

What is a Doctorate for?

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This paper explores the nature of the doctorate as a generic award ... but in the process will examine these broad questions specifically in relation to professional doctorates. Due to the current complexity and range of doctoral programmes being offered internationally, I invite readers to apply their own experience to the questions raised.

Purpose

What actually is the purpose of a doctorate programme? Traditionally, the doctorate is regarded as the highest academic award of a university, and is assumed to possess both intrinsic merit and extrinsic worth. What however, is its purpose? Does it represent the attainment of scholarly excellence, a pinnacle of personal achievement, advanced professional development, or a passport to an academic career?

What is the essential nature of the doctorate? Fundamentally it can be seen as a training in research skills and knowledge, a practical apprenticeship designed to equip students with a toolkit for future research. The PhD is regarded in this light, but can the same be said for Professional Doctorates, where the outcome is expected to be an advanced practitioner rather than a career researcher?

Is the aim of a professional doctorate to produce a 'researching professional' or a 'professional researcher', or an advanced practitioner? These are subtle but important distinctions. The professional doctorate is an advanced research and practice development programme that is professionally relevant, but it may also be expected to produce tomorrow's leaders and change agents.

Product

Is the award of a doctorate recognition of product or process? The doctoral process may be a research training, or practice personal/ professional/ practice development, but is the thesis the doctoral product, or is the person the product ?

The thesis is the evidence of the process, but beyond the academic world few people care about this document. After all, the thesis is not offered the job or the promotion! The possessor of a doctorate is seen as a person who embodies qualities related to the degree. So what are the qualities of a 'doctor'? The product of a doctorate could be seen as the individual who demonstrates the qualities related to doctoral level study, such as critical thinking, reflexive self-awareness, extensive specialist knowledge, research skills, and scholarship (Scott et al, 2004). Doctoral study involves mastering

procedures not only for generating knowledge, but also for becoming aware of different ways of knowing, and the limits of knowledge. This process invariably results in powerful personal transformation for students, whose lives are profoundly changed.

The PhD used to be regarded purely as a research training. It is now considered to be wider and broader than that – it is being stretched, and is also seen as preparation for the ‘academic life’ – which includes teaching and administration, as well as research (time and energy permitting). In 2001 the UK Research Councils, in collaboration with the UK GRAD Programme and the HE sector, developed the Joint Statement of Skills Training Requirements of Research Postgraduates (Rcuk 2001). This document sets out a joint statement of the skills that all doctoral students funded by the Research Councils would be expected to develop during their research training. The statement covers seven sections:

- research skills and techniques
- research environment
- research management
- personal effectiveness
- communication skills
- teamworking and networking skills
- career management

These ‘transferable and generic’ skills have now been widely adopted by UK universities as desirable outcomes of doctoral programmes. However, not all of these skills are relevant to professional doctorates (e.g. where careers have been successfully established), and where there’s an added ethos of continuing professional development (CPD) and lifelong learning (UKCGE, 2002; Park, 2007).

Stakeholders

Moving on from “What is a doctorate for”, we can also ask “**Who** is a doctorate for?” Who exactly are the ‘stakeholders’ in professional doctorates, and what are their respective vested interests and needs? Stakeholders include the students themselves, their employers, their colleagues, their professions, the public, and of course the universities. What does each stakeholder expect or want from these programmes?

Let’s look at each of these in turn:

Students usually have a range of personal and professional motives. Those undertaking professional doctorates often have career aims and seek to augment their practice expertise with research skills. Combined with enhancing personal effectiveness and resilience may be a desire to enhance their practice, and perhaps achieve a sense of parity of status with other professionals in their field. A doctorate satisfies both the ego’s need for self-esteem, and also fulfils an intrinsic enjoyment of learning and personal challenge. It should not be forgotten that students are also paying customers, and rightly expect value for money from their universities. Likewise, when students

complain of the stress and difficulties of their research journeys, I am happy to remind them that their situation is entirely self-inflicted!

Employers supporting professional doctorate students are found mainly in the public sector, although private sector companies will sponsor specific research projects and offer PhD studentships. These managers are interested in developing and enhancing their services, and usually need assurance that the planned research is likely to benefit the organisation in some way. The knowledge economy has fueled support for doctoral research which has clear practical application in the workplace; employers tend not to be attracted to abstract ‘blue-skies’ research. If managers are paying for their employee’s studies, they naturally expect some return for their investment, and will like the idea of their employees possessing the transferable research skills outlined above (Rcuk 2001). Giving priority to staff development within the organisation may attract high calibre recruits, but with the additional risk of losing them once qualified and having ‘outgrown’ their jobs. Financial constraints also influence the decision to support staff on doctoral programmes, when in-house CPD courses are cheaper and may appear more relevant and practical.

Colleagues may reasonably expect some pay-off from the research. Any benefits in the workplace could compensate for the increased workload that might be incurred by the student’s university attendance. Colleagues may even become co-researchers in a collaborative project and thus gain a sense of ownership of the research, or at least enjoy some ‘reflected glory’. On occasion, however, there may be barely suppressed resentment or envy of their colleague’s absence or success, leading to unpleasant workplace tensions.

Professional bodies might anticipate the development of new knowledge related to practice; expecting the research derived from professional doctorates to provide the future evidence base for practice. In addition to welcoming the development of the disciplinary knowledge base, professions may also view an increasing number of their members gaining doctorates as evidence of increasing occupational status and recognition (Galvin & Carr, 2003). Many professions will require its specialist practitioners and leaders of tomorrow to be educated to doctoral level, and so are likely to be supportive, at least in principle, if not specifically through funding. However, professional doctorates are still not recognised as research degrees by certain funding bodies, and this issue is a real concern for students who plan to seek post-doctoral funding.

Public understanding and expectations of what a doctorate represents varies considerably. Most people will know that a doctorate is a lofty intellectual achievement, and will associate this award with academia. Their perceptions of doctoral research are likely to involve the development of science and technological knowledge. Awareness of professional doctorates is probably limited, and members of the public may not assume that doctoral work will have a practical impact on public services like education and health care. Within society generally doctorates may provide social mobility and career enhancement, and could be regarded as denoting an accessible elite comprising 1% of the population.

Universities have obvious vested interests in doctorates. They represent valuable research activity which attracts funds, and enhances research profiles of schools and faculties. Although part-time doctoral students do not generate any significant income, the status of doctoral programmes can provide prestige to departments, and attract both staff and students as the centre's academic reputation is established. Historically, the university has maintained control over the generation of propositional knowledge by acting as a gate-keeper to advanced study, and thus has been regarded as the guardian of academic standards (Barnett, 2000). However, the recent development of 'second generation' professional doctorates threatens to challenge this dominant position, and represents a shift in the locus of control from academia to professional workplace.

Second generation professional doctorates

So-called 'second generation' professional doctorates are characterised by the increased importance attached to practice-based research, collaboration with the work place, as well as portfolio approaches to assessment. There are signs that second generation professional doctorates have gained acceptance in higher education throughout Australia and New Zealand (Maxwell et al 2001) and there is now evidence that recent professional doctorates in the UK can be justifiably described as 'second generation' (Thorne, 2004; Stephenson et al 2006).

Second generation professional doctorates, as discussed by Maxwell (2003) and Rolfe and Davies (2009), offer the opportunity for a fully integrated partnership between the university and the world of practice. These doctorates are also based on the principles of Mode 2 knowledge production (Gibbons et al 1994), which presents challenges to the power and authority of the University. Mode 2 knowledge production is based within the workplace, is context-driven, problem-focused, heterogeneous and transdisciplinary, and therefore challenges the traditional disciplinary boundaries and power base of the universities (Nowotny et al, 2001, 2005). Traditionally, 'Mode 1' knowledge-production resulted in propositional knowledge which was written up, published and occasionally applied to practice. In contrast, Mode 2 knowledge production can be regarded as 'knowing as action' (Barnett, 1997), 'process knowledge' (Eraut, 1994) or 'praxis' (Rolfe, 1993), in which the outcome is a process rather than a publication.

Interesting questions arise from these developments. Should universities still be regarded as the sole arbiters of scholarly excellence and the gate-keepers of new knowledge for practice? Should professional doctorate students regard their priority to be the academic requirements of their university, or the practical utility of their research findings? Should they be expected to jump through 'academic hoops' to achieve their degrees, or to demonstrate real benefits in transforming practice? At present the former is a requirement, the latter is a hope. Who should judge either these project outcomes in the workplace, or what constitutes original and significant knowledge for practice? Academic examiners ... or professional practitioners? ... and should the examination be a public and accountable affair, rather than the closed and rather secretive process it is currently in the UK?

The Future

What is the future for the PhD and for professional doctorates? What forces are driving the rapid development of professional doctorates, and in whose interests are they? To what extent are debates over the doctorate being driven by those from 'outside' the system, and should universities be taking a greater lead in these debates?

As professional knowledge is best developed through practice-based research, a pragmatic approach is frequently necessary to deal with the complex realities of researching one's own area of practice. This requires a creative mixing of methodologies and methods, and an ability to adapt research tools to complete the particular task in hand (Ellis, 2007; Lee, 2009). As a result, it can be argued that professional doctorates produce more versatile, reflexive and resourceful researchers than the typical PhD programme.

However, it seems no longer safe to assume that possession of a doctorate means a thorough training as a researcher has been completed. There is a move in some countries and professions towards non-research, practice-focused doctorates; e.g. the debate over the Doctorate in Nursing Practice in the US. If these so-called 'clinical doctorates' require students to investigate their practice through intensive inquiry, isn't that research? It may be called a 'capstone project' or 'clinical inquiry'... but isn't it still a research dissertation? The development of professional practice requires the skills of questioning, critically analysing evidence and of rigorous inquiry. In my view these are research skills, and all doctorates should be research degrees. Can, or should, any doctorate be awarded without evidence of 'original and significant' research? In the UK, the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA, 2008) do not think so, stipulating research skills as one of the qualification descriptors for all doctoral awards.

This situation explains why professional doctorates are not recognised by some funding authorities as equivalent to PhDs in terms of research training. Another related issue is the confusion over the proliferation of professional doctorate programme titles and their respective aims and outcomes, and the suspicion that some doctorates are 'more equal than others' (Kirkman et al, 2007). These are issues which threaten to undermine all the positive developments of recent years, unless addressed and resolved in the near future.

We have to ask whether the professions want research degrees or practice development degrees. Do they need critical, reflexive scholars or advanced practitioners and can't professional doctorates provide both? If career progression and senior appointments (previously set at masters degree level) are now linked to doctoral qualifications, this could potentially lead to the 'dumbing down' of programmes, 'academic inflation', and a demand for 'quick and easy' doctorates. An important point to bear in mind is that although a practice-based doctorate is different, it must be seen as equivalent in status and rigour to the traditional PhD. As professional doctorates were developed to make a difference in practice, then this closer relationship between

knowledge production and knowledge utilisation should not be resisted (Rolfe & Davies, 2009), despite resistance from within universities.

I realise that more questions have been asked in this paper than answers provided, but this reflects the complexity of debate which currently surrounds professional doctorates. It will be vital for these issues to be fully debated (and some consensus reached) in order to secure the future of professional doctorates in an uncertain and changing climate, and where the demands of the stakeholders are becoming more varied and strident.

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