

Workshop 4

Tuesday 10th November, 14.15 - 15.00

What is the impact of the professional doctorate on students, professional practice and personal development?

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The background

The professional doctorate (PD) is founded on a range of statements relating to: its 'impact on professional practice'; its aim of producing 'reflective practitioners'; and its role in developing 'professional knowledge'. Sometimes these claims are used as a means of marketing the PD, whilst sometimes they are used as a way of

separating it from the traditional PhD. Some of the rationale and rhetoric 'behind' professional doctorates involves the claim that we are developing 'researching professionals' (as opposed to 'professional researchers' in the PhD: Bourner et al, 2001) and that the PD will improve practice and enhance professional development.

All of the above terms and claims are problematic.

Previous research has shown that students have a wide range of motives for pursuing a professional doctorate and that some of these are as much related to their social and personal situations as they are to their professional lives and work (Wellington and Sikes, 2006). The same paper reported the occasional negative impact of the PD on students' professional lives (for example being seen as a 'clever dick' or as being 'divorced from pragmatic realities'); these comments resonated with Scott et al's study (2004, chapter 5) which reported that some students were regarded with suspicion in their workplace.

The Aim of this study

The aim of this study is to explore closely the extent to which students who have completed a PD consider that either the **product** of their doctorate or the **process** of doing it, have 'impacted' on their professional practice and personal development. We are collecting a range of case studies/narratives/stories from students who are willing to openly engage in the activity of personal reflection on how the PD has influenced or altered their own practice and development.

In summary, our key research questions are:

1. What evidence do we currently have about the impact of professional doctorates? Do the claims often used to market and to distinguish the PD from the PhD live up to the evidence (what we have of it) on this issue?
2. To what extent does the activity of doing and completing a PD really impact on a student's professional life and career?
3. Exactly how does it make an impact? Is it a visible impact or a tacit one? Does it make the student a 'better professional' or practitioner? Is it a result of process or product?

Methodology and approach

The first research question will be addressed by studying existing literature and analysing available documentation on PDs.

We aim to shed light on the second two questions by collecting our own data. Initially, our research data will be collected through e-mail 'interviews' with a sample of past students from our professional doctorates. We will offer students the structure shown in Appendix One for critically reflecting on their experience. However, we will also ask them if they wish to simply respond to the more open question: How has the PD influenced, impacted upon or altered your own professional life, practice and development?

This will be followed up by focus group discussions with students and by analysing written documentation such as evidence from completed PD theses in which students have been asked to reflect on the impact of the PD on their professional lives.

We are asking students to reflect on positive aspects of the interaction between the process and product of the PD and their professional life – but we also ask them to consider if any negative interactions or even dissonance has occurred.

Outcomes and implications

The data from those who participate will not only inform the main research questions listed above; it will also help us to conceptualise some of the problematic terms in this debate and show how 'impact' and influence might work in reality.

We hope that the outcomes of the study will have implications in certain areas, such as: the way we **conceptualise** professional doctorates and their purposes – how exactly do they differ from the PhD? ; the way they are promoted and marketed; and the way we **assess** them – for example, it may not be appropriate to suggest that all PD students should be assessed on changes in their practice, as some commentators have done (Maxwell, 2003).

References

- Bourner, T, Bowden, R and Laing, S (2001) Professional Doctorates in England, *Studies in Higher Education*, 26, pp. 65-83.
- Maxwell, T (2003) From first to second generation Professional Doctorate, *Studies in Higher Education*, vol. 28, no. 3, pp. 279-291.
- Scott, D, Brown, A, Lunt, I and Thorne, L (2004) *Professional Doctorates: integrating professional and academic knowledge*, Maidenhead: SRHE/ Open University Press.
- Wellington, J and Sikes, P (2006) 'A doctorate in a tight compartment': why do students choose a professional doctorate and what impact does it have on their personal and professional lives, *Studies in Higher Education*, vol. 31, no. 6, December 2006, 723-734.

Appendix One: Structure offered to students in reflecting on the impact of the PD

- Have your underlying values, feelings and basic assumptions regarding professional practice changed as a result of doing a PD?
- Have your perceptions and attitudes towards yourself changed?
- Have your actions or ways of 'behaving' changed?
- Has the way you use language (your discourse) in, for example, meetings, seminars and written reports changed or been influenced by the PD?
- Have your own personal circumstances changed?
- Can you attribute any of these changes to the influence of the PD?
- Can you recall and recount any 'critical incidents' which might indicate the connection between the PD and your professional practice?
- Your personal experience is part of the broader departmental, institutional and national context in which you are a professional- have there been any incongruities/ dissonances/ contradictions between your professional practice and the context you work in? Can these be attributed to your experience of the PD?
- Completing a PD involves both a product (i.e. your written assignments and dissertation) and a process e.g. your own personal development. Can you separate and reflect on both aspects (i.e. process and product) in terms of their influence on your professional life?