



## Letters to the Editor

**PhD by Prior Publication: An New Approach to the Doctoral Thesis\***

**Tesis por compendio de publicaciones: la innovación del doctorado**

Dear Editor,

Presenting a doctoral thesis (DT) for a postgraduate degree can improve work opportunities, inspire a teaching career, improve academic skills, promote personal development, and expand knowledge. However, the problem often attributed to DTs is that they contribute little to the current body of knowledge, since most (70%) are never disseminated among the scientific community.<sup>1</sup> Factors explaining this phenomenon have been identified as the author's lack of confidence in the quality of their work, lack of support and guidance by thesis supervisors, lack of skills and training on how to write a research paper for publication, and the fact that publication is not a priority for many authors.<sup>2</sup>

For all these reasons, universities have been considering (some for over 5 years) introducing a new approach to the DT: a clearly innovative format, known as PhD by prior publications (PPP).<sup>3</sup> PPP does not consist of a mere collection of publications; instead, these papers must meet certain conditions and demonstrate coherence, and the author must make an original and meaningful contribution to an area of knowledge.<sup>3</sup>

Traditional DTs may have some advantages: they may be a better representation of the work of the doctorate student; they can be written rapidly; the word count is not limited; certain examining boards might find them more acceptable; they may be more coherent; and the analysis of the results can be presented together. The disadvantages include less confidence in the scientific findings, and a lack of subsequent supervision for developing publication skills.<sup>3</sup>

The advantages of PPPs are that they promote a greater output and increase the impact and visibility, not only of the doctorate student, but also of the university. They generate greater experience in research methodologies, diffusion and collaboration.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, independent feedback is received on the progress of the work, the chances of completing the project are higher, new ideas are more easily developed, and the chances of collaborating in the right groups are higher.<sup>3</sup> In contrast, there are disadvantages to the PPP approach, including a lack of overall subject matter consistency among the papers, ending up in a mere compilation of studies. It may be difficult to establish the candidate's contribution as author, and PPP supervisors are required to dedicate themselves fully to the

task. More concerns are that the pressure to publish on the doctorate student may lead to undesirable practices, such as cutting the work up into several smaller papers, and copyright issues may be difficult to clarify.<sup>3</sup>

The experience may be very positive<sup>4</sup> once the essential factors for undertaking a PPP have been determined: university requirements, supervisors' attitudes, the selected research subject matter, intellectual property, working style and capacity, and co-authorship questions. Another practical aspect is the usefulness of the thesis as a tool for analyzing research activities<sup>5</sup>: as an indicator of trends, it identifies the output, the results, and the social structure of the university.

PPP is a clearly innovative development in the presentation of a DT, and has become a reality. PPP generates knowledge and visibility, and is perhaps a more effective investment of time and work.

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José Ignacio de Granda-Orive,\* Victoria Villena-Garrido

Servicio de Neumología, Hospital Universitario 12 de Octubre, Facultad de Medicina, Universidad Complutense de Madrid, Madrid, Spain

\* Corresponding author.

 E-mail address: [igo01m@gmail.com](mailto:igo01m@gmail.com) (J.I. de Granda-Orive).

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