The Professional Doctorate and the 21st Century University

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This article argues that far from being the poor cousin of the PhD, the professional doctorate epitomises a model of higher education that is for the 21st century, based on professional formation and design thinking.

The research-led, academically selective university is an invention of particular times and places. It is far from a universal model of higher education but has become the dominant model across the globe. It is what is meant by the terms 'good university', 'leading university' or 'top university' in much public and media discourse. The research-led, academically selective university is the gold standard, yet this model is very out of step with 21st century conditions: with concerns about employability, higher level skills - particularly as technology continues to advance - and the democratisation of knowledge and learning: sharing what we know and not building walls around it, already driven by the internet.

The future of successful developed economies is no longer as knowledge economies. All developed economies are knowledge economies because knowledge is everywhere. Instead, their future is as *creative economies*, economies where what matters is being able to use knowledge to create desired futures and solve problems. However, creativity needs a continual dialogue between ideas and action, and this does not sit easily with the separation of research and practice established by a tradition of academics who practise only research and teaching.

This could be seen as an argument for universities to become more practice-based. Boyer (1990) called this the scholarship of application or engagement. He argued that such scholarship could be the distinctive mission of 'comprehensive universities', a characterisation that in the US and the UK broadly fits institutions many of whose historical roots are in teacher training – like my own institution, Middlesex University, whose first founding institution was one of Britain's first teacher training colleges, St Katherine's College in Tottenham, founded in 1878.

The significance of these origins is not so much in terms of teachers, though that is important, but in terms of these institutions' broader commitment to professional formation. This is a model that promised a new type of higher education, based on students as makers and not just finders, which never fully emerged. 1878 was also the year that Joseph Swan announced his invention of the electric light bulb and later set up another of Middlesex University's founding institutions, the Ediswan Institute. This Institute is a reminder that in the past, as today, research was by no means confined to universities and was often grounded in companies and organisations that could exploit the results.

These early historical currents of higher education as about professional formation and research as about innovation in the workplace could have shaped the mainstream model of higher education. What actually happened is that universities came to be dominated by academic disciplines rather than professional fields of practice, with the exception of elite professions such as medicine and law that were seen as more akin to disciplines. Research came to be seen as having its natural home in universities, something that actually suited the short-termism of much of British business, which did not want to invest in its own research capability.

Creative economies need research, and often university research, but they might be regarded as needing even more the scholarship of application, especially if we frame that scholarship as about learning from application as well as applying learning. A problem with this perspective, however, is that it is thinking in terms of dichotomies, dichotomies of theory and practice and thought and action, when in fact the world is not like that. Better than the term scholarship of application, with its implication of mode 1 and mode 2 knowledge - another dichotomy - is a term from the creative sector itself and that is *design thinking*.

Design thinking has a disposition towards action and is an alternative paradigm to research for universities that are predominantly about professional formation. Design thinking is a term traceable back to Herbert Simon's (1969) book *The Sciences of the Artificial*. It is about how designers think: practical, creative problem solving that explores alternative solutions

for a better future design of products, artworks, services or policies. It is iterative, experimental, user led and, in contrast to the scientific method and its variants, it is context-dependent. In other words this is about the real world, not controlling for context but factoring context into solutions; not referencing some context-free notion of academic discipline but embedded in the practice settings that provide the experiences that generate the kinds of knowledge needed to contribute new developments in professional practice.

This is not an anti-disciplinary argument but post-disciplinary in the sense of higher education as post-secondary. Schools need to teach discipline knowledge – new learners need the 'what' before the 'how' - but, as we are now seeing in Finland, which is widely recognised as an education leader, schools need to start to introduce students to learning as about phenomena not just disciplines, and bringing knowledge and skills to bear on problem solving.

At University it is problem solving that should be the focus, and in those institutions with a commitment to professional practice it is design thinking that offers a paradigm for bridging university and workplace settings more appropriately than conventional research methods. Design thinking needs a breadth of knowledge and experience from various disciplines, so it is well suited to study at higher degree level. Its disposition towards action is a disposition to the real world. The Scottish philosopher John Macmurray argued very convincingly that knowledge only exists through activity, that action is logically prior to knowledge, and that action is intentional (Macmurray, 1961). Education, Macmurray argued, is about making action both purposeful and right, about choosing what is right or wrong for an intended outcome, and reasoning that through.

He also argued that when we act we act among others; we act in relationship to others. These notions of purposeful action, of doing what is right, and doing that in relation with others, captures the essence of professional formation: educating students to be successful professionals based on competence and standards and an orientation to their users, or relationship-based practice.

The separation of knowledge and action means that knowledge loses a connection to purpose and to others. Eric Robinson saw this in his 1968 vision for a new type of higher

education in his book *The New Polytechnics* (Robinson, 1968). But that vision got lost, partly as a result of government ministers often thinking that universities should be like the ones they attended, reproducing the class system in higher education. This has not just impeded the growth of the creative economy but is a continuing excuse for regarding academic and vocational education as separate and unequal.

The academically selective research university still has a place, especially now that research in increasingly an open enterprise and new knowledge is increasingly shareable, so we do not all need to be discovering things, some of us can instead be making things. The problem is the dominance of this model, which is a drag on creativity, productivity, democracy, equality and just about every challenge we face. If we question the dominance of this model then the PhD comes into question as well, certainly as the mainstream rather than as a specialised route to a higher degree.

The relative lack of recognition of the professional doctorate is not a reflection of its value but of the extent to which higher education under-values practice and society under-values professional excellence because of the hegemony of a narrow conception of both scholarship and professionalism. In addition, if practice-based teaching establishes itself as the norm for undergraduate learning then the professional doctorate is a natural progression, whether from an undergraduate degree or once in a career.

The other problem with the PhD is that, certainly often in the social sciences and humanities, it is such an individual project. Creative economies, design thinking and employability all need an ability to work in teams and to work effectively with others. More fundamentally, these need diversity, which is what the best teams bring to problem solving. There is evidence from the work of Scott Page (2008) and others that the different experiences and ways of thinking associated with identity diversity are not only desirable on equality grounds but more effective. Diverse discussions engendered by mixing gender, ethnicity and educational experiences can achieve better problem solving and better engagement because they explore many angles in looking for solutions.

The growing evidence on this is fascinating and challenges the idea that problem solving is only about cognitive ability. Diversity is needed too: an issue perhaps for the selective

research universities. They filter out much identity diversity in their search for the 'brightest and best'. This actually creates learning communities of people who are very similar when professional formation, and indeed professional ethics, need to include the ability to understand other people's perspectives and the diverse frames that different people bring to situations and with which they can solve problems together.

We can see this too if we get away from thinking about professional formation, at its highest levels, as about research, certainly as about research based on the scientific model and its variants. Diversity is central to design thinking, which is the better paradigm for professional education and professional doctorates. Design thinking embraces diverse contributions. Its product is not a research output – necessarily – but a change in practice that does something better.

A recent UK CRAC report on professional doctorates identifies how a cohort experience is a highlight for many candidates and helps sustain their commitment to the programme (Mellors-Bourne, Robinson and Metcalfe, 2016). Learning in a cohort creates opportunities for mutual support as well as sharing knowledge and expertise. It also, however, creates opportunities for students to encounter and use diversity, and I would like to see that designed in to professional doctorates and indeed all higher education.

The CRAC report is an interesting read but not helpful in a number of respects. It advocates standardising the title of these awards when there is no need to do this, just as there is no need to standardise the titles of undergraduate or taught postgraduate degrees. It is the PhD which seems odd with its single title embracing such variation in topics. The report also suggests that the research methods training received by professional doctorate candidates should be integrated with PhD training. This assumes that the type of training needed is the same when it is likely to be different and more akin to the design thinking that is called for in professional practice.

The report accepts the theory and practice dichotomy that unfortunately pervades much UK Quality Assurance Agency and research council discourse, and is unclear about whether professional doctorates should accord to the same standards as PhDs or different standards, when they are clearly different. That difference is most stark with the way that the UK

research councils have excluded professional doctorates from the funding and recognition of doctoral training consortia, which have been awarded overwhelmingly to academically selective research universities.

Yet there is a conundrum with professional doctorates, and that is the relatively weak demand from employers in most sectors. Where there is healthy demand, such as at Middlesex University, a pioneer of the professional doctorate, it is not so much driven by employers but by individuals looking to invest in their portfolio careers or career progression. That may be a reflection of the new economy but it is a problem, though not confined to doctorates. UK employers underinvest in training at all levels. This has been getting worse and not better, and is a cause of UK productivity lagging behind many other countries. It is an important reason why the UK government is introducing an apprenticeship levy from 2017 and that should extend to professional doctorates.

When we see an employer take doctoral training seriously, as with clinical psychology, we see demand. The UK is still stuck in a performance management culture that puts quick results before longer-term development, and the lack of employer funding for professional doctorates is a symptom of that.

Finally, there is also a conundrum in that most university teachers are not well equipped in terms of training or experience to undertake practice-based teaching and certainly supervision of professional doctorates. They bring important skills in learning design, but up-to-date skills and knowledge in professional areas requires time in practice with those who practise as professionals and employ professionals. It needs engagement with the professions on a scale that is about more than attending occasional conferences or reading the practice literature.

These are difficult to square with the demands of conventional academic research and REF-type expectations or even of conventional teaching; teaching that still often requires many hours in lecture theatres delivering material that could much more effectively be delivered on-line.

At Middlesex we have gone down the route of separate academic promotion profiles for teaching and practice on the one hand and teaching and research on the other. This is not to deny the potential connections and overlaps between the two but to recognise that we cannot expect academics to do everything and that professional practice is, on the whole, different from research.

To summarise, we need to reverse the current dominance of the academically selective research university over the practice-based, comprehensive university. We need to embrace design thinking as a paradigm that is as important, even more important, than research. We need to regard the PhD as a specialist option and argue for the professional doctorate as the mainstream model and fund it. We need to address academic workforce capability and its ability to rise to these challenges. And we need to see diversity as a strength and resource.

In other words, universities and higher degree training need to enter the 21st century.

References

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