

## Round-table Discussion - Theme C

Monday 9th November, 12.15 - 13.00

### Professional Doctorate Study: The Impact on Healthcare Practitioners

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Nikki Petty qualified as a Chartered Physiotherapist from Newcastle Polytechnic in 1979. She completed a Graduate Diploma in Manipulative Therapy in Melbourne Australia which was later topped up to an MSc from Coventry University. She is currently Principal Lecturer at the School of Health Professions, University of Brighton. She has written two successful textbooks on neuromusculoskeletal examination and assessment, and neuromusculoskeletal treatment and management and has a number of research publications related to this speciality. She is on the international advisory board and a reviewer for *Manual Therapy*, an international journal of musculoskeletal therapy and has served on the advisory board of the *Journal of Manual and Manipulative Therapy*. She has presented widely at conferences in the UK and abroad, with several as an invited speaker. Completion of a professional doctorate in physiotherapy in January 2009 has led to a dramatic change in her research interests and role within the School. Her thesis was entitled 'towards clinical expertise: learning transitions of neuromusculoskeletal physiotherapists' and her research activities have now moved to a more educational slant. She has recently become Programme Leader of the Professional Doctorate in Health and Social Care, at the University of Brighton.

#### Dr Graham Stew

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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.

The professional doctoral programme in health and social care was developed at the University of Brighton in 2002. The overall aim of the programme was to implement a programme of research based professional development for experienced practitioners, managers and academics. The programme was designed to enable practitioners to undertake critical reflection on issues within their work, and develop the ability to challenge current professional policies and practice in an innovative, substantive and original manner. Graduates were expected to foster local research activity, manage and implement recommendations emerging from research findings and thus contribute to changes within practice.

As the primary aim of all professional doctorates is to make a difference to professional practice, it is essential to examine their impact on individual students and their work (Doncaster & Thorne, 2000). The research question was therefore 'what personal and professional growth do students experience during a professional doctorate programme?' The aims of the study were to explore the students experience in relation to:

- understanding their personal changes and academic development
- examining changes in their perception of practice
- evaluating their professional role development

An evaluative case study was carried out over a four year period (2005-08) from one Professional Doctorate programme in the UK. Six focus group interviews with four student cohorts (32 students evenly spread for year 1, 2, 3 and 4) were conducted during the academic year with a neutral interviewer. Data were also obtained from 37 end of year course evaluation questionnaires. The study was given approval by the Faculty of Health Research Ethics and Governance Committee at the University of Brighton. Careful consideration was given to the ethical issues of anonymity and confidentiality as well as continued informed consent. Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) described by Smith and Osborn (2003, 2004) was used to analyse the data from the focus groups and questionnaires to develop understanding of individual's experiences of the programme. Participants were invited to comment on the themes developed from data analysis.

Participants referred to personal and professional changes. Students changed their view of themselves and their practice through critical exploration of their taken-for-granted professional knowledge. Students valued the intellectual exchange and social support

offered by multi-professional cohorts. Many students talked about a radical change towards more critical thinking and this led them to challenge and transform current conceptions of practice in their respective profession. Attempts to change practice in their workplace was sometimes resisted by colleagues and this led to students feeling isolated. This situation was overcome through the collaborative and cooperative methodology of action research. Students were committed to contributing to their profession through practiced based research and doctoral study gave them credibility and confidence to disseminate their research work. While a number of students were at consultant level in the NHS, others considered it would facilitate this development. For a number of students, their professional development resulted in feeling they had 'outgrown' their current role and needed to 'move on' in their careers. Students commented on their need to manage the competing demands of various stakeholders. The University required academic outputs of doctoral standard; employers expected benefits to service provision; practice colleagues looked for improved ways of working; the professions hoped for a significant contribution to their knowledge and evidence base; and students wanted their research to enhance their care for patients and clients.

Discussing their research on part-time research students from the professions, Barnacle and Usher (2003 p353) stated that "respondents believed that doing research makes them better professionals. It informs their work through disciplinary expertise and research knowledge and gives them confidence in, and a critical perspective on, what they do in the workplace". This initial small scale study of one professional doctorate programme echoes these findings, and contributes to the debate on the nature and future of professional doctorates. Further research could explore the relationships between university, profession and practice change, as the linkage of these differing agendas within professional doctorate programmes is vital (Maxwell and Shanahan 2000, McWilliam et al 2002). The influence of professional doctorate programmes on the individual's practice and personal growth has not yet been fully researched and the understanding gained from studies such as this will enable sounder decisions to be made regarding the research 'training' that is appropriate for a professional doctorate.

## References

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