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What Is a PhD Worth?

By Peter Bowditch

The University of Wollongong has tarnished its reputation by accepting a PhD thesis that presents anti-vaccination dogma in place of primary evidence.

In late 2015 the University of Wollongong accepted a PhD thesis by Judy Wilyman entitled: "A critical analysis of the Australian government's rationale for its vaccination policy". She will now be awarded a doctorate.

There are three players in the drama: Dr Wilyman, Prof Brian Martin (who supervised the process) and the University of Wollongong (which awarded the degree).

I should start off by countering one of the criticisms that have been made of the thesis – that the research was conducted in a humanities department. This is irrelevant. It's perfectly legitimate to investigate science from outside the world of science, and in fact most of the most famous and well-known philosophers of science were not themselves scientists.

The real criticism is that the thesis is not of the academic quality expected for the granting of a doctorate from a legitimate university.

Let's look at the three players individually.

Dr Wilyman spent a decade working on this. I have read the thesis (well, most of it anyway: at 390 pages it is only slightly shorter than my paperback copy of Darwin's On the Origin of Species), but the standard of "research" can probably be summed up by the fact that the second sentence in the abstract repeats one of the standard diversions used by anti-vaccination campaigners worldwide: "Deaths and illnesses to infectious diseases were significantly reduced due to environmental and lifestyle reforms prior to the widespread use of most vaccines in the mid-20th century".

Dr Wilyman is and always has been an opponent of vaccines, and the thesis is merely a regurgitation of the nonsense we have been hearing forever, including conspiracy theories such as that the Australian government's vaccination policy is informed by a conspiracy between the World Health Organisation and Big Pharma. We knew what she was going to say even before we had a chance to read it.

The "Publications in support of this thesis" include a link to a television show that quoted Ms Wilyman, with authorship attributed to Ms Wilyman (the actual author was journalist Anna Salleh), a paper in the journal Medical Veritas (a publication that is vehemently opposed to vaccination), a presentation at a conference run by an organisation that has run another conference specifically devoted to the dangers of radiation from mobile phones, and a couple of papers published in a journal produced by an Australian college of alternative medicine. (I couldn't find out too much about the college because its website was blocked by my antivirus program for trying to install malware on my computer.)

As I said, I didn't have to read far into the thesis before encountering red flags.

Prof Martin reacted to criticism of the thesis not by addressing the substance of the criticism but by accusing all critics of being bullies and crying "freedom of speech". These seem to be special interests of his lately, and a previous paper he wrote about people bullying the Australian Vaccination Network was submitted as evidence in at least two court hearings. (In both cases the magistrate ruled that it was inadmissible.)

On the day that acceptance of the PhD thesis was announced, Prof Martin pre-emptively published a paper accusing anybody who might have something bad to say about the thesis of doing so with an ulterior motive. It is usually the job of the candidate to defend a doctoral thesis, not the supervising academic, and in any case any defence should be based on the quality of the work.

By rebutting all criticism as simply being examples of bullying, Prof Martin is diverting the conversation away



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from where it should be going. As supervisor, he should have made a major contribution to the quality of the work but it seems that even he can't defend it.

Yes, academic freedom requires that unpopular or disruptive views must be freely expressed, but that doesn't mean that anything goes and that opinions and prejudices can be presented as fact without supporting evidence or, when any evidence is presented, it is selected by the firm and consistent application of confirmation bias. Freedom of speech might be the fundamental freedom, but it doesn't mean you can just make stuff up and call it research.

The University of Wollongong is included here too. By allowing this thesis to be accepted it has tarnished the qualifications of everyone who has received a higher degree from the institution in the past and those who will do so in the future. The value of any qualification is inextricably linked to the standards set by and the reputation of the issuing institution, and the publicity surrounding this case could lead to employers to reasonably question whether a degree from the University of Wollongong has any value at all.

Peter Bowditch is a former President of Australian Skeptics Inc. (www.skeptics.com.au).

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Submitted by Admin on Thu, 05/05/2016 - 17:07

A worthy PhD

Peter Bowditch says the graduation of Judy Wilyman from the University of Wollongong has tarnished the university's reputation. Actually, his claims are deficient in evidence and logic.

In December 2015, Judy Wilyman received her PhD from the University of Wollongong. I was her principal supervisor. Her thesis (<http://ro.uow.edu.au/theses/4541/>) is a critical examination of Australian vaccination policy. In Australia, it has been risky to be a public critic of vaccination ever since the formation of Stop the Australian (Anti-)Vaccination Network (SAVN) in 2009. SAVN's methods have included derogatory comments on blogs and its Facebook page, numerous complaints to organisations, and attempts to block public talks. I have written a series of articles (<http://www.bmartin.cc/pubs/controversy.html#vaccination>), including several in refereed journals, about what I see as SAVN's attack on free speech.

Judy, while working on her PhD, was also an outspoken critic of the Australian government's vaccination policy, and came under attack by SAVNers. This included abusive comments on social media, complaints to the university, and freedom-of-information requests to the university used as a basis for one-sided mass media stories.

Knowing the likelihood of attacks, those involved with Judy's candidature took extra care to ensure that her thesis was of satisfactory quality and that all university procedures were followed. Before submission, I sent her draft thesis to three vaccination researchers, and Judy took into account their comments. Her thesis was then sent to examiners who are highly experienced in the study of scientific controversies and the politics of health. This does not guarantee that her thesis is free from error, but does indicate that considerable efforts were taken to ensure quality.

Within the field of science and technology studies, there are many PhD theses examining disputes over scientific knowledge, policy-making and other facets of technoscience. Within the context of the field, Judy's thesis is not unusual, either at Wollongong or other universities. The one difference is the existence of SAVN and its campaign to censor and denigrate public criticism of vaccination.

Therefore I anticipated that on the announcement of Judy's graduation there would be a campaign to denigrate her and her thesis. That is exactly what happened (<http://comments.bmartin.cc/2016/02/01/orchestrated-attack-on-a-phd-th...>). There were negative articles in The Australian newspaper, hostile blogs and tweets, a petition, and new complaints and requests to the university.

Peter Bowditch's article "What is a PhD worth?" in the March issue of Australasian Science can be considered part of the attack on Judy, her thesis, me and the University of Wollongong. He makes sweeping criticisms of the thesis, for example saying it "is merely a regurgitation of the nonsense we have been hearing forever," thereby disregarding and denigrating what is actually covered in the thesis. Bowditch says, "Freedom of speech might be the fundamental freedom, but it doesn't mean you can just make stuff up and call it research," but gives no evidence for his implication that Judy has made things up. He does not mention his involvement in SAVN.

On what basis does Bowditch assert the superiority of his own judgement over that of Judy's supervisors and examiners? He provides no evidence of having published articles in refereed journals or of having supervised research students.

Bowditch writes "On the day that acceptance of the PhD thesis was announced, Prof Martin pre-emptively published a paper accusing anybody who might have something bad to say about the thesis of doing so with an ulterior motive." Readers can read my piece "Judy Wilyman, PhD: how to understand attacks on a research student" (<http://www.bmartin.cc/pubs/16jw.html>) and judge for themselves. I outlined four tell-tale signs that criticisms of a thesis are part of a campaign rather than being genuine concerns about quality. Bowditch's article reveals all four of these signs: (1) attacking the person, not just their work; (2) concentrating on alleged flaws in the thesis, focusing on small details and ignoring its central points; (3) making no comparisons with other students or theses or with standard practice, but rather making criticisms according to his own assumed standards; (4) assuming that findings contrary to what he believes must be wrong.

Bowditch concludes his article by saying that acceptance of Judy's thesis by the University of Wollongong "tarnished the qualifications of everyone who has received a higher degree from the institution in the past and those who will do so in the future." This is a remarkable assertion. By the same logic, at every university where a researcher has been found guilty of scientific fraud — and this includes many eminent institutions — the research of every other academic at the university is tarnished. Furthermore, Bowditch's criticism of the University of Wollongong assumes what remains to be proved, that there is any substantial shortcoming in the thesis or in university procedures.

It is reasonable to disagree with research findings. That is what goes on in scholarly work all the time. So it is reasonable to disagree with Judy's analysis and conclusions. However, Bowditch and others seem to prefer to use non-academic forums to criticise Judy, me and the University of Wollongong. Why are they so afraid of a scholarly critique of vaccination policy? Rather than denigrating and dismissing those involved with the research, they should be welcoming the opportunity for a serious engagement with the issues.

Brian Martin is professor of social sciences at the University of Wollongong.

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