

## Doctorates in Great Britain

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In Great Britain a doctoral degree in the humanities and social sciences was never an obligatory condition for an academic post, as had become the standard practice in the U.S.A. already in the 1950s. Although it was possible to take a doctorate at the major universities (Oxford, Cambridge, London, Manchester, Birmingham, Edinburgh, St.Andrews, perhaps a few others), they only became a standard part of British university curricula relatively late, in the 1970s. When I was admitted to register for a doctorate at Oxford, in 1956, immediately after my B.A., there was no Master degree as a preparatory passage, nor even a training programme (except, as far as I can remember, a course in palaeography, clearly necessary for the medievalists). In consequence, the academics who accepted the role of supervisor (tutor) for the most part were not very professional in their responsibilities. Many decades later, I recall an internationally distinguished historian at Oxford (subsequently vice-chancellor of the university) explaining to me that Oxford academics were highly specialized in providing a general training for the undergraduates taking the three-year B.A., but that they had never thought about how to train students at the doctoral level; even though there was a growing number of postgraduates, from the United States and all over the world, who came to Oxford, often because of the fame of a particular historian. And this was many years after the creation of two colleges – Nuffield and St. Antony's - specifically for social science and history postgraduate students<sup>1</sup>.

PhDs are a direct consequence of the rapid expansion of the number of universities from the mid-1960s, and the contemporaneous creation of public-funded research councils in the social sciences (including history). The universities, both the new ones and the older provincial ones, competed to recruit postgraduates, with M.A. courses and PhDs. The Social Science Research Council, SSRC (later restructured as Economic and Social Research Council, ESRC) and, in recent years, the Arts and Humanities Research Council, AHRC, gave selective support through scholarships to departments noted for their research, a logical step since doctorates by definition

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<sup>1</sup> Nuffield College was founded in 1937, St.Antony's College in 1950.

provide training in research<sup>2</sup>. Taken together, such developments have led, almost unawares, and certainly without State legislation, to considering the PhD as a more or less obligatory passage for appointment to a university post. It is perhaps appropriate to add that, in contrast to the expectation in Italy of ministerial scholarships that accompanied (and implicitly encouraged) the uncontrolled multiplication of doctorates in Italian universities, the research councils' selective policy in the award of scholarships to departments probably acted as a deterrent; although departments have an interest in trying to maximize the number of Ph.D students, even if they are without scholarships, as they have become an important indicator of 'research esteem' in the periodic Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) of universities. This role of the research councils as the primary source of triennial scholarships to departments has become ever more important (a theme to which I shall return)..

The starting point for any discussion of the PhD in Great Britain is that, although the universities depend on the State for the greatest part of their funding<sup>3</sup>, they have always had real autonomy in their academic functions. They are not (and never have been) subject to ministerial decrees<sup>4</sup>. There is no national regulation setting out formal procedures for admission to a doctorate, such as the *concorso* in Italy. Nor is there any legal limitation on the number of doctoral students (including part-time students) who can be admitted; hence there is no need for a *graduatoria*. Initially the maximum number of years within which the thesis had to be completed was not formally regulated, and only became standard practice relatively recently (probably since the 1980s)<sup>5</sup>. Nowadays each university specifies a maximum number of years ('permitted study') within which the thesis should be submitted (normally four years); but in practice authorization for examination of a completed thesis is granted one year (or more) after the specified period.<sup>6</sup>

The decision to create a doctorate is taken by the department (as in Italy); the requirements and procedures are subject to the approval of the faculty (or faculties, in the case of departments

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<sup>2</sup> The government introduced a limited number of three-year scholarships already in 1957. Initially the SSRC, created in 1965, funded research projects in 14 academic disciplines, each with a committee; one committee was for social and economic history. When the SSRC was restructured as the ESRC, the resources for history were significantly reduced. Recognition of funding for research in the humanities was long delayed, until 1998, and initially was symbolically represented as less important by its title and resources - Arts and Humanities Research Board; it only achieved the same status of the other councils in 2005, when it became Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC). There are now 7 research councils in England; which, taken together, are the equivalent of the Italian CNR. But each Council is functionally autonomous and financed separately by the Ministry. Rumour has it that the survival of the AHRC is now in doubt.

<sup>3</sup> With one exception, all British universities are public.

<sup>4</sup> This explains why doctoral schools have never even been discussed.

<sup>5</sup> Whereas a minimum number of (three) years before submission of the thesis was specified, probably as a consequence of the regulation of part-time students and university fees.

<sup>6</sup> I do not know of any country except Italy in which, once the deadline of four years has passed, the candidate cannot be examined or obtain any degree. In Great Britain a thesis may be rejected for the Ph.D by the examiners (an almost unknown practice in Italy and most Continental countries); but is customarily granted a compensatory degree, such as an M.Phil.. In Spain, where there is the same deadline as in Italy, few history doctoral theses are completed within four years, but the law allows departments to grant extensions in special circumstances.

that form part of more than one faculty). Not only in Britain but (as far as I know) in all English-speaking countries, the department decides on the admission procedures. There is no *concorso* for a fixed number of doctoral students<sup>7</sup>. Consequently applications do not have to be submitted within a fixed date, but are evaluated whenever they are made. Applications come both from students at other British universities, and in substantial numbers from all over the world; those from ‘internal’ students of the department are few (except, I imagine, at Oxford and Cambridge). It is worth noting that such mobility has always been characteristic of the British system, with undergraduate students applying to go to a university in a city different from their home and school (although in recent years, primarily for economic reasons, local recruitment has become more common).

Foreign students have traditionally chosen to come to Great Britain to study for a doctorate. Initially they applied primarily to Oxford, Cambridge and the LSE (analogous to European students applying to the best American universities), then increasingly to other universities. Compared to Italy, university fees have always been substantial, albeit much lower than their American equivalents. When, in the 1980s, Margaret Thatcher began to cut university funding, heavily and repeatedly, recruitment of foreign undergraduate and graduate students rapidly became an essential source of university finances. The more enterprising universities began to organize recruitment campaigns, sending senior staff not just to countries formerly part of the British empire, but to Asia and Latin America. Currently the fees paid by foreign PhD students in humanities and social sciences range around £10,000 (with requirement of a guarantee of a substantial additional sum to cover living costs)<sup>8</sup>. English language courses for such students became a regular practice within the universities already in the 1980s; university accommodation is normally available, at least for their first year. Such overseas students, including those from Europe and the U.S.A., now constitute a significant proportion of students at the doctoral level, particularly in the largest departments of history. Their presence has become a not insignificant element in making British postgraduate students less insular (although, regrettably, not in their unilinguism).

Applicants for a doctorate are required to send their *curriculum vitae*, a brief outline of their research project and the names of two referees. Nowadays it is easy for them to find out through websites about the academic staff and the particular strengths of the department. In the first instance the departmental coordinator of the doctorate decides whether or not to take the application further. He may reject it because the candidate’s c.v. is inadequate or because the area of research proposed in the project is too distant from the interests and fields of expertise of colleagues; otherwise, he

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<sup>7</sup> This is not the place to discuss the problems that result from the obligatory *concorso*. For example, the paradoxical situation in which mature school and library staff, with publications and experience that advantage them in the *concorso*, can obtain three years of virtual sabbatical leave as doctoral students (without a scholarship, but with their stipends), at the expense of promising young candidates.

<sup>8</sup> The fees for British and EU students are about one third of the overseas rates.

will consult with them (if appropriate, also with colleagues in other departments, for example economic history or international relations), contact the referees, and arrange for the candidate to come for an interview, in which interested colleagues participate. In the c.v. the candidate specifies the courses taken for the B.A. (and any further degree, in particular an M.A.) and the class obtained - at least 2.1; with a virtual guarantee of acceptance for a 1<sup>st</sup> class (only achieved by a very small proportion of students, perhaps 10%)<sup>9</sup>. Projects presented by candidates just completing their B.A. normally do not contain much detail, as the students have not had the research experience of the *tesi di laurea* of their Italian peers. References are fundamental and do not consist of a few lines of strong recommendation about the outstanding qualities of the favoured pupil. British academics recognize that the credibility of the system (as well as of themselves) relies on well-based comments and value judgements about the particular intellectual qualities of the student, his knowledge of and preparation in the field of future research, but also a discrete hint on possible weaknesses that can be resolved.

The three-year B.A. in history is very broad and general (albeit far less so than its American equivalent); nowadays it normally includes a written research project, roughly equivalent to an Italian *tesina*. With the expansion of the universities, one-year M.A.s began to be introduced, not only for British neo-graduates and foreign students who wanted to further their studies and qualifications, but for mature students, teachers and other adults (frequently of mature age) with an interest in following university courses. In practice, the M.A., which consists of taught courses and a reasonably substantial thesis (equivalent to the old *tesi di laurea*), has now become a condition for acceptance as a doctoral student in virtually all universities, in the sense that students are initially registered for an M.A. (unless they already have one), and formally only become doctoral students in their second year. This is essentially for practical reasons, on the one hand as a check on the intellectual capacities of the student, on the other as a form of insurance for the student that he obtain a degree, on the basis of a Masters thesis, should he be advised that he would not be admitted to the doctorate. The first year of a doctorate in Britain is not considered as providing a broad general preparatory basis, unlike the normal practice in the U.S.A., with its substantial number of courses and seminars, structured around texts and theory, which do not leave much time for research on the thesis<sup>10</sup>

Once admitted, responsibility for a research student has always been assigned to the research supervisor. There can little doubt that, with relatively few exceptions (such as Birkbeck College and

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<sup>9</sup> Since examinations are in the summer, for students in their final year acceptance would be conditional on the degree class obtained.

<sup>10</sup> It seems to me plausible that the advisors to the Italian Education Ministry had this American model in mind (with the habitual national bureaucratic added value of rigid uniformity) in the regulation stipulating  $x$  number of hours of face-to-face courses for doctoral students.

UCL in London or some regional graduate centres, like the Birmingham and London Russian and East European schools), until relatively recently the concentration on undergraduate and M.A. teaching effectively marginalized doctoral training in departments, with the consequence that much depended on the commitment of the individual supervisor. I suspect that in many departments doctoral supervision is still not included in the calculations and distribution of teaching hours within the department. On the other hand, from the point of view of the doctoral student, training within a department includes the possibility of teaching experience, particularly the regular weekly classes, with 15 to 20 students (and the Oxbridge tutorials, with essays) that accompany the undergraduate lecture courses; and marking coursework essays, an important element in applications for university teaching posts.

Once the thesis has been completed, and the supervisor has approved that it is of doctoral quality, it can be submitted for examination. There are only two examiners, one from a different university, the other from within the candidate's department; the supervisor can never be included (and is only allowed to be present in very few universities). Unlike Continental universities, there is no formalized preliminary written report by the examiners that the thesis will be approved. Doctoral theses in Great Britain can be rejected by the examiners, although this has become less common<sup>11</sup>. Following the oral *soutenance*, the examiners write a brief report for the faculty board about the quality of the thesis and the discussion; but they do not specify qualitative levels or give any *punteggio*, as in some national systems<sup>12</sup>. It used to be very rare, and although increasingly it has become less unusual, for the doctoral student to publish articles before completing the thesis<sup>13</sup>. The quality of the thesis and its possible publication as a book (in a revised and more readable form), or as one or more articles, become evident through the market process of acceptance by academic journals and publishers.

The intervention of the ESRC proved decisive in radically reforming the somewhat casual approach towards doctoral students and their training. The completion rates of doctoral theses had always been notoriously low in British humanities and social sciences departments. In some (rare) instances, failure to complete the thesis could be consequential on early appointment to a full-time teaching post. In most cases there were financial reasons, once the three year scholarship ended, or through difficulties of self-financing for those without a scholarship; or, for part-time doctoral

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<sup>11</sup> Over a half a century ago, when I was a doctoral student at Oxford, rumour had it that three quarters of the (small number of) doctoral theses in philosophy were rejected.

<sup>12</sup> During my years at the European University Institute there was a prolonged debate about specifying formal levels of quality, with much pressure from French colleagues in favour; in the end it was decided not to grade theses (though some PhD juries provide a broad interpretative wink by including the comment that it is not permitted).

<sup>13</sup> Half a century ago, at Oxford, the formal definition of a doctoral thesis as "an original contribution to knowledge" discouraged prior publication even of articles, lest they infringe its originality. At the other extreme, publication was (and perhaps still is) a prior condition of a German doctorate.

students, because of the difficulties of reconciling the demands of research and writing with the established commitments of daily and family life. The doctoral completion rates of academic institutions, when first published by the ESRC in 1985, were less than 30%. In order to achieve a substantial improvement of four-year completion rates of doctoral theses, the ESRC repeatedly imposed a 10% improvement as a condition for the renewal of scholarships to departments, allowing them three years within which to achieve the new level: by 1998 the submission rate of theses had risen to 80%..

The overall impact of such sanctions has transformed the overall role of graduate and especially doctoral training within social science and humanities faculties, without recourse to arithmetic calculation of 'face-to-face' hours. There are now strict requirements, both within universities and in response to the research councils, on reporting Ph.D student progress. Alongside the Masters courses and graduate seminars, the departments have regulated the responsibilities of supervisors and the progress of doctoral students: for instance, the creation of a small academic board of three, including the supervisor; with whom the doctoral student must discuss his regular written reports on the progress of his research during the year, the completion of a substantial paper or draft chapters of the thesis as a condition for passage to the following year, and similar. But equally important have been the institutional resources available to the doctoral students (graduate rooms, computers, library resources, internet, etc.) and the research, training and informal cultural environment of the department, to which the history panel of the most recent Research Assessment Exercise (2008) gave considerable weight, concluding that doctoral training in Great Britain today appears to be in good shape.

