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# **Design of Professional Doctorates in the Health Care Arena and Emerging Issues**

**Dr Sheena E. E. Blair**

**Programme Leader for Professional Doctorate in  
Health, Social Care and Nursing**

## **What is it like to be a “professional” at the moment?**

**Its like:**

**“rearranging the deck chairs on the Titanic”**

**“at the end of the day, the pawn and the king  
go back into the same box”**

**“feeling like the Ranger’s supporter at the  
Celtic end and vice versa!”**

**“its like a juggle presently – survival of the  
fittest”**

**“its like a computer game and you can see  
the action but you don not know the  
purpose of the game!”**

**“I am an ever-changing person, in an ever-  
changing world!”**



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## Context – for me



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- **Fascination with theory/practice issues and this dialectical relationship**
- **Issues of change and how to understand, initiate, foster, sustain and support changes within the complex situation of health and social care**
- **Personal decision to undertake an EdD rather than a PhD – defence of this!**
- **Appointed to a HoD post and as programme leader for the Prof Doc at GCU in 2006**
- **This Prof Doc programme was already designed and validated prior to my arrival**

## My intentions for the talk

**A characteristic of the programme at GCU is the collective reflective diary that each cohort owns and uses during the 20 days that they are in university**

**So – I will:**

- **Use selected reflections from the three collective diaries as pauses for thought/a unit for analysis and as a way of structuring the talk**
- **Explain factors which influenced the design of the programme at GCU**
- **Explain the outline of this programme at GCU**
- **Analyse some of the strengths and problematic issues**
- **Explore emerging dynamics**



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## **Metaphors used to describe experience**

**Selections from the three diaries concerning the first four days of the taught element:**

**“Start of a journey”**

**“First steps of the marathon”**

**“A rollercoaster - when the rollercoaster ride has begun there is nothing to do but cling on!”**

**“Pennies dropping and things beginning to make sense”**

**“Its like discovering a whole new view – yet in a strangely familiar continent”**

**“really thorough preparation for the challenge ahead – tools are in the rucksack for the expedition”**



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## **My sense of journey**



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**I had a route map – the design was there and I had to interpret it - but my feelings concerning the start of the programme resonated with the notions of journey, expedition, progression along a pathway.....**

**I shared the values underpinning the programme design and was entirely committed to this form of doctoral study**

**Understood the structure and rationale, and acknowledged the complexity.....but one of the entries in the reflective diary which resonated with my feelings was :-**

**“if you are going to change the world its better not to do it with a group of flying monkeys!”**

# Factors influencing design of Prof Docs

- **Ethos of continued professional development and lifelong learning**
- **Contemporary issues in health, social care and nursing**
- **Providing a genuine alternative form of doctoral study to the PhD route.....notion of professional scholar**
- **Awareness of stakeholder agendas (Park 2007)**
- **The strength of the cohort effect**
- **Providing a baseline in the taught element for the subsequent thesis**
- **To award credit for previous study – or not**
- **Who will be involved in delivery of the programme**



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## **GCU design**



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**“A unique opportunity to undertake an advanced research and practice development programme that is professionally relevant” Marketing material for GCU Prof Doc**

**Key characteristics of the GCU Prof Doc:**

**Research degree – 14% of total number of doctoral students in the university**

**Focus mainly on public sector employees**

**Developing and enhancing services**

**Educating future leaders/current leaders**

**Developing the professional knowledge base**

**Enhancing personal effectiveness and resilience**

## Issues in design



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### **Admissions criteria – “Normally” :-**

- **Three years post registration experience**
- **Upper second class honours**
- **Clear rationale for application**
- **All prospective students are interviewed**
- **No credit is given for existing academic qualifications**
- **Two references – one work, one academic**
- **Letter of consent from employer to agree to the 20 days of taught programme**
- **Letter to confirm financial commitment**

# GCU programme structure



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**4 years part time**

**Structure is based on a two stage model:**

**Stage 1 – (2 years) taught element with two macro modules in:**

- **Research Methods (70 M level)**
- **Professional Development (50 M level)**
- **Project Design. Development and Management (60 D level)**
- **Stage 2 (2 years) Research thesis (360 D level)**

**Fees are set at admission and are currently £12,000 for the four years**

## **Some local complexities**

**Nursing colleagues were concerned that originally “nursing” was not in the title – this was adjusted for the second cohort**

**The programme is hosted, administered and lead within the SHSC**

**Co-hosted by the Graduate Centre and students are able to access all the facilities**

**Modules are quality assured by NCMH and the modules are “owned” by this school**

**The teaching teams are drawn from throughout the university – Business School, Law and Social Science, Life Science, Engineering and Computing, Nursing**



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**My frequent thought is:**



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**“It’s like herding cats!”**

## **Students experience of a cross school approach**



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**“Lots of different perspectives – really enjoyable”**

**“Yesterday’s lectures felt like I had walked through the wrong door!”**

**“Great series of master classes”**

**“strategic thinking in business terms may be different from health and social care”**

**“I know some of this stuff – but by other names!”**

**“Flashback to interesting stuff from Marx and Gramsci”**

**“The variety of perspectives have been exciting – new languages to learn”**

# Assessment at GCU

**Stage 1 modules: 1 formative and 2 summative assessments per module at M level and one assignment for the D level module**

**Stage 2: thesis and viva**

**Changes that we have made or are making:**

- **Change to the weightings in the modules to allow for a gradual re-entry into academic work**
- **Change to the wording and structure of assessments**
- **Addition of a reflective/reflexive piece for every summative assignment**
- **Instead of the provision of data/findings for analysis – for students to provide their own from their work**
- **Introduction of regular meetings to discuss assessment with all the module teams invited**
- **Appointment of an Honorary Professor to help the teams recognise differences between PhD and Prof Doc students, prepare for the thesis**



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## **Reflective responses to assessment**

**“Never had such low marks”**

**“When there is failure it is public and there is a long way to fall”**

**“How can I be a senior practitioner and not pass an assignment on strategic thinking and leadership”**

**“I am so used to thinking in bullet points that I have forgotten how to join them up!”**

**“Markers do not understand my particular work situation”**

**“Theory is all right until you try to make it work in your local situation”**



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## **Assets of the current assessment system**

- **Allows people a chance to succeed i.e. the range of assessments on offer from discursive essay to critical appraisal tool**
- **Assessments have been converted into publications, conference presentations and local seminar presentations**
- **Content of the assessments have ensured that students seek out different perspectives and use them as units of analysis in their own workplace**
- **The M level modules ensure that all students are ready to transition to D level taught work and then to the thesis**



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# Importance of support

**This takes the form of:**

- **Allocation of academic tutors**
- **A “buddy” system between cohorts**
- **An informal collective support whereby students from all cohorts have established support networks**
- **Use of e-mail and discussion boards**
- **Student initiated “thesis club”**
- **Availability of all learning opportunities available through the Graduate Centre**
- **All students become members of HealthQWest**



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## Students reflections



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**“Really appreciate the support given from the cohort”**

**“Minimal competition and lots of sharing”**

**“Feel part of the programme and not just a student on it”**

**“Appreciated the availability of staff to help with ideas and paradigms that I did not understand”**

**“People took time with me to explore the crushing work responsibilities, personal lives and study and how this can produce conflict”**

## Some complex dynamics

- **Perspective - the need to appreciate where students start from, what they have achieved and eventual mark**
- **Different ontological and epistemological positions for example:-**
  - “They would never pass at M level in the Business School!”
  - “I cannot compromise my academic standards”
  - “Can you pass a Prof Doc thesis with a participant number of 10?”



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## Other emerging issues

- **Notions of the Prof Doc not being so academically challenging as a PhD**
- **Stakeholder agendas whereby if they pay – they want some pay-off!**
- **Perceived as a university success story and how to emulate this across the institution**
- **Widening the student cohort population – will that dilute the health, social care focus?**
- **Issue of being able to secure sufficient supervisors for the thesis**
- **Financial ramifications of limited resources and employer constraints**



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## **Some final reflections from the diaries (First cohort/Stage 2)**

**“My ontological stance is more of a slouch!”**

**“9.05 and I’m overwhelmed already!”**

**“So good to be back together again – need to get back on track”**

**“The need for rigour is so overwhelming that I am beginning to think that this is a course designed for undertakers!”**

**“Learning to defend the project proposal at a basic level is so helpful and being open to that criticism – a journey within itself”**



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## Three years later – reflections on design and emerging issues

### Ingredients for success:-

- **Initial design of a Professional Doctorate only for the Health Care Arena was perhaps too narrow a focus.....maybe we now need to think of public sector?**
- **The complex interdisciplinary organisation of the GCU Prof Doc is both a strength and a tension - that complexity is manageable but it needs judicious pedagogical scaffolding**
- **The help of an insightful and experienced external examiner has been a boon**
- **The help of an Honorary Professor from another university for staff CPD had been invaluable – a critical friend**
- **Our attention to support systems to assist learning for this demanding programme of study has resulted in a low attrition rate.**



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## **Final thought!**



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**In the diary of the third cohort, there is an  
Entry in the reflective diary:-**

**“By the end of the day my anxiety had given way to  
excitement.....bring it on!”**

**So the challenge for us at GCU and  
elsewhere is:**

- **How to sustain the conditions for learning and the learning climate that nurtures this excitement to become a scholarly professional**