Professional doctorates in the social sciences

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This paper provides a review of professional doctorates in social science. Starting from a review of the definition of 'social science', the history of professional doctorates in social science is discussed. This contextual discussion frames discussion of design and delivery issues including research element, learning outcomes, credit accumulation, entry requirements, contribution to professional practice, the typical length of the research thesis, supervision, mode of study, progression, funding and impact of professional doctorates in social science.

Keywords: professional doctorate, social sciences, design, delivery, social work

Introduction

This paper will review the provision of professional doctorates in social sciences broadly understood as an inclusive term capturing psychology, criminal justice, professional practice, health, social care and social work. Psychology has a clearly articulated professional doctorate structure and will receive less attention than social sciences.

The design issues considered are: the regulation guidance by professional bodies, the taught and research element on programmes, learning outcomes, credit accumulation, entry requirements, contribution to professional practice, and the typical weight/length of the research thesis. The issues considered in successful delivery of the Professional Doctorate in Social Sciences will examine: supervision, mode of study, progression, funding, impact, the age of austerity for the public sector, continuing professional development agendas and the international dimension.

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Context

The definition of social sciences defies easy clarity as the World Social Science Report, 2010: 'Knowledge divides' suggests and can be constructed as covering a multiplicity of areas. In a UK context, the registrations of doctoral degree candidates' theses in the British Library for details of print and electronic media are arranged by broad, general subject categories for 'humanities, psychology and social sciences'. The Higher Education Funding Council for England's (HEFCE) Research Excellence Framework (REF) Units of Assessment (UoA) develop descriptors of the scope and boundaries of each UoA, ensuring that all fields of research can be assessed within the collective scope of all the UoAs. These are grouped under four main panels; A: Health, B: Science and engineering, C: Social Sciences and D: Humanities. Higher Education Statistical Agency (HESA) categorisation presents significant issues for recording doctoral data. Despite the plethora of categorization (and intellectual reflection on this process such as Foucault 1970, 1972) the 'broad church' of social sciences captures Education, Social Science, Psychology. The blurred boundaries between health and medicine and health and social care present an interesting mix and one that will receive some attention. Elements of humanities such as philosophy vie for inclusion, as do engineering and medicine, but for the purpose of reviewing the provision of professional doctorates in social sciences, will be excluded. Psychology and education are considered 'stand alone' categories and will receive little attention.

This contextual discussion will include a summary of the history of developments in social sciences' professional doctorates at national level. Definitions of the professional doctorate given by the United Kingdom Council for Graduate Education (UKCGE, 2002) describes it as 'a programme of advanced study and research which, whilst satisfying the university criteria for the award of a doctorate, is designed to meet the specific needs of a professional group external to the university'. Usher (2002) identifies 'a diversity of Doctorates' from structured models with course work as well as independent study, to models which place the learner centre stage in defining their learning through portfolios and work-based projects. As Wellington & Sikes (2006) suggest 'it is useful to conceive of a continuum of professional doctorates to accommodate the diversity in nature, form, content and assessment' (728) or 'practitioner doctorates' concerned more with practice development and change (Lester, 2004).

Scourfield (2010) suggests professional doctorates aimed at producing knowledge for professional practice are 'fairly well established' in the UK, appearing in the early 1990s (Bourner et al., 2001), and this is especially the case in education, engineering, medicine and clinical psychology. There have also been significant developments in recent years in business administration and nursing (Bourner et al., 2001; Scott et al., 2004; Ellis, 2005; Powell and Long, 2005, Stephenson et al., 2006).

The first degree scheme in the UK that can unambiguously be termed a professional doctorate was the Doctorate in Clinical Psychology (DClinPsy), which began in 1989 (Scott et al., 2004). This is a pre-service degree and required for practice in clinical psychology (Powell and Long, 2005). Scourfield (2010: 569) suggests the doctorate in education (Ed.D.), is the UK's commonest professional doctorate degree (Powell and Long, 2005) which arrived in 1992, according to Bourner et al. (2001). Doctorates in Business Administration and Engineering are well developed (Scott et al., 2004).

Central to the heart of the DProf is professional practice. It has been described as developing 'researching professionals' rather than 'professional researchers', and is part of the move towards the knowledge economy in higher education, and can be seen as part of the transformation from 'autonomous scholar' into 'enterprising self' (Rose 1998: 168). Fenge (2009: 166) argues that professional doctorates enable an immersion in an area of doctoral research that is situated in a world of professional practice and that is doctoral study in 'a tight compartment' (Wellington and Sykes, 2006).

Bourner et al. (2001) identify twenty areas in which professional doctorates can be distinguished from Ph.Ds. Scott et al. (2004) summarize the distinctive contribution of the professional doctorate under just three main themes: the production of a portfolio rather than one thesis; different knowledge criteria, namely knowledge that is relevant for the workplace; and (in theory) a combination of written product and practice performance as the end-point of doctoral study. Powell and Long (2005) note three kinds of professional doctorate title: first, those naming a specific professional field (e.g. DSW); second, DProfs in a specific area (e.g. DProf in Health and Social Care) and, third, generic DProfs (Scourfield 2010: 576). Professional doctorates emphasise the importance of the connection with

practice (Neuman, 2005), and the notion that students exist within two communities of practice, namely the academic and the professional (Wellington & Sikes, 2006).

The diversity of the professional doctorate has lead to the categorisation of first, second and third generations. The first-generation degrees looked rather more like structured PhDs, whereas the second-generation degrees are more flexible, integrated with the workplace and involve a portfolio model of assessment instead of the more traditional professional doctorate structure of coursework plus thesis (Maxwell, 2003) demonstrating change and continuity (Pearson et al., 2008). Thorpe et al. (2007) have further argued that a 'third generation' of professional doctorates can genuinely integrate academic knowledge, professional practice and research skills. Third generation doctorates have seen the growth in reflexivity where, as Cunliffe (2003: 984) suggests, 'reflexive scholars question the threads of philosophical and methodological certainty implicit in the goal of mainstream social science to provide an absolute view of the world'. Reflexive scholarship is representative of a growing maturity and self-reflexivity of third generation professional doctorates.

In social work[2] the attraction of professional doctorates is to build research capacity (Lyons, 2002; Orme, 2003; Orme and Powell, 2007), which is significant given the College of Social Work's prioritisation of research informed practice. Social Work professional doctorates offer a bridging of theory and practice (Shaw, 2007), the opportunity of part-time study (Lyons, 2002) and in-service development of applied research (Orme, 2003). Powell and Long (2005), in their survey of professional doctorate awards in the UK, found only five programmes that explicitly included social work or social care plus two generic DProfs that, in theory, could encompass social work along with a range of other professional groups' (Scourfield 2010: 568).

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2 Scourfield's (2010) survey of social work professional doctorates suggests the following universities either have active professional doctorates that incorporate a social work element or offer generic schemes that are suitable for social workers Anglia Ruskin, Birmingham, Brighton, Bournemouth, Cardiff, East Anglia, Glasgow Caledonian, Middlesex, Portsmouth, Salford, Sheffield Hallam, Sussex, Tavistock Clinic/University of East London, University of the West of England. This includes five pre-1992 universities and nine that are post-1992. It is worth noting the research profiles of the social work as represented by the 2001 RAE outcome (looking at social work, social policy and sociology panels), there are two universities with a Grade 5, two with a Grade 4, two with a Grade 3a and two with a Grade 3b. Scourfield (2010: 572) suggests six out of the fourteen universities did not return social work staff groups to the 2001 RAE. The following universities either have concrete plans for establishing a professional doctorate or have expressed interest in doing so in future: Bedfordshire, Chichester, Hertfordshire, Hull, Lancaster, South Bank, Swansea and York.

The most significant recent contribution to the literature on professional doctorates comes from the publication of Fell et al. (2011) to inform debate on the design, validation, audit and relevance of professional doctorates. Key contextual developments such as policy changes are discussed alongside the societal and economic impact in the knowledge economy. The range of professional doctorates in professional studies, education (EdD), engineering (EngD), Business Administration (DBA), psychology (DClinPSy), health and social care and practice-led doctorates in art, design and architecture are also considered in this important contribution to the professional doctorate work. On a continuum, the diversity of third generation of PD have been established over the past thirty years, they are different from PhDs and contribute significantly to professional practice.

Design

There are over 150 'recognised bodies' within the UK who have the authority to award UK degrees (QAA, 2010a). Adopting a web-based systematic review of professional doctorates in social sciences suggests there are around 90 programmes that exist in this area. Reviewing the provision and delivery of professional doctorates provides evidence and supports the argument that these programmes are most clearly articulated in the field of psychology and education (around 50 and 40 programmes). Powell and Green (2005) have charted the difficulty in the nomenclature of discipline and professionally specific programmes, such as psychology.

Doctorates are not normally credit-rated, partly because of the dominance of original research which can take on an infinite number of guises within doctoral programmes, but also because learning at this advanced level is not linear or simply additive (Denicolo and Park, 2010). However, there is broad agreement from the programmes reviewed that the ratings attached sum to 540 credits at D level.

Programme learning outcomes for professional doctorates require successful completion of 'taught' elements and contribution by research usually in a thesis. A PhD's outcomes are 'an original contribution to knowledge' but PDs have a range of demonstrable outcomes including contributions to professional practice and managerial, organizational and ethical issues. Practice varies but typically professional doctorates include postgraduate study

equivalent to a minimum of three full-time calendar years with level 7 [Masters] study representing no more than one-third of this (QAA 2008: 11).

The Russell Group offer professional doctorates but usually within the specified professional field. For example, Birimingham currently has ten programmes leading to the award of distinct professional doctorates under the title of 'hybrid doctorate'. The majority of professional doctorate programmes 'frontload' their taught credits in the first year of the programme, which contradicts the requirement that the credits be spread over the programme. Birmingham also offers a Professional Doctorate in Social Sciences (SocSciD) a programme, normally of three years' duration, which integrates taught postgraduate work and/or professional practice with research within a programme of 540 credits. The programme comprises research related work (training and thesis or dissertation) and no more than 180 credits of subject-focused taught modules (a recent change from 120 credits).

Middlesex's Work Based Learning DProf consists of 180 credits at level 7 and 360 credits at level 8. All the level 8 work is project-based, although it may not be a single large project: candidates may be able to submit some previous work as accredited prior learning at level 8, or produce two linked projects (Costley, 2010). Although, there is broad unanimity on the need for 540 credits for composition of this is variable.

The majority of professional doctorates follow a two stage process with significant pedagogical input, assessment and cohort-based learning in part one, and a thesis and viva voce examination of independent research in part two. The first part usually comprises of epistemological, methodological and professional practice modules. For example, Brighton offers eleven available awards (Physiotherapy, Occupational Therapy, Podiatry, Social Work, Health Promotion, Health Care, Counselling and Psychotherapy, Midwifery, Nursing, Pharmacy, Biomedical Sciences) built on this model.

Professional Doctorates in Social Work (DSW) (3 to 5 years) usually comprise of a research and professional development component of one or two pieces of practice-based research, linked with a commentary demonstrating the relevance of the research to both practice and the practitioner. The nature of this study may include pure basic research or applied

research related to, for example, a management or educational setting. This should normally take between 18 and 36 months to complete. Assessment will be by a thesis or portfolio of research, an oral presentation and a viva voce examination.

The usual total credit value of a Professional Doctorate is 540 credits, of which the taught modules will normally comprise 120 credits, and the research element 420 credits. In all cases the credit value of the research element must exceed the taught element (QAA, 2004). In the case of accredited prior learning a minimum total of 480 credits, to include the research element, must be studied.

In terms of size of output Scourfield (2010: 576) suggests a standardized feature is the number of words expected which seems to add up to around 80,000, although there is some controversy around the amount of M-level work that is incorporated into several professional doctorate programmes. Reviewing the length of the thesis suggests these range from 35,000 words (Lancaster's Professional Doctorate in Organisational Health and Well-being, Palliative Care and Public Health) to 50,000 words (University of Leeds Professional Doctorate in Health and Social Care) to Keele's (DMedEth) 60,000 words for the final submission of a thesis. Plymouth's thesis word limit states 'Professional Doctorate project theses may vary in word limit depending on the subject area. The prescribed word limit must not exceed that for a PhD (80,000 words).'

Scourfield (2010: 577) further suggests there is an issue of equity in terms of the 'doctorateness' of the whole programme of study and what level of achievement is demanded of the student. Similarly, there is variation for prior learning, for example, Oxford Brookes offers a Coaching and Mentoring (PT 4 to 6 years) where Masters qualifications may be consider for accredited prior learning.

Fenge (2009) suggests of Bournemouth's DProf programme that no interim pieces of work are submitted during the course of the doctorate, apart from the MPhil transfer document and viva. The final thesis (40,000 words) combines four components which emphasise not only research or systematic review of practice (15,000 words), but evidence new practice knowledge and development (20,000 words), and a reflective narrative on the process

emphasising the integration of the work with the original contribution to knowledge (15,000 words).

Duration of study and mode of study also demonstrates some variation but is usually two years for the first part and two years for the second part with a maximum of seven years. Entry requirements are normally a good first degree, a Masters degree and two years experience. The pass mark for each taught module is 50% with a Pass/Fail decision. Where module assessment involves more than one element of assessment, a student is also required to achieve a minimum of 40% in each element. Exceptionally, a module may be approved with the requirement that a student achieve a pass (50%) in each of the coursework/examination elements.

One of the opaque areas is the intended contribution to professional practice that the professional doctorate makes and this is an area for future study. Ellis' (2007) study reported on the perceptions of senior academics' working in institutions of higher education towards professional doctorates for the health and social care professions. Arguing that little empirical or theoretical work in terms of the doctorates' contribution to practice has been conducted, Ellis (2005, 2007) attempts to begin to produce an evidence base in this area by reporting the views of those stakeholders responsible for delivering the curriculum and for improving practice. Telephone interviews and content analysis of programmes suggests there are three board categories of enthusiastic, ambivalent and sceptical views towards the professional doctorate. The views of senior managers also suggest some variability about the contribution to professional practice that the professional doctorate makes (Fenge, 2009).

Regulation and guidance by professional bodies is articulated by the General Social Care Council, College of Social Work, British Psychological Society, with broad and generic guidance rather than regulation, provided by professional associations such as the British Educational Research Association and Social Research Association. Discipline based professional regulation is most clearly articulated with the British Psychological Society where Government legislation protects award titles to protect the public from 'charlatans' and 'poor practice'.

Professional doctorates in the broad field of social science also include placement learning. For example, Brunel's Doctor of Public Health programme (DrPH) combines professional placements in Public Health Research, Policy and Practice with an advanced taught component over 3 years for a research-led coursework module, three placements generating a publishable paper and a final unifying piece of work.

Concerning progression and enhancement from undertaking the programme, there is a significant issue around the contribution of Accredited Prior Learning and Accredited Prior Certificated Learning for professional doctorate programmes. Similarly, not all professional doctorate candidates are required to undertake a process of transfer from MPhil to PhD' (Plymouth); and whether candidates are eligible for 'step-off or 'fall back' awards such as MPhil or MRes are laid down by individual course regulations. There is some discrepancy over internal quality assurance mechanisms, (such as are programmes 'taught' or research degrees), validation process mechanisms, and how annual reporting on progress is recorded. Finally, an applicant seeking admission on the basis of a degree which was not delivered and assessed in English will also be required to provide evidence of English language competence (normally IELTS 6.5-7.0).

Delivery and best practice

Powell and Green (2010: 4) reviewing doctoral supervision across a range of countries conclude 'one thing all countries shared was the notion that certain academic staff members were designated to be 'in charge of' doctoral candidates though it is important to note here that supervision is not always the word used and the understanding of what it means to guide / supervise / oversee / sponsor may vary'. In addition, doctoral students and supervision is seen as distinct in university life although this distinction may vary. Powell and Green (2010: 5) argue supervisors have 'to engage with a student who will necessarily challenge his/her existing understandings and add to, or change, those understandings of the particular aspect of the world that is under study'. It was also noticeable in the UK the kinds of parameters regarding the qualification, roles and training of supervisors are, in comparison to many other countries, relatively ill-defined and much less centrally regulated.

Powell and Green (2010: 16) argue for a committee to stand outside of the pedagogical relationship so that research degree committees do not need to defer to academic judgement made by others. The qualification and eligibility of supervision is discussed where the QAA Code of Practice (2004) refers to the need for those who are to supervise should have the 'appropriate skills and subject knowledge to support, encourage and monitor research students effectively' (QAA, 2004, precept 11). In the UK qualifications to supervise and the appointment of supervisors are 'custom and practice' at an individual institutional level. Powell and Green (2010: 27) suggest this is either a sign of maturity or opaqueness. For the appointment of supervisors they argue 'academia in many of our examples can be seen to be permeated by a culture where reputation and status become imbued with indications of worthiness which may, or may not, have substance'.

Training of supervisors is discussed in the Report on the Review by QAA (QAA, 2007) it becomes clear that the training of 'new' supervisors has become commonplace in the UK if not universal (paragraph 34, p. 8) although the degree of training for established supervisors is less clear. The quality of supervision is discussed by Powell and Green (2010: 35) who conclude 'there is a lack of evidence regarding the quality of supervision, goal posts [of best practice] are subtly but significantly moved in the process of reviewing and reporting' and there is little scrutiny beyond the review team's judgment of quality in the supervisory process. Powell and Green (2010: 39) suggest 'supervision is, therefore, primarily an act of pedagogy – not of research'. The criteria and expectations of successful supervision are often negatively defined when there is a challenge raised to the supervisory process and inadequacy defines the necessary criteria.

The process of learning is critical thinking through peer supervision and 'cohort' based group supervision sessions to reinforce identities within a community of scholar-practitioners with themes of mutual respect, trust, understanding, co-operation and a feeling of enrichment from within the cohort (Fenge, 2009: 167). Significant learning styles are developed on professional doctorate programmes of group cohort based holistic learning that attends to academic, professional and personal learning (Mullen, 2003) and reflective dialogical and critical reflective learning (Brockbank and McGill, 1998). Lesham and Trafford (2006)

suggest learning moves from the individual to the group through dialogue and storytelling as a cohort based pedagogy for 'doctoral' study.

Similarly, there is wide variation on the timing of classes with most programmes having block teaching to suit part-time students but some have weekly contact and some very little contact with other students (Powell and Long, 2005). This ranges from intensive three day sessions, pre and post reading and activities, and weekend teaching for compulsory, generic and specialist modules. The second stage research programmes are often non-modular and are supported by weekend workshops per year, individual supervision and a virtual learning environment. Students are able to engage in interprofessional communities of learning and practice through the group supervision element, and this is facilitated as candidates enrol as part of a cohort, attend a series of monthly seminars and group supervision sessions (Fenge, 2009: 166). Action learning sets, distance, e-learning and on-line support are all identified in support for learning.

The use of research approaches of methodologies and epistemologies in a range of occupational areas also suggests the efficacy of the professional doctorate. The practice-based candidate's personal, professional and disciplinary backgrounds, as well as immediacy and brevity, inform methodological choice. Social science research methodologies provide the yard-stick but practice-based approaches could be developed (Costley and Armsby, 2010).

Conclusions and future perspectives

Although exciting times for professional doctorates there are a range of issues that would benefit from greater consideration. The conclusions that can be drawn from the preceding discussion are similar to those of Powell and Green (2005). There has been growth, diversification, proliferation and lack of clarity in awards and titles. Professional doctorates are not synonymous with 'taught' programmes. Further perspectives concern the role of recognition, internationalisation, and policy developments. There are significant issues with the nomenclature of the awards and unification and simplification in this process would be welcomed.

Recognition from Funding Council's support for professional doctorates needs to be recognized. The relationship between collaborative arrangements between business and higher education (Borell-Damain, 2010) is also a burgeoning but re-ordering dimension to professional doctoral research. The contribution of professional doctorates to Europe's Universities Association DOC-CAREERS project and *Vitea's* continued support for post-graduates present significant areas for continued development. Professional doctorates also require cognisance of the joint skills statements published by the Research Councils, and professional framework statements from QAA. Internationally, Bologna and Salzburg principles on Doctorate Education and the Professional Doctorate in a European Context require monitoring to inform programmes for mutual recognition, transparency and mobility and compatibility (QAA, 2008a).

Professional doctorates are fundamental to develop all areas of professional practices' research capacity and the capability of practitioners to improve (Orme, 2003) to develop 'scholarly professionals' (Fenge, 2009). The limitations of available data suggest issues for further research, policy and practice (Ellis, 2007) and the absence of Senior Managers' perspective on the effectiveness of programmes for researching professionals also present future, fertile possibilities. The 'age of austerity' with limited alternatives suggests the challenge of predominantly public sector sponsorship for professional doctorate programmes in financially challenged times.

How far the growth and diversity of different generational doctorates is a result of the widening participation agenda and growth in the higher educational experience of previously marginalized or excluded groups is a moot and mute point. Further research and contributions to the evidence base on the impact of professional doctorate programmes provide fertile ground for further work under the championship of United Kingdom Council for Graduate Education and special interest groups in professional doctorates.

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