

## Troublesome knowledge and the professional, mature-age PhD candidate

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In earlier work (e.g. Kiley 2007, Kiley 2009, Kiley and Wisker 2009) it was argued that several Threshold Concepts had been identified that related to learning to be a researcher. The tentative threshold concepts included the concepts of: knowledge creation, argument, theory, framework, analysis and research paradigm. Additional concepts since that early work include writing, creativity and the actual completion of the doctorate itself.

However, knowledge and understanding of the Threshold Concepts noted above does not necessarily address the issue of the research candidate who appears to be able to demonstrate some of these concepts but still has difficulty with completing a quality doctorate. In particular, considerable anecdotal evidence suggests that some mature-age candidates, who have substantial professional experience, seem to be challenged more than one might expect in appreciating as Trafford and Leshem (2009) describe “doctorateness”. A comment often heard in professional disciplines such as business is that some of the most challenging PhD candidates to work with are those who are mature-age, and have been highly successful in their professional career. Why might this be so?

One possible reason might be that there are additional Threshold Concepts yet to be identified. Another answer might be related to the difficulty the candidate has in implementing the concept in practice. A further possibility is that the professional has been rewarded and promoted for knowing the answers and being able to present them quickly, efficiently and un-problematically. This is in many cases almost the opposite to the way one approaches research, that is from a perspective of not knowing the answer and hence the need to ask the question. A fourth possibility is that the candidate has difficulty in integrating the different concepts in a way that leads to “doctorateness”.

Therefore, this study aimed to examine the notion of the integration of a range of Threshold Concepts related to learning to be a researcher rather than the identification of the concepts themselves. The study specifically related to PhD candidates who could be described as mature-age (40 years or older) with considerable success in their professional life prior to commencing a PhD. Data was collected through interviews with supervisors of such candidates to identify what they thought might be the issues.

The analysis indicates that it is the very nature of “troublesomeness” that poses a particular issue for these candidates. From the reports it appears that some candidates have difficulty in acknowledging and handling the notion of “troublesomeness” when for much of their career they have been seen as an “expert”.

This paper will outline the findings and pose a number of possibilities for working with such candidates.

### References

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