Beyond the PhD: Reconceptualizing Faculty Qualifications in Professional Disciplines Through Subject Matter Expert Integration

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Abstract: Higher education institutions face a critical disconnect between traditional faculty qualification requirements and the evolving demands of professional disciplines. This article challenges the prevailing PhD-centric hiring paradigm by examining how professional degree holders and industry subject matter experts (SMEs) can enhance educational quality, student outcomes, and workforce alignment in applied fields. Through analysis of accreditation standards, labor market data, and case studies from business, technology, healthcare, and creative fields, we argue for a pedagogical paradigm shift that values professional degrees and substantive industry experience alongside or, in certain disciplines, above traditional research doctorates. We present evidence that subject matter experts (SMEs) with professional credentials and current industry engagement provide superior instruction in applied disciplines through authentic assessment design, relevant curriculum development, and enhanced student outcomes including employment rates and career advancement.

Keywords: Subject matter experts, professional credentials, faculty qualifications, applied disciplines, pedagogical innovation, industry experience, higher education reform.

1. Introduction

Higher education stands at a critical juncture where traditional academic structures increasingly conflict with the evolving needs of students, employers, and society. The longstanding preference for doctoral degree holders in faculty hiring, while appropriate for research-intensive and theoretical disciplines, creates significant limitations in fields where professional practice, current industry knowledge, and applied skills constitute the core educational mission (Brint et al., 2012; Kezar & Sam, 2013). This credential bias manifests across multiple dimensions: hiring practices that systematically exclude accomplished professionals who have not earned a Ph.D., promotion criteria emphasizing scholarly publication over instructional excellence or professional achievement, and accreditation standards that quantify faculty qualifications primarily through academic degrees rather than professional competencies (Schuster & Finkelstein, 2006).

The traditional academic credential hierarchy, which privileges doctoral degrees over professional experience, increasingly fails to meet the evolving needs of higher education in practice-oriented disciplines. This article examines the disconnect between university hiring practices favoring Ph.D. holders and the actual competencies required to prepare students for contemporary professional environments. Drawing on educational research, The article proposes a framework for credential evaluation that balances academic rigor with professional relevance, recommends institutional policy reforms to facilitate SME hiring and retention, and addresses concerns about academic quality through alternative credentialing and faculty development models. Our findings suggest that reconceptualizing faculty qualifications to include professional expertise as equivalent or superior to research credentials in designated disciplines would better serve students, employers, and the broader goals of higher education in the 21st century.

The disconnect between academic credentialing norms and market realities has intensified as professional fields undergo rapid transformation. In disciplines such as business, information technology, healthcare management, cybersecurity, design, digital marketing, and professional writing, the half-life of technical knowledge has shortened dramatically, rendering traditional academic research cycles inadequate for maintaining curricular relevance (Vedder, 2004). Simultaneously, employers increasingly voice concerns that graduates lack practical competencies, industry-standard tool proficiency, and professional workplace behaviors—gaps that industry subject matter experts (SMEs) are uniquely positioned to address (Hart Research Associates, 2018).

A subject matter expert, for the purposes of this article, is defined as an individual possessing extensive, specialized knowledge in a particular professional field, typically demonstrated through advanced professional credentials (e.g., MBA, MFA, M.Eng., J.D., clinical doctorates), substantial industry experience in progressively responsible positions, recognized achievements or certifications within their profession, and ongoing engagement with current professional practices and standards (Driscoll & Carliner, 2005). Unlike traditional Ph.D. holders whose training emphasizes theoretical knowledge production and research methodology, SMEs bring experiential knowledge, professional network connections, industry credibility, and immediate applicability of content to real-world contexts (Lave & Wenger, 1991).

The educational value of incorporating industry SMEs extends beyond simply updating content. Research in situated learning theory demonstrates that authentic contexts, legitimate

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peripheral participation, and communities of practice—all naturally embedded in SME-led instruction—significantly enhance learning outcomes and transfer to professional settings (Brown et al., 1989; Wenger, 1998). Students taught by faculty with current professional engagement demonstrate higher employment rates, faster career advancement, stronger professional networks, and greater alignment between academic preparation and workplace demands (Binder et al., 2015).

Despite compelling pedagogical and practical rationales, institutional resistance to hiring SMEs without traditional academic credentials remains entrenched. Regional and specialized accreditors maintain faculty qualification standards emphasizing terminal degrees, though recent modifications increasingly acknowledge professional experience equivalency in applied programs. University promotion and tenure systems reward scholarly publication, often treating professional achievement and teaching excellence as secondary considerations (O'Meara, 2002). Academic culture privileges theoretical knowledge over applied expertise, creating status hierarchies that devalue practice-oriented faculty (Schön, 1995).

This article argues that certain academic disciplines—particularly those preparing students for specific professional careers rather than academic research positions—benefit substantially from pedagogy delivered by SMEs with professional credentials and current industry experience. We contend that university bias favoring Ph.D. holders is not reflective of current market needs nor the dynamic nature of professional careers in these fields. Rather than viewing professional credentials as inferior alternatives to research doctorates, institutions should recognize them as equally rigorous but differently focused qualifications that may be superior for instruction in applied disciplines.

The remainder of this article proceeds as follows: Section 2 examines the historical evolution of faculty credentialing and the limitations of current practices. Section 3 presents theoretical frameworks supporting SME-led pedagogy, drawing from experiential learning, situated cognition, and professional identity formation literature. Section 4 provides empirical evidence of SME effectiveness through case studies across multiple disciplines and analysis of student outcome data. Section 5 proposes a framework for evaluating professional credentials and experience as equivalent or superior to research doctorates in designated fields. Section 6 addresses common objections regarding academic rigor, intellectual contribution, and institutional quality. Section 7 offers policy recommendations for hiring and evaluation, professional development, and accreditation reform. The article concludes with implications for the future of higher education and calls for further research examining long-term outcomes of SME-intensive programs.

2. The Evolution and Limitations of Traditional Faculty Credentials

2.1 Historical Context of the Ph.D. Preference

The contemporary emphasis on doctoral credentials for college faculty emerged from the research university model imported from Germany in the late 19th century and consolidated through the 20th century expansion of American higher education (Geiger, 1986). The Ph.D. degree, designed to prepare scholars for original research contribution, became the standard terminal

credential as universities increasingly defined their mission around knowledge production rather than solely knowledge transmission (Lucas, 2006). This evolution served important functions: establishing intellectual rigor, promoting disciplinary specialization, creating peer review cultures, and differentiating higher education from secondary schooling (Golde & Walker, 2006).

However, the wholesale application of research doctorate requirements across all academic programs, regardless of their professional or liberal arts orientation, represented a categorical error that conflated institutional prestige with instructional appropriateness (Schuster & Finkelstein, 2006). Professional schools including business, law, medicine, and engineering historically maintained different credentialing norms, recognizing that practitioner faculty brought essential expertise that complemented academic researchers (Sullivan, 2005). The expansion of professional and applied programs within comprehensive universities during the late 20th century created tension between these traditions, generally resolved in favor of traditional academic credentials as institutions sought to maintain research university status (Brint et al., 2012).

2.2 Misalignment Between Research Training and Teaching Practice-Oriented Disciplines

Doctoral education prioritizes developing research competencies including theoretical mastery, methodological sophistication, literature synthesis, and contribution to scholarly discourse (Golde & Walker, 2006). These capabilities prove invaluable for faculty teaching research methods, preparing future academics, and advancing theoretical understanding. However, they bear limited relationship to competencies required for effective instruction in professional programs: current knowledge of industry practices and standards, proficiency with professional tools and technologies, understanding of workplace contexts and organizational dynamics, networks within professional communities, and credibility with practicing professionals who employ graduates (Brint et al., 2012).

The temporal lag between research and practice further exacerbates this misalignment. Academic research, particularly in applied fields, typically examines phenomena retrospectively, with publication cycles extending 2-5 years from initial investigation to journal appearance (Beyer & Holtzblatt, 1999). In rapidly evolving fields such as information technology, digital marketing, cybersecurity, and data science, this lag renders much published research obsolete for instructional purposes by the time it appears (Copeland & Clapham, 2019). SMEs maintaining active professional engagement encounter emerging practices, tools, and challenges in real-time, enabling them to prepare students for contemporary rather than historical professional environments.

2.3 Credential Inflation and Opportunity Costs

The doctorate preference creates credential inflation, requiring ever-higher academic qualifications for positions that fundamentally involve teaching professional practice rather than conducting research (Brown, 2001). This dynamic imposes significant opportunity costs on multiple stakeholders. Institutions invest substantial resources recruiting scarce Ph.D. holders for positions where professional credentials would provide superior qualification, creating faculty shortages in high demand applied fields (Vedder, 2004). Accomplished professionals face barriers to academic careers despite possessing exactly the expertise students

need, limiting the talent pool and reducing curriculum relevance (Kezar & Sam, 2013). Students receive instruction from faculty whose primary training and often career incentives emphasize research over teaching or professional practice, potentially compromising educational quality in applied programs (Umbach, 2007).

The systematic exclusion of SMEs without doctorates also perpetuates demographic imbalances in faculty ranks. Many underrepresented groups pursue professional degrees and careers rather than research doctorates, meaning credential requirements disproportionately limit their access to faculty positions (National Center for Education Statistics, 2019). Professional fields with significant minority and female representation in practice often exhibit less diversity among doctoral-credentialed faculty, undermining efforts to create inclusive academic environments.

2.4 Accreditation Standards and Institutional Incentives

Accreditation bodies significantly influence faculty credential requirements through standards that, until recently, emphasized terminal degrees with minimal acknowledgment of professional experience equivalency (Eaton, 2012). The Higher Learning Commission's "qualified faculty" standards historically required that instructors possess degrees at least one level above the courses they teach, with master's-level instruction preferably delivered by doctoral holders (Higher Learning Commission, 2016). Specialized accreditors in fields such as business (AACSB International) and nursing maintained even more stringent requirements, creating powerful incentives for institutions to hire Ph.D. faculty regardless of program orientation (Policano, 2005).

Recent accreditation reforms acknowledge growing recognition that professional credentials and experience can constitute equivalent qualification in applied disciplines. AACSB's 2013 standards revision explicitly recognizes "professionally qualified" faculty alongside "academically qualified" faculty, defining the former as possessing professional credentials, substantial experience, and continued professional engagement in their field (AACSB International, 2020). Similarly, the Higher Learning Commission's Criterion 3 now states that faculty qualifications should be "consistent with the mission" and allow for professional experience to substitute for academic credentials in appropriate circumstances (Higher Learning Commission, 2020).

Despite these policy shifts, institutional implementation lags significantly. University hiring committees, promotion and tenure systems, and faculty cultures continue privileging research doctorates even in programs explicitly designed for professional preparation (O'Meara, 2002). This inertia reflects multiple factors: academic status hierarchies valuing theory over practice, faculty governance systems dominated by research-credentialed professors, administrative risk aversion regarding accreditation compliance, and institutional identity concerns about being perceived as "less academic" (Schön, 1995).

3. Theoretical Foundations for SME-Led Pedagogy

3.1 Experiential Learning and Authentic Contexts

Experiential learning theory posits that knowledge construction occurs through transformation of experience, with effective learning requiring both concrete experience and abstract conceptualization (Kolb, 1984). SME faculty maintaining an active professional practice, inherently integrate experiential learning

principles, bringing authentic cases, current challenges, and real-world problem-solving approaches into instruction. Unlike faculty whose primary professional experience involves academic research, practicing SMEs provide students with vicarious and direct experience of professional contexts, enabling learning that transfers more readily to workplace settings (Raelin, 2008).

Situated cognition research demonstrates that learning is fundamentally contextual, with knowledge best acquired within the physical, social, and conceptual contexts where it will be applied (Brown et al., 1989). The "cognitive apprenticeship" model, in which novices learn through legitimate peripheral participation in authentic professional activities under expert guidance, represents an ideal that SME faculty can more fully realize than research-focused academics (Collins et al., 1989). When instructors possess current professional networks, use industry-standard tools, apply contemporary methodologies, and maintain credibility within professional communities, they create authentic learning environments that research-credentialed faculty often cannot replicate (Lave & Wenger, 1991).

3.2 Professional Identity Formation and Communities of Practice

Professional education involves not merely knowledge transmission but socialization into professional communities, identity formation, and development of disciplinary ways of knowing and being (Sullivan, 2005). Communities of practice theory emphasizes that learning involves increasing participation in social practices, with knowledge residing in communities rather than individual cognition alone (Wenger, 1998). SME faculty serve as bridges connecting academic and professional communities, facilitating students' transition from peripheral to full participation in professional practice.

Research on professional identity formation indicates that students develop professional identities through interaction with credible role models who embody professional values, demonstrate expert practice, and provide access to professional networks (Ibarra, 1999). SME faculty offer authentic professional identities for students to observe and emulate, while Ph.D. faculty—particularly those who entered academic careers directly from doctoral programs—model academic rather than professional identities. In programs preparing students for industry careers, this distinction proves critical for effective socialization (Trede et al., 2012).

3.3 Transfer of Learning and Applied Problem-Solving

Transfer of learning—the ability to apply knowledge and skills acquired in educational settings to new contexts, particularly professional environments—represents a central goal of professional education (Perkins & Salomon, 1992). Research consistently demonstrates that transfer increases when learning contexts resemble application contexts in surface features, underlying structures, and cognitive demands (Barnett & Ceci, 2002). SME faculty teaching from current professional practice naturally creates "high-road transfer" conditions: making explicit connections between academic content and professional application, providing varied examples from authentic contexts, and requiring students to apply learning to realistic professional problems.

Furthermore, professional expertise involves not only declarative knowledge (knowing what) and procedural knowledge (knowing how) but also strategic knowledge about when and why

to apply various approaches in specific contexts (Alexander, 2003). This metacognitive dimension of professional competence develops through experience with authentic complexity, ambiguity, and contextual variation—precisely what SME faculty bring through current professional engagement (Schön, 1983). Research-trained faculty excel at teaching analytical frameworks and research methods but may lack the situated judgment that characterizes expert professional practice.

3.4 Currency of Knowledge in Rapidly Evolving Fields

In stable disciplines where foundational knowledge changes slowly, research doctorates emphasizing deep theoretical understanding provide excellent preparation for teaching. However, many professional fields undergo continuous transformation driven by technological innovation, regulatory changes, market evolution, and emerging practices (Vedder, 2004). In such contexts, currency of knowledge—understanding of current tools, techniques, and challenges—becomes as important as depth of foundational knowledge.

SMEs maintaining active professional practice possess inherent mechanisms for knowledge currency: daily engagement with emerging challenges and solutions, participation in professional development and certification programs, network connections to leading practitioners and innovators, and exposure to real-world applications of emerging research (before academic literature captures and analyzes it). This ongoing professional engagement supplements and sometimes supersedes traditional scholarly activity as a means of maintaining instructional relevance in rapidly evolving fields (Binder et al., 2015).

3.5 Implications for Higher Education Transformation

The shift toward recognizing professional credentials represents one dimension of broader higher education transformation responding to societal change, technological disruption, and evolving student needs. This evolution connects to several contemporary reform movements.

Competency-Based Education emphasizes demonstrated competencies, rather than credit hours aligns with professional credential focus on applied expertise and performance (Johnstone & Soares, 2014). SME faculty with industry experience naturally design competency-based curricula and authentic assessments measuring professional readiness. The seismic shift in hybrid and online learning through digital delivery expansion increases feasibility of engaging working professionals as faculty through flexible teaching arrangements. Geographic constraints that previously limited SME recruitment diminish as institutions embrace remote instruction (Allen & Seaman, 2017).

There is also a renewed interest among academics for developing *Work-Integrated Learning (WIL)* through internships, cooperative education, and applied projects. WIL leverages SME faculty strengths in creating industry partnerships, supervising authentic work experiences, and assessing professional performance (Billett, 2009). Examined in context with the proliferation of *micro-credentialling* (professional certificates, digital badges, and industry certifications), the recognition of professional credentials in faculty qualification support SME faculty (Raish & Rimland, 2016). Both trends reflect movement toward competency-focused, stackable credentials recognized by employers.

The recognition of professional credentials also facilitates deeper *industry-university collaboration*, including joint program development, research partnerships, and talent exchange. SME faculty serve as boundary spanners connecting academic and professional communities (Perkmann, *et al.*, 2013).

4. Empirical Evidence of SME Effectiveness

Academic disciplines that benefit most from involving industry Subject Matter Experts (SMEs) tend to be those that are highly applied, dynamic, and closely tied to evolving professional standards and technology.

Essentially, programs that emphasize skill development, hands-on problem-solving, and rapid technology shifts tend to gain the most from SME involvement, whereas more theoretical or foundational academic disciplines remain traditionally faculty driven. SMEs provide currency and context that improve learner engagement, employer relevance, and program responsiveness in these applied fields. These include, but are not limited to Business and Management, Informational Technology and Cybersecurity, Healthcare and Allied Health Sciences, Engineering and Manufacturing, Creative Arts and Media, and Production: Industry experts impart current content creation trends, technology use, and Education and Training Development.

4.1 Student Outcome Studies

Research examining relationships between faculty credentials and student outcomes reveals complex patterns that challenge assumptions about Ph.D. superiority. While early studies found positive correlations between faculty research productivity and student learning (Marsh & Hattie, 2002), more recent research disaggregating by discipline and outcome type shows that professional credentials and current practice experience predict superior outcomes in applied programs.

A comprehensive study of business programs found that courses taught by professionally qualified faculty (those with professional credentials and substantial industry experience) produced significantly higher student performance on professional certification exams compared to courses taught by academically qualified faculty with research doctorates but limited professional practice (Martell, 2007). Similarly, research in nursing education demonstrates that clinical faculty with current practice experience generate better patient care outcomes during clinical rotations than research-focused nurse scientists (Bussard, 2018).

In technology and information systems programs, student employment outcomes correlate more strongly with instructor currency of professional knowledge than with instructor research productivity. Graduates of programs with high percentages of industry-engaged faculty report higher starting salaries, faster time-to-employment, and greater job satisfaction than peers from programs dominated by traditional research faculty (Walstrom et al., 2008). Employer surveys consistently rate graduates from SME-taught programs as better prepared for workplace demands, particularly regarding technical skills, professional communication, and understanding of organizational contexts (Hart Research Associates, 2018).

4.2 Case Study: Business Education

Business schools provide particularly compelling evidence for professional credential equivalency, having struggled longest with tensions between academic research expectations and

professional education missions. AACSB's adoption of "professionally qualified" faculty categories acknowledged that MBA degree holders with substantial executive experience often provide superior instruction in management, entrepreneurship, marketing, and strategy courses compared to Ph.D. holders whose research specialization and lack of management experience limit practical insight (Pfeffer & Fong, 2002).

Empirical studies comparing student outcomes across business programs with varying proportions of professionally versus academically qualified faculty reveal consistent patterns. Programs with higher percentages of professionally qualified faculty demonstrate higher job placement rates, stronger employer satisfaction ratings, better student engagement scores, and more successful alumni entrepreneurship (Martell, 2007). These outcomes persist even after controlling for program selectivity, student quality, and institutional resources.

Notable examples include executive MBA programs, which routinely employ senior executives and entrepreneurs as instructors despite their lack of doctorates. Student satisfaction, learning outcome achievement, and career impact in these programs typically exceed traditional MBA programs taught primarily by research faculty (Navarro, 2008). Similarly, specialized master's programs in fields such as business analytics, financial engineering, and digital marketing increasingly recruit industry leaders who bring current technical knowledge and professional networks that enhance student outcomes (Levendis, J. & Indika, N. (2025).

4.3 Case Study: Information Technology and Cybersecurity

Information technology and cybersecurity fields exemplify domains where professional credentials and current industry experience provide superior qualification for instruction. The rapid evolution of technologies, methodologies, and threat landscapes means that research conducted during doctoral programs becomes outdated quickly, while industry practitioners maintain current knowledge through professional necessity (Copeland & Clapham, 2019).

Programs at institutions such as Carnegie Mellon University, Georgia Institute of Technology, and University of Maryland explicitly recruit cybersecurity professionals with industry certifications (CISSP, CISM, CEH) and current or recent work experience in preference to Ph.D. holders without such credentials (National Centers of Academic Excellence in Cybersecurity, 2020). Student outcomes from these programs, including employment rates, starting salaries, and employer satisfaction, consistently exceed outcomes from programs emphasizing traditional academic credentials.

A comparative study of information systems programs found that courses taught by instructors with current industry certifications and professional practice produced significantly higher student performance on professional certification exams (CompTIA, Cisco, Microsoft) than courses taught by Ph.D. faculty without such credentials, even controlling for student ability and program selectivity (Walstrom et al., 2008). Furthermore, alumni from SME-intensive programs reported greater confidence applying technical skills in professional settings and faster career advancement in technical roles.

4.4 Case Study: Creative and Professional Writing Programs

Creative writing and professional writing programs demonstrate alternative credential models where terminal degrees (M.F.A. for creative writing, M.A. or M.S. for professional writing) represent practice-oriented professional credentials rather than research doctorates. The creative writing M.F.A., recognized as the terminal degree for hiring and promotion purposes, focuses on developing writing craft through intensive practice, critique, and mentorship rather than scholarly research (Wandor, 2008).

Faculty with M.F.A. degrees and active publication records consistently produce superior student outcomes in creative writing programs compared to Ph.D. holders whose training emphasized literary scholarship rather than writing practice. Students in M.F.A.-taught workshops publish more frequently, win more writing awards, and pursue writing careers at higher rates than peers taught primarily by literature Ph.D. faculty & Writing Programs, 2020).

Professional writing programs similarly benefit from faculty with professional credentials (M.A., M.S.) and current writing practice in fields such as technical communication, corporate communications, or journalism. Research comparing technical writing programs found that students taught by instructors with professional certifications (Certified Professional Technical Communicator) and current industry practice demonstrated superior performance on professional portfolio assessments and obtained technical writing positions at higher rates than students taught by Ph.D. faculty without professional credentials (Hayhoe, 2000).

4.5 Limitations and Confounding Variables

While evidence supports SME effectiveness in applied disciplines, interpretation requires acknowledging limitations and confounding variables. Many studies compare outcomes across programs or courses but cannot perfectly control for student quality, institutional resources, program selectivity, or other factors affecting outcomes. Furthermore, the most effective programs likely integrate both professionally and academically qualified faculty, leveraging comparative advantages of each.

Research also indicates that effective SME instruction requires pedagogical development, just as effective Ph.D. instruction does. SMEs without teaching experience or pedagogical training may struggle initially, particularly with course design, assessment, and diverse student populations (Driscoll & Carliner, 2005). Institutions successfully employing SME faculty typically provide teaching mentorship, pedagogical resources, and support systems that help practitioners transition to instructional roles.

Credential "type" represents only one dimension of instructor quality. Individual variation in teaching ability, subject matter depth, professional engagement, and commitment to students likely exceeds variation attributable to credential type alone. The argument for professional credential equivalency does not claim that all SMEs outperform all Ph.D. holders, but rather that professional credentials and substantial experience constitute appropriate and often superior qualification for instruction in applied disciplines.

5. Framework for Evaluating Professional Credentials and Experience

5.1 Discipline-Specific Credential Assessment

Recognizing professional credentials as equivalent or superior to research doctorates requires developing systematic frameworks for evaluating qualifications based on program mission and disciplinary context. We propose a continuum of disciplinary types that suggests appropriate primary credential expectations.

Research-oriented disciplines (pure sciences, mathematics, theoretical social sciences, humanities) should continue prioritizing research doctorates, as these programs prepare students for academic careers or research positions requiring deep theoretical knowledge and research methodology expertise. Examples include physics, pure mathematics, philosophy, and sociology.

Applied research disciplines (engineering, applied sciences) benefit from hybrid models employing both research-trained faculty (Ph.D.) and professionally credentialed faculty (professional engineering degrees, industry experience). The appropriate balance depends on specific program focus—more research-oriented for students pursuing R&D careers, more practice-oriented for those entering design and implementation roles.

Professional practice disciplines (business, healthcare management, information technology, creative fields) should recognize professional credentials (MBA, MHA, M.F.A., professional doctorates) combined with substantial experience as primary qualifications, with research doctorates valued but not required. These programs explicitly prepare students for professional practice rather than academic careers, making professional expertise the central qualification.

Vocational and technical programs (applied technology, skilled trades) appropriately emphasize industry certifications, licensure, and extensive hands-on experience over any academic degrees, as these programs focus on immediate workplace competencies.

5.2 Criteria for Professional Credential Equivalency

When evaluating professional credentials and experience as equivalent to research doctorates, institutions should assess multiple dimensions. Professional master's degrees (MBA, M.F.A., M.Eng.) and professional doctorates (D.B.A., Ed.D., DNP) that involve substantial coursework, comprehensive examinations, applied research or creative projects, and demonstration of advanced professional competence represent rigorous alternatives to research doctorates. Institutions should evaluate program accreditation, selectivity, and curriculum intensity when assessing credential quality.

Substantial professional experience involves progressively responsible positions demonstrating expertise development, typically 7-10+ years post-credential work in the field, and evidence of professional achievement, leadership, or innovation. Experience should be recent and continuous, with at least some currency within the past 3-5 years to ensure relevance.

Professional Standing and Recognition within an industry is a key component of credential equivalency. Indicators include professional certifications and licensure in fields where these

represent standards (CPA, P.E., CISSP, PMP), publications in professional outlets or presentations at professional conferences, awards, patents, or other recognition within the professional community, and leadership roles in professional organizations or industry initiatives.

Continued Professional Engagement: Ongoing involvement maintains knowledge currency through continuing education and professional development, active consulting or professional practice concurrent with teaching, participation in professional conferences and communities, and maintenance of professional networks and industry awareness.

Educational Preparation: Despite emphasizing professional credentials, some pedagogical preparation enhances SME effectiveness. Institutions should support completing teaching certificates or graduate courses in education, participating in faculty development programs, and mentorship from experienced faculty during initial teaching assignments.

5.3 Documentation and Review Processes

Operationalizing professional credential equivalency requires systematic documentation and review processes. SME candidates should compile comprehensive portfolios documenting their educational credentials with transcripts and degree verification, detailed professional experience descriptions with position responsibilities and achievements, evidence of professional standing including certifications, publications, presentations, and awards, documentation of continued professional engagement, and teaching philosophy and evidence of instructional effectiveness if available.

Evaluation committees should include practicing professionals from the relevant field alongside academic faculty, ensuring balanced assessment of professional qualifications. External reviewers from industry or other institutions can provide independent validation of candidate qualifications.

Unlike terminal degrees representing permanent credentials, professional qualifications require ongoing validation. Institutions should establish periodic review cycles (e.g., every 5 years) assessing continued professional engagement, updated professional certifications or credentials, evidence of maintaining current knowledge, and teaching effectiveness.

6. Addressing Concerns about Academic Rigor and Quality

6.1 Maintaining Intellectual Rigor

Critics of SME-led instruction often express concern that professional practitioners lack the intellectual rigor, theoretical sophistication, or commitment to critical inquiry that characterizes doctoral-level scholarship (Schön, 1995). This objection conflates research training with intellectual rigor generally and misunderstands the nature of professional expertise.

Professional expertise represents a different but equally rigorous form of knowledge. Schön's (1983) concept of "reflective practice" describes how expert professionals engage in sophisticated analysis, generate working hypotheses, test solutions, and continuously refine understanding—forms of inquiry that parallel academic research but address practical rather than theoretical problems. Professional judgment in complex contexts requires integrating theoretical knowledge, empirical observation, tacit understanding, and contextual awareness in ways that demonstrate high-level cognitive sophistication.

Furthermore, professional credentials such as the MBA, M.F.A., or professional engineering degrees involve rigorous academic study, comprehensive examinations, and demonstration of mastery, differing from research doctorates primarily in emphasizing application over theoretical contribution. These programs maintain intellectual standards appropriate to their professional focus while developing analytical capabilities essential for both practice and teaching.

6.2 Contribution to Intellectual Life and Scholarship

A second concern involves SME faculty contributions to the broader intellectual mission of universities beyond immediate instructional duties. Traditional faculty governance, scholarly discourse, and institutional reputation building assume faculty engagement in research and publication (O'Meara, 2002).

However, professional scholarship represents an alternative form of intellectual contribution increasingly recognized as valuable. Boyer's (1990) influential reconceptualization of scholarship identified four equally important forms: discovery (traditional research), integration (synthesizing knowledge across fields), application (using knowledge to address societal problems), and teaching (transforming knowledge for student learning). SME faculty excel particularly at scholarship of application and teaching, contributing to intellectual life through different but valuable activities:

- Writing for professional audiences in practitioner journals, industry publications, and trade books that disseminate knowledge to broader communities

- Developing innovative pedagogical approaches, curricula, and assessment methods that advance teaching practice

- Creating applied research partnerships between universities and organizations, generating practical knowledge

- Mentoring student research, capstone projects, and professional development

- Participating in professional conferences and presenting at industry events where knowledge exchange occurs

Institutions should establish faculty evaluation systems that recognize and reward these diverse forms of scholarship rather than privileging only traditional academic research.

6.3 Ensuring Teaching Effectiveness

While SME faculty bring subject matter expertise and professional credibility, concerns about teaching effectiveness absent formal pedagogical training warrant attention. Research indicates substantial individual variation in teaching effectiveness regardless of credential type, with pedagogical knowledge and instructional skills developed through different pathways than subject matter expertise (Shulman, 1987).

Institutions employing SME faculty should invest in comprehensive faculty development including new faculty orientation addressing institutional policies, student demographics, and teaching resources; pedagogical workshops on course design, active learning strategies, assessment, and technology integration; teaching mentorship pairing SMEs with experienced faculty for observation, feedback, and support; and regular teaching evaluation through student feedback, peer observation, and teaching portfolio review.

Many universities successfully prepare SME faculty through programs such as teaching certificate programs for practitioners transitioning to academia, online courses in college teaching fundamentals, discipline-specific pedagogical resources developed by professional associations, and communities of practice where SME faculty share teaching strategies. Research demonstrates that supported SME faculty achieve teaching effectiveness equivalent to traditionally credentialed faculty while maintaining advantages in content currency and professional relevance (Binder et al., 2015).

6.4 Accreditation and External Perceptions

Accreditation compliance and reputation concerns often underlie resistance to SME hiring and experienced SME-led pedagogy. Proactive documentation of faculty qualifications and student outcomes, along with Concerns about accreditation compliance and external perceptions of academic quality represent practical rather than pedagogical objections. Major accrediting bodies increasingly recognize professional credentials as equivalent in appropriate contexts, but institutional implementation varies.

Proactive approaches include clearly documenting faculty qualification rationale in accreditation self-studies, emphasizing student outcome evidence supporting SME effectiveness, engaging accreditors in dialogue about evolving standards and best practices, and participating in accreditation reform efforts advancing professional credential recognition.

Regarding external perceptions, research universities particularly may resist SME faculty for fear of diminished prestige. However, professional program rankings increasingly emphasize outcomes such as employment rates, salary increases, and employer satisfaction—metrics where SME-intensive programs often excel—rather than solely research reputation. Furthermore, prospective students and employers increasingly value practical preparation and professional credentials, making SME faculty an asset rather than liability for program reputation.

7. Policy Recommendations and Implementation Strategies

71. Implementation Challenges and Success Factors

Institutional transformation faces predictable challenges including faculty governance resistance from traditionally credentialed faculty concerned about status implications, administrative inertia and risk aversion regarding accreditation compliance, compensation and workload policy complexities when accommodating continued professional practice, and cultural barriers between academic and professional perspectives. Successful implementation requires strategic approaches addressing these challenges.

Executive Leadership and Senior administrators must champion a professional credential recognition through policy changes, resource allocation, and cultural messaging. Presidential, provost, and dean-level commitment proves essential for overcoming resistance (Kezar & Eckel, 2002). Rather than imposing change, institutions should engage faculty in developing credential policies, evaluation criteria, and implementation processes. Cross-functional committees including both academic and professional faculty can build consensus around appropriate standards (O'Meara, 2002).

Systematic collection and dissemination of student outcome data, employer feedback, and alumni career progression evidence build internal and external support for SME faculty. Demonstrating tangible benefits overcomes abstract concerns about academic standards (Binder *et al.*, 2015). Beginning with pilot programs in disciplines where professional credential value is most evident (business, technology, professional writing) in crafted pilot programs, allows demonstrating success before expanding. Documenting lessons learned and refining processes based on experience increases likelihood of successful scaling.

A substantial investment in teaching preparation, pedagogical support, and academic integration for SME faculty will be crucial. Ensuring that professional experts become effective teachers addresses legitimate quality concerns while honoring their professional expertise (Driscoll & Carliner, 2005).

7.2 Hiring Practice Reforms

Institutions should reform hiring processes to eliminate categorical Ph.D. requirements in appropriate disciplines, replacing them with mission-aligned qualification criteria. Specific recommendations include crafting modified position announcements specifying professional credentials, experience requirements, and continued engagement expectations rather than defaulting to "Ph.D. required" language. Example: "Qualified candidates will possess either (1) a Ph.D. in [field] with demonstrated professional practice experience, or (2) a professional master's degree in [field] with 10+ years progressive professional experience, current professional certifications, and evidence of continued engagement in professional practice."

Search Committees should include practicing professionals from relevant industries alongside faculty, ensuring balanced evaluation of professional qualifications. External advisory board members, industry partners, or alumni in leadership positions are ideal candidates for committee participants. Search Committees should develop rubrics for assessing professional qualifications that specify credential expectations, experience quality and recency indicators, evidence of professional standing, documentation of continued engagement, and teaching capability assessment approaches.

Universities must also recognize that accomplished professionals may command higher salaries in industry than traditional academic positions offer. Institutions should develop competitive compensation packages including flexible arrangements such as part-time positions or teaching-intensive tracks that accommodate continued professional practice, consulting allowances recognizing that professional engagement enhances teaching, and differential salary structures reflecting market rates for high-demand fields.

7.3 Promotion and Tenure System Modifications

Traditional promotion and tenure systems reward scholarly publication, often marginalizing teaching excellence and professional achievement. To successfully integrate and retain SME faculty, institutions should *create alternative professional tracks* by establishing teaching-focused or practice-focused tenure tracks with promotion criteria emphasizing instructional excellence, curriculum development and innovation, professional engagement and continued currency, and professional scholarship including practitioner publications, conference presentations, and professional leadership.

The expanded scholarship model explicitly recognizing application, integration, and teaching scholarship alongside traditional discovery scholarship (Boyer, 1990). Universities should develop guidelines for documenting and evaluating professional scholarship such as industry impact, practitioner publications, invited presentations, and curriculum innovations. Concurrently, Universities need to adapt to the reality of higher education delivery and align with the *flexible workload models* of American Industry. There is a compelling need to design workload policies accommodating continued professional practice through reduced teaching loads balanced with professional engagement expectations, summer consulting or practice opportunities, and sabbatical policies supporting professional renewal alongside traditional research leaves. There is also a need to develop peer review mechanisms appropriate for evaluating professional work, including external reviewers from industry assessing professional standing, practitioner journal publications evaluated for field impact rather than academic citation metrics, and professional presentations and workshops contributing to promotion portfolios.

7.4 Professional Development and Support

Successful integration of SME faculty requires intentional professional development addressing their unique needs. *Pedagogical Training* is required to provide comprehensive teaching preparation including pre-service workshops before first teaching assignments, ongoing pedagogical development opportunities, teaching mentorship programs, and discipline-specific teaching resources from professional associations. Experienced SME-led pedagogy, mentoring, scholarly support aligned with practice, and accommodations for professional commitments help SMEs succeed as faculty implementing experienced SME-led pedagogy.

SME faculty integration into academic communities can be accomplished through mentorship programs pairing SMEs with experienced faculty and communities of practice for SME faculty across disciplines. Providing specialized orientation to institutional culture, policies, and student services, and leadership development will prepare SME faculty for the multiple administrative roles required by the job.

SME faculty can develop scholarly research agendas aligned with professional expertise, including writing workshops for practitioner publications, guidance translating professional projects into scholarship, and connections with applied research centers or industry partnership offices. By recognizing that SME faculty who maintain a professional practice may face unique time demands, support through flexible scheduling, professional commitment accommodations, technology support for hybrid or online teaching, and administrative assistance with routine tasks will ease the burden and expedite the integration process.

7.5 Accreditation Engagement and Advocacy

Institutions should actively engage accreditation reform efforts. Detailed qualification matrices documenting experienced SME-led pedagogy models, outcome evidence from experienced SME-led pedagogy programs, and proactive engagement with accreditors support recognition of professional credentials and experienced SME-led pedagogy. Compiling student outcome data will support SME effectiveness.

Universities should engage in proactive communication and engage accreditors through liaisons discussing relevant policies

and standards evolution. SMEs can collaborate with associations, industry partners, and peer institutions to advocate for continued reform and to contribute data on faculty qualifications and student outcomes from experienced SME-led pedagogy initiatives. Participation in accrediting body committees and conferences will help to redefine best practices and provide evidence that supports professional credential recognition. SMEs can serve as ambassadors in collaborative advocacy by working with professional associations, business and industry partners, and peer institutions to advocate for continued accreditation reform recognizing professional credentials. SME participation and support of research on faculty qualifications and student outcomes, will build the foundation for informing policy.

8. Limitations

While this article synthesizes existing evidence supporting SME effectiveness, significant research gaps warrant investigation.

8.1 Longitudinal Outcome Studies

Most existing research examines immediate outcomes such as employment rates. Long-term studies tracking career advancement, professional achievement, leadership development, and lifetime earnings would provide stronger evidence of SME impact. Comparative studies following graduates from SME-intensive versus traditional programs over 10-20 year career spans would illuminate lasting effects.

Research examining ideal proportions of academically versus professionally qualified faculty across different program types, student populations, and institutional contexts would inform implementation decisions. Analysis could identify threshold effects, complementarity benefits, and discipline-specific patterns.

8.2 Pedagogical Practice Studies

Detailed investigation of how SME faculty design courses, implement teaching strategies, and engage students would enhance understanding of their pedagogical approaches. Ethnographic studies observing SME classrooms and interviewing students about learning experiences could illuminate mechanisms producing superior outcomes.

Evaluation research examining different professional development models for preparing SME faculty would identify best practices for *Professional Development Effectiveness*. Comparative studies of teaching certificate programs, mentorship models, and workshop series could determine most effective approaches for different faculty and institutional contexts.

While outcome studies demonstrate SME effectiveness, process studies examining how students learn differently with professional versus academic faculty would advance *theoretical understanding*. Mixed-methods research combining learning analytics, classroom observation, and student interviews could reveal differential learning mechanisms.

"Diversity and Inclusion" are currently challenged assumptions, but there is no denying the impact and implications of ignoring these concerns. Research examining how professional credential policies affect faculty diversity would illuminate equity implications. Studies could investigate whether SME hiring increases representation of women, minorities, and first-generation college students in faculty ranks and how diverse SME faculty affect student experiences and outcomes.

9. Future Direction

The transformation of higher education to better serve 21st-century learners and societal needs requires reconceptualizing faculty qualifications in applied and professional disciplines. The traditional research doctorate, while appropriate for research-intensive fields preparing future academics, represents an increasingly poor fit for programs preparing students for professional practice. Subject matter experts with professional credentials and substantial industry experience offer pedagogical advantages grounded in experiential learning theory, situated cognition, and professional identity formation scholarship. Empirical evidence across multiple disciplines demonstrates that SME-taught programs produce superior student outcomes including employment rates, professional competencies, and career advancement.

Advocating professional credential recognition in appropriate disciplines does not suggest replacing all research-credentialed faculty with practitioners. Optimal faculty composition varies by program type but generally involves integrating both academically and professionally qualified faculty to leverage their complementary strengths.

Research-credentialed faculty contribute theoretical frameworks, research methodology expertise, scholarly perspectives on disciplinary debates, and connections to academic research communities. Professionally credentialed faculty contribute current professional practice knowledge, authentic problem contexts, industry connections and partnerships, and professional identity modeling. The most effective programs thoughtfully deploy each faculty type where they provide greatest value: Ph.D. faculty teaching foundational theory, research methods, and advanced seminars; professional credential faculty teaching applied courses, professional skills, and capstone experiences; and collaborative teaching approaches where both perspectives enrich learning.

This balanced approach also addresses concerns about institutional quality and academic mission. Universities maintaining robust research programs alongside professional education can staff research-intensive courses and graduate programs primarily with research faculty while recognizing professional faculty as appropriate for practice-oriented programs. The key principle involves matching faculty qualifications to specific program missions and student needs rather than applying uniform credential requirements across all contexts.

Ultimately, this article advocates not merely policy adjustments, but a paradigm shift in how higher education conceives faculty qualifications. The research doctorate emerged as the universal academic credential during an era when universities primarily served traditional-age students preparing for research careers or liberal arts education. Contemporary higher education serves dramatically more diverse missions: preparing working adults for career advancement, developing technical and professional competencies for immediate workforce application, partnering with industry to address regional economic needs, and facilitating lifelong learning throughout dynamic careers.

These diverse missions require diverse faculty qualifications matched to specific educational goals. The outdated assumption that Ph.D. holders represent superior educators across all contexts undermines institutional effectiveness and student success.

Professional credentials and substantial industry experience constitute not inferior alternatives but appropriate—often superior—qualifications for instruction in applied disciplines. Recognizing this reality requires intellectual humility from traditional academics, acknowledging that different forms of expertise suit different educational purposes.

The transformation also demands courage from institutional leaders willing to challenge entrenched status hierarchies and navigate resistance from faculty governance structures dominated by research-credentialed professors. However, the imperative for change grows increasingly urgent as higher education faces mounting pressure to demonstrate value, relevance, and return on investment. Institutions that successfully integrate professional expertise into faculty ranks while maintaining appropriate academic rigor will be best positioned to thrive in the evolving educational landscape.

10. Conclusion

The marriage of academic expertise and industry insights creates powerful synergy fostering holistic educational experiences that serve students, employers, and society. Industry SMEs infuse courses with invaluable experience-driven context while supporting academic efficiency gains through authentic curriculum development and industry partnership facilitation. The inclusion of full-time faculty with research training ensures balanced approaches integrating theoretical foundations with applied learning.

However, balance should not mean uniformity. Different programs serving different students pursuing different career paths require different faculty qualification profiles. Research universities preparing future scholars appropriately emphasize research credentials. Comprehensive institutions offering both research and professional programs benefit from diverse faculty portfolios matching credentials to program missions. Teaching-focused institutions emphasizing professional preparation should feel confident hiring primarily SME faculty in applied programs without sacrificing quality or prestige.

The blend of pedagogical expertise, curriculum design knowledge, and educational research offered by doctoral-trained faculty complements the dynamic professional insights provided by industry experts. This orchestrated integration appeals to students seeking practical skill development while positioning programs as credible and responsive to workforce needs. Integrating academic and industry expertise through experienced SME-led pedagogy can create holistic learning environments that better serve students, employers, and society. SMEs provide context-rich, current, and professionally credible instruction characteristic of experienced SME-led pedagogy, while doctoral-trained faculty contribute theoretical depth and research literacy. Faculty composition should reflect program mission rather than default to a single credential model, embracing experienced SME-led pedagogy where appropriate.

Empirical literature supports the supplementary or primary use of SMEs in various fields where practical skills and industry knowledge are core to program outcomes, while foundational and research-heavy fields favor traditional faculty models. Findings point toward the importance of local context, collaboration, and discipline alignment in maximizing educational quality.

The question facing higher education is not whether professional credentials and experience matter, but whether institutions possess the wisdom and courage to recognize their value, develop appropriate evaluation frameworks, and transform hiring practices accordingly. The evidence presented throughout this article demonstrates unequivocally that in many disciplines, professional expertise equals or exceeds research training as teaching qualification. The remaining challenge involves translating this evidence into institutional action that better serves students, honors professional accomplishment, and strengthens higher education's contributions to societal flourishing. Doing so promises to strengthen student outcomes, enhance equity and representation, and position higher education as a more responsive partner in a rapidly changing professional landscape through the transformative potential of experienced SME-led pedagogy.

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