

Discussion Lecture - Session 2

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Doctoral-level qualifications outside of universities: a comparison of forms and practices

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Dr Stan Lester has been a consultant, systems developer and researcher in professional and vocational education since 1993 and a visiting academic at Middlesex University since 1999. He works with a variety of clients including universities, professional bodies, employers, and government and EU departments and agencies, and his work has included involvement in developing the Ufi-LearnDirect Learning through Work system, UK and international qualification frameworks, accreditation and CPD systems for professional bodies, and various research and development projects for education and training agencies. Stan's research interests include the development of professions and professionalism, qualification frameworks and systems, and work-based learning and assessment at all levels.

The breadth of doctoral forms available in universities has expanded considerably over the last twenty years to include a wide range of professional and practice-based doctorates in addition to the well-established PhD and older academic doctorates such as the DSc and DLitt. However, the essential properties of the doctorate – that it consists of original research or scholarly contribution, and that it represents a substantial piece or collection of work equivalent to at least three years' full-time study – remain the hallmark of qualifications at this level.

Outside of higher education there are a small number of qualifications and professional designations that while not doctorates have claims to being considered

as broadly at doctoral level. Three such awards were identified from a study of professional fellowship-type qualifications (Lester 2009), and their characteristics examined. These awards – a fellowship by thesis or publication assessed in a similar way to a PhD, a fellowship awarded on the basis of contribution and distinction in a professional career, and a modular diploma in strategic leadership – represent a broader range of practices than university doctorates, and used as a 'mirror' to the latter offer some learning-points of potential relevance to higher education provision at doctoral level.

A contribution-based approach to awarding higher qualifications or designations raises questions about where the line is drawn

between honorary awards and those earned through publication or other forms of work in the public domain, particularly where the latter is practice-based rather than based on research or advanced scholarship. A danger exists in that if what is valued in professional or public life is allowed to 'reverse-colonise' the criteria for award of the doctorate (cf Scott et al 2004) without critical input from the university, both the academic and professional standing of the qualification is likely to suffer.

A potentially more exciting avenue for exploration is offered by the appearance of small qualifications that are ostensibly at doctoral level. The emergence of the diploma mentioned above suggests that there is a potential market for smaller awards at this level that are geared to advanced professional extension, typically for people who already hold master's degrees or the equivalent but are not (at least initially) prepared to embark on the lengthy journey represented by a doctorate. These might include:

- a) a module or short programme that expects a similar level of thinking to be applied as would be the case for a doctorate
- b) an investigation, project or change programme that makes an original contribution to knowledge or an equivalent advancement in practice, but is more limited in scope than a doctoral project or thesis
- c) a published or public work – such as a single journal article, research report, development or composition – that, similarly, makes an original contribution or advancement but in a more limited way than would be needed for a doctorate.

These posited awards or components start to suggest a structure that fits beneath the doctorate in a way that has some parallels with the modular frameworks that support some professional master's degrees, with intermediate awards available for smaller achievements. A model of this kind raises a number of challenges including the question of appropriate terminology and whether taught modules would be validated at master's or doctoral level. However, while awarding bodies outside the higher education system now have an avenue to gain accreditation for 'level 8' (i.e. doctoral level) qualifications in the new UK Qualifications and Credit Framework, universities have the advantage in being able to locate their awards more clearly in relation to the professional or practitioner doctorate.

References

- Lester, S (2009) *Professional bodies' senior designations and awards*. Bristol, Professional Associations Research Network.
- Scott, D, Brown, A, Lunt, I & Thorne, L (2004) *Professional Doctorates: integrating professional and academic knowledge*. Maidenhead, Society for Research into Higher Education / Open University Press.