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To cite this article: Alan Reid & Phillip Payne (2013) Thesis summaries: an innovation, introduction, guidelines and invitation, Environmental Education Research, 19:2, 243-247, DOI: [10.1080/13504622.2013.789286](https://doi.org/10.1080/13504622.2013.789286)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13504622.2013.789286>



Published online: 28 Apr 2013.



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INTRODUCTION

Thesis summaries: an innovation, introduction, guidelines and invitation

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Overly abstract notions of the constituting and reconstituting of a field of inquiry can be quickly deflated when we consider which moments and markers count as the most significant in the ‘careers’ of environmental education researchers. A strong contender in the category of ‘most formative’ must be the successful completion of a *higher degree by research*, and with that in mind, we briefly consider how that might be communicated most effectively via a research journal such as this.

Research degrees, by their very terms of reference, engage a range of possible futures for a research field, united as they are around interpretations of research as intensive, systematic investigations that reach or yield new conclusions. Conducted under the guidance and supervision of an experienced academic, mentor or/and committee, research degrees come in a variety of shapes and sizes, at both Masters and Doctoral levels (Powell and Green 2007). Notwithstanding differences and overlaps in arrangements, expectations, assessments and products in a wide range of institutions – in environmental education research, see for example, Nikel et al. (2010) – their particular processes and outcomes are crucially viewed both within and outwith the academy as the principal catalyst for generating and encapsulating an initial, original, distinctive and durable contribution to researched knowledge, most usually by the way of submission of a ‘thesis’ or ‘dissertation’ for examination.

Some cautions are inevitable. In a globalised knowledge network and economy, the expectations and characteristics of arguing and demonstrating the intellectual work of graduates must inevitably engage a variety of expressions and tensions. While it is the awarding of the research degree that most visibly signals to the academy and public the legitimacy of a candidate’s claims to scholarly capability and identity, it remains that higher degrees by research are not uniform, and thus in an important sense, have always invited contestation. On the one hand, there is the immediate sense of the ‘defence’ of the thesis by the candidate; on the other, in the academy and society, questions as to what forms and expectations best serve and demonstrate a ‘fit and proper’ claim to know (as with the ongoing debates about the legitimacy of adopting or adapting ‘Practice-as-Research’ from arts/media/performance studies for doctorates in educational and other fields). Even in a lyrical register, the ‘ground beneath one’s feet’ is likely to shift, as much as the ‘air one

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breathes' as a fledgling academic (Kalmer and Thompson 2008; Lee 2008; McAlpine and Amundsen 2011). Thus, a multiplicity of experiences, histories, interpretations and roles of higher education institutions and research degrees around the world must be acknowledged too, even as the markers and shifts in the socio-demographic characteristics of higher degrees and candidates might also be flagged.

These factors, along with the forces of 'credential inflation', the pressures to create or revise the terms and features of a 'research degree', and various attempts to use higher degrees by research to further 'workforce remodelling' in the West (see, for example Bradley, Noonan, Nugent, and Scales 2008; Clegg 2010; Delamont, Atkinson, and Perry 2000) remain important, but they are essentially a backdrop to our immediate concerns. Put differently, while various aspects of the structures and experience of higher degree programmes endure and others mutate, a key question we raise in these introductory comments attempts to cut through various anxieties about the contemporary intellectual climate and context, by asking: *how does this or any instance of a thesis or dissertation for a higher degree by research add meaning and value to the 'stock of knowledge'?* Relatedly, critical readers of theses and dissertations are right to ask, did the artefact in question articulate a clear contribution to scholarly inquiry and a research programme (in train in the first instance, if not, now, in prospect)? This is because, between and beyond matters sociological, economic and political, a yardstick for credibility and authority within the academy is whether *the award of a higher degree by research adds sound, insightful and useful knowledge to the field, its praxis and, inevitably, some measure of regeneration, dynamic growth and future sustainability to the field's inquiries* (see Leonard, Becker, and Coate 2005).

According to such a framing, the successful completion of a higher degree is usually expected to signal 'the end of the beginning' of a crucial phase in the induction and apprenticeship of the scholar (Austin 2009), even as the education research graduate's likely orientations towards and participation within her community of scholars gained from that period remain equally important and serious considerations for all concerned. It is not just a question of the breadth and depth of one's 'reading', 'skills', 'competencies', 'research group' or 'scholarly dispositions'. The rub these days, typically indexed to matters of the broader audiences expected for an educational research account, is how policy makers, curriculum specialists, pedagogical developers and various other versions of 'stakeholders', might make sense of the research work and its implications, most notably beyond the strictures, complexities and length of the documentation itself. Again, we must leave these matters to one side for now, even as we recognise they speak of a desire that invites identification of the key contribution a study makes to a field, and hence, its possible constitution and reconstitution: that is, *how one effectively communicates the essential features of a thesis or dissertation to those within and beyond the spaces of academia?*

In this, research journals remain prominent vehicles for academics to communicate and discuss research in a range of ways and forms. While in recognising this, and to identify a blank spot in its publishing efforts, the editorial board of *Environmental Education Research* issued a first call for submissions of Thesis Summaries in 2010. The invitation was sent to recent graduates and early career researchers who had successfully completed a higher degree by research about environmental and/or sustainability education since 2010. Working with the first set of respondents, our protocol has developed further on identifying what is grounded in, and

appeals to, the cognate parameters of this field. (We also alert readers to the fact that the invitation remains open to subsequent graduates).

The initiative arose because we wished to record, acknowledge and celebrate this important marker in the lives of researchers, while also embracing the broad values and potentials for the graduate as they become part of an 'epistemic community' of environmental education researchers, represented and promoted internationally as this is by *Environmental Education Research*. Accordingly, after an extensive piloting process, the first set of peer-reviewed summaries of theses and dissertations appears in this issue. We trust they are informative about aspects of the state of the art of research in this field, and the intellectual currents both navigated and sought as they claim their various 'original contributions to knowledge'.

The view of the editorial board here is that an ongoing, broad-based record of theses and research dissertations publically summarised and synoptically elaborated in the Journal is an important resource for the research community's discourse and dialogue. It allows readers to appreciate the range, trends and shifts within a key strand of research and its development, including the continuities and discontinuities in arguments and evidence, and debates thereof. Equally, a Journal does not always require the submission of a full paper, nor for that matter, do editors relish the prospect of submissions that, putting it bluntly, attempt to squeeze a whole research monograph into a single (or linked) journal manuscript. Thus, a batched, public record of summaries might serve as a convenient entry point for readers considering the range, substance and import of recent inquiries in the field, over time and representative of a range of instantiations from around the world, without resorting to standard publication requirements for full, original papers, here or elsewhere.

Ideally then, thesis summaries will alert the Journal's readers to the names, contact details and research interests of early career colleagues, including those who may not usually publish in an English language context but would benefit from having their work noted or somehow otherwise engaged. Public records also allow stocktaking: availing a research community with snapshots of evidence of how the field was, is, and generatively, might become – particularly as readers follow through on the research questions, theory sets, empirical bases and developments and recommendations expressed. In this 'first batch', these range from questions of curriculum, identity, place and relation in the human and more than human world; to the insights and shortcomings of applications of prototypical and avantgarde 'continental philosophy' to understanding and developing environmental and sustainability education; alongside instances of surveys and factor analysis to self-study and autoethnography of practice and practitioners.

The Guidelines and Submission Procedures for 'Thesis Summaries' can be found at: http://www.tandf.co.uk/journals/pdf/thesis_summary_revised_guidelines.pdf.

We encourage researchers and readers to share this invitation and information, as an avenue and stimulus for further developing and regenerating our understanding of the substance and boundaries of the field, through this publishing opportunity. Two further points about the thesis summary procedures are worth noting at this stage.

First, every Thesis Summary submitted that fully complies with the A–H sequence listed in the guidelines is peer reviewed by at least two members of *Environmental Education Research's* Editorial Board (or invited experts).

Second, in part E, we deliberately ask for a 350 word (max.) 'Synopsis', to replace the typical request for an Abstract. We note the latter are often already

available, and usually, the key entry to our libraries and databases and the basis for searches and possibly retrieval via, for example, ProQuest. Rather, requesting a Synopsis has become our deliberate point of difference from other journals or avenues for information about successfully completed research degrees. Its form and review invites submitting authors to not only document and describe key aspects of the thesis or dissertation but to make clear how the work enhances and advances the field in important, significant and valuable ways.

To assist the generation of a synoptic summary, the Guidelines provide probes that the submitting author should carefully consider, discuss with her supervisor, mentor or colleague, and then elaborate upon precisely within the challenging limit of 350 words. Of particular significance from the piloting phase has been prompts concerning:

- (a) the preparation, and compelling communication, of:
 - *what* has been studied;
 - *why* the research is valuable, useful and timely;
 - *how* and in what theoretical and/or empirical ways does this research advance the field;
 - *which* essential understandings about this research must be communicated to an international audience; and
 - *where* and how might this research be transferable or generalisable to similar and other settings and contexts?
- (b) the use of a narrative form to the explanation and justification of how the thesis advances the field of environmental education and/or its research, mindful of the aims and scope of the Journal.

We look forward to this invitation being taken up further by recent graduates and early career researchers in environmental and sustainability education, and its sharing with others who have recently and successfully completed a higher degree by research in this field. We also look forward to witnessing the new insights this initiative might bring to our understandings of the variety and quality of work that researching environmental and sustainability education both allows, and demands.

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