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Cover Page Footnote

Neil K. Dickson replies to this article in ‘Response to Professor Zellick’s Article’, Transactions of the Burgon Society, 20 (2020), pp. 175–76.

Transactions of the Burgon Society, 20 (2020), pages 166–174

'Degrees of Degrees'[1]: An Alternative Structure

By Graham Zellick

As Dr Neil Dickson wrote: '… in order to understand the customs surrounding the wearing of academic dress, it is necessary to understand the history of how and when degrees are awarded'.[2] In advancing that understanding, he identifies six types of degrees which he styles as follows: earned degrees, honorary degrees, incorporation degrees, official degrees, dignity degrees and prerogative degrees.[3] This is a welcome analysis in the course of a scholarly and stimulating exposition much of which is of historical interest. It has provoked my own thinking with a view to offering an alternative taxonomy with the emphasis on contemporary practice and designed to facilitate a better understanding of academic dress.

It affords an understanding of academic dress because academic dress varies not only with specific degrees but with the category of degree, subject to the caveat that nearly all generalizations about academic dress tend to be wrong. Gowns vary as to the category. Thus, most bachelors' gowns have an open sleeve very different from the closed sleeve found on masters' gowns. Both are typically black, but some masters' gowns have an element of colour introduced by way of facings. Doctors' gowns in their festal or ceremonial form are much more ornate and elaborate, especially in the case of the higher doctorates. The original doctoral colour was scarlet—hence the commonly seen dress-code formula: 'Academic dress: Doctors wear scarlet'—but many other colours are now employed. Headwear also differs: bachelors and masters wear the flat cap or mortar-board while doctors usually sport a Tudor bonnet.

I shall also discuss the use of the title 'Dr', since Dr Dickson raises this point in his discussion of honorary degrees. I begin with some comments on Dr Dickson's analysis of degrees.

The Dickson scheme: a critique

Earned degrees is the category covering the vast bulk of degrees awarded. They are, says Dr Dickson, degrees obtained by studying and taking examinations, which may be written or oral, including assessment of a thesis. He also includes in this category the Oxford and Cambridge MA 'because … the right to the MA stems from sitting and passing the BA examinations'.[4]

The weakness of this category is that it conceals more than it reveals and as a category embracing the whole gamut of degrees from first degrees to higher doctorates it provides no guidance on the hierarchy of degrees which is crucial to an understanding of the different styles of academic dress attached to each level.

1 Neil K. Dickson, *TBS*, 19 (2019), pp. 183–203, available at <newprairiepress.org /burgonsociety> https://doi.org/10.4148/2475-7799.1171.

2 Ibid., p. 183.

3 Ibid., pp. 187–99.

4 Ibid., p. 189, n. 30.

Dr Dickson writes of 'study and examination' but he should say 'study and/or examination', since there are earned degrees—notably the higher doctorates but also in some institutions the PhD—where there is no period of study preceding the scrutiny, which is not of a thesis but of a body of original published work. This is different from the 'scrutiny of a thesis' mentioned by Dr Dickson.

The inclusion of the Oxbridge MA in this category is especially problematic. I do not question it because, like many others, I find it an objectionable tradition. On the contrary, I take the view that its justification, rooted in its origins and long history, is compelling. The mystery is why later universities, aware of the use of the MA in Oxford, Cambridge, Trinity College, Dublin and the Scottish universities, chose to make the MA a postgraduate degree awarded after a prescribed course of study and examination. To envelope it within this category, however, is unhelpful. Dr Dickson rightly says that it stems from the BA which itself follows study and examinations, but the MA calls for no further study or examinations and some BAs choose not to proceed to it. It differs from the MA in all other universities throughout the world where that degree is awarded and it is controversial. In my view, it is better to recognize its distinct nature and treat it transparently rather than rely on a fiction or a contrived explanation.

Most of us would suppose that there was only one other category, namely honorary degrees, to cover the full range of degrees conferred other than after study and/or examination. Dr Dickson helpfully elucidates the different kinds of non-earned degrees but some of the distinctions are highly subtle. For a scheme seeking to capture contemporary usage, a single category, noticing minor technical distinctions, will be sufficient.

I have no comments on Dr Dickson's category **Honorary degrees** save for a statement about the use of the title 'Dr' to which I shall return at the end of this note.

Incorporation degrees, or rather degrees by incorporation, arise in the UK at present only at Oxford and Cambridge. If a Cambridge graduate accepts a post at Oxford, or an Oxford graduate at Cambridge, the new employer will 'incorporate' the individual's degrees from 'the other place', meaning they will be admitted to the equivalent degrees in their new university; so, for example, an MA, PhD, LLD from Cambridge will acquire the corresponding Oxford degrees of MA, DPhil, DCL. This curious practice flows from the fact that degrees obtained elsewhere, and their academic dress, were not formally recognized. Why only Oxford and Cambridge? Because at the time this practice originated there were no other universities in England. Dr Dickson explains all this more fully, including the wider scope of incorporation in times past.

These degrees are clearly not 'earned' in the sense discussed above, nor are they 'honorary', so their explicit recognition is necessary, but in my arrangement they are treated as a specific kind of substantive degree. Moreover, although 'incorporation' is the official term employed by the two universities for this kind of degree and it is not inapt, it is not illuminating and I have adopted an alternative which I think better conveys its nature.

Dr Dickson's remaining categories call for explanation. **Official degrees** are similar to degrees by incorporation in that they give an Oxford or Cambridge degree, as the case may be, to a new member of staff who does not already have a degree either from the newly employing university or 'the other place'. The rationale is that it is the degree (usually MA) that confers membership of the university. For my purposes, I prefer to treat it as a sub-category of substantive degrees.

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Dignity degrees are similar to honorary degrees but confer full substantive rights on the holder. The only practical difference I can discern is that it would not be necessary or appropriate to add 'Hon' or '*honoris causa*' in brackets after the abbreviation for the degree. They were at one time not uncommon at Oxford and Cambridge, particularly in respect of any alumnus who became a diocesan bishop and who did not have an earned doctorate. It is only Oxford that now confers 'dignity degrees', limited for the most part to royalty and heads of state, where they are termed 'degrees by diploma'. Diocesan bishops without an earned doctorate no longer receive a DD either from their own university or the Archbishop of Canterbury. Even the present Archbishop himself is without a doctorate, unthinkable in times past. In my view, this attenuated category is no more than an honorary degree by another name.

Finally, there are Dr Dickson's **Prerogative degrees**, defined as 'degrees awarded by, or on the direct instructions of, a senior person with prerogative powers such as a pope, king, emperor or archbishop who is not part of a university or college'.[5] He says these *include* Lambeth degrees, which are degrees awarded by the Archbishop of Canterbury.

As the Archbishop of Canterbury is the only contemporary degree-awarding authority of this kind, the use of the word 'include' is odd, as is the use of the word 'prerogative'. The Archbishop's power derives from statute; he has no prerogative power. If there is a prerogative power in play here, it is that of the Sovereign, but every university established by royal charter has degree-awarding powers deriving from the royal prerogative. The fundamental problem with this category, however, is that it refers not to the nature and character of the degree but to the nature and character of the authority awarding the degree. It is therefore different from all Dr Dickson's other categories: it is not a type of degree at all. Lambeth degrees are of several kinds: (a) some may be earned following a course of study and examinations; (b) some may be conferred in recognition of the recipient's standing as a scholar and thus correspond to a higher doctorate; and (c) some are bestowed for service to the Church or similar distinction and correspond to an honorary degree, even if not explicitly described as such.[6] They are therefore all covered by the earlier categories. In any event, the award of Lambeth degrees other than following a course and examinations is currently in abeyance.

An alternative scheme

My schema is designed to enumerate the different kinds of earned degrees with a view to facilitating an understanding of academic dress. Explanation of the hierarchy of degrees is important because academic dress changes and becomes more elaborate as the hierarchy is ascended. It also de-emphasizes distinctions which are largely formal and technical, are almost entirely devoid of practical implications and are irrelevant to questions of academic dress. I have used only three categories, though the first has a number of classes to specify the different levels and kinds of degrees. The last two categories complete the picture, but are irrelevant to questions of academic dress, since these degrees (with only rare exceptions) take the same costume as the corresponding degree in the first category. I have also devised a different nomenclature, although any such terms can only be understood with their explanations and definitions.

5 Ibid., p. 196.

6 See further William Gibson (ed.), *The History of Lambeth Degrees: Sources and Studies*, Burgon Society Historical Reprints 2 (London: Burgon Society, 2019).

I. Substantive degrees awarded after formal assessment

• *First degrees* (chiefly bachelor's, some MAs (e.g., in Scotland), four-year (or longer) first degrees with a master's designation, e.g., MSci). Qualifying medical, dental and veterinary degrees (MB, ChB; BDS; and BVetMed), although around five years' duration, also fall into this group.

• *Taught masters' degrees* (e.g., MSc, LLM, the Oxford BCL).

• *Postgraduate degrees based on course work and a dissertation* (mostly master's, but including professional doctorates).

• *Research degrees* (e.g., MPhil, PhD, MD, ChM).

• *Degrees awarded on the basis of original published work* (chiefly higher doctorates, such as DLitt, DSc, LLD, MusD, and DD; but also the PhD in some universities).

II. Nominal degrees

The degrees falling within this category are actual degrees indistinguishable from those in the first category, but awarded without study, examination or assessment of any kind. The titles for each of these sub-categories are mine.

• *Maturation/complementary/choate [the opposite of 'inchoate'] degrees*. This refers specifically to Oxford and Cambridge, where the first degree in all disciplines was until recently the BA which after about three years entitles the graduate to proceed to the MA without further study or examination. It is the MA that confers full membership of the university. The BA may therefore be seen as a provisional or inchoate qualification, which matures into an MA. Hence the designation 'maturation' or 'choate'.[7] As the BA may be regarded as an incomplete qualification and status, the MA may also be said to be 'complementary'.

• *Reciprocal or derivative degrees*. These are the degrees by incorporation discussed above whereby Oxford and Cambridge will recognize the degrees awarded by the other university and will accordingly admit a new member of staff to the same or equivalent degrees. Thus, for example, an Oxford MA, DPhil employed by Cambridge will be admitted to the degrees of MA, PhD; a Cambridge MA, ScD on taking up a post in Oxford will be given the degrees of MA, DSc, and an MA, LLM will become an MA, BCL. This recognition of degrees may be described as 'reciprocal' or alternatively as 'derivative' since they derive from the degrees previously conferred by the other university.

• *Membership degrees*. This is shorthand for the conferment of a degree, typically the MA, for the singular purpose of conferring full membership of the university. It arises where a new member of staff in Oxford or Cambridge without an Oxbridge degree and therefore not eligible for incorporation may acquire full membership of the university by being given the local MA.

III. Honorary and titular degrees

Any degree conferred by a university to honour an individual for that person's achievements or in respect of his or her appointment to high office may be styled an honorary degree, or degree *honoris causa*, whatever technical label may be attached to it by a particular university's statutes or ordinances. For present purposes, and particularly in view of

7 The word 'choate' is not recognized in British usage, although it has currency in American English, especially in the law, but it is controversial even there and on etymological grounds is indeed questionable.

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contemporary practice, no purpose is served by refining this category and distinguishing a degree conferred on, say, a head of state because, for example, it is expressed to be a 'degree by diploma', not least because this is confined to a single university, the expression has no wider connotations and in itself is a meaningless term of art. Also included in this category are the so-called dignity degrees described by Dr Dickson, now of only historic interest.

Use of the title 'Dr'

In the course of his discussion of honorary degrees, Dr Dickson writes:

> … holders of honorary Doctor degrees are entitled to use the title Dr, as stated in Patrick Montague-Smith (ed.), *Debrett's Correct Form*, revised edn (… 1992), p. 266. The practice of universities also makes this clear. For example, T. R. Craig, who was Chancellor's Assessor (senior lay member of the University Court) at the University of Glasgow in the 1970s, and whose only degree was a Glasgow honorary LLD, was always addressed and referred to as Dr Craig within the University (personal recollection).[8]

I make four preliminary comments. First, Dr Dickson speaks of 'entitlement' without any analysis of where this is found or its logical or legal basis. Secondly, he relies on *Debrett's*, but not only is this out of line with other guides on forms of address, it dates from 1992 and no longer represents *Debrett's* current thinking.[9] Thirdly, a single example from one university some years ago affords inadequate evidence to support the assertion. Fourthly, internal practice does not support use of the title outside the institution.

The fundamental point to note is that use of the title 'Dr' is not a matter for universities at all, at least in any technical sense. Universities are empowered to confer doctoral degrees; they will prescribe the abbreviation which may then be used post-nominally; but nothing authorizes a university to pronounce on use of the title and I know of no university that purports to do so. Aside from use of the title by medical professionals and certain others, where it may be the subject of legislation or rules of a regulatory authority—often, it should be noted, where there is no doctoral degree at all[10]—the title of 'Dr' is entirely unregulated. It is purely a matter of social or professional custom and convention, as indeed is the title of 'Professor'.

This is the nub of the difficulty. There is no royal warrant to which to turn; no legal basis on which to rely; no official ruling from the Crown or those empowered to pronounce with authority. Social custom is not always easy to capture. Practice varies. Views differ. And times change. There are today far more universities, and honorary degrees have proliferated. They are being given to different kinds of people. Many recipients are celebrities—prominent figures from the worlds of entertainment and sport, for example. Any opinion about the propriety or correctness of use of the title by the holders of honorary doctorates needs to take all this into account. Indeed, that recipients may call themselves 'Dr' has been used by critics of the award of honorary degrees as one of the arguments justifying the abolition of the practice.

The near universal adoption of the title 'Dr' by dentists in the UK presents striking

8 Ibid., p. 190, n. 34.

9 See <www.debretts.com/expertise/.forms-of-address/.professions/>, [retrieved 4 June 2021]. 'In practice, … the recipient [of an honorary doctorate] does not generally adopt the title of "Doctor" …'

10 Few medical practitioners in the UK have a doctorate: the standard degrees are MB, BS/MB,ChB; most dentists also now use the title Dr: see below.

evidence. Dentists in the UK, as in many other Commonwealth countries, qualify with the degree of Bachelor of Dental Surgery. Very few go on to acquire the postgraduate research degree of Doctor of Dental Surgery. Until 1995, the dentists' statutory regulatory body, the General Dental Council (GDC), had a rule prohibiting the use of the title 'Dr' by dentists, since it was thought to imply that they were also medical practitioners, which would mislead their patients or potential patients. In 1995, the GDC rescinded the prohibition provided that there was no implication that the dentist was qualified to carry out medical procedures. The consequence of this was a rush of dentists who began to call themselves 'Dr', as if the GDC had actually licensed them to adopt the prefix.

This is bizarre. The GDC did not tell dentists they could adopt a title they had no claim to either historically or logically; and indeed would have had no power to do so. But there was a growing head of steam among dentists to have the title enjoyed by their physician colleagues. They argued that they should have full parity with physicians; that their course of study was just as long and arduous; and that dentists in the US and throughout the EU had long been called 'Dr'. With the support of their professional body, they just went ahead and did it. Their patients were left with no choice but to accept it.

There is, perhaps surprisingly, also a divergence of views about the use of the title by the holders of substantive doctorates. Some argue that the holder of a PhD or other doctorate should not use the title socially and even professionally should use it only where it relates to the occupation in question.

No better example is afforded than that of the new First Lady of the United States, Jill Biden, who has had a long career as a teacher, currently in a community college, and has over the years steadily upgraded her qualifications from bachelor's degree to master's and eventually to an EdD, since when she has styled herself 'Dr Biden' for both professional and social purposes.[11] Most people see no problem with this, but some ridicule and decline to acknowledge it, insisting on calling her Mrs Biden. They say, variously, her thesis was pedestrian; the University of Delaware which conferred the degree is of low standing; the EdD is a so-called professional doctorate that does not rank as a real doctorate; the title should be used only in connection with her teaching role and it is an affectation to use it socially; and only medical doctors are real doctors entitled to the honorific. This resistance is odd in a country which has compensated for its refreshing lack of titles of nobility and chivalry by turning many job titles into prefixes in a way unknown in Britain and most other English-speaking countries. Job titles such as Dean, Principal, President, Ambassador, Director and Chairman are all used as prefixes; and it is customary to cling tenaciously to some of these titles in retirement, such as President, Vice-President, Senator, Secretary [of State], Ambassador, Governor and Judge.

Some of the objections to Dr Biden's use of the honorific hardly require refutation. Are we to assess the merits of a particular thesis or the standing of a particular institution or degree before conceding that an individual's doctoral title should be acknowledged? The one argument that deserves any consideration is the assertion that only medical doctors should be accorded the title: in other words, that physicians are the only true doctors.

In the US, of course, all medical practitioners will have an MD and may therefore base their honorific on possession of a doctorate, but that is not the case in many English-speaking countries whose higher education systems are based on the British where the qualifying

11 See, e.g., *The* [London] *Times Magazine*, 9 January 2021.

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degrees are Bachelor of Medicine and Bachelor of Surgery awarded simultaneously. They are nevertheless styled 'Dr' (as are dentists and veterinary surgeons). The simple fact is that the word 'doctor' has two distinct meanings. First, and originally, it refers to people who hold a university doctorate. Secondly, it refers to medical practitioners, but the reason this second meaning evolved is that the early physicians trained in Europe where they received MDs and thus were called 'Dr'. Hitherto, the only doctors had been those in possession of the degrees of DD and LLD/DCL from Oxford and Cambridge. The true doctors, therefore, insofar as that term has any significance—or, more accurately, the original doctors—were not medics but lawyers and clerics.

The refusal to credit Jill Biden with the title she has earned flows, it seems to me, from a blend of misogyny, ignorance, envy and arrogance and it is not attractive. Their objections are mere canards. Common sense and common courtesy demand that Dr Biden, and all those who have acquired earned doctorates, should be so styled if that is their wish. To deny them the title is an act of disrespect, bordering on insult.

For the individual holder of the degree, it is wholly a matter of personal preference. We see this clearly in public life. Many politicians with PhDs do not call themselves 'Dr', but some do. Courtesy dictates that we respect their choice. *The Times Style Guide* takes the lofty view (which I do not share) that 'there is little to be said for a German-style flourishing of doctorates in public life, and we should resist'.[12] What may be apt for a newspaper report or article, however, may be very different from a social and personal context where failure to recognize the title is likely to be taken as disrespectful. It is not only the title 'Dr' that is disliked by *The Times*. They have recently introduced a policy on their news pages to dispense with all honorifics after a person's first mention. Thereafter they are referred to by surname alone, even, for example, in the case of Cabinet ministers, judges, and the victims of crime. This is a surprising and regrettable development, but it puts their reservations about the title of 'Dr' in context.

It follows that no single university is able to shape the practice. It has no power to do so. I suppose a policy formulated on behalf of all British universities by its representative body (Universities UK) might carry some weight, but no such policy exists and is unlikely to emerge. A university may choose to use the title internally, though I am certain it is not common to do so, just as many universities will use the title 'Professor' for its visiting and honorary professors, but it is generally accepted that it does not carry beyond the campus. I have only ever come across one institution that habitually used the title 'Dr' for its honorary graduates: it was a small American liberal arts college based in London and clearly wished to humour its honorary graduates, many of whom were its trustees or benefactors.

The example of Dr Craig in Glasgow tells us very little. If Craig adopted the title himself, as was very likely the case, it would have been churlish and risk causing serious offence if the University insisted on calling him 'Mr'. I can cite similar examples. I recall a case in the University of London of the head of one of its colleges whose only earned degree was a BSc but who had several honorary DScs, including one from the University of London itself, conferred prior to his appointment. He called himself 'Dr' as head of college until he received a knighthood some years later. Was the University to insist on addressing him as 'Mr' prior to the knighthood? Clearly that was not a feasible option, but to infer from this instance of acquiescence that the University of London approved of the use of the title

12 2nd edn (2017), p. 80.

by its honorary graduates, or even prescribed, permitted or encouraged it, would not be correct. There was also the case of a senior administrator in the University of London who on his retirement was awarded an honorary LLD and thereafter was styled 'Dr'. Neither the Glasgow nor the London examples lend support to the use of the title generally. If universities were canvassed on the point, I should be surprised if there was much, if any, enthusiasm for the title's use by honorary doctors.

It is true that some holders of honorary doctorates call themselves 'Dr', but that proves nothing. It is generally deplored, even derided. Clerics seem especially prone to the conceit. Their use of it does not make it correct, let alone establish an 'entitlement', but there is no power to stop it; and quite often common courtesy dictates that we acquiesce. We commonly see these breaches of etiquette in the use of other titles, even by their holders, such as life peers and the wives of knights including their first names, as in Lord John Smith and Lady Mary Jones. This misuse, widespread though it has become, does not make it correct or acceptable.

At least in these instances we can confidently state that the usage is wrong—which is not to say that it will not eventually supersede the correct forms—but it is more difficult when the usage is governed purely by custom and convention. Take the prefix 'Mrs' used by married women together with their husband's surname. We know that many women these days on marriage eschew the title 'Mrs' and retain their maiden name together with the prefix 'Ms', but a very few choose to retain their maiden name and combine it with 'Mrs' which they assume they may do because the prefix accurately denotes their marital status. Traditionalists will object that the honorific cannot be separated from the husband's surname and it is therefore incorrect, but no one can proscribe the practice and it would be difficult and churlish to refuse to follow such women's preference, even though it is confusing: if Mr Smith is accompanied by Mrs Brown, no one will suppose they are married to each other. To take an analogy, could Sir John Smith's wife, Jane Brown, call herself Lady Brown because she has retained her maiden name? The answer is surely no.

In determining whether the holder of an honorary doctorate may use the prefix 'Dr', regard must be had to usage, analogies, logic and common sense.

A particularly powerful argument relates to the inherent nature of an honorary award or appointment. Just as an honorary knighthood does not give rise to the title 'Sir' and an honorary professorship to the title 'Professor', so an honorary doctor should not be styled, or style himself, 'Dr'. Interestingly, *Who's Who* does not accord the title even to its biographees who use it socially or professionally.[13]

Custom and practice in such matters can be elusive and contradictory, and it has a tendency to change over time, but to assert unequivocally that an honorary doctorate *entitles* the holder to use the title 'Dr' is at best questionable and at worst wrong. Perhaps we might at least agree that use of the title is problematic and should be discouraged.

Conclusion

There are any number of ways of classifying degrees. For example, there is a legal classification based on the source of the degree-awarding power—whether Act of Parliament, Order-in-Council, Royal Charter or some overseas authority. Or there is the classification

13 I do not, however, necessarily defer to *Who's Who* in these matters. It is far from infallible. For example, it thinks the title 'Dr' can be combined with 'Sir'; that retired High Court judges are entitled to the honorific 'The Hon'; and that serving High Court judges may use that honorific in conjunction with their non-judicial title.

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developed by Dr Dickson, with its predominantly historical accent. Other classifications might be based on types of course and study or on methods of assessment. All are legitimate and have their uses. It depends on the purpose which the analysis is intended to serve. None of the examples chosen, however, would shed any light on academic dress or lead to an understanding of the different kinds of dress attaching to particular categories or levels of degree.

By looking at the hierarchy of degrees, my scheme makes it easier to appreciate the different styles of academic costume typically attaching to the different levels of degree, even if that is not its only or even primary purpose. Degree structures in all universities are hierarchical and academic dress varies with that hierarchy. Thus, a clear understanding of that hierarchy is essential to an understanding of the different styles of academic dress attaching to each level, culminating in the elaborate robes worn by higher doctors.

The use of the title 'Dr', raised by Dr Dickson in the context of honorary degrees, is a discrete issue. The salient point here is that there can be no laying down of the law on the use of this honorific since there is no law to lay down. The title is a product of social and professional custom and practice, informed and shaped by history. That custom and practice, or usage, is fascinating and arcane.

There are people called 'Dr' who have no doctorate, namely, the majority of British medical, dental and veterinary practitioners. There are those who would be entitled to use the honorific but in practice do not—holders of the American JD degree and UK surgeons (even if they have an MD or PhD). There are those with substantive doctorates who eschew the title in either their social or professional life or both. And there are a few people with honorary doctorates who make use of the title. In the absence of law, we fall back on social custom and usage, or occasionally professional edict. Custom is often varied and may be uncertain or divided. What can be said with certainty, however, is that it is not for universities to prescribe use of the honorific. They have no power to do so, except perhaps within their own institutions.

The two prominent areas of controversy are the use of the title by the holders of honorary degrees and its use by those with substantive doctorates in their lives beyond any relevant occupation or profession to which the degree relates. My own view is that it is wholly inappropriate for the former to call themselves 'Dr'; and in the case of the latter it is entirely a matter for them, and their choice should be respected in all contexts.