy (the quest for self), competence (the intellectual quest), and relatedness (the professional quest). Where nontraditional students are concerned, the debate of intrinsic vs extrinsic motivation also emerges. They may be intrinsically motivated by an interest in practice-oriented research, science, and the dissemination of knowledge; or extrinsically motivated by social benefits (networking), and the furthering of their career in industry (Terentev et al., 2020).

Current literature also highlights ways to analyse *ongoing* motivation throughout their programme. Litalien et al. (2015) refers to the conceptual lens of the self-determination continuum (Litalien et al., 2015) to do so. A model developed by Ryan & Deci (2000), the continuum consists of intrinsic regulation, integration regulation, identified regulation, introjection, and external regulation. This highlights how underpinning

motivations may change and develop throughout. Similarly, social cognitive theory (SCT) may provide understanding as to how students manage motivation-triggered behaviours, such as control and reinforcement, as they move towards their goal (Nwosu et al., 2022). In the case of ODSs, SCT considers expectancy and observational factors specific to the group which may positively or negatively impact drive (Jacobs et al., 2012).

Perceptions

A PhD is widely considered to be the highest level of education despite the existence of other qualifications at the same level (Mattijssen et al., 2020), and a pervasive PhD bias across academia remains (Dunlap, 2024). An example of this is Servage (2009: p774), who noted that some people may be "*content with a professional doctorate that is not a serious status contender in academic circles*." Unfortunately, the bias extends beyond academia, with Suomi et al. (2020) finding some professional doctorate holders do not feel their degree is respected outside of universities, with inconsistency of attitudes amongst employers. In some cases, respondents in that study reported bullying and derogatory comments from industry colleagues regarding their doctorate, hence avoiding sharing their achievements where possible.

It is worth noting, however, that poor perceptions of PhDs exist too, particularly the myth that holders are trained only to perform research and serve in HEIs (Germain-Alamartine et al., 2021). Kopotev et al. (2021) note these are rarely read by more than a few people. Hambrick (1997) points out that no value is obtained from this squabble over differences and, instead, there is a need for a shift in business school culture to shape better attitudes towards all types of doctoral study (Khuram, 2024). Winn et al. (2008) refer to a need for reputation management amongst doctorate holders at a collective level, as by doing so, members of that collective can come together to ensure consistency in their messages and actions, with a view to altering judgements surrounding their reputation and the reputation of their respective qualifications.

Impact

Saturation has triggered a "PhD crisis," whereby graduates cannot always access meaningful employment *within* academia (Coughlin, 2024; Horta & Chan, 2023). This has pushed graduates into non-academic roles such as government, non-profits, startups, and the financial sector in particular, meaning they positively impact industry (Coughlin, 2024; Li & Horta, 2023; Li & Horta, 2022). However, traditional PhDs are designed primarily (albeit not exclusively) to prepare the candidate to become a principal investigator, and although this skillset is valued in industry, the PhD experience often fails to prepare the candidate for the wider responsibilities of a non-academic career (Coughlin, 2024). The impact of non-traditional doctorates, on the other hand, is vastly different. Such qualifications aim to impart knowledge and skills applicable to industry context (Watson et al., 2024), particularly co-development and networking (Macintosh et al., 2021). Generally, such qualifications achieve this - with 60% of non-traditional doctoral completers feeling their qualification is valued by employers (Watson et al., 2024), albeit with room for improvement, since 11% feel their doctorate is not valued, and 26% remain unsure.

Current literature surrounding the impact of non-traditional doctorates remains focused upon research outputs, despite their practical nature; although research is of critical importance to industry, as it drives innovation and transformation (Watson et al., 2024). Research active organisations demonstrate improved performance over their counterparts, notably because of dedicated research and development (R&D) functions (Jonker et al., 2019) featuring non-traditional doctoral graduates with strong critical thinking skills obtained from study (Macintosh et al., 2021; Watson et al., 2024). This only reinforces the need for non-traditional students to be just as research active as their PhD counterparts. This impact can be split down further into two parts: academic impact (contributions to the academic community via dissemination), and economic or societal impact (Adams & Neary, 2022). This shows how graduates contribute to society by addressing global issues such as poverty, sustainable development, and social responsibility (Khuram et al., 2023).

Drawing from theories of educational commodification and credential inflation, this study situates NUDQs within a wider neoliberal framework of marketised higher education (Ball, 2012; Brown et al., 2011). The value of the qualification is examined not only in personal terms but as part of a system that monetises

and standardises knowledge acquisition, aligning qualifications with productivity and labour market signalling (Collins, 1979). This lens allows for critique of both the symbolic and economic dimensions of credentialing in the 21st-century academy.

Methodology

The study adopts an analytic autoethnographic stance (Anderson, 2006), using structured self-reflection as a data source. Data was generated through iterative journaling during the qualification, contemporaneous field notes, and retrospective sense-making aligned with emerging themes. Analytical coding was conducted thematically, informed by the research question and concepts of credentialization, professional identity, and educational legitimacy. Autoethnography, as a qualitative research method, allows the researcher to draw on their personal experience (Ngunjiri et al., 2010) in the production of an insider account (Adams & Manning, 2015). A methodology which is growing in use and popularity (Rambo & Ellis, 2020), autoethnography allowed the researcher to demonstrate reflexivity (Wall, 2006) by acknowledging their own subjectivity (Finlay & Gough, 2003) and understanding how their own position and interests affect the findings (Primeau, 2003). Mcilveen (2008) discusses the benefits of autoethnography, notably how it promotes trustworthiness and authenticity of the researcher, by giving transparency of the process as well as the product (Ellis et al., 2011). There are, however, criticisms of autoethnography as a research method. Described as a queer research method (Jones & Adams, 2010), Ploder and Stadlbauer (2016) state it is overly narcissistic and lacks theoretical grounding, whilst Woodley (2016) described it as a threat to disciplinary identity. Wall (2008) noted associated issues of representation, balance, and ethics, although adopting a more analytical approach and maintaining the emotional core of ethnography can address this concern somewhat (Mendez-Lopez, 2014).

Autoethnography can be evocative via personal narrative (Mayor, 2016), or analytic, including input from the community (Anderson, 2006). Autoethnography sits in the wider bracket of ethnography; a type of research focused upon being in the field of study to understand cultures, challenges, and motivations (Arnout et al., 2020). Subsequently, this paper takes an evocative approach, focusing upon the researcher's own experience of identifying, studying, and perceptions of their NUDQ. The researcher reflects upon collected self-observational and self-reflective data, and external data in the form of literature (Chang, 2016; Gautam, 2016), before analysing and interpreting this to allow for link between personal experience and broader cultural contexts (Jones, 2005). Although the paper contains personal narrative elements, it adheres more closely to Anderson's (2006) notion of analytic autoethnography, where the goal is not solely evocation but theoretical insight. The author is a full member of the research setting and uses their experience to interrogate wider systemic forces. Reflexivity is applied not merely to narrate but to critically interpret the sociological significance of the journey, framed through concepts such as educational capital (Bourdieu, 1986) and credential stratification (Brown et al., 2011).

Discussion

Identity and Barriers

I identify as a "pracademic," an experienced industry professional who decided to transition to academia as a practitioner-academic (Blackler & Miller, 2021; Owens, 2017). I remain active in both domains of academia and practice (Hollweck et al., 2022), primarily employed as a Lecturer in Business by a HEI in the UK, but remaining industry active by conducting occasional consultancy work. As I made the transition from industry to academia, I decided I would seek to undertake doctoral level study, due to motivations which I will discuss later. My first step in doing so was to identify and assess my options, of which there were several:

a) a traditional PhD;

b) a PhD by publication, published works, or portfolio;

c) a professional doctorate, such as DBA or similar; or

d) a NUDQ listed on the Ofqual RRQ in the UK (GOV.UK, 2024).

As a mature learner and "interrupter" (Zhuchkova & Terentev, 2024), with a full-time job, additional consultancy work, and a young family; I needed more flexibility than a traditional PhD may offer (Williams et al., 2021). With regards to professional doctorates, I was concerned about the lengthy commitment of 5-7 years (Choi et al. 2024), and how my family and work obligations might change over this time, impacting my ability to progress and complete (Dunlap, 2024; Watson et al., 2024). I acknowledge that the PhD by publication, published works, or portfolio route may, however, be a good option in the future (Choi et al., 2024). This left just option d to consider in the present moment.

Turning my attention to NUDQs, I utilised the GOV.UK (2024) qualification search function and compiled a list of options and associated information, presented in Table 1. A qualification offered by the Chartered Management Institute (CMI), who I instantly recognised, became my desired choice. I subsequently sought a provider of the CMI Level 8 Diploma in Strategic Direction and Leadership (600/9469/2), seeking one which focuses upon supportive one-to-one coaching practices (Lee et al., 2022), and simple systems to avoid technological challenges (Williams et al., 2021).

Table 1

Level 8 qualifications listed by Ofqual

Number	Title	Owner	Credits	TQT	GLH
600/9467/9	CMI Level 8 Award In Strategic Direction and Leadership	CMI	10	100	30
600/9468/0	CMI Level 8 Certificate In Strategic Direction and Leadership	CMI	20	200	60
600/9469/2	CMI Level 8 Diploma In Strategic Direction and Leadership	CMI	67	670	210
601/5362/3	Qualifi Level 8 Diploma in Strategic Management and Leadership	Qualifi	160	1600	640
603/6996/6	OTHM Level 8 Diploma in Strategic Management and Leadership Practice	OTHM	180	1800	900
610/2993/2	Grade 8 Examination in Musical Theatre - Cabaret	UWL	25	250	46
610/2994/4	Grade 8 Examination in Musical Theatre - Recital	UWL	25	205	46
610/2995/6	Grade 8 Examination in Musical Theatre - Concert	UWL	25	250	46
610/3003/X	Grade 8 Examination in Musical Theatre DUET	UWL	25	250	46
610/4175/0	IAB L8 Doctor of Business Administration	IAB	180	1800	360
610/4176/2	IAB L8 Doctor of Education	IAB	180	1800	360
610/4177/4	IAB L8 Doctor of Philosophy	IAB	180	1800	360

Motivation

My motivation for studying a NUDQ was two-fold. On one hand, I was concerned that, as a new academic entering the arena without a PhD, I may be viewed differently by my colleagues, students, and others in the industry. I had a distinct fear of being called out on my expertise. Although this has, to date, never occurred, this symptom of imposter syndrome remains (Abdelaal, 2020; Bothello & Roulet, 2018). Upon starting HEI employment, I was surprised to find plenty of "pracademic" colleagues either holding a non-traditional doctorate, working towards this, or not yet at that point in their journey (Mirick & Wladkowski, 2020). On the other hand, unmotivated by extrinsic academic career goals (Horta, 2018), I wanted to engage in an intrinsic intellectual quest (Ryan & Deci, 2000; Skakni, 2018) to achieve top level expertise in business management, from which I could begin contributing new knowledge to the field via practice-oriented research and subsequent dissemination (Terentev et al., 2020).

After enrolling on my Diploma qualification, I worked through seven units as per the structure highlighted in Table 2, completing all Group A mandatory units and one Group B optional unit to a total of 67 credits, 210 guided learning hours (GLH), and 670 hours of total qualification time (TQT), typically completed in approximately 12 months (Next Level Impact, 2024). Each unit consisted of online learning materials to engage with, and a written assessment of between 4000-4500 words to complete. Along the way, I found myself to be intrinsically motivated for the main part, but found my regulatory style shifted to somewhat external (introjected regulation) as per the self-determination continuum (Litalien et al., 2015), as I sought and received approval (small wins) after each unit from my mentor, someone I viewed as a role model, which kept me on track and triggered behavioural change by boosting my self-esteem (Jacobs et al., 2012; Nwosu et al., 2022).

Table 2

Qualification Breakdown

Number	Title	Credits	TUT	GLH
	Mandatory Group A			
8001V1	Personal development as a strategic leader	10	100	30
8002V1	Collective strategy development	10	100	30
8003V1	Inter-organisational strategic planning	10	100	30
8004V1	Inter-organisational strategic direction	10	100	30
8005V1	Strategic communication	10	100	30
8006V1	Strategic culture	10	100	30
	Optional Group B			
7013V1	Strategic leadership	7	70	30
7014V1	Strategic leadership practice	7	70	30

Perceptions

Since completing my NUDQ, I have experienced mixed perceptions surrounding it amongst the academic community. I contacted multiple UK universities to enquire about using it as recognition of prior learning (RPL) towards a university-based professional doctorate (DBA), with one stating that they would "consider applying RPL for the taught phase, allowing fast-track to thesis only," and another stating they would not do this due to "credit value and lack of research relevance" The latter comment surrounding research value confirms Mattijssen et al.'s (2020) findings of a pervasive bias favouring the traditional research focus,

and Germain-Alamartine et al.'s (2021) findings that NUDQs are viewed as more practical by the academic community.

Aside from DBA applications, I also received a negative comment from a member of the academic community that my qualification is "far from academic," reaffirming a bias against NUDQs (Dunlap, 2024) and showing disrespect by downplaying my achievement (Suomi et al., 2020) as being less prestigious than a PhD (Hambrick, 1997; Servage, 2009). Ultimately, my experiences highlight that a) Khuram (2024) is correct in calling for better attitudes towards such qualifications, and b) holders of such qualifications can come together to engage in reputation management to improve the overall perception of their achievements (Winn et al., 2008).

Returning to credit value and research focus, there appears to be inconsistency amongst NUDQs. UK based awarding organisations CMI (Next Level Impact, 2024), Qualifi (2024), and OTHM Qualifications (2024) each offer Level 8 Diplomas, each with varied GLH, TQT, credit value, and research focus: despite demanding a similar workload in terms of unit quantity and subsequent assessment word counts. Furthermore, CMI's qualification does not feature a research-related module. Some also note DBA/MPhil/PhD as a progression option, whilst this is not noted with others. This points to a potential opportunity for awarding organisations to work collaboratively to standardise their respective offerings in terms of credit value and research focus, to assist in aforementioned collective reputation management (Winn et al., 2008). A critical gap, however, remains in understanding how NUDQs compare structurally and functionally to PhD or DBA pathways. For example, traditional professional doctorates in the UK span approximately 540 credits, although the CMI Level 8 NUDQ assessed here comprises just 67 credits. This disparity raises questions around depth, research orientation, and volume of independent work. Sixty-seven credits for up to 31,500 words in total across 7 units seems low, given a 540 credit PhD, at most, is less than 3 times that. It is these inconsistencies which breed poor perceptions. Without parity in volume or academic outputs, NUDQs may struggle to gain equivalence in credibility, highlighting the need for clearer qualification frameworks and more explicit positioning within academic hierarchies.

Impact

I have broken down my doctoral level impact into academic (research dissemination) and societal (economic or social contributions), as per ESRC (Adams & Neary, 2022)). In terms of academic impact, my qualification triggered post-completion focus on research due to increased subject matter expertise and decreased imposter syndrome (Jonker et al., 2019). I have subsequently been awarded funding, worked on several projects resulting in the publication of peer-reviewed papers, and delivered an award-winning presentation at the Asia Pacific Institute of Information Technology (APIIT) International Research Conference (IRC) 2024 (APIIT, 2024). As noted by Mosanya (2021), I am now engaged in collaborative research in the spirit of peer co-development and professional networking discussed by Macintosh et al. (2021). Ultimately, my qualification gave me the potential to drive my societal impact in addressing global challenges through future research-driven contributions (Khuram et al., 2023).

In relation to societal, economic, or social contributions (Adams & Neary, 2022), NUDQ completion allowed me to successfully obtain Chartered Fellow status (CMgr FCMI) with CMI, an accolade valued by industry (Watson et al., 2024). CMI (Next Level Impact, 2024) state achieving Chartered status increases an individual's self-awareness skills in 91% of cases and improves management skills in 81% of cases, with 95% achieving organisational results and 81% using their skills to lead people during change. I am in the majority here as I find myself now much more focused on inter- and intra-organisational relationships (key themes in the qualification). This focus has seen me strike up strong relationships with wider departments and other organisations, in my role as a Lecturer in Business. I have subsequently played a part in delivering a significant increase in student numbers associated with my course, just one example of the practical impact of my newfound knowledge. Despite my achievements, I came out of the qualification with more gaps than I went in with, which I feel is a symptom of increased self-awareness which has fuelled a concrete plan to improve further.

Conclusion

This autoethnography contributes to current theory exploring the impact and perceptions of professional doctorate vs traditional PhD routes, and the motivations and barriers of those that study them; by adding another avenue to the debate: the alternative pathway of non-university doctoral qualifications. Subsequently, this paper recommends that scholar practitioners considering flexible and practice-oriented doctoral level study which aligns with their personal and professional commitments, take seriously the option of the qualification route, either as a stepping stone towards a doctorate, or as a final resolution. Furthermore, it recommends that NUDQ holders come together to collectively reshape the perceptions of their qualifications by strongly defending their rigour. The wider academic community, and business schools specifically, can play a part in this by celebrating their peers' achievements of NUDQs in the same way they would a traditional doctorate. The paper also recommends that awarding organisations, including CMI, Qualifi, and OTHM Qualifications, standardise GLH, TQT, credit value, research focus, and progression pathways of their respective NUDQ offerings to ensure consistency.

Limitations of this paper include the restrictive nature of autoethnographic input, (i.e., utilising the lived experiences of a single author). It is also noted that experiences of scholar practitioners with varied demographic factors, such as the nine protected characteristics, may vary. Furthermore, the author's experience may have been positively or negatively skewed by their chosen qualification option, training provider, and own academic network. This paper, therefore, recommends extensive qualitative study into this research matter, achieving a diverse sample population to capture the professional identity, motivations, perceptions, and impact of study for those individuals. Finally, the study is UK-based, where non-university doctoral qualifications are regulated and recognised by a non-ministerial government body. Although qualification such as those by CMI are offered to an international audience, non-UK residents may experience varied response and recognition to the achievement of such a qualification.

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