



UK Council *for* **Graduate Education**

## **What is a Doctorate Workshop**

University of Reading

4 May 2007

### **Notes from Afternoon Discussion Group**

#### **What is the purpose of the doctorate?**

We began with the following themes and questions:

Product vs process

Education vs training

Broad vs specialised

Greater uniformity?

Equity/ widening participation?

There was extensive discussion about professional doctorates and their relationship to more traditional doctorates, including the following points:

- Not all professional doctorates are recognised by relevant bodies, eg. the council of physiotherapists don't recognise them
- Professional doctorates do however emerge from 'outside' the academy
- The doctorate used to be considered to be a vocational qualification (eg. training to be an academic). It is no longer seen in that way – it is considered to be wider and broader than that – it is being stretched.
- Who's interests are being served with the doctorate? The academy, employers, professional bodies...?
- Is the thesis the product or is the person the product? The thesis is the evidence, but it was widely acknowledged that beyond the academic world no one cares about this document – the PhD is seen as a person who embodies qualities related to the degree (whether they are stereotypes or not). No one asks to read the thesis!
- To what extent is the doctorate a 'badge' or a good marketing brand which denotes 'expert practice'? For example, in Health and Social care the term 'doctor' does of course have high status. It was noted that moving away from the term 'doctor' was very unlikely because of this strong 'brand' aspect which is widely accepted to denote quality and status.
- What is the essential nature of the doctorate? Is it 'research' or is it 'the highest degree which you can attain in this field' (whether academic or in a practical domain)? Or is it a notion of 'criticality'? There was some agreement that it may be more appropriate to see it as the highest degree, which only involved research if that was relevant to the domain (as indeed it is for most academic doctorates, but not for all professional ones).

- To what extent are debates over the doctorate being driven by those from 'outside' the system? Should academia be taking a greater lead in these debates?
- The PhD used to be seen as training for research (only). Now it is also widely seen as training 'to be an academic' – meaning teaching, administration, and research. Is this a problem and where is the solution? (more training, or a narrower definition?)
- What is the public understanding of a doctorate?
- Is a doctorate a social filter? Does it denote an (accessible) elite? (accessible because it is not the Nobel prize!)
- It was acknowledged that there is another way in which doctorates are valued/judged – not just the discipline that it is in, but also where the doctorate was obtained.

Notes compiled by Julia Horn (University of Reading)