The role of systematic review in PhD research: opportunities, challenges and contradictions

Sharing some experiences:
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(all of IHSR, PCMD) *and ECEHH
Some context: What is a PhD?

• The qualification of someone demonstrably trained in appropriate research methods
• A competent researcher in a field
• Emphasis on the person, and the research training they have received
• Not just the thesis (in UK – importance of Viva)
QAA Framework: Doctorates are awarded for …

The creation and interpretation of new knowledge, through original research or other advanced scholarship, of a quality to satisfy peer review, extend the forefront of the discipline, and merit publication

A systematic acquisition and understanding of a substantial body of knowledge which is at the forefront of an academic discipline or area of practice;

The general ability to conceptualise, design and implement a project for the generation of new knowledge, applications or understanding at the forefront of the discipline, and to adjust the project design in the light of unforeseen problems;

A detailed understanding of applicable techniques for research and advanced academic enquiry
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<th>Challenge or Tension 1(?)</th>
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<td>A PhD:</td>
<td>Systematic reviews</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Creates new generalisable knowledge</td>
<td>• Re-uses, summarises and synthesises ‘old knowledge’</td>
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a PhD:
  • Is normally seen as an individual researcher’s independent research

High quality systematic reviews
  • Normally require at least a 3-person team (2\textsuperscript{nd} and 3\textsuperscript{rd} reviewer, information specialist)
Challenge or Tension 3(?)

a PhD:
• ability to conceptualise, design and implement a project ... and to adjust the project design in the light of unforeseen problems

Systematic reviews (of effectiveness)
• Highly standardised and protocol-driven methods (e.g. Cochrane Handbook, CRD Guide)
Challenge or Tension 4(?)

A PhD:
• Developing knowledge and/or understanding “at the forefront of the academic discipline”

Systematic reviews
• What’s the discipline??
• Review topic?
Or HSR (=multi-disciplinary)
Some questions for discussion

If someone was the lead reviewer of a Cochrane systematic review, e.g. doing 2 years work to complete the review, would this be a sufficient basis for obtaining a PhD?

*If not, why not?*

What additional elements or types of research activity would you expect or want to see in order for systematic review(s) (or this Cochrane review) to be a good basis for a PhD?

*also ...*

Does the usual introductory ‘literature review’ within a PhD - that is traditionally conducted to contextualise PhDs based on primary/empirical research – need to be a systematic review?