

Discussion Lecture - Session 1

Monday 9th November, 14.15 - 15.15

What is a Doctorate for?

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Graham Stew (DPhil; MA; Cert Ed; DipN; RGN; RMN; RNT; FHEA) has a professional background in general and mental health nursing and has worked in therapeutic communities in London and Cambridge. He has taught in Higher Education for the last 25 years, and his research interests include the management of change, reflective practice, inter-professional learning and the use of mindfulness in clinical practice. For the last six years, Graham has been the Course Leader of the Professional Doctorate in Health and Social Care at the University of Brighton, and regards this as the most stimulating and satisfying experience of his whole career.

What actually is the purpose of a doctorate programme? Is it concerned with knowledge development or student development... or both? Is the thesis the product, or is the person the product? The thesis is the evidence, but beyond the academic world few people care about this document. The outcome of a doctorate could be seen as the individual who demonstrates the qualities related to doctoral level study, such as critical thinking, self-awareness and scholarship. This session will examine these broad questions specifically in relation to professional doctorates.

Is the aim of a professional doctorate to produce a 'researching professional' or a 'professional researcher'? This subtle but important distinction will be explored in relation to the practitioners who undertake

professional doctorates. Is a doctorate a passport to an academic career; or the means to enhance professional skills?

Who are the 'stakeholders' in professional doctorates, and what are their respective aims and needs? Stakeholders include the students themselves, their employers, their colleagues, their profession, the public, and of course the universities. What does each stakeholder expect or want from these programmes? What forces are driving the rapid development of professional doctorates, and in whose interests are they?

Linked to aims are outcomes, and these too will be addressed. Doctoral study involves mastering procedures not only for generating knowledge, but also for

becoming aware of the limits of knowledge, and different ways of knowing.

If professional knowledge is best developed through practice-based research, it will be suggested in this presentation that a pragmatic approach should be adopted to deal with the complex realities of researching one's own area of practice. This involves a creative mixing of methodologies, and an ability to adapt research tools and methods to achieve the particular task in hand.

As a result, do professional doctorates produce more versatile, reflexive and flexible researchers? To what extent is the doctorate a 'badge' or a good marketing brand which denotes expert practice, quality and status?

What is the essential nature of the doctorate? Is it a research apprenticeship, training 'to be an academic', or is it the highest award which can be achieved in a particular discipline (whether academic or in a practice domain)? What is the distinction between academic and practice domains? Does not the development of professional practice require the skills of critical analysis of evidence and rigorous inquiry? Aren't these research skills, and shouldn't all doctorates be research degrees?

Why aren't professional doctorates recognised as equivalent to PhDs in terms of research training? Is it because they are the victims of 'academic inflation' within the professions, being regarded as the ultimate in continuing professional development? If career progression and senior appointments (previously set at masters degree level) are now linked to doctoral qualifications, will this inevitably lead to 'dumbing down', and a demand for 'quick and easy' doctorates?

All these issues and questions will be addressed in the session, and it is hoped that a stimulating discussion will ensue!

References

European University Association (2006) *Bologna Seminar: Doctoral programmes in Europe*. At: <http://www.eua.be/research/doctoral-programmes/doctoral-programmes-in-the-bologna-process/doctorates-seminar/>

Galvin, K. & Carr, E. (2003) "The emergence of professional doctorates in nursing in the UK: Where are we now?" *Nursing Times Research* Vol. 8. No 4, 293-307

Lee, N-J. (2009) *Achieving your Professional Doctorate*. Maidenhead: Open University Press

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