PROJECTIFICATION OF DOCTORAL EDUCATION

Conflicting Temporal Orders

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What is Projectification?

- A basic process of conceptualising activities in the form of a project. Projects are always limited in time, scope and content before activities have commenced.

- In the academic world, projectification simply means that research processes (including doctoral research) are increasingly understood as the development, assessment and realisation of a project.

- Projects project future research and only exist in statu nascendi.

- We communicate projects to others using a plan that outlines the contents, aims, methods and milestones that ultimately lead to desired results.

- It is expected that the realities of research should follow the plan.

Temporalities of project-based Research

- Given timeframes for new, unique and unknown activities
- Predicting future research dynamics in a plan
- Investing precious research time in planning activities
- Sequencing interdependent activities ('milestones')
- Spending an extended period of time on one topic and excluding or postponing emerging themes
- Linear understanding of time that is constantly running out creates time pressure
- Conflicts between types of time including expected and actual completion times or the duration of research cycles

Evolution and Drivers of Projectification

- Projectification is a long-term trend that can be traced back to the 17th century ("Age of Projects").

- Understanding of projects has shifted significantly from negative (speculative promises) to positive connotations (systematic planning).

- Modern Drivers of Projectification:

a) Applied or targeted research

b) Coordinated research in "Big Science"

c) Assessing, selecting, monitoring project proposals at funding agencies

d) Research governance at academic institutions to drive research performance in terms of publications, funding and PhD completions

The Project concept from 1550 to 2019 (Google Ngram)
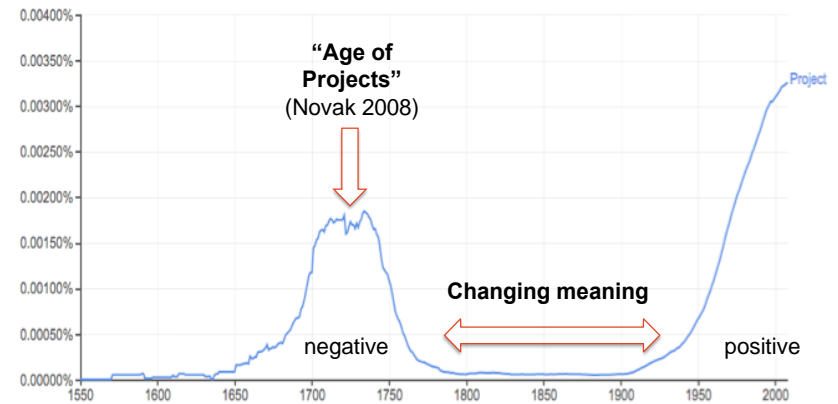
An Early Projector: Daniel Defoe (1660 – 1731)

"The honest projector is he who, having by fair and plain principles of sense, honesty, and ingenuity brought any contrivance to a suitable perfection, makes out what he pretends to, picks nobody's pocket, puts his project in execution, and contents himself with the real produce as the profit of his invention."

*Daniel Defoe, An Essay upon Projects, 1697.*
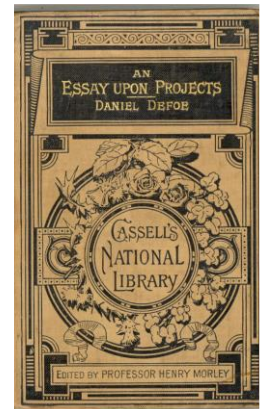
Projects as basic elements in doctoral programs

- Doctoral programs borrow the already established project form and apply it to all stages of the PhD process:
- Project proposals are required for admission, finding supervisors or progressing to candidature
- Proposals function as benchmark for supervision meetings and progress review panels
- Supervisors are assessed in their capacity as project managers
- Coursework provides project-related skills considered relevant within and beyond academia
- Trend towards a broader examination process to address the diverse competencies candidates have developed in the course of their project.

"The development of a research project is the most effective way of training of research" (Ruberti, 2001)

"Students should plan and execute the project within the time limits defined" (USYD 2013)

Figure 6: Optional transversal skills training
What type of optional transversal skills training is offered to doctoral candidates at your institution?
Number of respondents: 127-133/138
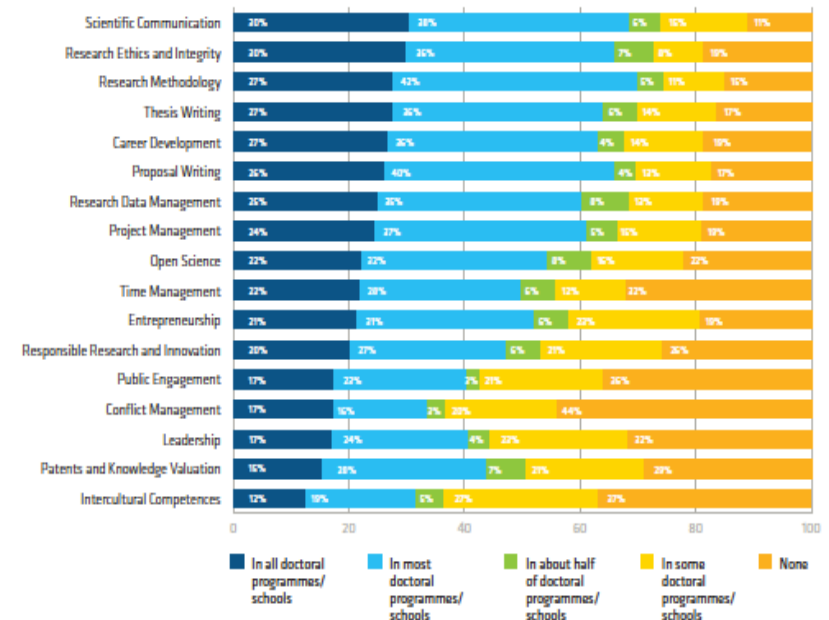
Different 'fit' between projects and doctoral research practices

- Research fields use and relate to the project form differently according to their socio-epistemic properties.

- Creating your individual project is common in the social sciences and humanities but also challenging due to unclear intellectual technologies.

- The best fit was found in observational astronomy where students receive predefined work packages that already contain theories, methods and data to work out a topic.

- Theoretical physics used small 'initial projects' to start an open thought process rather than planning it ahead.

- In experimental physics PhD students usually grow up in teams and already existing experiments. Themes emerge in the course of collective experimental work and individual achievements are ascribed ex post.

	Individual work	Collective work
Good Fit	**Creating individualised projects** (Social Sciences)	**Working out predefined projects** (Observational Astronomy)
Poor Fit	**Generating own ideas in initial projects** (Theoretical Physics)	**Constructing Individual projects ex post** (Experimental Physics)

Torka, M. Projectification of Doctoral Training? How Research Fields Respond to a New Funding Regime. *Minerva* **56,** 59–83 (2018)

Standard time for PhD projects?

– Completion times have been slightly improved but a mismatch between expected and actual completion times remains around the globe: Australia 4.8 versus 3.5, South Africa 5 versus 3, USA 6 versus 4 (after qualifying exam), Netherlands 5 versus 4 years.

– Differences between disciplines and specific student cohorts largely remain indicating that the specific structural and social conditions which drive or slow down completion have not been addressed.

– A re-alignment between normative and real completion time or at least more flexibility in our governance and funding mechanisms is necessary to account for differences in the PhD process.
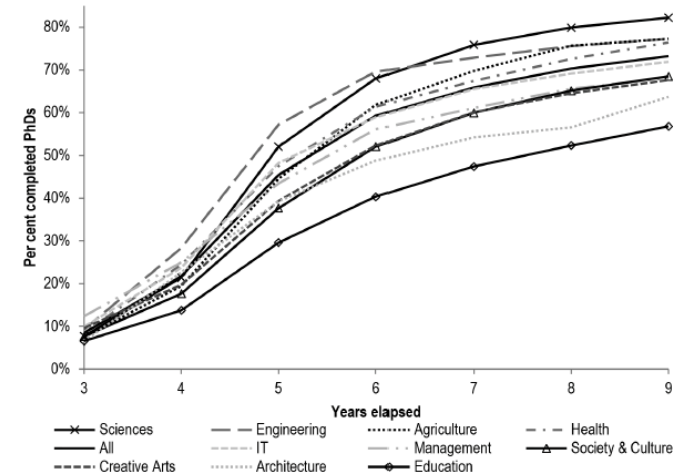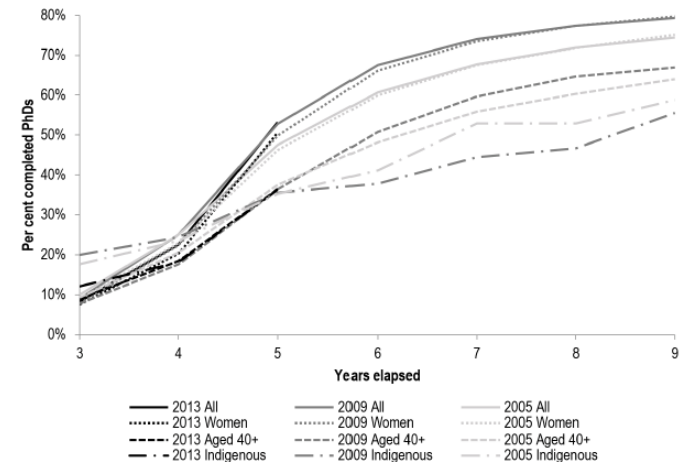

Figure 2: CCR 2009 all Broad Fields of Education

Figure 9: CCRs by full-time student characteristics

Torka, M. Change and continuity in Australian doctoral education. PhD completion rates and times (2005-2018). AUR 62, 69-82 (2020)

Wrap up

– Projects are considered key mechanisms in doctoral programs to deal with tight timeframes, accelerate the doctorate and control the research process.

– Project-based research is a demanding model particularly for novice researchers.

– Projects fit differently to doctoral education practices and do not guarantee timely completion.

How can we maintain temporal flexibility in organizational and funding frameworks to address different needs?