Taking a professional doctorate in Public Health: A Case Study of students on the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine’s DrPH Programme.

The Doctorate in Public Health (DrPH) at the London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine (LSHTM) is the leading professional doctorate in public health in the UK. Drawing students from across the world, the programme provides doctoral level training for the future leaders of public health service organisations around the globe. The DrPH at LSHTM is a research-heavy professional doctorate with only two compulsory taught modules. The taught element is followed by two periods of research. These vary in scope with the first serving as a short-term analysis of a public health entity, traditionally having either an organisational or a policy focus. The second focuses on the professional and intellectual interests of the students via traditional approaches to doctoral thesis research. Given the increased demands on DrPH students to complete three distinct elements, DrPH research theses have tended to be narrower in scope than traditional PhD theses; however, on occasion DrPH students have aligned both periods of research and thus produced doctoral studies in line with PhDs. The subjects of the research theses range right across those for which supervisors are available at LSHTM, from infectious diseases to a policy or health systems focus. With the majority of students come from outside the UK and a strong emphasis on research training for the LSHTM DrPH, this leads us to ask the questions:

1. What drives students to pursue the DrPH degree at LSHTM?
2. How do students’ perceptions inform our understanding of the similarities and differences between a DrPH and other types of Professional Doctorates (PD) or terminal research degrees?

This is a small case study, being undertaken in preparation for a larger project with an international comparison. The specific aims of this case study are to (1) understand the perceptions of current DrPH students and recent graduates with respect to their motivations for selecting the DrPH at LSHTM over other professional doctorate programmes or a traditional PhD; (2) explore the experiences of these students and graduates with respect to how LSHTM’s DrPH programme enhanced their professional and academic development,
and how this relates to their career objectives; and (3) consider the experience of LSHTM DrPH students with what is known in the literature about motivations for students to pursue a PD.

**Methods**

The study employs a mixed methods design. We undertook semi-structured interviews of a sample of current/recent DrPH students (n=10) and sent a self-administered online questionnaire to all current and very recent DrPH graduates (n = 76). We had hoped to include more graduates of the program, but lack of accurate contact details prevented this. Analysis of the qualitative work is on-going and the survey data will be analysed from mid-February. The results will be combined with insights from a recently conducted internal review of LSHTM’s DrPH programme to create practical and empirical recommendations, used as a foundation for further research on the DrPH programme and cohort, and make empirical contributions to the wider body of existing research on doctoral degrees and professional doctorates.

**Results**

We have received a 42% response rate to the survey, which remains open. Second round reminders for completion are currently being sent. Our responses have come from students across the programme, although weighted towards those in the later stages: 24% registered in the current academic year, 21% are working on their first research project (year 2) and 55% are reaching the completion of their thesis phase. Most are studying part-time (65%) with 35% studying full-time. Interestingly, 17% registered full-time in order to complete both taught components in their first term and then switched to part-time for the research components. Based on free-text survey responses, this flexibility and minimal formal requirement to remain in London was one of the elements that attracted students to the programme at LSHTM.

Our data shows a range of reasons for students choosing both a DrPH and the programme at LSHTM. A majority of respondents (76%) considered pursuing a PhD, while 45% had looked at other DrPH programmes before applying to LSHTM. Reasons for choosing LSHTM were evenly split between students’ perception of LSHTM’s reputation and convenience to work/life demands (44.8% each). Many students taking advantage of the option to change modes of study from full to part-time, after completing the taught modules,
illustrate the high rating for convenience. The majority of students (83%) come with over five years’ professional experience and 45% have over 10 years. Professional experience prior to entering the programme ranged from the voluntary, NGO and charitable sector (55% of respondents), civil servants, Government employees or advisors (24%) or clinicians (7%).

Of those who gave an answer, the reasons cited for choosing a DrPH, rather than a PhD, were the wider range of skills and practical experience offered by the programme (35%), which is allied to the next largest reason for not choosing a PhD – not wanting to pursue an academic career (31%). Looked at alongside the length of work experience before joining the programme, this might indicate that students come to the DrPH for professional development to support their existing careers or to help secure promotion (which is an emerging theme from semi-structured interviews discussed below). It is notable that 69% of respondents said that their career aims had not changed since beginning their studies, remembering that the majority of respondents (55%) were in their third year or later.

Our survey data corresponded with the results of the qualitative interviews, particularly on the subject of selecting a professional doctorate, rather than a PhD. Several students mentioned a perceived narrowness in PhD study, compared to the breadth of the DrPH, and see the former very much as something for students planning a career in academia. They come to the DrPH at a point when their careers are already established and are, mostly, looking for career enhancement, rather than career change. As a result, they find the taught modules particularly useful, along with the Professional Development Residential. Perhaps for similar reasons, some of those interviewed found the research elements a little ill-defined and very heterogeneous across the student body – every organisational study is different. While this allows the students to create an individual learning plan, it can also fracture the cohesiveness of each cohort, built up over the course of the taught modules.

**Discussion**

Our data would seem to indicate that students are looking to the professional doctorate for career development and to maintain career trajectory. Some may initially look at the traditional PhD as a terminal qualification, but as they are looking to improve skills and knowledge gaps rather than move into academia, the professional doctorate is the more natural choice. However, the DrPH degree at LSHTM is research heavy and has fewer taught
elements than other professional doctorates, which would seem to contradict these reasons for selecting the DrPH. Although this is perhaps explained by the issue of ‘convenience’ driving the selection of a professional doctorate at LSHTM.

Until recently, LSHTM was the only institution in the UK awarding a DrPH and it still has primacy in terms of brand recognition, particularly with students from low and middle income countries. However, it will be interesting, in future years, to see the impact of increased competition.