

# Reflections on developing a project management doctorate <sup>☆</sup>

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## Abstract

The history and development of a globally offered on-line professional doctorate in project management (the DPM) is discussed from its inception in 1998/1999 to the end of 2007. Insights are provided into (1) the identified initial perceived need for the program and its rationale, (2) its development, and (3) its continued evolution over the past 6 years of its delivery.

The DPM at RMIT is a vibrant doctoral program with eight completions (as on December 2007) and a further 20+ candidates in the pipeline. The program is highly intensive for both candidates and supervisory staff with identified challenges needing to be overcome situated across administrative, internal academic-political, resource provision, candidate recruitment and support mechanism dimensions. The DPM is a niche academic program that faces a number of challenges that need to be considered when contemplating scaling up the program elsewhere. Lessons learnt from this paper provide useful insights to any education providers contemplating initiating such an academic program.

Project management practitioners may find the paper stimulating a desire in them to consider the value of undertaking a practice-based doctoral research degree similar to that described.

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## 1. Introduction

Project management (PM) may be understood as having evolved from the military application of science to logistics and development of supporting infrastructures. History records many examples of this from the way that Greek, Persian and Roman armies planned and delivered their battle plans and campaigns. However, the PM profession has mainly evolved into its more recent form over the last 50 years from an offshoot of systems thinking applied to the delivery of technology development, engineering and construction projects [1,2] to a management-by-projects

concept, recently becoming popular and recognised by business [3].

The movement towards PM practice being treated as a professional discipline in its own right is gaining pace – rather than remaining in the realm of the accidental project manager [4]. There is a growing perception of a need for greater levels of sophistication of project managers in their appreciation of the tools and techniques of PM and a widening of topics of PM study [5,6]. This is evidenced by the development of post graduate degree courses, the recent ‘Project Management Conference: Excellence in Teaching and Learning’ held at Bournemouth University during September 13th and 14th 2007, the re-thinking PM work, and the bodies of PM knowledge that underpins the training, skills and professional development in managing projects recognised and facilitated by PM professional bodies. Additionally, there has been a call by leading PM academics [7–9] for project managers to become what Schön [10] calls reflective practitioners.

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The educational response to this call has been the creation of a number of post graduate educational programs. Australia for example has offered a Master of Project Management (MPM) degree for almost two decades.<sup>1</sup> This situation is similar to other parts of the world. For example during the late 1970s there were master degree programs in construction management in the UK and Canada. This trend undertook a further development in 2001 with the first Doctor of Project Management program<sup>2</sup> in the world being offered in Australia by RMIT University [11] and this was quickly followed by UTS in Sydney. Currently several universities offer a DPM degree. For several decades PM professionals have been undertaking PhD programs with PM topics. The concept of post graduate study at this level in PM is now becoming better understood with three types of PM doctoral level degrees: the DPM, the Doctor of Business Administration (DBA) with a PM emphasis<sup>3</sup> and the PhD (with PM topics being specifically investigated). Individual doctoral programs continue to evolve.

This paper provides some reflections and insights from one of the available doctoral programs that pioneered the concept of the DPM in 2001. The paper is therefore a single case study of tracing the development and business case that was argued for this world's first DPM degree. Data used are drawn from university documentation that includes reflections and file notes of the internal program champion (the author) and developer. A single case study is recognised by Yin [12] as a valid way to investigate a unique or rare event/phenomenon.

The value of the paper is that it traces the history of its genesis during 1998/1999 and its development to the end of 2007 in which eight candidates have successfully completed their DPM with an immediate pipeline of around 3–4 completions per year that will rise as the current intake in this program reaches around 10 candidates per year. Lessons and insights learned from this journey may be useful to others contemplating developing a similar educational program, or those practitioners interested in partaking in this kind of study.

## 2. Identified initial perceived need for the program and its rationale

The DPM grew out of the MPM together with a perceived need to extend the program of study that was previously framed by content identified within the Project Management Institute's (PMI) Guide to the Project Management Body of Knowledge (PMBOK® Guide) [13]. However, the form and content of individual subjects

extends beyond that prescribed by the PMI. The MPM grew out of the educationalists' response to demand by practitioners for graduate study in PM.

As noted earlier, since the early 1970s there were Construction Management master's degree in the UK and Canada and no less than four similar programs in the UK at that time with a focus on PM aspects of Construction Management and Economics. The PMI has recently developed a Global Accreditation Centre (GAC) to recognise PM degrees, and it currently provides a list of some 14 master degrees with another 15 under review.<sup>4</sup> There are many more PM master degrees or MBAs with PM specialisation content in a range of countries around the globe that have not sought GAC accreditation. The Australian MPMs extended the scope of their PM Graduate Diplomas offered from the early 1980s – the core courses (subjects) generally included PM concepts, PM techniques for planning monitoring and control, risk management, quality management and managing project teams. This was seen at that time as inadequate as postgraduate study 'fashion' had moved towards higher education institutions offering a coursework master's degree model. Many of these PM Post Graduate Diploma programs added some depth by increasing the content to include aspects of design management, some elective study, research methods and a mini-thesis research project to bring the programs in line with the equivalent of three full time semester model offered in a range of flexible enrolment plans for those candidates wishing to take full or part time study.

These programs are generally being driven by increased demand from two distinct groups – first, PM practitioners who sought a post graduate degree; and second, academics that sought to raise their school or department status by offering post graduate degree study. The experience of RMIT University is somewhat typical of many universities in Australia, UK, USA and Canada. The MPM programs tend to be offered on a full fee paying basis and are very popular. Personal experience and interaction with colleagues indicates that there typically is a commencing intake of about 40–60 each year of part time fully employed students who have an undergraduate degree and PM experience ranging from a few years to decades. These programs, in Australia, are well recognised, supported by industry and the universities and well established. About half of these complete the first two stages (to graduate diploma level) and half finish to masters level, though many struggle with the minor thesis component.<sup>5</sup> There recently seems to be a growing trend of an option of more coursework study or the more traditional research topic. On-line MBAs and MPMs, from the USA in particular, are growing in number and convenience and no doubt meet the needs of global mobile project managers who are

<sup>1</sup> RMIT University for example initiated the MPM in 1989; around the same time QUT, UTS, Curtin and Victoria Universities all developed a MPM from their previously offered graduate diploma programs in PM.

<sup>2</sup> A number of universities around the world offered PhD degrees where students could undertake research into PM topics but they are designated as PhDs without explicit reference to the study area.

<sup>3</sup> For example at Cranfield University in the UK.

<sup>4</sup> URL <http://www.pmi.org/CareerDevelopment/Pages/Degree-Directory.aspx> accessed on December 29th 2007.

<sup>5</sup> A consensus drawn from a GAC round table discussion held in Sydney on 26th September 2006.

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