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Doctoral School Annual Lecture 2020

The Question of Doctorateness

Theory and Practice

Shosh Leshem

Doctoral School
University of Malta

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Foreword

On 22 November 1974, the University of Malta bestowed on a researcher from the Department of Chemistry its first Doctor of Philosophy (Ph.D.) degree. Since then talented students in all disciplines have chosen the University of Malta to push the boundaries of human knowledge as part of their graduate studies. The growth in the number of doctoral candidates has been an exponential one in the last twenty years with graduates increasing year on year. A good number of our doctoral researchers are foreign and they bring with them a range of experiences and the wish to shape their research fields through original insights, methods and data sets. More than ever before, the community of graduate students and academic supervisors is transforming our old university putting research at the centre of its mission and strategy.

It may come as no surprise that in the year of the University's 250th anniversary from its re-foundation, the Doctoral School chose its annual lecture as an opportunity to reflect on those qualities that constitute a doctorate. Professor Shosh Leshem has written extensively on the subject. Her address invites us to consider the meaning and significance of doctoral education in a fast changing world, where the aspirations of society are challenging the very nature of what constitutes the highest award that tertiary institutions can award their students.

On 28 February 2020, Professor Leshem delivered her address remotely, from her home in Israel. The effects of the COVID-19 pandemic were beginning to be felt around the world. International travel and mobility were curtailed. This was the last

in-person event that the Doctoral School organised. The stakes in this worldwide pandemic have never been higher as lives are lost, economies falter and our lives keep changing radically. We salute those researchers from all over the world who rose to the challenge of providing hope for humankind.

Nicholas Vella
Director, Doctoral School

Doctoral School Annual Lecture Series

28 February 2020

Shosh Leshem (Kibbutzim Academic College of Education and Oranim Academic College of Education), Israel

The Question of Doctorateness: Theory and Practice

1 March 2019

Ivan Callus (Department of English, Faculty of Arts, University of Malta)

The PhD, Tal-Qroqq and Campus Fiction

The Question of Doctorateness: Theory and Practice

Studies for a doctoral degree endow their recipients with a title and a claim to researching proficiency, rigour and incisiveness which entails a demanding framework of academic studies and a process of rigorous assessment. This prompts the exploration of the characteristics that influence the process of assessment and criteria used by the assessors. While each university, and sometimes even faculties and disciplines, possess their own institutional regulatory procedures that apply to their degrees, there are generic features of 'the doctorate' that transcend any individual university or discipline. These features have sometimes been referred to as the 'gold standard' (Taylor 2008: 71). This 'gold standard' constitutes doctorateness, which is what examiners are looking for in theses, and what doctoral candidates strive to achieve in order to be awarded the doctorate. So, what is common to all doctorates? What is the special 'something' that is recognized by examiners and doctoral graduates? In what sense is it different from the expectations and requirements bearing upon other degrees? This short essay attempts to answer some of these questions.

The debates around the definition of doctorateness

The term 'doctorateness' entered the lexicon of doctoral education little more than a decade ago. Since then it has gained momentum and a body of research on the topic is already available. A study conducted by Yazdani and Shokooh in 2008 found 82 published articles, reports,

documents and books on the concept, originating mostly from the UK, the US, Europe and Australia. Yet, 'doctorateness' still has not gained currency worldwide (Poole 2015) and a definition of the term has not won its place in any dictionary.

There have been many attempts to define doctorateness and I will provide just a few in chronological order. Already in 1997 the UK Council for Graduate Education published a report on the quality of the doctorate and defined doctorateness as follows: "The essence of "doctorateness" is about an informed peer consensus on mastery of the subject; mastery of analytical breadth (where methods, techniques, contexts and data are concerned) and mastery of depth (the contribution itself, judged to be competent and original and of high quality)' (Frayling *et al*. 1997: 11).

In 2007 Park suggested that the essence of doctorateness should be a topic of debate due to internationalization and the growth of interdisciplinary research, and defined doctorateness in terms of factors that must be present for any particular degree to fit into the category, or factors that allow us to discriminate between a doctorate and other degrees (Park 2007). In 2008 Trafford and Leshem designed a model based on longitudinal research of key criteria on which to base judgment of doctorateness in any particular piece of research (Trafford and Leshem 2008). Murray indicated that 'doctorateness' might seem an odd or even new word for some students, examiners and supervisors, but its use does pose a particular type of question, inviting students to consider closely where in their thesis they have engaged explicitly with doctoral criteria (Murray 2009).

For Denicolo and Park the term is a reflection of the mix of qualities required of a person who has or is acquiring doctorateness, including such things as intellectual quality and confidence, independence of thinking, enthusiasm, commitment and ability to adapt to changing circumstances and opportunities. They suggested the Researcher Development Framework as a tool for evidencing doctoral graduate attributes. So, 'the current challenge is to reform doctoral assessment to meet contemporary situations whilst maintaining continuity and congruence with the past' (Denicolo and Park 2010: 3).

Wellington (2013) offered five areas of discussion where we could 'search' for the meaning of the doctorate: the purposes of doctoral study, the impact of doctorates, written regulations for the award of the doctorate, the examination process and the voices of those involved in it. He also contended that the idea of doctorateness is a 'contested concept', arguing that we are never likely to have complete agreement on the nature of doctorateness and that to search for attributes 'common to all' is like looking for the Holy Grail. Nevertheless, we need to keep the debate alive.

Poole (2015) critiqued Wellington's arguments and stated that we should not abandon the attempt to identify and describe rigorously an 'inner essence' of doctorateness. He believes that due to diversity in the types of doctorates offered by universities around the world and the re-shaping of our understanding of what a doctorate is, it is vital to stimulate debate about what a doctorate should be. In addition, the question of whether doctorateness should

be seen as residing in doctoral dissertations, doctoral candidates, or both will drive and promote the conceptualization of doctorateness. In this respect, he suggested that the amount of publishable material fit for journals of repute in a dissertation, should be a useful scale for measuring the doctorateness of a thesis.

Yazdani and Shokooh (2018) believe that too much emphasis is put on the product part of the doctoral study (in other words, the submitted thesis and the subsequent thesis defence), rather than the process, and too much stress on the thesis as an 'original contribution to knowledge'. They offered another view of defining the concept, defining doctorateness as: 'A personal quality, that following a developmental and transformative apprenticeship process, results in the formation of an independent scholar with a certain identity and level of competence and creation of an original contribution, which extends knowledge through scholarship and receipt of the highest academic degree and culminates stewardship of the discipline' (Yazdani and Shokooh 2018: 42).

In light of all said above, we should not forget that there are national institutional and international factors influencing the nature of the doctoral degree. Given the variety of doctoral awards and the differences in approach, emphasis, structure and outputs, defining 'doctorateness' in a contemporary situation is challenging. Firstly, questions arise about what they all have in common that defines them as doctoral, and how equity of standards between all types of doctoral awards can be assured and evidenced (Dunin-Woyseth and Nilsson 2012).

Secondly, we live in a context of globalization which affects universities and the preparation of researchers all over the world (Altbach 2009). Global trends are emerging in PhD studies and policy makers are aware of the potentially international reach and dimension of the local decisions they take concerning provisioning and governance of doctoral programmes (Nerad and Evans 2014). The implications and outcomes can be seen in the flow of international students, international collaboration, diversified modes of knowledge production, and implementation of systems of accountability (Nerad 2012). While there is a worldwide upsurge in the standardization of doctoral education, different competencies are being demanded and the question is whether we can find agreement on what these competencies are. Nerad presents research carried out by the Center for Innovation and Research in Graduate Education in the US which investigated the question and found agreement on three points as to which skills and competencies a PhD graduate should possess:

1. *Traditional skills and competencies:* […] in-depth knowledge of the researcher's field, knowledge about the development of conceptual frameworks and research designs, knowledge about the application of appropriate research methods, and skill in writing about and publishing research findings, critical thinking, analysis, synthesis, research integrity, and ethical conduct of research.

2. *Professional competencies:* […] to be able to communicate complex research findings to diverse audiences; work in multi-, trans-, or interdisciplinary teams; write grants; apply knowledge in commercially viable, socially responsible ways; manage people and budgets; and take on leadership roles in complex organizations.

3. *Cultural competencies:* [...] competencies that are pertinent to effective collaboration in international teams dedicated to solving societal problems in multinational settings (Nerad 2012: 57).

As we can see, there are ongoing debates about the definition of doctorateness and its utility, but there are generic, universal characteristics which are requisite components in any doctorate. These will be discussed in the second part of this essay. I will focus on the notion of doctorateness from Trafford and Leshem's point of view and its practical implications. The data presented draw on insider research gathered over more than 6 years, extensive supervisory and examining experience, observations, participation and documents from conducting international workshops for doctoral supervisors and candidates in different countries. This yielded the book *Stepping Stones to Achieving your Doctorate by focusing on your viva from the start* (Trafford and Leshem 2008).

The notion of Doctorateness

We chose the words of T. S. Eliot to illustrate our approach to the doctoral journey:

The end is where we start from.
What we call the beginning is often the end
And to make an end is to make a beginning.

Eliot's words have a practical application in guiding how candidates might think about assessing their doctoral research. Using the

generic questions that examiners ask provides them with a practical template from which to write, present and submit doctoral research. Making the research destination (*the end*) explicit should be the starting point for candidates and guide the subsequent planning and execution (*the beginning*) for their doctoral research. In this sense, Eliot's words offer a visualisation of successful doctoral journeys. The words identify, implicitly, crucial relationships between ends and beginnings. Thus, the candidate uses the end (judgements on the merit of a thesis) as a guide from the start of the doctoral journey (how they undertake the research and present it). This concurs with Murray's observation that '… it is never too early to start thinking about your viva' (Murray 2003: 45).

Questions in a viva are not arbitrary and they follow a certain pattern. This transpires from attendance at numerous vivas and the collation of the questions asked by the examiners. Exploring the motivation for their questions after the viva and analysing their individual written reports has revealed that examiners recognized and commend two significant approaches that candidates had to the research: first, how the thesis exhibited innovative features of research design that used concepts in a developmental manner; and second, the scholarship on and interpretation of 'realities' that were presented by the candidate (Trafford and Leshem 2002). Thus, examiners' questions can be mapped against two axes, namely 'Innovation and Development' and 'Scholarship and Interpretation'. This produces quadrants that focus respectively on: Technology of the thesis, Theoretical perspectives, Practice of research, and Demonstrating

doctorateness (Trafford and Leshem 2002). The features in each of the quadrants are singly and collectively important in the production of a doctoral thesis (Trafford and Leshem 2008: 19); however, they differ in their respective level of conceptualisation (Figure 1).
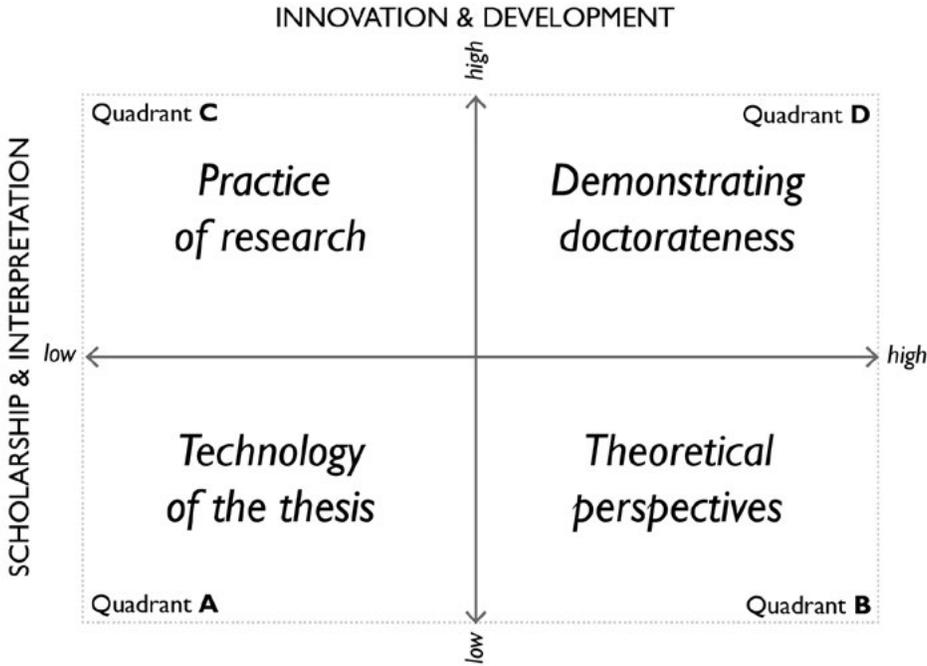
INNOVATION & DEVELOPMENT

Quadrant **C**

Practice of research

Quadrant **D**

Demonstrating doctorateness

Technology of the thesis

Theoretical perspectives

Quadrant **A**

Quadrant **B**

SCHOLARSHIP & INTERPRETATION

high

low

low ← → high

Figure 1: Quadrants of questions in a doctoral viva.

Quadrants A, B and C provide the foundation for Quadrant D where the candidate demonstrates doctorateness (see also Figure 4 – interpretation of quadrant D). Figure 2 shows the distribution of questions (represented by stars) in an observed successful and an observed unsuccessful viva. The analysis of the questions shows that

it is possible to distinguish between the relative focus of examiners' questions. It highlights how a successful viva proceeded in respect of the questions that were asked by the examiners. It implies that for this thesis most questions focused on quadrant D because the examiners were satisfied by how other aspects were dealt with in the thesis and recognized that the candidate is ready for higher-order and conceptually evolved questions. The unsuccessful viva illustrates the opposite, where the examiners were not satisfied with aspects pertaining to quadrants A, B, C, and concluded that the candidate was not ready yet for quadrant D questions.
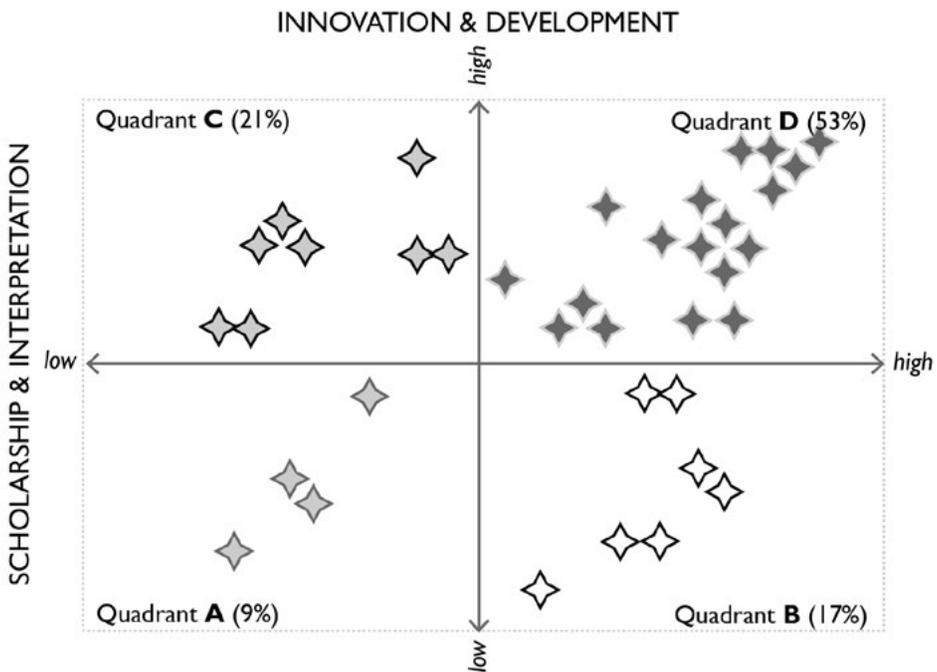

Figure 2: Questions in a doctoral viva.

The focus on scholarship and conceptualisation shown in quadrant D demonstrate high-level thinking and that the candidate was able to conceptualise their work. This is what examiners are looking for (Figure 3).

Figure 3: Interpretation of Quadrant D – the quadrant of doctorateness.

These views of how questions in the viva offer insights about doctorateness are based on four practical conclusions: (i) initial reading of the thesis determines the agenda of questions that examiners ask in the viva; (ii) 'good' theses will attract proportionally more questions concerning issues of doctorateness than 'poor' theses; (iii) 'poor' theses will attract proportionally more questions on the technology of the thesis, literature and practice of research than 'good' theses;

(iv) defending successfully the scholarship in the thesis provides a firm foundation on which to defend the thesis in the viva.

These conclusions can help the doctoral candidate to recognize the importance of several considerations: first, organizing thinking before even commencing writing; second, envisaging what the thesis might look like; third, avoiding becoming over descriptive and identifying the conceptual 'thread' that goes through the thesis and so achieve cohesion in the arguments and depth in the thesis.

The four quadrants comprise the critical elements of doctoral research which interest examiners and are inescapable in doctorates. They are illustrated in Figure 4.

Figure 4: Synergy and doctorateness: critical components of doctoral research.

Each box represents an essential element of research activity that has to be accounted for and explained in the thesis. The interconnectedness between the research-related items implies that they depend on one another to create a network of equally important issues. When all 12 boxes are appropriately represented, and there is dependency between these separate components, then it is the nature of their interdependencies that will determine how their collective effectiveness and synergy will be achieved. Thus, *'doctorateness results from specific critical features [... that] form a mutually interdependent network system of parts that have practical relationships within the thesis. Inherent in this model is the notion of synergy – the whole may be greater than the sum of its parts'* (Trafford and Leshem 2008: 52).

So, the features that examiners expect to find in doctoral theses are indicators of high-quality scholarship and research. Examiners consistently look for how doctoral research addresses a gap in knowledge via research questions that are founded on explicit conceptual frameworks. The research design and appropriate methodology combine to illustrate candidates' grasp of research as an integrated process. A clear and precise presentation of text that demonstrates engagement with theoretical perspectives and is coherent throughout the thesis should produce a thesis that readers will "enjoy" reading. These features which typify high-quality research are constantly found in excellent doctoral theses, and collectively they make high-level thinking visible and demonstrate doctorateness. Examiners will immediately recognize how the

presentation of argument and structure makes the thesis coherent as a piece of scholarly research. They will conclude that the thesis demonstrates doctorateness and that the candidate demonstrates episteme and is *thinking like a researcher.*

Relationships and the interdependence that create synergy in the thesis: practical examples

Synthesizing, making linkages and theorizing are quite a challenge for candidates (Wisker 2008). I will present just a few examples of generic features of doctorateness which illustrate linkages and explain internal cohesion and, thus, scholarly thinking.

The model in Figure 5 portrays a sequence of decisions in choosing the research strategy. These decisions involve a critical thinking process to determine how that research is to be undertaken. These decisions are interrelated and show different levels of thinking that have to be explained and appear explicitly in the thesis, as examiners want to know more about the *Why* and the *How* (explaining) rather than the *What* or *Who* (describing). For example, the choices of paradigms framing the research questions have strategic importance as they affect the choices in the subsequent levels. By making the assumptions about the paradigm explicit it is then possible to align the choice of investigatory approach with the paradigm. The research approach follows from the paradigm (deductive, inductive, mixed, etc). Depending on the research approach, the methodologies will be chosen and subsequently the methods. Explaining the links between the components shows how they all coordinate and build strategic

consistency leading to a solid research design. This strengthens the defence within the thesis.
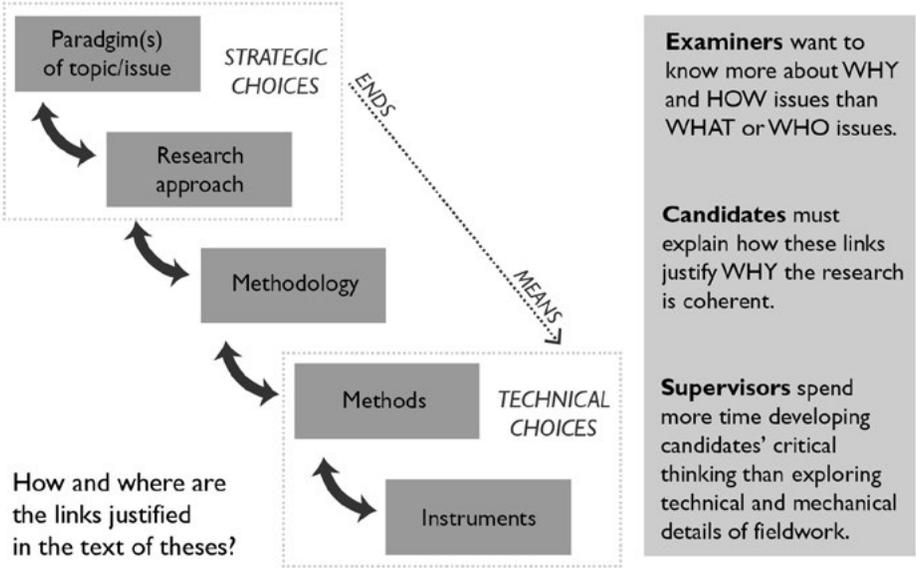

Figure 5: Research as a strategic process.

The model in Figure 6 illustrates the centrality of the Conceptual Framework in the research process. It functions as a signpost that runs through the thesis providing traceable connections between theoretical perspectives, research strategy and design, fieldwork and the conceptual significance of the evidence; 'It is a bridge between paradigms which explain the research issue and the practice of investigating that issue' (Leshem and Trafford 2007: 99).
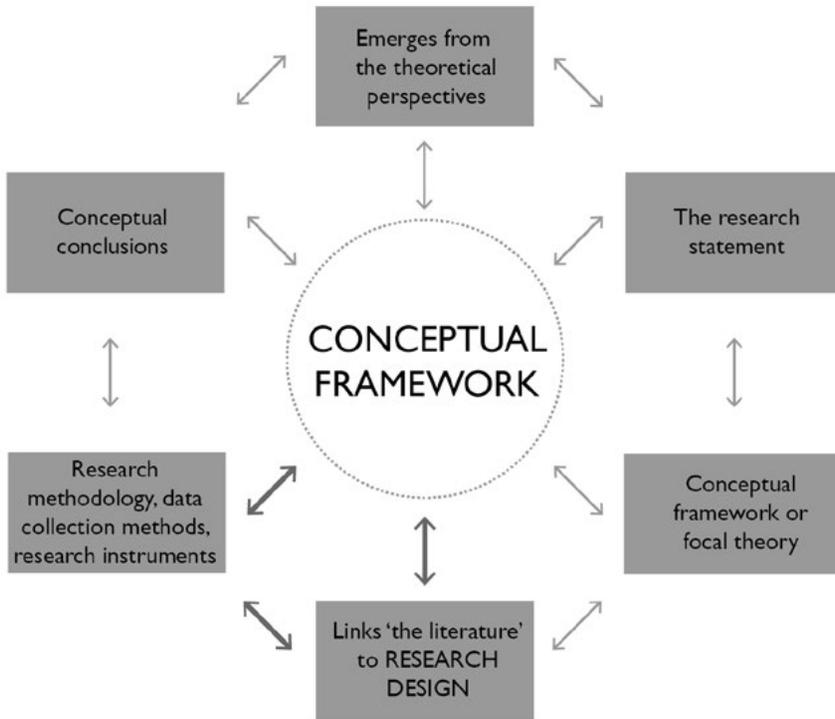
Figure 6: The context of conceptual frameworks.

The model in Figure 7 provides a vision of the research process as a system of interconnected parts. Moving clockwise from the Research Issue shows factors that are concerned with the Gap in Knowledge with iterations between Research Design and Fieldwork (in disciplines where fieldwork applies). The final three factors involve differing levels of contributing to knowledge. The internal diagonal arrows inside the circle link pairs of factors which are influential on one another. The research issue and the research design show how the boundaries and focus of the issue are apparent in how the research was designed.

The research statement and factual conclusions show how the research statement relates directly to the factual conclusions that are drawn from the evidence. The research questions and interpretive conclusions show how answers to research questions should emerge from the interpretation, analysis and discussion of the evidence. The conceptual framework and conceptual conclusions determine the scholarly and theoretical level of the research. It demonstrates the relationship and relevance of the research to other external research and extant theories (Rose 1982). The model enables the planning and auditing of integrated and coherent research. A detailed explanation can be found in Trafford and Leshem (2008: ch. 10).
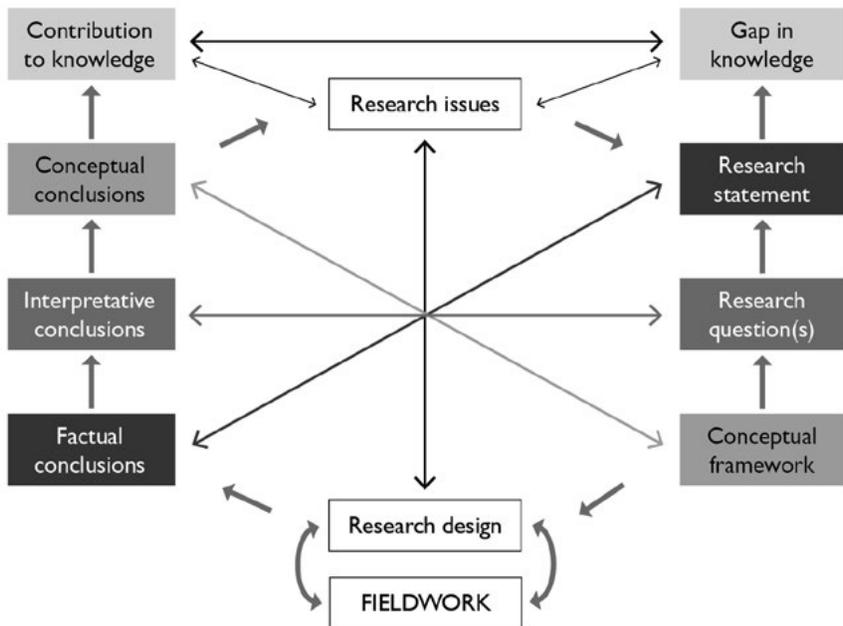

Figure 7: The magic circle.

Some food for thought and 'difficult questions' for candidates and supervisors

Doctorateness is a plural concept. It contains multiple components. All have to be evident in the research and in the thesis for examiners to recognize. It embodies both doing and achieving a doctorate. It combines research process and research technique. It distinguishes doctoral degrees from other academic awards. It is displayed via text, structure, content and presentation of theses. It enables research quality to be identified, assessed and appreciated. Explicitly, doctorateness coincides with the criteria for assessing a doctoral thesis. It accommodates expectations of 'the product' and 'the process' and its generic features apply across the disciplines.

The final words include some practical questions that candidates should ask themselves in order to achieve scholarly merit in their research. An important developmental part of the research process involves 'difficult questions' that researchers can ask themselves and answer appropriately. Identifying and resolving such questions helps candidates to understand the complexity of 'doing research' and then to make it visible in their thesis and in their oral defence. Some examples of questions are as follows: *What are the characteristics examiners look for in a thesis? Why is it important to make my thinking visible in my thesis and how can I accomplish it? What is my conceptual or theoretical framework? What is its place in my research? How do I devise a conceptual framework? How can I reach the level of thinking required for displaying scholarship which will award me the doctorate? How can I claim to have made a 'contribution to knowledge'*

as required by University regulations to judge the scholarly merit of a thesis? How can I audit the process of research and the thesis to ensure that it demonstrates methodological rigour and scholarship? How should one define 'doctorateness' in a contemporary situation where there are a variety of types of doctoral programmes and awards?

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Prof. Shosh Leshem
Kibbutzim Academic College of Education and Oranim Academic College of Education, Israel

Shosh Leshem is Professor in Education at Oranim Academic College of Education and Kibbutzim Academic College, Israel. She has published extensively in the fields of doctoral education, postgraduate supervision, mentoring, language acquisition (EFL/ESL), academic writing and teacher education. She was a visiting scholar at Harvard Graduate School of Education and a visiting lecturer in a number of universities in Europe, including Malta (where she has been hosted by the Faculty of Education), the USA and South Africa, teaching on doctoral programmes and conducting workshops for doctoral students, supervisors and examiners. She is also co-author, with Vernon Trafford, of the seminal book *Stepping Stones to Achieving your Doctorate: focusing on your viva from the start*. Professor Leshem has been involved in international projects on teaching excellence in higher education in the framework of the Erasmus programme, and is also a reviewer for various international journals and conferences.

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