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Loneliness of the PhD thesis writer

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STUDYING for a doctorate can be a lonely experience. When I started my supervisor compared it to a medieval form of torture where guards used to strap dead bodies to the backs of prisoners, leaving them in the dungeons until the dead body had rotted through the unfortunate inmate's back.

His message: complete it as quickly as you can, with no distractions.

Ignoring that advice I took close to maximum time to complete my PhD (well, that's how it felt): working, partaking in further study and publishing widely before formally graduating. I have the scars on my back to prove it, but it helped me get my start in academe.

The role of the PhD as a rite of passage to becoming an academic is but one of many contradictions in the profession.

How does a minimum of three years spent in virtual solitary confinement writing 100,000 words as a dissertation prepare people to teach classrooms full of undergraduates in their teens? Once upon a time PhD graduates took their time to complete while holding down tutor positions. Not anymore: occasional session teaching is as good as it gets.

How does the PhD - original research that is often complex, bordering on the unintelligible - prepare wannabe lecturers to simplify and refine ideas for an audience new to scholarly endeavours? No formal teaching qualification is required to stand before a classroom in academe.

The isolation of studying for a PhD is matched by university research which is often also done by the individual. Good researchers move up the ranks quickly, putting them in line for promotion to chairs of disciplines, heads of school, deans and VCs.

Being a quality researcher doesn't necessarily provide the right training to become an excellent administrator. And shouldn't universities find ways to provide incentives to keep quality researchers researching, rather than moving into higher-salaried administrative postings?

All professions have their contradictions. In law, for example, you fight your way to partner by being a good lawyer, yet once you get there the role of partner is more PR (getting clients and keeping them) than black letter law. But in the academy the contradictions are vast.

My first supervisor's advice (I took so long to complete that I went through two of them) that I complete quickly represents a particularly important contradiction in the profession.

University funding models encourage pushing students through quickly; yet that isn't necessarily in the students' best interests - certainly not if they are looking to become an academic. There are far more PhD graduates floating around than entry level academic positions. When universities receive applications from eager candidates for new jobs, one of the first things those on the selection panel do is check for publishing output. After all, it's publish or perish.

But if you just spent three years diligently working your way towards PhD completion, you wouldn't have

had the time or the inclination to revise chapters as you go, sending them off to journals for peer review.

Yet that is what gives candidates for new positions the edge. And without taking time off during studying for your PhD you wouldn't have built into your CV real world experience within the discipline you are working in - an increasingly important string to one's bow in the modern university construct.

It's time to think harder about how we bleed people for a career in the academy.

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