The potential to enhance practice: the value of a professional doctorate for social work practice

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This paper explores the benefits to one social work agency of investment in a Professional Doctorate programme developed in collaboration with a local university. The agenda to transform local government requires innovation and the ability to meet changing demands and expectations. Today's political domain emphasises the importance to the government that services are provided on the basis of what is effective in practice. Social work services are especially challenged because the complexity of social work interventions are difficult to measure resulting in part to the low evidence base about 'what works'. It is recognised that Professional Doctorate programmes provide a route to scholarly professionalism for practitioners but the benefits to employers are less well known. This paper describes the use one employer has made of the Professional Doctorate to support a programme of service redesign and achieve the organisation's aspirations to be research-informed. It also contributes an agency perspective to a topic generally informed by student and educator perspectives.

Keywords: professional doctorate, social work, research, curriculum, transformation

The aim of this paper is to explore how the curriculum of a Professional Doctorate (ProfD) developed in collaboration with employers has added value to a social work employer of students studying on such a programme. As Scourfield and Maxwell (2010a) have recently explained, it is difficult to be certain of the specific value that professional doctorates may have on social work practice. However, it is possible to outline a number of scholarly activities which may contribute 'added value' for employers using the experience of one Scottish local authority as an example. This paper firstly sets out the UK and Scottish context and the governmental push for transformation of public services. The agency's response is then described and how ProfD scholarship was seen as supporting transformational change and underpinning research. The agency's research strategy is then outlined and the ways in

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which the ProfD students add value to this activity. The paper concludes with a discussion about the relatively low uptake of professional doctorates by social work agencies and how this may be exacerbated by the lack of knowledge about professional doctorates held by social work learning and development managers.

Context

In the UK the expectation that public services will use the best available evidence to inform practice has intensified in recent years. Government strategies which call for a greater evidence-base to practice take an unquestioning stance that this is a power for greater efficacy. Nutley et al. use the term 'evidence-based everything movement' (2007: 20). Evidence based practice has its origins in medicine but has now been embraced enthusiastically by government and public organisations concerned to achieve economy, efficiency and effectiveness to maximise the returns on scarce resources.

The different social work jurisdictions of the UK each undertook wide-ranging reviews of social work practice: 'Options for Excellence: Building the Social Care Workforce of the Future' (DfES/DoH, 2006) covered England and Wales; the Northern Ireland Social Care Council reviewed the roles and tasks of social workers (NISCC, 2008); and the Scottish Executive commissioned 'Changing Lives: Report of the 21st Century Review of Social Work' (Scottish Executive, 2006). One driver that all reports had in common was the need to transform services to more effectively meet the challenges of protecting vulnerable people, managing the demographic changes of people with complex health and social care needs living longer and implementing new governance arrangements between social work and health. Key to the transformation strategy was a focus on 'what works' to make services more effective and so evidence-based approaches became a priority. Ozga (2000), writing from an education perspective, observed that economy and efficiency had become justified as values.

Changing Lives brought the transformation agenda to social work in Scotland by building on concerns for the protection of vulnerable people; modernisation of services; empowerment of professional staff to improve services; and the use of new technology. *Changing Lives* described the changing social environment in which social work operates and the

challenges, expectations and complexities this brings. The report was concerned by the current weak evidence base and expressed the need to both develop and use evidence to inform practice (Scottish Executive, 2006).

The Scottish Government signalled with *Changing Lives* that evidence-based practice was no longer an optional extra for social work but a mandatory requirement. The compulsory nature was verified by the introduction of Single Outcome Agreements in the concordat between the Scottish Government and local authorities. These set out how each party will work in the future towards improving national outcomes. The accompanying guidance explicitly promoted the use of '...hard edged measures on social, economic and environmental trends and conditions.' (Scottish Government, 2008). There was a direct connection made between improvement actions and measurements of improvement alongside a government performance measure to 'improve knowledge transfer from research activity in universities' (Scottish Government, 2010). This is not, however, a straightforward transaction because knowledge is intimately related to both context and practice and it is both what people know and what they do with what they know.

Confirmation that evidence-based practice was being raised in status from voluntary action to a mandatory imperative came in 2009 with two significant publications. The Scottish Government asserted the role of Chief Social Work Officers was to '...actively promote continuous improvement, raising standards and evidence-informed good practice...' and to 'support and contribute to evidence-informed decision making and practice...' (Scottish Government, 2009). This responsibility was verified with the publication of the Social Work Inspection Agency Supported Self-Evaluation Guidelines '...created it in partnership with colleagues in *Changing Lives...*' (SWIA, 2009: 5) which states 'Social work services need to be able to show that they are doing the right things to deliver excellent outcomes and do so efficiently.' (*ibid*: 7). The Regulation of Care (Scotland) Act 2001 provided the legal framework for both external inspection of services and registration of the workforce. This gave employers the formal duty to support and enable workforce learning and social workers the personal responsibility for maintaining and improving their knowledge and skills.

There can be an assumption that an evidence base exists but there are relatively few examples of thoroughly evaluated activity in social care (Walter et al.*,* 2004; Petch, 2004; Shaw, 2005; Stevens et al., 2005). It can be extraordinarily difficult to measure the performance of social service agencies because often there is no 'bottom line' to act as a summary measure of performance (Challis et al., 2006; Johnson et al., 2006). Some social work processes are difficult to measure such as, for example, the way in which involuntary, non-cooperative service users are constructively engaged (Jones et al., 2008). Also practitioner voices are largely absent from the evidence base despite them being well placed to provide insights into the processes of defining, identifying, weighting and applying evidence to practice. These are challenging issues for social work employers who seek well informed practice decisions and practitioner engagement in the development of services.

The agency response

The agency is one of the larger local authority social work departments in Scotland with 3,000 employees of which 400 are registered social workers or occupational therapists in practitioner and manager roles. Research knowledge is believed by the agency to be important to the development and delivery of good social work practice from three perspectives. Firstly, it can help protect people from abuse by giving service users the right to well informed practice decisions which safeguards against incorrect use of professional power. Secondly, research can challenge assumptions about ways care is provided by encouraging practitioners to look outside their usual professional domain to make connections across other professional disciplines and perspectives. In this way it can also strengthen professional identity. Thirdly, social work has a duty to secure 'best value' in the performance of services to efficiency, effectiveness, economy, equal opportunities and sustainable development so has a need to know 'what works' (or equally what does not work).

The agency's research strategy

The agency strategy was to take a multi-strand approach to encouraging and supporting the use of research evidence. This was achieved by embedding research findings in policies, procedures and practice guidance; by encouraging all staff to be research-informed practitioners; and by developing an 'organisational excellence' approach (Walter et al., 2004; Nutley et al., 2007). This stresses the importance of creating a research-informed culture and the critical role of leadership and management in promoting and supporting the use of research and adapting findings to local conditions. Specifically, a vision of research-informed practice was developed which required that all new policies and service developments to be explicitly informed by research findings. Senior managers are expected to identify research needs and they have the authority to commission research. All managers are expected to support research-informed practice and have had training to support this role. All practitioners are encouraged to be research-informed and this is an explicit part of induction to social work and occupational therapy posts. Significant investments have been made to remove access barriers to research sources such as the provision of Athens accounts and an e-library and the agency actively participated in the development of the on-line portal Social Services Knowledge Scotland (www.ssks.com).

A challenge to the strategy was the knowledge that influential leaders in the agency lacked both research skills and sufficient knowledge of how to lead and implement transformational change. McCrystal and Wilson (2009) found that social work education had stimulated research-mindedness in respondents but that a limiting factor was a tendency to see professional credibility as coming from closeness to practice rather than the ownership of research credentials. This is similar to the 'circle of resistance' term used by Orme and Powell (2008) to describe the unwillingness of some social work academics to undertake research activity. There was also a high level of dissonance between the social work and the academic worlds. A particular issue was that the agency valued applied research over the theoretical and sacrificed methodological rigour in favour of quick results. Also, where results were published this tended to be internal rather than dissemination to a wider professional audience. The agency's social work practitioners and managers viewed

practice and academia as separate entities. This is illustrated by the following extracts from a focus group made up of agency employees discussing the value of research:

Manager 1*: 'We're not an academic discipline you know. We don't see ourselves in that way.'*

Social Worker: *'Yes, I think if we could see how research would make an impact in people's lives through their assessment and it strengthened their assessment, then maybe that would encourage us to look at it in more than just an academic way.'*

Manager 2: *'I think that's…that's maybe a key, it's about not just seeing it as an academic exercise involving research but actually seeing how it informs your practice and it's…rather than seeing it as being something that's in academia and the social worker's involved in practice, they actually should intertwine.'*

The agency recognised that in order to achieve transformational change it would be necessary to create an internal resource which could challenge existing practice using evidence-based methods and support the implementation of the resultant changes to services. The level of research skill and literacy required meant that these practitioners would be at the doctorate point in Orme and Powell's (2008) continuum of learning and research expertise.   Also required were skills in leadership and the management of transformational change.   The agency's experience of seconding managers to PhD programmes was that extensive research expertise was gained but not the knowledge and skills required to lead transformational change.   The agency collaborated with a local university to design a programme of learning at doctorate level which would meet this specification.

The ProfD curriculum

The university had already identified a need to provide doctoral level education to senior level managers and leaders within health and social care to enable them to enhance their

leadership skills and increase their knowledge and skills in a wide range of research approaches. This was a genuine alternative to traditional PhD education whereby the focus was directly upon work based issues and the programme was designed to enable learners to initiate and sustain effective change within health, nursing and social care. It was envisaged as a three-way mutually beneficial relationship. The university had direct access to current practice; the employer was gaining expertise in strategic leadership and research and the student was developing higher order knowledge and skills at the highest level of educational attainment. The programme was designed in collaboration with employers which ensured that it met both practice and academic requirements.

The programme was planned in two stages. Stage one included a taught element comprising three modules: research methods; professional development; and Project Development, Design and Management. The research methods module equipped students with the knowledge and skills to undertake investigative work-based studies using a full range of methods of enquiry. The syllabus had four blocks: the nature of enquiry; qualitative research design and analysis; quantitative research design and analysis; and critical review. The professional development module focused on the development of leadership skills and on providing students with the knowledge and confidence to analyse the macro and local factors that influence the delivery of health and social care within the UK. A key element of the programme was that it brought together practitioners from diverse professional groups who became a community of practice. This not only provided support and shared identity but a network of contacts which broadened disciplinary understanding. This syllabus also had four blocks: professional life skills; strategic thinking; strategic leadership; and culture and cultural change. The third module comprising stage one was Project Development, Design and Management which integrated the knowledge and skills developed in the research design and professional development modules. Students identified a workbased issue which was developed into a researchable question supported by a comprehensive literature review and selection of appropriate methodologies. The underpinning notion was that the modules converged to provide the knowledge and skills to directly impact upon practice. Upon successful completion of those three modules, the student would then commence the doctoral thesis and stage two of the programme which was focussed directly

upon some element of practice. The doctoral thesis required to demonstrate how practice had been enhanced in some way either in terms of theory development, highlighting an area which had not been tackled before and improving elements of practice or contributing towards the generation of policy in the chosen area (Glasgow Caledonian University, 2006).

The advantage of this curriculum is that by placing an early emphasis on advanced knowledge and skills in transformational leadership which have the potential to change practice it achieves what Maxwell describes as 'course work that is organic to the research' (2003: 285). This converges with the ProfD requirement for high utility and a focus on applied research which has relevance both to professional interest and organisational context and which must facilitate a detailed and comprehensive evaluation of areas of planned change in professional practice / service delivery.

What the agency has gained from the ProfD programme

The agency sponsored a senior manager onto the first cohort of the programme in 2007. This investment has resulted in benefits to the agency including those stemming from the ProfD research project; the application of learning in relation to leading and implementing change to support service redesign; the development of new research partnerships; publication of agency best practice; and participation in the ProfD student community of practice which stimulates practice innovation.

The direct value of ProfD research activity to the agency can be illustrated by the work completed to date on one ProfD thesis. The focus of this enquiry is the extent to which practicing social workers are minded and able to include research knowledge in their practice expertise. There is an abundance of literature about why research is an essential component of good practice. This often positions research use as a core social work value and central to the improvement of practice and a keystone of innovation. Many commentators have approached the topic from an academic perspective, from the outside looking in and removed from direct social work practice. Much theorising is speculative in that it has not been tested in the real and complex world that comprises the social work practice environment. Many studies have identified barriers to research use by practitioners – access issues, lack of appraisal skills, workplace culture issues etc - and assume that

elimination of barriers will increase research use. The agency has invested significant resources in minimising these barriers but has this created a more research-enabling environment? Has this made a difference to the research-mindedness of social work practitioners? This research will provide valuable insight into the research-mindedness of social work qualified practitioners, supervisors and managers. The ProfD student will then have a leadership role in designing and implementing the future interventions required for effective use of research to inform practice.

The second benefit concerns the application of the acquired knowledge and skills in leadership and managing transformational change. The agency has implemented extensive service redesign which has involved almost every employee having to change how they practice. For example, the introduction of personalisation of older people services has changed the service provided from a demand-led care service to a needs-led support service. This required retraining for hundreds of employees and managers and overcoming significant resistance to change. The ProfD students supported the change strategy with research-informed advice and coached managers in the skills required to manage the transformational changes. This was assisted by participation in the multi-disciplinary network of ProfD students which allowed exploration of different approaches to the transformation challenges and a deeper understanding of other professional perspectives which aids the sharing of solutions.

The research partnership with the university was strengthened by the decision to second a senior manager to the university to increase research capacity, improve dissemination and to encourage learning between agency and university and vice versa. This person became the agency's second ProfD student. Benefits to the agency from investment in this student's ProfD programme include a research project centred on managing risk in child protection work and ongoing support to practitioners engaged in research activities as part of their professional development. The university supported the ProfD student to develop agency guidelines for the ethical approval of requests for research access to users of the agency's services. Previously requests for research access had been dealt with on an ad hoc basis by senior managers.

Social work has a low evidence base about what works in complex social situations and there is a need to increase the pool of knowledge. The academic culture of the ProfD places emphasis on disseminating findings through publication and conference presentations. This has never been more essential than in the current political climate and the importance that the government places on services which are safe and effective in practice. The ProfD students have enhanced the agency's organisational reputation through peer reviewed publication and research-informed approaches. West, Watson, McAllan and Kelly (2010) is a co-authored agency / university evaluation of changes to the way student social workers on practice placements are supported by the agency. McAllan and Macrae (2010) is an account of a leadership development programme delivered to all the agency's middle managers. Kettle, O'Donnell and Newman (2010) describes a strategy for the personalisation of social care services. The agency had not published any peer reviewed papers prior to the ProfD programme. The value of publication is not always appreciated by social work agencies but they do recognise benefits from improved services achieved by good leadership and effective management of change supported by sound research methods. Further, the process of producing a journal paper from an agency perspective requires agreement and participation from all the stakeholders which appears to stimulate interest in research activity. For example, the current research project into the effectiveness of coaching newly qualified social workers brings together practitioners, their managers, learning and development staff and senior managers into a shared dialogue about service improvement underpinned by reliable data including a review of the literature. There are some indications that the inclusiveness of this process may encourage practitioners previously not engaged in research activity to become more research-informed.

The agency relies on the ProfD students to lead on research by applying their knowledge of different research methods to advise and support other colleagues engaged in research and service evaluation activities. Current projects receiving this support include an evaluation of the agency's coaching programme for newly qualified social workers and research investigating the quality of the agency service received by carers of people with a learning disability. The social worker who instigated this latter project has been selected as the agency's third ProfD student.

Discussion

The agency discussed here has identified significant benefits to their participation in the ProfD programme. Scourfield and Maxwell (2010b) surveyed employers for their experiences of doctoral studies but respondents were mainly social work educators rather than service providers. There are journal papers from authors with a social work perspective but these tend to be about the student experience and the development of scholarly professionalism (e.g. Fenge, 2009) or accounts by social work educators rather than the standpoint of employers. The lack of comparative studies means that it is not possible to evaluate if the positive experience of this agency is mirrored by other social work agencies who have invested in professional doctorate programmes. It could be some time before this question is answered because of the current low uptake of doctorate training by social work agencies (Orme & Powell, 2008; Sharland, 2010). Mindful of the benefits to this agency and curious as to the reasons behind the low uptake, a group of social work learning and development managers from seven agencies were asked for their views on professional doctorate programmes. Social work learning and development managers are responsible for developing agency learning strategies and can be hugely influential on the deployment of resources to support strategic change. None of the agencies represented were sponsoring employees on professional doctorate programmes. The learning and development managers were unable to explain the difference between a professional doctorate and a PhD and they did not know which local universities offered professional doctorate programmes. They identified the barriers to doctorate programmes as a lack of evidence of the benefits to employers, a belief that doctorate awards are not valued by the profession and the perceived high fees of such programmes. Therefore, one explanation for the reported low uptake may be lack of knowledge by key managers about professional doctorate programmes. Scourfield and Maxwell (2010b) show social work research is currently undergoing expansion at doctoral level so there may be grounds for optimism.

Conclusion

This paper illustrates the high utility of the ProfD learning programme and how this impacts on agency practice to improve services to the citizens of one local authority within Scotland. While the benefits of the ProfD award might not yet be fully appreciated by all social work

agencies, the experience of this agency has been positive. The curriculum and learning process strengthens professional identity and encourages practitioners to look beyond their professional domain to more interdisciplinary working. The focus on the knowledge and skills required for leadership and change management and their application converges with the local government transformation agenda and the ability to meet changing demands and expectations. The training on research skills can be of benefit beyond the immediate research project to provide a resource to the wider organisation.

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