



## **Making Meaning from the Minoritarian PhD: How to Build a Significant Original Contribution to Knowledge for a PhD by Prior Publication**

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### **Abstract**

Doctorates are diverse. Spanning from the traditional thesis and the artefact and exegetical mode through to the professional doctoral suite, the PhD is not singular in its enrolment, methodology or outputs. This article investigates one of the smallest and most unusual doctoral enrolments: the PhD by Prior Publication. The goal of this article is to discuss this mode with specific attention to how a Significant Original Contribution to Knowledge (SOCK) is created through papers published before an enrolment commences. This article also demonstrates – through form and content – how the student and supervisory relationship changes through this way of completing a PhD.

Keywords: Doctor of Philosophy, PhD by Prior Publication, Significant Original Contribution to Knowledge (SOCK)

### **Introduction**

The higher degree by research (HDR) – as a qualification - is filled with acronyms, national legislative requirements, and cliches that are a proxy for academic standards, including confirming scope and scale and volume of learning. But higher degrees are diverse. They include research masters' degrees, that are granted nomenclatures such as a Master of Philosophy, Master of Science and Master of Arts. But higher degrees also span through an array of doctoral modes, including the Professional Doctorate (Laing and Brabazon, 2007; Lee, Brennan and Green, 2009) and incorporate such qualifications as the Doctor of Education, Doctor of Business Administration, and the Doctor of Public Health, noting the multiple disciplines and professions included in allied health in particular (Jolley, 2007). But even the PhD – the Doctor of Philosophy – features an array of modes of research and outputs, including the 'traditional' format of an integrated document of

between 70,000 and 100,000 words, and an artefact and exegetical thesis. This latter category is composed of an object – such as a novel, educational design, paintings, furniture or a performance – and a 40,000 word explanation that demonstrates the original research constructed through the multimodal configuration. Part of this diversity of enrolments, outputs and ‘products’ results from neoliberalism and the rhetoric of the knowledge economy (Usher, 2002). However it is also clear that as students diversify in terms of age, gender, class, race, impairment and disability, different modes of doctorate serve multiple requirements. This is productive inclusion. It is also ensuring standards are maintained without standardization. This is not a PhD as preparation for an academic post or training for the ‘future’ of work (Ball, 2002). It is not housing “generic skill development” (Manathunga and Wissler, 2003). A PhD is not being “uberfied” (Brabazon, 2024a). Instead, it is a recognition of students who are already in work and completing a doctorate for personal interest or professional enhancement of an already successful career.

To understand the complexity and multiplicities in doctoral education requires a profound reconsideration of the relationships between students and supervisors / advisors. Doctoral supervision must change when the assumptions about a ‘young’ student guided by an experienced advisor are displaced. Suddenly, the emotional process (Johansson et al., 2014) is usurped by the need to transform and professionalize supervision for the “modern doctorate” (Lee, 2018), to “partner” with students (Kaur et al., 2022) and “co-create” (Riva et al., 2022), rather than continue to validate homology through a master and apprenticeship model.

Even when recognizing the plurality of doctorates, some modes remain marginal and marginalized. This article investigates one specific type of doctorate that exists internationally: the PhD by Prior Publication. The first part of the article summons the history, requirements, expectations and assumptions of this mode of doctorate, followed by specific attention to the SOCK, the Significant Original Contribution to Knowledge, confirming the key definitional distinction that separates the masters and a doctorate. The final, and largest, part of this paper probes how a supervisory relationship between student and supervisor can create a successful PhD by Prior Publication, building a SOCK, while noting the inclusion of research that has been disseminated over a relatively wide span of time.

This article has an unusual shape and structure. Our goal is to increase the visibility, awareness and currency of the PhD by Prior Publication. This imperative has been actioned through a presentation of the history, strengths and weakness of this mode of doctorate, and then to focus on one specific challenge: how to develop a Significant Original Contribution to Knowledge (SOCK) in this mode of PhD. The article has been written by two experienced researchers and professionals who came together in a supervisory relationship to complete a PhD by Prior Publication. It offers a contribution to the understanding of academic writing in doctoral education (Paltridge and Starfield,

2016). That is why the last section of the article assumes a question-and-answer format, so that new information and interpretations can be added to the discussions about the diversity of doctorates in the present and the future.

### **Defining the Doctorate**

The publishing encircling doctoral education is dominated by quite basic ‘How to do a PhD’ guides. Most scholars only complete one doctorate in their lives, so experiential ideologies offer patchy framing and assistance. ‘When I did my PhD’ is a slogan that summons a data set of one, that is overwrought by subjectivity, opinion and over-sharing. The doctorate is complex, highly regulated, governed through national legislation, and requires the maintenance of international standards. The complexity of this andragogy and professional socialization is intensified because of the increasing diversity of doctorates. Yet through the proliferation of modes, what makes a doctorate a doctorate? Except for the higher doctorates that are determined by very distinctive criteria detailing achievements over a career since the PhD was completed, the PhD and attendant doctorates are the highest degree awarded in a university. While awarded in and from a specific institution and nation, they are international qualifications. They must travel and the standard of the qualification be recognized so that – without question – the degree is equivalent in quality in Australia, Finland, Indonesia, Canada, Algeria and Malaysia. Therefore, the discussions about doctoral standards are not a national concern. It is an international matter.

A PhD is based on competitive entry. Students must have validated qualifications, available supervision, resourcing, and support to gain entry into a programme. The intellectual ability of the candidate is assessed, as is the project, before enrolment. The project must have the potential to develop a significant original contribution to knowledge. A Master’s degree synthesizes knowledge. The doctorate must develop originality in some way. The doctorate is not a participation award. Solid lab work is not sufficient. The doctorate is granted after being assessed by independent international experts and the calibre of the research is evaluated. The standard of the research is assessed. The reputation, independence and skill of the candidate is verified through the protocols of examination which involves – in most nations – the assessment of a written document and an oral examination (Bourke and Holbrook, 2013).

Three characteristics are required to frame and shape a doctoral programme: outstanding candidates, an original contribution to knowledge, and international examiners who are empowered to evaluate the thesis against scholarly standards and institutional and national regulations. There are many challenges that corrode these standards. A first issue is the diversity of the doctorate. There are five different doctorates: the traditional doctorate, the artefact and exegetical thesis, the professional doctoral suite (Nelson and Coorough, 1994; Neumann, 2005), the PhD by Publication, and the PhD by Prior

Publication. The challenge – and perhaps it is impossible – is to create a culture of equivalence between these modes. This is the greatest difficulty in the governance of doctorates. When universities and international higher education reduces the standards of a doctorate, then the highest qualification granted at a university is undermined. Anything that undermines the independence and power of the examiner must question doctoral quality.

Refereeing for published articles and the examination of a doctorate require different standards. Peer review is different from examination. Therefore, to demonstrate this difference, a pivotal and historical moment of change in doctoral education is summoned that also introduces the frame for this article. In 1992 in the UK, the former polytechnics became universities. The CNAA, the Council of National Academic Awards, was held responsible for moving the polytechnics into the university system and verifying the scholarly standards. There were many challenges in this movement. One issue was about the credentialling of staff in the former polytechnics. They were research active academics, but frequently did not have a PhD. One definition of a university is the capacity to supervise and award doctoral degrees. Therefore, this movement by the CNAA was aligned with a change in the doctoral space. This change was logged at the time by Noble (1994).

The PhD by Prior Publication was constructed so that the academic staff with publications during their career could bundle them together, with a newly written introduction and conclusion. When the publications were integrated, a PhD was constructed. This was a controversial configuration. One author of this article has an insider view of this committee. Tara Brabazon's late husband Steve Redhead was a member of the CNAA and was a member of the committee assessing whether a specific number of publications would be equivalent to a PhD. He disagreed with this inclusion in the doctoral suite (Redhead and Brabazon, 2023). This is a significant question: would five articles be equivalent to a PhD? What about seven articles? Nine? The traditional thesis is much more intricate and complex than a collection of articles, capturing a wider scope and scale. This traditional mode of theses is critiqued and attacked by the PhD by Publication. This enrolment produces articles during the enrolment and is favoured by supervisors who want co-authorship on articles with their students. The traditional thesis can be written by a student in a way that confirms their individual authorship is verified by research codes of conduct in disparate nations. It is in the interest of exploitative supervisors to discredit the traditional doctorate, so that student papers increase their publication list and citations (Brabazon, 2024b).

Such statements and interpretations are not anti-publications emerging through the candidature. Most doctorates have publications derived from them. It is not unusual. There is nothing special about publications emerging from a thesis. However, it is important to note in both policy and application that refereeing and examination are unique formations.

Significantly, the PhD by Prior Publication also does not harvest publications for supervisors. Students arrive into the enrolment with already published articles, book chapters, books and NTROs (Non Traditional Research Outputs). Supervisors cannot gain authorship credits on articles that are already published. Therefore, for the academics that require student publications to enable their own career, the traditional thesis and the PhD by Prior Publication are not of use. The death of the traditional doctorate has been proposed for some time. By 2009, Donna Lee Brien posed the question, “Is the ‘traditional’ PhD becoming obsolete?” (2009). Her pessimistic prediction was not accurate. The traditional PhD continues to dominate enrolments in higher degree programmes.

The PhD by Prior Publication (PPP) is a small enrolment in doctoral programmes, but offers a mirror moment to doctoral studies and the administration and governance of higher degrees. Many more articles and publications are included in a PPP than in a PhD by Publication. Further, a long and large integrating essay or contextual statement builds the relationship between the articles, and confirms the SOCK. The examination protocols also confirm that peer review is distinct from examination, as the peer reviewed material is all placed under examination for a different set of standards and evaluation. Therefore, the PPP is a meta-doctorate, revealing the assumptions about publications, supervision, volume of work and – indeed – the supervisory exploitation of the student (Martin, 2013). This mode of doctorate that began as a way to render polytechnic academics compliant and equivalent with the requirements of a university workforce has – thirty years later – become a diagnostic tool to verify the scope and scale of a doctorate regarding length and breadth, volume of work, empowerment of the examiner, and how to verify a SOCK.

The Australian Quality Framework, formulated by TEQSA (Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency), confirms the requirements of certificates, diplomas, and degrees, including the doctorate. The doctoral degree is AQF 10 (Australian Qualifications Framework level 10), the highest level accorded in their schema (AQF, 2024). It involves the application of a “substantial body of knowledge” and the development of new knowledge. The challenge is that a PhD by Publication, sometimes termed a sandwich PhD, may be the length of a research masters degree, coded the AQF 9. The SOCK becomes the only definitional distinction (AQF, 2024). With the PhD by Prior Publication featuring ten or more refereed articles and a 10,000-30,000 word integrating statement, the PhD by Publication may appear small, lacking scope and scale, and volume of work. Noting the diagnostic role of the PPP or indeed – to change metaphors – the canary in the mine / mind of international doctoral education, the definitional parameters will now be specified in greater depth.

### **The Specificities of the PhD by Prior Publication**

As discussed in the last section, the CNAAC, the Council of National Academic

Awards, moved the polytechnics into the British university system. There were many challenges with regard to quality assurance and governance matters through this movement. Discussions on the number of articles, the role of authorship and co-authorship, and how originality could be proven through articles written over many years, were all areas of discussion. The imperative was to transform refereed articles – with a different aim, outcome, audience and argument – into a clustering that could form a PhD.

This was a complex moment of quality assurance for national systems of doctoral regulation. But the difficult quality assurance work was completed. Now, three decades on, the PhD by Prior Publication still exists, but this original aim or goal has now dissipated. More people are in doctoral programmes around the world than at any point in the history of universities. When junior academic posts are advertised, most of the candidates already hold PhDs. The original aim – to ensure experienced staff had a pathway to the doctorate that recognized their prior research career - has gone. The degree remains. One of the authors of this article has written the regulations and implemented this mode of doctorate in two universities. The trends and tendencies of these new enrolments are intriguing. The degree is currently dominated by health professionals. Those who have had distinguished professional careers review their publications and see a cluster of new research that may enable an enrolment.

The PhD by Prior Publication has two parts: the contextual statement that in some systems is also referred to as an integrating essay, and a selection of publications. These publications can include refereed articles, books, book chapters and Non Traditional Research Outputs (NTROs) These outputs slot together to build an original contribution to knowledge. These the publications must be nested in a particular cluster of knowledge and order, often not chronologically. The selection of publications is the first key step. After determining the clustering around a topic, problem, or issue, the student must then ensure that they are the first or sole author of these outputs. Research integrity protocols must be guaranteed. The examiner must be examining the student's work and that authorship must be confirmed. If there is co-authorship, then it is the student's responsibility to prove to the examiners that the research was conducted by the individual being assessed.

The most difficult component of a PhD by Prior Publication is the construction of the contextual statement or integrating essay that frames the research outputs. This statement must demonstrate the candidate's capacity to conduct original research. Unlike the conventional PhD, the candidate is assessed via the proxy of this contextual statement. The researcher and the research are contextualized. How was the research formed, and why? From these contextual, ethical and methodological considerations, the SOCK is demonstrated. This is the challenge for this mode of thesis, as much of the work may be historic. An article may have been original in 1994. What about in the present? Therefore, how the case is made for originality in a traditional PhD and a PPP thesis is different. The

candidate shows how their research made an original contribution to knowledge by telling the story of the research. The challenge is to take these disparate pieces, and through the contextual statement, link them. That is difficult, but they must also be linked in a way that proves originality. The publications do not speak for themselves. Publications are not a PhD. Refereeing is not examination. The mistakes are made in this mode of doctorate when it is assumed the publications speak for themselves. They do not. Refereeing is distinct from examination.

This PPP mode of thesis will pass or fail on the contextual statement. It is the mediator – the filter – and the funnel for research. The story of the research must be told, revealing the context for each of these pieces, including how they were formulated, the researcher’s contribution to each of them, and how they align to the other chapters / publications. Each piece is discussed overtly and clearly. Citations can be used, alongside impact, engagement or any of the current protocols being developed through the Declaration on Research Assessment (DORA). DORA’s toolkits (2024) include, for example, how research draws new audiences to research. These micro-narratives about the value, impact and importance of publications differ by disciplines, but the overarching imperative is to prove originality.

The key mistake made in this mode of doctorate is that the articles are simply placed together, with no sense of the ordering or relationship between them, and the contextual statement features bullet points and lists, only confirming when and where the publications appeared. The other key variable to be considered is what can be considered a ‘publication.’ The work must be published. Unpublished or material currently moving through peer review cannot be considered. While refereed articles have dominated this mode of doctorate, scholarly monographs, chapters in books and exhibitions, films, sonic artefacts can also be included. Multimodal materials – now described as NTROs – also have a pathway into the PPP (Brabazon, 2018a). What is frequently shunned in this mode are review articles, newspaper articles, articles in non-refereed professional journals, work that had been successfully or unsuccessfully submitted for another degree, or the works on which the candidate was an editor.

The contextual statement is a proxy for the candidate’s research ability. However once these organizational matters have been addressed, and a contextual statement is written, there is one further and key challenge in this mode of doctorate; verifying the Significant Original Contribution to Knowledge (SOCK). It must be overt and proven, not assumed. Therefore, the next part of this article focuses on the very specific work of the SOCK in the PPP.

### **SOCKs and the PhD by Prior Publication**

As discussed earlier in this article, the definition of a Doctor of Philosophy that

makes it distinct from a Masters by research is an original contribution to knowledge. A doctorate offers originality in relation to existing knowledge. This originality may activate other nouns, such as creativity or innovation (Baptista, Frick, Holley, Remmik, and Tesch, 2015). Conversely, a Masters synthesizes knowledge, validating what already exists in knowledge. To signify this difference, an acronym is now deployed to frame this project: the Significant, Original, Contribution to Knowledge (SOCK). One author of this article has researched and disseminated the SOCK acronym through NTROs (Brabazon, 2018b; Brabazon, 2022c; Brabazon 2023b), with other scholars then deploying this material in the refereed literature (Mammen, 2020).

Knowledge is the least controversial of the terms. Knowledge is the theoretical or practical understanding of a subject. It can be obtained formally or informally. The term implies understanding something: facts, ideas or skills (Mantai and Marrone, 2022). Knowledge, within the context of philosophy, is epistemology. Simply because something is believed does not mean that it is true or justified. The justification is what separates knowledge from a feeling, thought, assumption or vibe. Knowledge cannot be invented. It is justified through the sharing, analysis and verification of others. This verification protocol confirms that knowledge has an audience that maintains the expertise to assess, check, and confirm. Therefore, knowledge must be disseminated to be assessed, evaluated and believed.

The next word to consider is ‘Contribution,’ which designates the role or part played by a person or object that enables the advancement of – in the context of doctoral education – knowledge. The contribution of a doctoral project can be ideologically washed with matters of employability or impact. Frick has asked of this focus on a contribution is a “myth or reality in doctoral work” (2018). Contribution is also aligned with importance, including an intervention and transformation of a field. This intervention may be through widening the parameters of a discipline or policy implications, to name two examples. A contribution may recontextualize a theory, model or technique, expand an existing model, or combine two or more ideas to create something new. Impact – although an ambiguously constituted word in research metrics – is also a component of making the case for a contribution.

Originality is the focus and key that unlocks the specificity of doctoral education. A PhD must present, demonstrate, and confirm how the research is original. The best doctoral research presents originality in a succinct, focused and critical way. This statement of originality is not woolly or generalized. It must pinpoint – with clarity – how originality emerged through the knowledge presented in the thesis. Most research is not original. The concept is also differently interpreted in the Sciences, Social Sciences, and Humanities (Guetzkov, Lamont, and Mallard, 2004). Originality is confirmed through demonstrating a strong and expansive grasp of the research literature – often displayed through a literature review, scoping review or systematic review – and then deploying



research methods to scaffold from the literature review to newly discovered knowledge. In empirical studies, these reactive methodologies move a researcher from existing to new knowledge.

Procedurally, that is why literature reviews and research methods are important through the examination process for doctorates. The research gap and the scaffolding to fill that gap must be available for examiners to verify, confirming accountability, transparency and repeatability of research. The PhD must demonstrate originality. It is not simply a matter of outlining the originality. It must be showed to examiners how originality was confirmed (Clarke and Lunt, 2014) and how – through analysis and interpretation – it was rendered meaningful.

Originality is more than something that is novel or unique. It manifests in a doctorate through presenting new information for the first time, carrying out original reactive or non-reactive research, generating or executing an original technique, observation or result, offering an original ideal, method or interpretation, an original testing of the ideas of others, offering empirical work that has not been done before, applying an old technique to a new area, material or interface, or finding or discovering new evidence applied to an old issue. A PhD must not simply claim originality, but verify it in a substantiated way, that is available for the scrutiny by assessors and examiners. There are many ways to do this, but framing the research within the context of existing evidence, literature and methods is the most effective and efficient way.

Verifying this originality for the PhD by Prior Publication is difficult, as it is rare that a literature review chapter and methods chapter have been published in a self-standing output. In many of the empirically-led disciplines, sections of articles feature methods of literature. Therefore, in the contextual statement, it is necessary to cluster the selected methods and confirm a gap in the literature that shaped articles that may be separated in time by a decade or more.

The final – if inverted letter in the acronym of the SOCK is the discussion of ‘S’ and word ‘significant’. It is the most subjective, variable, and difficult to discuss and evaluate. While there are objective and verifiable strategies to demonstrate originality, a contribution, and knowledge, significance is in the eye of the beholders. Doctoral candidates, including PPP students, worry – rightly – about examiners being arbitrary in their judgments, picking out random or bizarre ‘errors’ or flaws. The power held by examiners in a PhD is enormous. Through policies, procedures and checklists, normative parameters for examiners are assembled. Yes, examiners can still go rogue. Policies mitigate such behaviour, but the subjectivity can re-emerge through any discussion of ‘significance.’ An original contribution to knowledge means we as examiners are looking for a presentation of the literature and then a demonstration of how research methods move knowledge in another direction, towards originality.

Significance is less verifiable against regulations. There are, however, four clear

strategies when making a case for significance. Firstly, the importance of the research question, and explaining the value of the research, can confirm significance. Secondly, the significance of the findings may demonstrate the value of the research and why examiners should care. Thirdly, research may transform theory, or theories, which is another proxy for significance. Finally, the research may be generalizable – or hyper-distinctive – in some form. That can also be significant.

Therefore, while originality may be more difficult to verify through the PhD by Prior Publication, significance is easier, because the research was spanned over time, and therefore has proxies such as citations, translations, and policy impact. Significance, at its most basic, verifies that the doctorate is making a contribution to research, but that contribution is worth making. It has value. While such words as ‘value’ and ‘worthiness’ are highly ideological, particularly when deployed through examination, such terms can be nested more comfortably in a PPP. This is particularly the case, when the importance or value of the research can be confirmed through ‘stakeholders,’ which aligns economic, social or cultural significance. Impact is a clear strategy to verify significance, but such an alignment can also result in the dismissal of many topics that do not contribute to the policy flavour of a particular day.

Significance is not about size of the research contribution, as a small discovery can be significant, but it is about importance. Obviously, importance can be subjective. All the other lettered components in a SOCK can be demonstrated, confirmed, verified and tethered to evidence. Significance – like importance - is defined by and from a particular perspective. All examiners, like all researchers, have biases, favoured tropes, interfaces, software, hardware, methods and theorists that provide a pathway to significance. But the gift of a SOCK is that it provides a useful tool for students and supervisors to be aware of the changing language and landscape of doctoral education.

The second half of this paper provides profile and meaning to this mode of doctorate and how the SOCK is configured within it. To render this article practical and useful for prospective students and supervisors, it is framed as a series of questions and answers between a successful and completed PhD by Prior Publication student and a supervisor. Both are the authors of this paper.

### **Building the Profile and Meaning of the SOCK in the PhD by Prior Publication**

The question and answer format in the second half of this paper aims to assist prospective scholars and national regulators in configuring an equivalence for the PhD by Prior Publication. Further, the goal is to create transparency and governance for this unusual model of doctorate and demonstrate how a SOCK is configured to ensure an equivalence of academic standards.

TB: What are the challenges in building disparate articles, written over a span of time, into a Significant Original Contribution to knowledge?

CY: This great question had me review my original notes and emails which coalesced my thoughts and followed the formation and writing of my significant original contribution to knowledge (SOCK). I would summarize that the greatest initial challenge was finding my voice, because after that happened, everything else was a product of that. Nearly all of my research articles are collaborations, and despite my individual efforts, I can see I had collective group think associated with most of the achievements. But a PhD and a SOCK require focusing on my specific elements and contributions.

I am well aware that to achieve anything you require ambition, time and a mentor (Arnesson & Albinsson, 2017). I cannot repeat enough that these three things must be present, exercised, made sharp and constantly renewed during the process of writing a thesis. The next challenge was converting the abstract thoughts and desires with partly formed ideas into the concrete solid objects of which articles to include (Borghi et al., 2022). I developed a strong desire to complete a PhD, and then began researching the PhD by Prior Publication (PPP) format in multiple countries. I soon came upon the many videos of Professor Tara Brabazon (Tara), and downloaded and read many PPP theses from Flinders University website.

The constant theme that permeates much of my thinking in regard to Colorectal Surgery is how and why we make decisions in regard to specific diseases and their management. Realising this overarching theme and my fascination and enthusiasm for it made much of what followed feel effortless, but just time-consuming. Many others may find acquiring or coming up with the overarching theme a challenge. But once created in the mind, the associated actions required have the impetus needed behind them.

Following my initial email to Tara, including my background story, my desire to pursue a PPP to demonstrate my commitment to academic rigour and process, and a copy of my CV with my publications, Tara responded. My key request of Tara was did she think I could appropriately select and package a PPP and write the required commentaries. The clear and deliberative response formed my wet cement into a useful tool. I was advised to create a cluster of articles around decision making, primarily first authorship or senior authorship. Then I was to make a contextual statement for each piece, and to focus on the significant original contribution to knowledge (Brabazon et al., 2022). Explaining to me that the role of the supervisor was to be an expert in form rather than content, the advice added that the contextual statement included to introduce myself and my research, discuss the nested publications and build up the SOCK, and to discuss the citations and impact of the publications and why the research matters. The second half of the thesis was to present the publications.

This form follows function advice was so helpful and at just the right time when

my head was spinning with possible ideas (McElravy, 2022). I was suddenly filled with the sense that I was onto a winner, but that I better hang on tight lest I fall off. I note that I read about applying for a PhD, thesis formatting, and downloaded and read ten PPPs, quickly focusing on two by proceduralists, one on pelvic floor repair and another on head and neck cancer, which had different subjects but similar form. I next very carefully studied and took word-for-word notes from two of Tara's videos, "Supervising a PhD by Prior Publication", and "So you want to do a PhD by Prior Publication? The interactive session" (Brabazon, 2022a, 2023a). Following this I printed out my publication pages from my CV and started circling in pencil the themes and connected articles based on authorship, content, where I believed my contribution had been both original and to knowledge, and the articles had been well cited in high impact journals. After deciding on 12 publications, I printed them out, and placed them in a rational thematic order, but not chronological order. The first group of articles did have six in chronological order, followed by three other themes that in my mind all connected with decision-making.

While it is a challenge, it has also become a practice for me to be well organised and to find resources and catalogue them. My copious notes remain well organised in Evernote and allow me to review my steps. My notes allow rearrangement, and link the notes, the internet sources, the saved files and the type-written word documents, so that I can not only stop and start at the same point, but can re-shape and mould as the writing process progresses. Being able to find things quickly is essential to minimise wasting time when you are writing and researching simultaneously.

The next challenge was to write the 500 words of what I believe was my SOCK. The writing of the ideas and concepts was not so difficult, but the combining together into a coherent contextual statement was. The kind and caring editorial suggestions of my supervisor allowed me to see the final step of what could be. My notes tell me how extensive my preparation and planning were, and my searching for where to do the PhD and who I wanted as my supervisor. My blessing was that after emailing my hopeful supervisor with a plan, I was gifted that which I sort the most, her supervision. Finding the right supervisor potentiated the ambition and hope that I had internally, and allowed proper form to develop.

As with all theses, the draft contents pages came next, and then I was away. The greater plan of the draft contents of course changed, but the underlying premise did not, once the spark was lit.

TB: How did you manage each of the words: significant, original, contribution and knowledge?

CY: I managed each of the words of the significant original contribution to knowledge with an obsessive, detail driven, fascination with words and definitions, both

present and historically. The interconnectedness of words, meanings and usage drives to seek clarity while appreciating the myriad of change from usage. Initially I researched the words exegesis, eisegesis, epistemology, ontology and synthesis. Understanding fully what is knowledge was key to understanding the entire SOCK phrase and words.

The word epistemology caused me great fascination and I researched it from ancient Greek, and Plato to modern times. By continue to research and read, I realised that the Greek parts of ‘episteme’ meaning knowledge and ‘logos’ meaning the study or science of, had allowed the modern term epistemology to have a range of meanings from the theory of science to the study of knowledge. These meanings are not quite the same thing, but that is a good thing. Knowledge is traditionally defined since the time of Plato as justified true belief, or the nexus of truths and beliefs (Dawson, 1981; de Grefte, 2023; Perla & Parry, 2011). Appreciating the more recent 1847 re-introduction of the term epistemology from a German translation of Richter, and the 1854 publication of epistemology by Ferrier, put perspective into its modern world terminology.

Furthermore, the Greek word episteme has a Proto-Indo-European origin, made up of the two words epi meaning on, where we use it as a prefix in English, and the verb histemi meaning to stand or make stand (Green, 2015). Chamberlain (1903) goes further to explain that the word histemi and its definition in terms of where you stand on any topic reflects the ancient perception or definition of knowledge.

The terms significant, original and contribution deserved their own explanation, combined with extensive reading. I defined significant in science and surgery as that which moves an opinion, a practice, or a paradigm, or prepares a path for such movement. Original can be defined as something that did not exist before. It may have the same elements as before but in different combinations, or it may be incremental, as most clinical research is. Huge leaps in discovery and then knowledge often happen through the luck of the prepared mind, or cultivated happenstance, such as Roentgen and X-rays, Florey and penicillin, or Marshall and Warren and H. Pylori. Finally, contribution can be defined by Ferrier’s definition if it adds to what is known (Ferrier, 1854). The combination and final assessment of SOCK will inevitably be subjective and relativistic, because like epistemology, it is also a construct of the mind and results from the effects of the material world on the mind, but is not in the realm of the material world itself.

For me, once I had these concepts in my head, I felt far more assured about how I could write and how I could find the SOCK word components in each of my selected articles. I must repeat that this going to the nth degree helped me and is my usual process. Others may want a simple explanation. I like simple explanations, but need to know what else is out there.

TB: Was there a benefit in focusing on the SOCK to align these articles?

CY: I remain mindful that my method is mine, and that it may not suit others. A prepared mind with structure, classifications, definitions and protocols, is more likely to produce

output because it recognises patterns from the chaos. These mental tools for seeking patterns and synthesizing thought into writing need to be not so rigid that they do not recognise new and unknown patterns. But in focusing on the SOCK and going back and forth from the articles to the writing, in the framework described above, allowed me to see the overall message, meaning, contribution and knowledge that my work had produced. I was literally looking at the paper articles and typing on a 36-inch monitor, and going back and forth continually asking myself what did it all mean and what had I done. I have always worked better in a structured environment, and the form given to me allowed that to happen. It also has become obvious that the structure must allow for slow but constant change, because otherwise I chafe against the structure that I asked for in the first place.

TB: Was the configuration of the SOCK involved in your selection of articles, or was the clustering of publications created through a different rubric or proxy? If that was the case, how did you make that selection?

CY: Reconstructing events and timelines in the mind is reconstruction, not absolute mirror image replay. However, with that caveat, I know that I slowly looked at the video again “So you want to do a PhD by Prior Publication? The interactive session” (Brabazon, 2023a). I took notes and thought, and really thought about the initial 500-word contextual statement and the papers. Because the focus has to be on first author and not include anything used in a thesis, I slowly went through my CV and chose 12 papers, 10 as first author and two as last/senior/corresponding author, which spanned 26 years. As much as I like decision making, the 12 papers spoke to me differently, and painted the picture of the accrual of evidence in colorectal surgery until it becomes knowledge and wisdom. I genuinely believe that my main contribution is to thinking in colorectal surgery and surgery in general. I often tell my students I am more likely to effect or change their thinking in the short time they will be with me compared to their total time in training, and it takes such a long time to learn manual skills.

So, the selection of papers came in conjunction with writing the initial 500-word contextual statement, which very much became my eventual abstract. The creation of the SOCK chapter developed following research and thinking, and became part biographical, part story, part philosophical, full of definitions and etymology. Then I expanded on each articles SOCK and the total 12 as a whole, because I had created a language and a form, with help, of how to write about it.

TB: What specific strategy did you deploy, when writing your contextual statement, to ensure that the SOCK was clear for examiners?

CY: This is partly answered above, but the contextual statement was created with

structure, form, reading, reflection, and writing. Most of all was the guidance described above which allowed me to see the connectedness between my articles and allow the overarching themes to shine through.

### Conclusion

The PhD is an international qualification. It must be mobile and maintain currency in a diversity of nations, regions, professions and disciplines. While the diversity of doctorates is welcome, quality assurance, governance and accountability must match social inclusion with intellectual rigour. Stark problems remain, such as attrition (Lovitts and Nelson, 2000). This article has reviewed and analysed a minoritarian enrolment in the doctoral suite: the PhD by Prior Publication. The specific goal is to recognize its history and legacy, while also recognizing its present function and future trajectories. Most importantly, this article is practical in its inflection, enabling prospective and current students – and prospective and current supervisors – to explore how the SOCK, the defining characteristic of the doctoral genre, is organized, enabled and proven through the PhD by Prior Publication.

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### Biography

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