

## **Exploring the impact of the professional doctorate on students' professional practice and personal development: Early indications**

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### **Abstract**

*The aim of this study is to explore the extent to which students who have completed, or are still engaged in, a PD consider that either the product of their doctorate or the process of doing it, have 'impacted' on their professional practice and development. A range of case studies/ narratives/ stories from students who were willing to openly engage in the activity of personal reflection on how the PD influenced, impacted upon or altered their own professional practice and development provide part of the evidence base for this research. Data were also collected from written documentation including evidence from completed PD theses. In the next phase of this research we intend to collect further data from interviews and focus groups.*

*The data from those who participated serves to inform the main research question: what is the impact of the professional doctorate on students' professional practice and personal development? In addition, it is helping us to begin to conceptualise some of the problematic terms in the debate around professional doctorates and to show how 'impact' and influence might work in the professional practice of PD students.*

**Keywords:** Professional doctorates; Impact; Professional practice

### **Introduction**

The research for this paper emerged from our experiences of students studying for a Professional Doctorate in Education and our concern about the ways in which it may

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have influenced their personal and professional lives. It also originates in our shared view of the importance of research as an activity that should engage professionals as they seek to extend their knowledge, skills, professionalism and develop evidenced based practice. In this paper we are concerned with the impact of undertaking a doctorate in education on underlying values and assumptions, perceptions and attitudes and how ways of 'behaving' may have changed. We have asked students to address the following specific research questions:

- Have your underlying values, feelings and basic assumptions regarding professional practice changed as a result of doing a professional doctorate?
- Have your perceptions and attitudes towards yourself changed?
- Have your actions or ways of 'behaving' changed?
- Has the way you use language (your discourse) in, for example, meetings, seminars and written reports changed or been influenced by the professional doctorate?
- Have your own personal circumstances changed?

We address these research questions in the context of two professional Doctorates in Education programmes at the institutions where we work and the nature of professional doctorates in the UK and elsewhere.

## **Context**

### *The emergence of the PD*

Professional doctorates (PD) emerged in the UK for a variety of different reasons depending on the subject area. For example, the engineering doctorate (EngD) was promoted by the Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council (EPSRC) and developed to provide a high status route for young engineers to develop industrial careers; the business doctorate (DBA) grew out of the highly successful MBA as a means to further extend professional development. The education doctorate developed through the initiatives of universities rather than a professional body or research council. As a consequence, the structure and length of EdD programmes may vary considerably with some having more restrictive entrance requirements than others and

often varying in length from 3-7 years. The majority of professional doctorates, including the EdD, are studied part-time. The UK Council for Graduate Education notes that the EdD

“has developed to bring a demonstrably high level of research enquiry to bear within a practical context. This route is particularly relevant for experienced education professionals and is almost invariably undertaken on a part time basis” (UKCGE, 2002: 19).

*Are there distinctive features of the PD?*

The Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) has recognised the relevance of the professional doctorate for educational practitioners and welcomed the development of such programmes in universities. The Postgraduate Training Guidelines (ESRC, 2005) now include a section of guidance for professional doctorates (termed PD) where it is described as an exciting innovation within the field of doctoral study. The term ‘professional doctorate’ incorporates the range of doctorates in the UK including the DBA in the field of business and management and the DClInPsy or DEdPsy in psychology as well as the EdD. A distinguishing feature of a professional doctorate is the undertaking of an original piece of research and therefore, a grasp of research methods is required. The ESRC state: “*Professional doctorates aim to develop an individual’s professional practice and to support them in producing a contribution to (professional) knowledge*” (ESRC, 2005: 93).

There have been many claims and arguments made around what a professional doctorate is and the difference between the PD and PhD. While the development of professional knowledge is seen as particularly important within a PD a number of other features are identified by the ESRC. For example, in discussing the PD the ESRC have stated that:

“...the research conducted would be expected normally to involve ‘real life’ issues concerned with practice, often within the student’s own organisation, and there would also be an expectation that students’ close interaction with professionally related problems through the process of their research would lead to opportunities for

personal and professional development. The measure of this development would be expected to form part of the assessment for the doctoral award.” (ESRC, 2005: 93)

Thus there is a distinct emphasis in the PD on research which is expected to lead to personal and professional development and is grounded in practice. The ESRC also suggested that research training should include a range of methodological approaches.

The way in which the professional doctorate provides a link between theory and practice and how the overall pedagogical philosophy underlying the doctorate supports students during their research, are considered by the ESRC to be key features for all professional doctorate programmes. However, as Burgess *et al.* (2006) argue, possessing the right research skills is essential but that knowledge alone will not be sufficient to achieve a doctorate.

#### *Motivations for choosing a PD*

It has been argued (Scott *et al.*, 2004) that the distinctiveness of the PD attracts a unique population which is different to those who choose to study a PhD. They draw some of this conclusion from the work of Evans (1997) who suggests that the uniqueness of the PD is in “the richness of students’ professional contexts and their position of having to balance senior work responsibilities and family commitments with their research” (Evans, 1997: 177). Scott *et al.* (2004) were mainly concerned with the initial reasons students chose to undertake a PD and their motivations for joining the programmes. They developed a typology to clarify the different motivational forms which they identified as Type 1: extrinsic-professional initiation; Type 2: extrinsic-professional continuation; and Type 3: Intrinsic-personal/professional affirmation. They go on to explore how the learning undertaken in a PD influences the learner and their life-course and career trajectory through the themes of identity, experience and professional performance.

Wellington and Sikes (2006) built on this study by exploring students’ motivations further. They found that there is a diversity of reasons for wanting to undertake a doctorate; some intrinsic, some extrinsic though the line between them is often faint. Also, they are not mutually exclusive - the same person can have several reasons and

motivations, at different times in the process; and the individual student may need to draw upon their own reservoir of reasons and motivations at different phases and stages, as we see later in reporting on the students' stories.

Choosing to undertake a professional doctorate is also discussed by Fenge (2009) who considers her own choice of PD over the traditional PhD. In her case, the professional doctorate was more easily accommodated alongside her working life, was more meaningful and could be integrated into everyday practice.

Our research builds upon these explorations of students' initial motivations for undertaking PDs by moving on to take a specific focus on the impact that the doctorate has subsequently had on the students (both extrinsic and intrinsic) and an analysis of both the personal and professional issues our students faced.

#### *Our own context*

We have seen that the EdD is a professionally oriented doctorate that allows professionals to develop and refine their research skills, to carry out a substantial piece of research and to reflect upon their own practice. Our own part-time EdD programmes, upon which our research is based, both follow these principles; however, each has a slightly different structure. The first EdD we studied has a structured programme of work across three and a half years and strict entry criteria that include required study of core modules upon which the research is to be based and a research methods course that includes both quantitative and qualitative methods of research. The programme has a compulsory residential weekend in Years 1 and 3 and a Day School in Year 2. Students are expected to write 12 Progress Reports across the three and a half years of study and a 50,000 word thesis. The second EdD we studied is a four year programme divided into two parts. Part 1 consists of six modules undertaken over two years with three compulsory residential weekend study schools in each year. In part two of the programme students work on a 50,000 word thesis and there are three optional weekend study schools each year. In both institutions the final thesis is examined by viva voce.

#### **The research approach**

Our research approach is ethnographic (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995) with the aim of exploring the extent to which students who have completed, or are still engaged in, a professional doctorate consider that either the product of their doctorate or the process of doing it, have ‘impacted’ on their professional practice and development. Data were drawn from a range of case studies/ narratives/ stories from students who were willing to openly engage in the activity of personal reflection on how the PD influenced, impacted upon or altered their own professional practice and development. We have aimed to concentrate on the ‘voice’ of students to let us hear what they have to say and how they have thought about the impact of the professional doctorate upon their personal and professional lives. It should be noted in the context of this paper that our research is, as yet, incomplete as data collection is ongoing and a full analysis across all sources is yet to be carried out.

An on-line semi-structured interview is being used to collect the narrative stories from different cohorts of students with a view to exploring the impact of gaining a professional doctoral qualification between two to five years after completion. This paper is based on eight narrative stories of students in this category. Documentary evidence from submitted theses has also been collected and further cohorts of students have been invited to tell their story of the impact of gaining a doctoral qualification. These data will add to further analysis of our research in the next phase.

Our respondents closely matched the comment by Evans (1997) about the nature of students who undertook a professional PD. All our respondents to date have been mature, mid to late professionals with the exception of one who had retired from work. Some of the narratives they produced are long and intricate and contain a wealth of data. However, for the purposes of this paper we are going to concentrate on just three areas that are represented strongly within all the narratives: the impact upon professional careers, the impact upon discourse and the impact upon personal lives.

### **Impact on professional careers**

The narratives reveal an impact in terms of professional career trajectory and impact in the way the students operated as professionals within their work. Five of the eight

students found that completing an EdD significantly changed their work environment either through rapid promotion to senior posts in higher education institutions and /or opened up opportunities to undertake research and have their research valued by colleagues.

“For me personally, the EdD experience opened up a new chapter on my career trajectory and generated another facet in my professional identity. It induced a distinct but gradual shift along the continuum of teacher education, namely from managing and delivering teacher education programmes to becoming a research active academic concerned with teacher education.”

Thus for some students, it seems, their main motivation was to enhance their professional careers and in some cases gain promotion (c.f. Wellington and Sikes, 2006).

Students in our research talked about moving from being educators to researchers:

“All in all, the EdD at xxxxx has enabled me to manage the transition from teacher educator to research active academic, from PGCE tutor for modern foreign languages to Principal Lecturer in Educational Research, from Reader in Education to Professor of Teacher Education. Since my completion of the EdD in 2002 I have widely published in peer-reviewed academic journals, presented papers at prestigious international conferences and have been involved in a number of collaborative projects that are of national and international significance.”

Not all were so meteorically successful in their careers as the student in this example but others also found that the EdD programme gave them an opportunity to consider the place of research in their professional lives.

“For me it was a stressful (due to the pressure of holding a full-time job and investing extra time and effort in the PD) but very enriching

experience, which I would undoubtedly recommend to anybody who is interested in research. It has given me the opportunity to reconsider my professional life with a different outlook and has confirmed that research is an ongoing process. There is always scope for improvement in the teaching-learning activity”.

Other students entered the programme specifically to gain promotion or a career move:

“I have changed jobs twice since starting the EdD; both of these were positive moves in terms of my career, and in both cases being enrolled on the EdD (and making clear progress towards completion) was a key factor in my getting the job. Having a doctorate is virtually a prerequisite for further progression in my career”.

While another said:

“I work in a post 92 institution and when I started the EdD I was a senior lecturer. I had just been rejected for a ‘personal promotion’ and in the next promotion round I drew on the positive feedback I had received on my early assignments. I am sure this was helpful in securing the principal lecturer (PL) promotion I received. It was also helpful in securing a subsequent PL post in academic development, by demonstrating my interest in matters educational above and beyond the other candidates. Although it probably did not play a direct part in becoming Deputy Director of xxxxx (a HEFCE CETL) the written communication skills and the enhanced understanding of pedagogic issues I developed certainly helped me write the successful bid for the CETL in the first place. Finally, I was appointed to the post of the university’s Director of Learning and Teaching – part of the senior management team – two years ago. The imminent completion of the doctorate was almost certainly a key factor in my appointment (I was not the expected appointee). I am very grateful for the opportunities the EdD has opened up for me.”



Thus undertaking research and gaining the EdD qualification were important factors for these students. In this respect they fit Scott's Type 2 typology, as they identified the doctorate directly with career development and all were established in their careers. Undertaking research was empowering for these individuals and opened up opportunities, making them more competitive and promotion worthy. This is significant as the PD is evidently perceived by employers as a recognised qualification that brings with it a range of skills in terms of intellectual capability, research capacity and potential for future development. On the basis of this evidence those who hold a PD are highly marketable and employable.

### **Impact on discourse**

As far as we are aware, this is not an area that has been researched in the context of a PD programme. We chose to include it in our research questions as completing a professional doctorate is about the development of knowledge, understanding, greater skill in writing and presenting through exploring and researching practice and as a consequence this will impact upon discourse. We wanted to know if our students had explicitly noticed particular changes in their discourse and use of language and what these might be. All our respondents could state reasons how or why their discourse had changed and it included for some the way they responded to others, or listened, as well as a greater understanding of the ways in which language can be a barrier as well as a means of communication. The three examples below express some of these aspects:

#### **Example One**

“I have a greater understanding of other people's language – e.g. pedagogy, epistemology etc. I probably use this a bit more than I would have done before but not overly so as I have come to realise what a barrier to understanding and belonging jargon can be. I think much more carefully about my use of language now.”

#### **Example Two**

“I refuse to use the word ‘learner’ to describe students after the question was raised (by xxxx) as to what then was a ‘non-learner’. No doubt there are other changes but the biggest change would be the

confidence to engage in debate or discussion in circumstances where I would have previously remained silent.”

### Example Three

“I have always hated the unnecessary use of jargon and am keen to use inclusive language. I was delighted that early on the EdD team stressed the importance of effective, clear communication and not using jargon to impress. I have often drawn on this example when imploring colleagues to focus on clarity and more than ever find myself trying to do this. It may not always be the best option politically – but that is my way.”

Gaining confidence in their use of language to persuade, change, argue a case, challenge assumptions and listen critically to others emerged in other accounts:

“I have a much more critical and analytical approach to issues, and concerns. I think I listen more carefully and critically and also am concerned for those who are not listened to very often. I am much more inclined to seek out the ‘under dog’ and draw out their thoughts and views. I am more willing to challenge another person’s point of view if I feel they are being inappropriate in their assumptions and do not so readily revert to what might be considered to be my ‘position’ in society. I am very aware of stereotypes and of matters of emancipation. I am more able to present a reasoned argument/discussion than before and can detach my emotions more readily in order to engage in academic discussion. I am less fazed in committees and more senior meetings and feel that my contribution is as likely to be of use as the next person’s.”

One talked of changing their language and discourse according to the setting in which they found themselves – rather like ‘code switching’ or being bi-lingual perhaps:

“I feel I have a much more scholarly approach to writing reports, but in seminars I am mindful of language as I feel it is important to remain understandable. In introducing new terms and vocabulary I seek to explain the idea, meaning and concepts behind the terms. Having seen other academics converse in language which is inaccessible to

others I have tried to remain grounded. I seek to use the language which is appropriate to the setting I am working in at the time. Therefore if it is a high level committee with a high level of specific vocabulary or an academic discussion, I will use the same language and participate fully. However, in other settings I use the language of the people, whatever that is (within reason).”

Issues around gaining confidence in academic and other settings to join in and put forward a point of view are reflected in some of the comments by these students. They are also indicative of the way the students perceived themselves as ‘more scholarly’, ‘more aware’, ‘more emancipated’ and this does link into the notion of the self as a social construction and undertaking a doctorate as professional socialisation (Scott *et al.*, 2004). However, this type of socialisation is not about induction into a setting but rather an enhancement of skills and knowledge to perform at a higher level. These students did not compartmentalise their study and their professional lives in the way Scott’s respondents did, rather they blended the experiences of doctoral training with their professional careers and lives. Butcher and Sieminski (2006) describe a four part model of the professional impact of the EdD which they describe as professional self-esteem, impact on wider professional community, impact on professional self and impact on professional colleagues. While they do not specifically discuss the use of language and discourse it would fit every element of their model and is an aspect that we will explore further as more of our data emerges.

### **Impact on personal lives**

For most, the personal and professional are closely intertwined and this was certainly the case for our students. However, what was interesting for us to note was the way in which the influence was ‘felt’ in 3 areas: the way they viewed other learners; the way their own thinking or ‘thought processes’ developed; and the way they themselves were viewed by their colleagues.

The following examples express these 3 aspects of impact, respectively:

#### **Example One**

“I now have a much stronger appreciation of the journey some people take in order to undertake educational study. I am willing to spend time with students who need additional support and I think am perceived by the students as someone from whom they can ask for support in their studies. I have recently been a tutor for other students undertaking Master’s degrees while engaged in their regular jobs. I have sought to understand their position, but also been clear about academic rigour and process. It has presented within me an interesting challenge of wanting to make education at more academic levels accessible to those who may not have previously considered such a route, while at the same time remaining loyal to the academic community which I have now become a member of. “

#### Example Two

“As a lawyer I had previously always thought and approached problems in a very logical way, whereas as a senior manager I actually needed to move away from my rather linear default setting. Law is a well-defined world with the structure of given case law and statute that you can refer to. Doing the EdD took me away from this comfort zone into a world where I couldn’t always apply logic and where there wasn’t always a definite answer. Although this rocked my foundations, and at times felt very uncomfortable, it really improved my strategic thinking! I had to think outside of the box, connect the unconnected and make decisions based on incomplete fragments of information. I also became much more critical and did not take things as givens as I had previously. All of these things are an exact parallel to management. Therefore, even though my doctorate was in education, many of the thought processes have helped me to improve my practice and performance as a leader and manager.”

#### Example Three

“Six years on from my shaky start, I ask myself “have my attitudes changed?” I like to think that I have gained insights into areas not previously covered. As a professional educator, I have gained new

perspectives and developed confidence to speak on subject matters where previously I may have been silent. Within my institution, whilst I received no handshakes or pats-on the –back, there has been a grudging acknowledgement of what I achieved by completing the Ed.D. I am now asked for an opinion on matters of pedagogy in the planning of a new course. I have been asked to submit bids for funding and evaluate proposals made by others. I have also been invited to participate in cross faculty discussion groups and discussions. These things have contributed to my personal development and I am glad that I persevered with the Ed.D”

However, the impact was not always an entirely positive one. It seems that the perennial issue of parity of esteem (in this case as it relates to the doctorate) is alive and kicking. Usher (2002) talked of a ‘diversity of doctorates’. It seems that, as in so many cases in educational innovation in the UK, a diversity has once again been rotated through 90 degrees to become a hierarchy:.

“On the negative side, the Professional Doctorate (PD) is relatively new and as such new ideas tend to be treated with scepticism. One of the Professors in my department said to me “Now that you have this (Ed.D.) out of your system are you going to do a **proper** PhD?” This suggests that there is a stigma attached to the PD in that it is not quite up to a “proper PhD”. I believe that the experience of the PD was every bit as rigorous as a “proper PhD” but perhaps it is just a tad recent for some. If anything the Ed.D. was tougher than a “proper PhD” as I had to pass six bloody assignments as well as submit a thesis whilst one need only submit a thesis for a “proper PhD”! I feel that my Ed.D. thesis could stand beside any PhD thesis in the field and be indistinguishable academically. Yet this feeling that somehow the PD is an inferior product seems (to me) to be persistent in some circles. I would urge fellow PD holders to resist this argument steadfastly. In my opinion the PD is not inferior to the “proper PhD”, it is just different!”

Negative stories though were rare and there were far more examples of the way in which personal skills that were unrecognised or dormant in an individual emerged as well as the realisation of the power of research for bringing about social change.

“It brought home to me the importance of research as a means for effecting change – applied research. However, I still struggle with the tension between the importance of using evidence to inform decisions and the need to sometimes progress activities when good evidence is not available. I get frustrated by the view that is heard so often that ‘we must do more research before taking action’ that is commonplace in academia – it can be a useful delaying strategy. But having said that I also recognise why that approach is important to some people as their whole thinking/value structure is geared that way. The EdD has also helped me develop a greater awareness and sensitivity towards issues of social justice.”

For another student, the main impact of undertaking and completing a PD was in improving his personal ability to write and to do research - and the satisfying ‘realisation’ that this had occurred:

“Perhaps the most significant realisation was that I could write very well. Completing 6,000 word assignments was a real concern for me at the time I applied to do the EdD. It was therefore of immense satisfaction to have the comments such as the following on most of my assignments: ‘Another extremely well written and entertaining piece xxxx. I thoroughly enjoyed reading it’ (yyyy).

I also discovered that I quite liked and was good at doing research. I had initial reservations about my ability to conduct interviews and wished I had chosen a topic involving desk-bound research. However, in the later stages I felt more comfortable and competent with this type of research.”

For other students the journey was mainly a personal one linked to stimulation, enjoyment, meeting other people and sharing in the communication of ideas.

“I don’t think it’s going to have much influence on my professional life. I haven’t really got one now. I’m not thinking of advancing my professional career- I will be 80 next birthday. I suppose I might attend the odd conference, as I have been doing for years, or something like that. My personal life? I have thoroughly enjoyed the course with its involvements, excitements and challenges, and so it has certainly made life more interesting.”

## **Conclusion**

As the above selections indicate, the impact or influences of the PD on a person’s life can be many and varied. Scott *et al.*’s (2004) typology has been valuable in understanding students’ motivation for undertaking a PD while our main aim was to explore the impact of completing a professional doctorate in terms of the process and product. We therefore used the three categories of impact on professional career, impact on discourse and impact on personal lives. Thus our data indicate that the doctorate may have a direct impact on career development; it may influence the way a student speaks, listens and writes; or it may affect their personal views, attitudes and social life. The impact may sometimes be in the cognitive domain of a person’s development (their skills, knowledge and understanding) – but equally it may be seen as part of their affective development i.e. in terms of their attitudes, feelings, self-esteem, dispositions and emotions.

Our conclusions at this stage can only be tentative as our data are not yet complete. However, there are a number of emerging issues that we will continue to explore:

- The nature of the PD versus the PhD – is there still an issue about parity of esteem? Are the two doctorates comparable or do they serve different purposes?
- The nature of knowledge developed through a PD – is there a distinction between professional knowledge and academic knowledge, or modes of

knowledge (Taylor and Beasley, 2005)? On what grounds could this be made e.g. the distinction between pure and applied knowledge? Fenge (2009) argues that part of the reason the PD may appear so challenging is because it shifts the knowledge base from the University to a practice setting. This opens up an argument about the nature of new knowledge production being developed through practice

- The development of the professional self: professional development has clearly taken place in the accounts above. Has this development of the individual had an impact upon the profession they work in - i.e. how does an individual's professional development contribute to the overall development of their profession? How could this be conceptualised or even quantified?
- The impact upon the personal self: personal development has clearly taken place in the accounts above. Has this personal development been separate from professional development or intertwined with it? Has the individual's personal development added to the development of their profession?

Clearly, there is a lot more to be done in terms of conceptualising the meaning of impact, personal and professional development in the context of the PD. In discussion around all these issues lie the experiences of our EdD students and their narratives that they have so generously shared with us. The accounts help to shed light on some of the conceptual difficulties we are grappling with. We hope that through the development of our research the students' voices can be heard and that we can weave them together to tell the overall story around the impact of the professional doctorate.



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