

EARNED DOCTORATES VS. HONORARY DOCTORATES: PURPOSE, VALUE, AND THE MISUSE OF HONORARY DEGREES

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the conceptual, procedural, and social differences between earned doctorates (PhD and equivalent research doctorates) and honorary doctorates (honoris causa). It traces their history and purposes, contrasts formal requirements and academic standing, and surveys documented cases in which honorary doctorates have been misused or have generated controversy — including commercialization, political patronage, celebrity publicity, and fraudulent certificate schemes. The paper concludes with ethical and policy recommendations for universities and regulators to preserve academic integrity while maintaining the symbolic value of honorary awards.

1. INTRODUCTION

Rationale

Doctoral degrees are among the most important academic credentials in modern higher education. An earned doctorate (commonly a PhD) certifies original research capability and scholarly contribution after years of supervised training and examination. An honorary doctorate is an institutional honor awarded without completion of the normal academic requirements to recognize outstanding contributions to society, culture, science, or the arts. Although historically distinct in purpose, honorary doctorates have increasingly become a source of controversy — when awarded for publicity, transactional donations, patronage, or when recipients misuse the title. Maintaining the boundary between earned qualifications and ceremonial recognition is essential for protecting both academic standards and the symbolic value of honors.

2. METHODOLOGY & SOURCES

This paper synthesizes scholarly commentary, university policies, news reports, and documented case studies. Sources include academic articles and institutional guidance on honorary degrees, investigative journalism and university statements about rescinded honorary doctorates, and public records of fraudulent honorary-degree schemes. (Representative sources are cited in the references section and inline where used.) The analysis aims to be descriptive (what is and how it differs) and normative (what should be done to reduce misuse).

3. HISTORICAL AND CONCEPTUAL DISTINCTION

3.1 Earned Doctorates (PhD)

- **Purpose:** certify candidate's ability to conduct original research that advances knowledge in a discipline.

Requirements: formal admission, coursework (in some systems), supervised research, dissertation, oral defense/examination, and publication expectations. Duration commonly 3–7 years depending on discipline and country.

Rights & Recognition: an earned doctorate confers formal academic qualification and is listed in the education section of CVs; the holder is widely recognized as an expert in their field.

3.2 Honorary Doctorates (honoris causa)

- **Purpose:** symbolic honor recognizing significant contributions to society, culture, science, public life, philanthropy, or the university. Historically conferred to distinguished visitors and public figures.

Process: typically awarded following nomination and committee review in accordance with university regulations; however, criteria and rigor vary widely across institutions.

- **Status:** honorary degrees are titular: they waive the usual academic requirements and are not equivalent to an earned degree. Most institutional guidelines request recipients not to use the academic title “Dr.” in ways that would imply an earned doctorate. Wikipedia.

4. WHERE CONFUSION AND MISUSE ARISE

4.1 Misunderstanding of Title Use

Because both degrees may carry the label “Doctor,” recipients and the public sometimes confuse honorary recognition with earned academic qualification. While many institutions recommend that honorary recipients refrain from using

"Dr." in professional contexts, compliance and social conventions vary. This ambiguity has produced public confusion and, on occasion, reputational harm for institutions and recipients. Wikipedia

4.2 Transactional Awards and Donor Influence

Universities sometimes receive criticism for appearing to confer honorary degrees in return for donations or political favors. When awards look transactional rather than merit-based, the honor is perceived as commodified, devaluing the symbolic currency of the degree and undermining trust in institutional governance. Several commentators and higher-education observers have documented cases where honorary degrees became embroiled in questions about donor influence and university priorities. Bestcolleges.com+1

4.3 Celebrity and Publicity-Driven Awards

Awarding honorary doctorates to celebrities or public figures primarily for publicity can backfire—when the recipient's later conduct contradicts institutional values or when the public perceives the award as mere spectacle. Such episodes have sometimes led to rescinding honors and reputational damage for universities. Notable rescissions (e.g., in high-profile cases) illustrate the reputational risk. TIME+1

4.4 Fraudulent and Fake Honorary Degrees

A distinct, criminal form of misuse is the sale or distribution of fake honorary degrees by organizations falsely presenting themselves as legitimate awarding bodies or by individuals selling certificates or membership packages. These schemes can defraud recipients or the public and can erode trust in genuine institutional awards. Recent policing and law cases show this is a live problem in multiple jurisdictions. The Times of India

5. CASE STUDIES (REPRESENTATIVE)

5.1 Rescinded Honorary Degrees Following Misconduct (High-profile cases)

Universities have rescinded honorary degrees after recipients' actions contradicted institutional values (e.g., criminal allegations, credible misconduct). Rescission is a legal and reputationally fraught process but has been used as a remedy when the conferral damages university community trust. Examples in the press illustrate both decisions to revoke and the institutional rationale for doing so. TIME+1

5.2 Transactional Concerns & Donor Relationships

Investigative coverage and higher-education studies have flagged situations where the conferral process lacked visible independence from donor relations or political influence — generating debate about governance and the integrity of awards. Such cases emphasize the need for transparent nomination and review procedures. Bestcolleges.com+1

5.3 Criminal Fraud: Fake Degree Sales

News reports document arrests and prosecutions of individuals who sold counterfeit honorary degrees or solicited fees in exchange for "honorary" titles that had no legal or academic validity. These criminal episodes directly harm victims and degrade public confidence in honorary awards. The Times of India

6. ETHICAL AND INSTITUTIONAL IMPLICATIONS

6.1 Integrity and Symbolic Value

Honorary doctorates function as a symbolic bridge between universities and society. When the process is perceived as corrupt or purely transactional, it erodes the symbolic value of the honor and, by extension, the perceived moral authority of the institution.

6.2 Conferral vs. Credential: Communication Responsibility

Institutions bear responsibility for communicating clearly what an honorary degree means, how it differs from an earned doctorate, and what (if any) title usage is appropriate. University web pages, nomination forms, and public statements should explicitly state that honorary degrees are awards — not academic qualifications.

6.3 Legal, Regulatory & Cultural Variation

Rules about title usage and the legal standing of honorary degrees vary across countries. Some jurisdictions have explicit prohibitions on misrepresenting honorary degrees as earned qualifications; others have cultural conventions that differ. Universities operating internationally must consider local law and cultural expectations.

7. RECOMMENDATIONS (POLICY & PRACTICE)

7.1 Clear Institutional Policy

- Publish explicit, accessible policies that define honorary degrees, set nomination criteria, require independent vetting committees, and prohibit transactional awards.

- Require documented rationales for each award, including how the recipient's achievements align with institutional mission.

7.2 Transparency & Auditability

- Maintain public records of nomination procedures (redacted as needed for privacy) and the criteria used. Periodic audits by governance bodies can help ensure adherence.

7.3 Title-Use Guidance

- Provide unambiguous guidance to recipients on appropriate use of titles and ensure press releases and certificates clearly label the award as "honorary" and not an academic qualification.

7.4 Conflict-of-Interest Safeguards

- Prohibit members of selection committees from voting on nominations involving personal, financial, or political contacts; require recusal and disclose conflicts.

7.5 Revocation Procedures

- Draft and publicize clear revocation procedures, with proportionality and due process, so universities can respond when a recipient's actions seriously contradict institutional values.

7.6 Public Education & Media Practice

- When the media reports honorary awards, encourage precise language (e.g., "received an honorary doctorate from X university") to reduce public confusion.

7.7 Enforcement Against Fraud

- Cooperate with law enforcement to investigate and prosecute fraudulent degree sellers; maintain lists of recognized awarding institutions to help the public verify legitimacy.

8. CONCLUSION

Earned doctorates and honorary doctorates serve different but complementary roles: the former certifies scholarly competence and original contributions to knowledge; the latter publicly recognizes distinguished societal contributions. Protecting the integrity and clarity of honorary awards requires robust institutional governance, transparent criteria, and public education. Without such safeguards, honorary degrees risk commodification, legal abuse, and reputational harm — eroding both academic credibility and the social value of honors.

9. REFERENCES

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- [4] News case: Times of India — recent criminal case involving fake honorary degrees and fraudulent selling of honorary certificates. The Times of India.
- [5] News examples of rescinded honorary degrees (Bill Cosby / Sean "Diddy" Combs coverage) showing reputational risks and institutional revocation practices.