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Challenging the PhD: managing the alignment of an EdD programme alongside a traditional PhD pathway

Introduction

The impact of undertaking a professional doctorate on professionals is now well documented (Wellington and Sikes, 2006, Butcher and Sieminski, 2006). However, the cultural and pedagogical challenge the EdD brings to the traditional research PhD is less well recognised. The aim of this paper is to examine the cultural and pedagogical changes currently being experienced by the University of Derby in two aspects: (1) from the 'master/apprentice' model traditionally reserved for PhD degrees to a more flexible and responsive pedagogy; (2) managing the integration of the EdD within already well-established university systems that do not easily support its wide and diverse approach. The programme at Derby supports UK/European-based participants as well as a burgeoning off-site provision located in Cyprus; drawing on a mainly Israeli population who range from Arabs (Christians, Muslim and Palestinian) to Israeli Jews. The University has a strategy of Widening Participation and encourages participants from a wide range of professions, from education (predominately), social work, health-based professions and the business sector.

This paper argues that the best practice of PhD and EdD routes can be used for the mutual benefit of all doctoral participants. Gaining parity for professional doctorates alongside PhD programmes is giving rise to tensions as numbers of participants on the EdD programme outstrips the traditional route coupled with faster completion rates compared to the PhD. Coming to terms with the 'challenger' has not been easy, but the thesis here is that while pedagogy might be different for the traditional and professional route there is much to be gained in opening up Research Offices to allow equity and opportunity for PhD and EdD participants. Furthermore, the opportunities to bring national and international PhD and EdD groups together for study would enhance the research capacities at level 8 as well as provide a solid basis for on-going staff development offered by both doctoral routes; currently many university staff undertake the more flexible EdD route, as compared with the PhD route.

Who are the professionals on our programme?

There is a wide diversity of students applying for the doctorate at Derby; the programme operates a national programme for predominately UK-based students and an off-site provision in Cyprus for Israeli students. UK students also comprise students who travel from their place of work overseas: currently USA, Russia and Switzerland and Greece. The range of UK student professional backgrounds is also varied, drawing from predominately

Education, Health and Business. There is also a large number of University staff who are registered on the programme. While there are staff registered on the PhD programme (mainly PhD by publication), the professional doctorate serves the majority of University staff studying at this level. The flexibility of the Ed D award in particular is well recognised at both national and international level at Derby. Internationally there is a large cohort (over 60) of Israeli and Arab students who similarly face the challenge of the status issue of the EdD in their own country. Israeli universities do not recognise the EdD as a doctoral qualification (only the PhD); therefore many successful students have to undertake a further viva with the Ministry of Education in order to 'validate' the degree for its doctoral worthiness in Israel. Rather than adversely affecting recruitment to the programme this has not been seen as a barrier by busy Israeli professionals who value the opportunity to undertake research into an area of their professional expertise on a part-time basis. Indeed, the EdD is seen as an alternative means of securing a doctoral route which allows students to study independently of traditional research professors utilizing PhD students to help with their research. Successful completion of the 'second viva' has also encouraged continued participation in the award.

Methodology

This work is not based upon any empirical research but centred on personal reflections of a relatively new programme leader for the Education Doctorate. Therefore, any conclusions must only be seen as speculative, tightly context bound (one university) but which illuminates the 'struggle' for recognition that is only just being fully recognised at a wider university level. It might appear, even given the widening participation agenda, that a post-1992 teaching university would give increased recognition to the professional doctorate. Taylor's (2008) point about older research-led universities using the increased numbers of EdD students to strengthen their research base has not been captured in the same sense by this University. The management and leadership of all professional doctorates resides within faculties rather than within the central University Research Office that exclusively manages the PhDs. Neuman (2005) notes a similar situation in Australian universities. This emergence of a 2-tier system may indeed strengthen Neuman's (2005) perception of a different status for the professional doctorate, which is reinforced by these very university systems. Only recently has it been recognised that recruitment, retention and completion rates on professional programmes is impressive and therefore programme leaders have been invited to share expertise at Faculty and University Research meetings, previously held exclusively for staff supervising PhDs. The recent validation of a 'New Route' PhD (although less 'new' now) would appear to reinforce a separation between the PhD routes themselves; given that this is a route for non-masters qualified entrants. However, such variance in doctoral programmes could, one might argue, provide a strong suite of awards suited to cover a range of requirements for students working at this level. It is possibly now the time to review how doctorates are led and managed at Derby, with a view to equalising the 'status' between traditional, new and professional routes. Recognition and understanding of the pedagogical

differences between the routes is now becoming more widespread throughout the institution; the impact of a successful Masters in Education award is now actively feeding doctoral routes and increasing numbers of students. Institutionally the organisation and management of doctorates is now in need of review, in a sense not only to improve efficiencies in day to day running, but to bring about a sense of shared understanding between academics and administration of all (rather than just PhD) doctorates.

The PhD and EdD routes compared: pedagogical issues

The success of the EdD programme at Derby sustained over a period of 10 years demonstrates that professional doctorates are by no means static and are becoming the preferred pathway for doctoral awards for busy professionals who would not otherwise be able to study at this level. The route is also preferred by those wishing to impact on their professional practice or to use their years of experience to gain accreditation for the work they do. The EdD provides a pathway for doctoral study to a group of professionals who would otherwise not have the opportunity because of professional/personal commitments. While the level of the awards is not contested here (both being doctoral, level 8), what remains less clear is the distinction between the two awards beyond that of applied research (EdD) and pure research (PhD). The means for such debate, discussion and clarification of these differences is now emerging at Derby and is further focused by a forthcoming revalidation of the EdD programme.

Admissions to the EdD have been strong since its inception in 1999 and continue to be so with the minimum of marketing for the course. Admission criteria show that the main 'attractor' to the course is the weighting placed on professional experience of the applicant, and anecdotally to 'make a difference' to their professional practice. Many presenting for interview do not even consider the PhD options (either traditional or 'New Route'), nor have a grasp of the different options available for them to progress to the doctoral award. The current validation operates totally at level 8; applicants must be qualified at master's level and must have been operating in a professional field for at least 3-5 years. Pedagogically speaking, such students start at level 8, whereas PhD students contestably work at level 7 until they are formally 'rolled over' from MPhil to PhD. Arguably, PhD students are constructing their methodologies at level 7 whereas EdD professionals are being charged with working at level 8 from the outset. This arbitrary levelling is not criterion referenced in detail at level 8 (as compared with level 7, which is), and so it may be more difficult to convince the institution that professional students should be working at this higher level, as we approach the time for revalidation.

A philosophical debate is now overdue in respect of the level students work at in the initial phases of their award. Professional doctorates must meet the same core standards as traditional doctorates but they will have more of a focus on the applied knowledge and impact on professional ways of working, rather than just pure research. Parks (2007) notes that

commentators on doctorates might be likely to point out that the focus on coursework (at the expense of the research) might infer the professional doctorate is of 'lesser quality', yet this has yet to be proved and rarely voiced explicitly (Parks, 2007: 35). He further challenges Institutions to respond to the diversity of doctoral degrees: 'How are the regulations for the PhD and professional doctorates similar and different?' (Page 6-7). As we move to revalidate the EdD such issues repeatedly arise and are worthy of continued debate. Similarly review of University regulations needs to keep pace with supporting professional doctorates and a helpful starting point is an alignment with the PhD route. We should be celebrating the different pathways available to students and Derby is starting to move in this direction.

The programme has enjoyed good retention these past years and those students withdrawing are doing so with good reasons; life changes such as new roles, family commitments and similar. Retention is more effective during the taught phase of the programme as compared with the thesis stage; arguably the change in pedagogical approach is harder for some to manage alongside a professional career. Whereas the New Route PhD undertakes its taught component via distance learning (modules online) the personal approach to the teaching of the EdD modules is valued highly by the students (as evidenced in student evaluations). The sessions, tutorials, supervisions and personal correspondence with students are valued for not only the expertise of teaching, but also to form networks and 'critical friends' essential for many students during postgraduate study. Indeed, many of these bonds eventually take the form of small study groups especially seen in our international cohort that last until and beyond the final examination. Equally, the reliance, in the main, of a PhD student on two supervisors is not the experience of the EdD student; who has, during the course of study established networks with other EdD students and with a range of staff who deliver on the course. The development of a student's research area over the taught component of the programme may also contribute to better retention well into thesis stage, although there is often a period of adjustment to the 'secret garden' pedagogy associated with supervision.

Integrating the EdD by alignment with the PhD

By locating professional doctorates within faculties and not centrally within the University, Derby (as with many other institutions) maybe in danger of setting up a 2-tier system which operationally reinforces balkanisation of the two programmes between the PhD and the EdD routes. This distance is reinforced by the complete separation of the administration of the two awards with the PhD administered from a central Research Office and the Professional Doctorates from within Faculties. Interestingly, with similar student numbers on the PhD (whole University) and the EdD (one Faculty), the number of staff working full-time to administer the PhD programme is far in excess of the part-time staff serving the EdD programme. Maintaining professional doctorates behind the 'back door' has given further weight to this 2-tier system between the traditional and professional routes. University meeting structures have also previously served to reinforce this symbolic culture; however,

areas of commonality between the two routes are now being actively explored through the same meeting structures. While this is mainly positive, this type of culture can still exclude a group of doctoral students; an example recently occurred where only invitations were sent to PhD students for a Postgraduate Research conference taking place in the New Year.

If the EdD currently inhabits Scott et al's (2004: 3) 'twilight zone' then it does so both pedagogically and operationally, with the professional student placed at the centre of a research degree who is accorded a service commensurate with that view. The status of the student is important here; PhD programmes might well support professionals but there are fewer of them and more research students who are learning their 'master-apprentice trade'; that is, how to become a *bone fide* researcher, possibly with a career mapped out in Higher Education. Conversely EdD students are looking to make more sense of their professional knowledge and practice, to undertake a course that in many cases rejuvenates their professional working lives and potentially makes some personal impact on them, both personally and professionally. While they may very well go on to work in Higher Education or similar organisations, many take their research skills back into their professional contexts (with all the restraints of their professional guidelines) and use their research skills to make significant improvement to their practice. Working and studying for a doctorate in professional issues also has a significant impact on practice during the course of study (Ibbotson, Davies et al, 2008). PhD students are arguably not seeking that focus on change or impact professionally; they are yet to establish (in the majority of cases) their career path. The tension arises between the academy and the students' professional practice because there appears to be little consensus of the differences between the PhD and the EdD routes. The career aspiration of the PhD student may not already be set in stone, whereas for the EdD student they have experienced many years of a particular career and are now seeking some form of confirmation/affirmation for the work they have achieved and the experience they have gained over many years. This form of 'vocational mission' described by Butcher and Sieminski (2006) is different from the tightly focused research-driven agenda of the PhD student. Alignment of the level 8 programmes would enable not only operational consistency and quality of the doctorates but would also level the academic landscape for both students and staff. It would also promote the philosophical debates required to come to some collective understanding across the institution of the differences between the doctoral routes.

As EdD programme leader I am coming to the conclusion that the flexibility and impact on professions offered by the EdD is not in any way 'inferior' to the PhD programme. Indeed, there have been few barriers to students transferring from one programme to another, which, in terms of quality and standards, moves us towards parity between the programmes. Any resistance to professional doctorates have grown up through a lack of understanding of their pedagogy, yet many university staff actively seeks admittance to the programme across the subject range. Clearly this is an area worthy of some future research. I am further heartened

that recognition of the EdD cohorts at Derby is now becoming more widely recognised at University level, which might indicate a cultural 'shift' in those academic staff previously wedded to the PhD philosophy (Boud and Tennant, 2006). The struggle continues.

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Biography

I am an Assistant Head of Teacher Education at the University and have worked in H.E. since 2003, following 22 years of teaching in secondary schools. My main research area is middle leadership in secondary schools particularly related to school improvement processes and how research can support practitioners in schools. I teach on the MA in Education and was appointed programme leader for the Doctor of Education (EdD) in January of this year.