

## Workshop 5

Tuesday 10th November, 14.15 - 15.00

## Understanding the Research Journey: a programme for potential Professional Doctorate candidates

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Ian is a Reader in the Department of the Built Environment in the Faculty of Science and Technology at Anglia Ruskin University. He is Director of Research Students for the Faculty at Chelmsford and is Director of the Professional Doctorate for the Built Environment. This professional doctorate, which offers a flexible and innovative alternative to the traditional Ph.D., is specifically designed for senior built environment professionals in full-time employment who have the desire to engage in doctoral studies and wish to make a significant contribution to the development of professional practice.

#### Programme purpose

A review of professional doctorates at Anglia Ruskin University (in Built Environment, Business, Education, Health and Social Work, Law and Practical Theology) indicated the need for an alternative, introductory Understanding Research programme for all candidates lacking a masters' degree. Since direct entry to all doctoral programmes in the university is via a masters qualification, experienced professionals lacking this qualification had previously been excluded.

#### Programme design and approach

The *Understanding Research* course was designed to help potential candidates develop the attitudes and skills required to benefit from doctoral education and to understand the commitment required to undertake a rigorous three to four year

doctorate. It was also evident that a lack of understanding of research processes and research language from existing masters' entry candidates was inhibiting the early development of their research and was distorting the nature of the workshops. For example, too much time was being devoted to training in research methods.

*Understanding Research* aimed, therefore, to introduce candidates to the research culture, ethics, methodology, philosophy and research questions and to data collection and analysis. The central focus of the introductory course was a short research project or *Speed Doctorate* designed to take the students through the whole doctoral process in a short five month period. Students were asked to write a rationale for their project, specify its objectives and research question(s), identify and critique key sources, outline

and justify research methodology and methods and indicate the contribution their project would make to academic and/or professional knowledge. The programme also inducted students into the university administrative systems and to the support available. During the *Understanding Research* programme students grappled with an unfamiliar research language and explored appropriate research methods to develop their critical thinking and writing skills. The programme, supported by several weekend workshops and a virtual learning environment (VLE), was delivered by colleagues from across the university. This blended learning approach was designed to give access to information on the web and free up the workshops to facilitate two-way intellectual engagement. The VLE also promoted discussion outside workshops. The workshops also enabled students to interact with, and learn from, existing PhD and Professional Doctorate candidates and to access a range of university expertise that would otherwise have been unavailable.

#### Evaluation

Students appreciated their interdisciplinary group together with the diverse and high quality of the collaborating staff team. They evaluated the programme, its administration and resource materials as excellent and recommended it as a pre-requisite for all research students. Candidates enjoyed the freedom to find their own way through their intellectual journey but appreciated the strong support from the supervisory team. Each workshop session, though challenging, was comfortable, nurturing and non-intimidating. Although the candidates enjoyed having access to a wide range of expertise drawn from across the university, they felt that this sometimes led to too much lecturing and too little discussion. Sessions were originally designed to help candidates present a final mini-project or 'Speed Doctorate' mini-thesis. In practice, students' own high expectations resulted in much more detailed project proposals.

#### Practical implications

Students recommended that future *Understanding Research* programmes should adopt a more active learning approach and should include a new workshop on research writing style. Assessment was seen as very important and central to the development of research skills. Tutor feedback on submissions should continue to be seen as critical and constructive. Students also recommended that assignments should be more evenly spaced and assessed throughout the programme. It would be more beneficial to the candidates if their mistakes could be identified earlier in the programme. The virtual learning environment, which facilitated information transfer and allowed communication outside the workshop sessions, was

regarded as excellent by those using it but not all students were fully engaged. These issues will be addressed in the next programme with more careful design and stronger team management.