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Neil K. Dickson

University of Glasgow, neil.k.dickson@gmail.com

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Response to Professor Zellick's Article

Cover Page Footnote

This article is a response to Professor Graham Zellick, 'Degrees of Degrees: An Alternative Structure', Transactions of the Burgon Society, 20 (2020), pp. 166–74,

Response to Professor Zellick's Article

By Neil K. Dickson

I am very grateful to the Editor for deciding to let me see Professor Zellick's article¹ prior to publication and for offering me the opportunity to publish this response alongside it.

Professor Zellick and I share the view that an understanding of how and when degrees are awarded will aid the understanding of the customs surrounding academic dress. My analysis of the types of degrees was based on the historical context. Professor Zellick takes an alternative approach based on contemporary practice to which he adds a discussion on the hierarchy of degrees, and thus provides important additional insight. I find myself in agreement with much of what he says. Readers will however identify that there are some issues where we differ.

One of these is the arcane area of the Archbishop of Canterbury's degree awarding powers. The archbishop's powers derive from the Ecclesiastical Licences Act 1533. The wording of that Act makes it clear that the king is delegating his prerogative powers to the archbishop and not giving the archbishop absolute powers. It also put in place arrangements involving the Clerk of the Crown in Chancery and the requirement for certain degrees to be confirmed under the Great Seal that enabled the king to monitor the exercise of these powers.² This contrasts with the wording of the papal bulls, royal charters and acts of parliament under which universities were granted absolute and unmonitored powers. Therefore in my historical analysis I treated the archbishop differently from universities. On the other hand, the practice of the current archbishop to award degrees only on the basis of study and examination, and not on his own initiative or the recommendations of others, means that in an analysis of contemporary practice like Professor Zellick's it is perhaps more appropriate to treat the archbishop as a 'one-man university'.³

The principal area of difference between Professor Zellick and me would appear to be the question as to whether honorary doctorates 'entitle' the holder to the use of the title 'Dr'. The word 'entitle' was perhaps an infelicitous choice when I wrote my article. As Professor Zellick correctly points out, there are no statutes governing the use of that title. Rather, what Professor Zellick, the successive editors of *Debrett's* and I are trying to capture is custom and practice, and what is acceptable to public opinion. These are shifting sands that subtly change from time to time and even from place to place. I think that changes are currently taking place that can perhaps explain why Professor Zellick, based in London, with his extensive experience in England and overseas, can appear to interpret the current position differently from me with my particular knowledge of Scottish universities. For example, Professor Zellick cites the 'near universal adoption of the title 'Dr' by dentists': that may be the case in England but it is currently not common practice in Scotland.

1 Graham Zellick, 'Degrees of Degrees: An Alternative Structure', *TBS*, 20 (2020), pp. 166–74.

2 <<https://www.legislation.gov.uk/aep/Hen8/25/21/contents>> [retrieved 14 June 2021].

3 Neil K. Dickson, 'Degrees of Degrees', *TBS*, 19 (2019), p. 199, at <newprairiepress.org/burgonsociety> <https://doi.org/10.4148/2475-7799.1171>.

Professor Zellick rightly draws attention to the large increase in the number of universities, particularly in England, the proliferation of honorary degrees, and the increasing number of such degrees conferred on what he describes as 'celebrities'. I agree that this is shifting public opinion as to when it is acceptable to use the title 'Dr'.

Nevertheless, if we leave to one side the 'celebrities', it is my view that it has been accepted custom and practice, certainly in Scotland, for holders of honorary doctorates to use the title 'Dr'. I cited as an example Dr T. R. Craig of the University of Glasgow. I chose him because it was the University that decided to confer the honorary doctorate on him and, while he may well have enjoyed being called 'Dr', I formed the impression from personal observation that it was the University that had initiated the use of the title in relation to him and then used it with great consistency in a wide range of official documents. In any case, he is simply an example of what I saw as common practice. Another more widespread example concerns Church of Scotland ministers. A Church of Scotland minister Hamish McBlogs is generally referred to in writing as Rev. H. McBlogs (note not the Revd, which is an English custom) and when spoken to is called Mr McBlogs. If however he has received an honorary DD, these references change to Rev. Dr H. McBlogs and Dr McBlogs, respectively. This is not, in my view, a 'conceit' of the clergy (to quote Professor Zellick). Rather, it represents the long-accepted custom and practice of the Scottish universities, the Church, newspapers, publishers and the general public.

I think that, despite the differences between the views of Professor Zellick and myself, we might agree that we embarked on a hazardous task when we tried to record custom and practice, a fickle thing that resists being pinned down even by time or place. I suggest that a comment that Professor Zellick makes about academic dress applies equally to custom and practice regarding titles: 'nearly all generalisations ... tend to be wrong'.

With the Editor's indulgence, I also take the opportunity to report the result of further personal communications with Dr Nicholas Groves and Dr W. B. Stewart following the publication of my article. I am advised by them that persons holding MA status at the University of Oxford in the late twentieth century adopted the practice of wearing MA gown and hood on formal occasions, which caused the 'unseemly row' to which I referred because the academic dress regulations did not cover MA status.⁴ The Vice-Chancellor could have resolved the situation by a pronouncement, but apparently never did.

⁴ Ibid, pp. 201-02, n. 80.