

Student perceptions of the professional doctorate

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This paper explores the expectations which students and employers have of a professional doctorate programme. We present a mixed method study of more than 50 students on a professional doctorate programme at a UK. We explore four themes which have emerged from the study: cohort experience; structure and academic support; personal impact; and employer perceptions. We critically assess these findings against other published studies, and draw conclusions which we believe are of use in the future development of professional doctorate programmes.

Keywords: professional doctorate, student perceptions, employer perceptions, cohort experience, academic support, personal impact

Background

Universities across the UK have seen a significant rise in demand for professional doctorate programmes (Costley & Stephenson, 2005; UKCGE, 2010). These new types of doctorate are often marketed as an alternative to the traditional PhD, which better meet the requirements of practitioners (Lester, 2004). A recent report on postgraduate provision in the UK stated that professional doctorates were helping to meet employer requirements (Report for the First Secretary of State, 2010). The report also recommended that UK Research Councils and other funding providers should favour courses that meet employer

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demand. With rising pressures on Universities to secure funding from alternative sources it will become increasingly important for Doctorates to provide a means to equip the workforce with transferable skills that meet the demands of the marketplace (Lee, 2009).

However, it is not merely by securing additional funding that Universities can benefit from offering professional doctorates. The students studying on these courses are high level professionals, who can provide important links with industry, thus forging new collaborations and creating new ways of transferring knowledge between academia and industry (Gill & Hoppe, 2009). Further the professional doctorate offers the opportunity to engage in research projects which make real impact upon professional practice. Ellis concluded in her study of academic perceptions of the clinical doctorate, that there was general enthusiasm from academics due to the impact they could see their students making on clinical practice (Ellis, 2007).

The term 'professional doctorate' covers a number of forms of doctoral programmes, including generic programmes, and subject specific routes. A number of studies have focused on subject specific courses particularly in the areas of Education, Nursing and Business (Taylor, 2007; Guthrie, 2009; Hadacek & Carpenter 1998; Gill & Hoppe, 2009). There is less literature on generic professional doctorate courses, although the University of Middlesex have conducted a number of studies which compare their generic programme with those of other Universities (Stephenson et al, 2004; Costley & Stephenson, 2005). Ellis points out the importance of interdisciplinary research and its benefit to the professions. She points out, however, that, at this point, this can only be conjecture, as there are relatively few professional doctorate graduates because of the relative newness of the programmes (Ellis, 2007). This is a point that others contest; arguing that the PhD and discipline-focussed programmes should stand alone as only they can provide the subject depth and research expertise that is required (Guthrie, 2009). This paper adds to the literature already available in this relatively new area.

With the increasing success of professional doctorate programmes, research in this area is growing significantly (UKCGE, 2009; Smith et al., 2009a, 2009b). Early research focused on the balance between academia and the profession within the programme (Costley &

Stephenson, 2005). A number of studies have been conducted which compare the professional doctorate with the PhD (Poultney, 2010; Metcalfe, 2006; Hudacek & Carpenter 1998; Neumann 2005). These studies have focussed on the similarities and differences between the doctoral models. The professional doctorate has grown alongside the traditional PhD route, which suggests it is meeting a previously untapped market (Neumann, 2005). More recent qualitative research has focused on the student experience (Costley & Stephenson, 2005; Taylor, 2007). These studies have shown that students have been able to take control of their own learning (Costley & Stephenson, 2005) and use work already completed in their workplace to gain a doctoral qualification with the use of reflective tools (Lester, 2007). However, there is a perceived lack of employer input to programmes (Malfroy, 2004).

Early research on the professional doctorate tended to focus discussion around the balance between the workplace and the University and how to measure and regulate workplace contributions (Costley & Stephenson, 2005). This paper extends this work by studying the reasons which lead students to choose a professional doctorate, and the expectations that students and employers have of the doctorate. The study used mixed methods including a questionnaire and focus groups and involved more than 50 students at different stages of doctoral study. This paper outlines the key themes which have emerged from the study, critically assesses these findings against other UK studies, and draws conclusions which the authors believe will be of use in the future development of professional doctorate programmes.

The professional doctorate programme

The professional doctorate (DProf) scheme under study has been running since 2007, and currently has 56 students drawn from a range of professional backgrounds. The scheme was first approved in 2006/7, and the first cohort students were recruited in April 2007. The initial scheme was approved as a research degree and was approved by the University Research Committee. The scheme was designed to meet the growing demand for a doctoral level qualification which enables candidates from business, industry and the professions to build an individual research programme based upon work which they are undertaking within the workplace (Smith et al., 2009a).

The scheme is portfolio based and enables a student to build up a doctoral submission which is based on a portfolio of evidence, drawing from material which is generated within the workplace. This portfolio can draw retrospectively on previous work, and build upon current and developing work. The candidate is required to demonstrate that the portfolio addresses the programme learning outcomes, which have been derived from the QAA qualification descriptors for a higher education qualification at level 8: doctoral degree (QAA, 2008). The candidate is required to undertake formal assessed coursework in the areas of reflective practice, research methodology and contextualization and planning, and to ultimately produce a doctoral report which reflects upon the work contained in the portfolio and demonstrates the contribution made to knowledge and the impact which they have made on their profession.

Each student is supported by two internal supervisors. The students follow similar enrolment, registration and annual monitoring processes as are followed by MPhil and PhD students. The programme is centrally administered; however, the students are very clearly owned by academic Faculties.

The students on the programme come from a variety of professional backgrounds. They include:

- senior pharmacists, working on a variety of projects relating to professional pharmacy practice,
- senior managers and academic staff from local colleges, all working on various aspects of further and higher education,
- town planners, working on projects relating to urban design and regeneration,
- internal university staff from a variety of roles and areas,
- senior engineering and computing staff working on projects involving the acceptance and application of technology, and,
- senior managers from business and finance; working on projects which involve the management of significant change within their professional context.

The concept of a cohort has been integral to the operation and success of the programme

(Smith et al., 2009a) and each cohort has come together with core staff from the programme every two months for formal learning sessions. These sessions have delivered key material on reflective practice, and research methodology. They have also given the candidates the opportunity to discuss their project work with their peers and to offer each other support. Reaction to these sessions has been extremely positive and the programme team views them as key to the success of the programme. The programme is also using a virtual learning environment as a vehicle for communicating with, and between, students for discussion, and for lodging documentation relating to the programme.

Most of the current students are based in the UK, with two students coming from Ireland. All students meet current admissions requirements; at least an upper second class honours degree, Masters degree, or equivalent. All students are required to be working within their profession and, through their job; they must have the opportunity to make a contribution to their profession and to practice.

The programme aims are set out below, followed by a brief discussion on each.

- *Aim 1. Develop students as reflective practitioners to enhance their professional practice and enable them to innovate, and make informed judgements.* The programme sees the concept of the reflective practitioner (Schon, 1982) as central. This is in two senses; firstly to develop reflection as a skill which the students can then practice within their work context, and secondly, to encourage the students to reflect on their own previous experiences when setting the context of, and issues within, their project.
- *Aim 2. Develop within students the ability to synthesise ideas, concepts and approaches from their profession with relevant theoretical frameworks to create solutions, drive change, innovate and make a difference within their workplace.* It is important that the programme blends theory with practice, and that it challenges students to set their professional work within a theoretical context and draw upon theoretical models from the literature which can then be used to explore and test their professional practice.

- *Aim 3. Develop within students the ability to select appropriate research approaches from a range of research methods and to apply these to issues and dilemmas which they encounter in their own professional practice, and hence by doing so making a contribution to the practice within their profession.* Although the professional doctorate is set within the context of professional practice, it is still a research degree, and needs to reach doctoral standards as set out by the QAA (QAA, 2008). It is important that the candidate grounds their study within a clear methodological framework, and uses well understood research methods to explore their professional issues.
- *Aim 4. Provide opportunities for personal fulfilment, professional development and career enhancement.* The candidate needs to approach the doctorate as means of personal and professional development, and not simply as a means to achieve a doctoral qualification.

Methodology

An online questionnaire was set up and all of the 56 students on the DProf programme were asked to complete it. The questions were designed to explore the perceptions and expectations that the students have of the doctoral programme. 30 students (54%) choose to complete the survey. To date four students have graduated from the programme. These graduates were also asked to complete a slightly modified questionnaire; and all did so. The questions in the graduate questionnaire were essentially the same, with very minor changes to the wording (largely change of tense) to recognise that the students had now completed the programme.

In addition to the questionnaire four focus groups were held with 6-10 students in each group. These were used to further explore some of the themes which emerged from the questionnaire.

The aims of the study were:

- To understand student motivations for studying a professional doctorate
- To measure student perceptions of the programme: has it changed how they work?
- To understand employer perceptions of the doctorate

Results

Demographic Information

There are 58 students on the programme, including 35 men and 23 women. The majority (56) of the students come from the UK, with two students coming from Ireland. In terms of ethnicity, 56 students are white, and there are two students of non-white origin.

Quantitative Results

The students were asked 'Why did you choose to study the programme?' The results obtained are shown in Fig. 1. It can be seen from Fig.1 that the highest response to this question was 'For a sense of personal achievement'. The next most popular choice was 'For professional / subject interest'.

The next question asked about employer support. The results relating to this question are shown in Fig. 2. The majority (62%) of respondents indicated that their employer supported them financially (e.g. by paying fees), while almost half (42%) received time for study. A small number of respondents indicated that their employer did not care that they were studying the DProf programme.

Do you approach professional issues differently since studying the Dprof Programme?

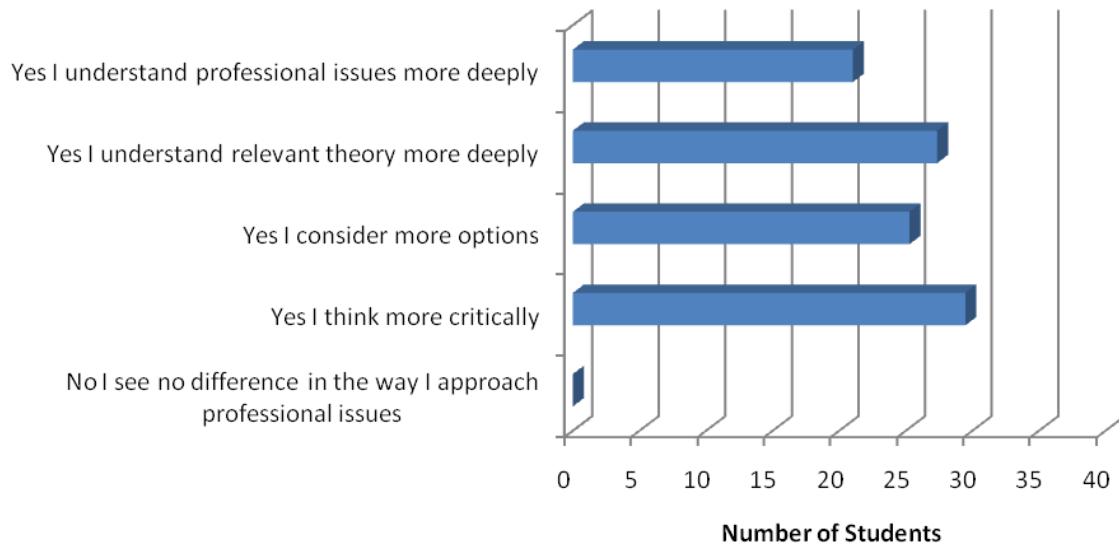


Figure 1 Reasons for studying the professional doctorate programme

How does your employer support your study on the Professional Doctorate?

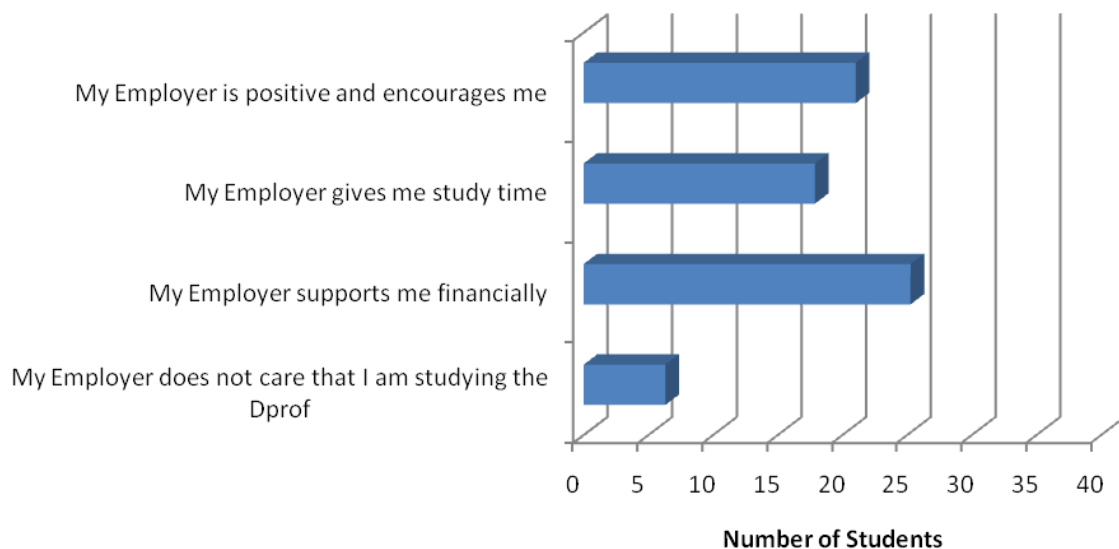


Figure 2 Employer support

In terms of impact upon themselves (see Fig. 3), 68% of students felt that they thought more critically as a direct result of studying on the programme, 71% felt that they understood relevant theory more deeply, and 50% felt that they understood professional issues more deeply. All of the students recognised that studying on the programme had made a difference in the way that they approached their professional practice. 93% of students also stated that they had begun to use reflective practice within their work context.

Why did you choose to study on the Professional Doctorate Programme?

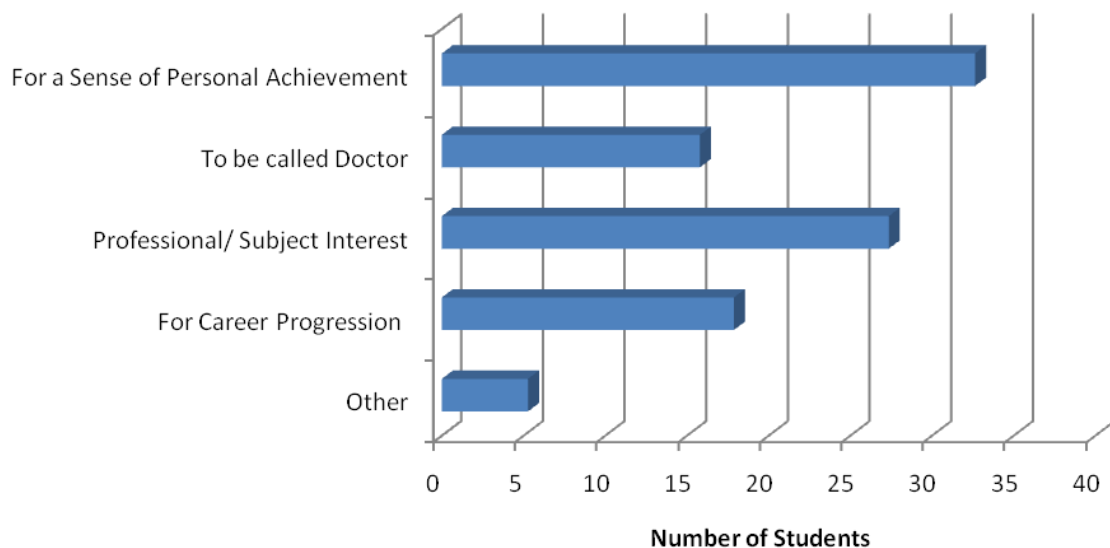


Figure 3 Impact of the programme on students

A further set of questions asked the students about their perceptions of certain aspects of the programme. The results from this question are shown in Fig. 4.

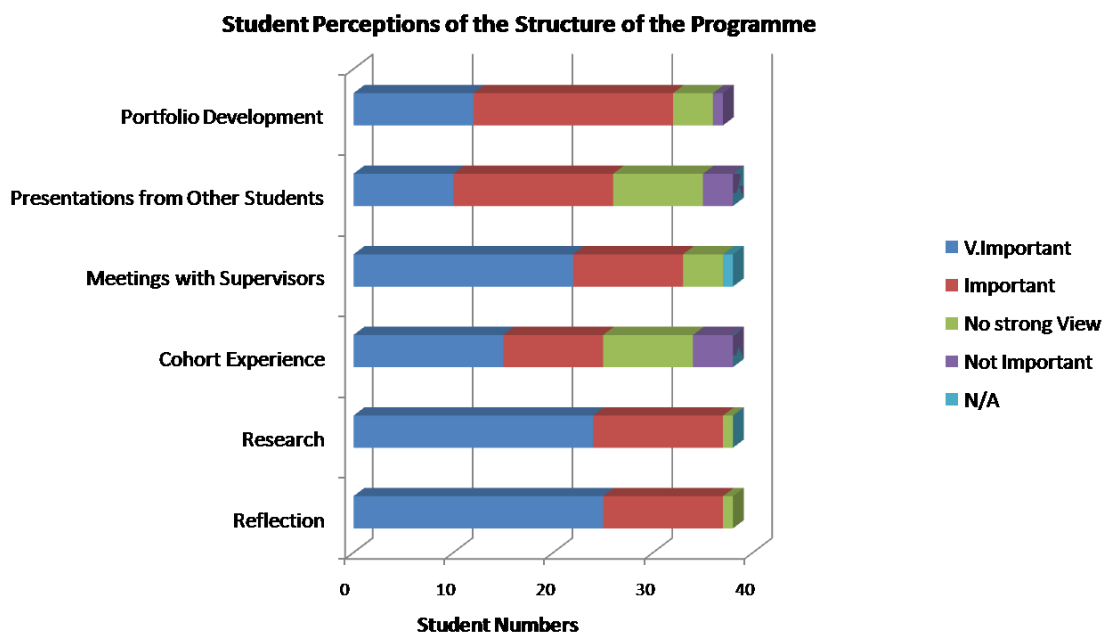


Figure 4 Student perceptions of programme structure

Qualitative results: further student perceptions

Qualitative responses were obtained from the questionnaire and from focus group discussion, which was also based around the topics covered within the questionnaire. First, the respondents were all asked the question: ‘Why did you choose to study a professional doctorate?’ Selected responses are shown in Table 1, which consists of direct quotes from the respondents. These quotes, and those in the tables which follow, have all been selected to represent the main themes which came out of the discussions. All of the responses from the students were analysed and grouped using a content analysis approach (Berelson, 1971). The themes which emerged are discussed later in this paper.

Quotes from Respondents
<i>It best fits with my learning journey. I began a PhD but it didn't naturally lend itself to my portfolio career path.</i>
<i>To support my desire to publish my theories and frameworks.</i>
<i>To explore professional issues.</i>
<i>Because of the flexibility.</i>
<i>I wanted a structured programme.</i>
<i>The opportunity to site my project within the workplace.</i>

Table 1 ‘Why did you choose to study a professional doctorate?’

The responses to this question revealed a number of reasons for studying the programme. These included the structured nature of the programme, flexibility and the way in which the programme supports the student in exploring their own professional issues. Through all of this there was a strong sense that the students were undertaking the programme for their own professional development reasons and for a feeling of self-fulfilment and self-motivation, rather than because their employer wanted them to do it, or simply to achieve the qualification and have the title Dr.

The students were all asked the question: *'Is the programme what you expected?'* Selected responses are shown in Table 2, which consists of direct quotes from the respondents.

Quotes from Respondents
<i>Not sure what I expected - so unable to answer!</i>
<i>I would prefer a slightly increased taught component.</i>
<i>Much more work than envisaged, especially with the portfolio.</i>
<i>It is better; as it is far more practically oriented than I was expecting.</i>
<i>It is 'dovetailing' extremely well with my professional practice.</i>
<i>I did not fully appreciate the coursework aspects of the programme.</i>
<i>It has surpassed my expectations. I did not envisage developing as much as I have done.</i>
<i>My confidence has grown as a result of doing this programme.</i>

Table 2 *'Is the programme what you expected?'*

The responses to this question showed that, although the students had studied on Masters and other programmes in the past, they were quite unsure what to expect from a doctorate of this nature. It wasn't until they got further into the programme that they really began to understand its nature and the impact that it had upon them personally. Some wanted more coursework and taught structure, others less; all students found it much more challenging, exciting and motivating than they had initially envisaged. Students found reflective writing and doctoral level writing to be challenging, and found it even more difficult to mix the two! It is important that students are given ample opportunity to practice writing within a

professional doctorate programme, and that they are given plenty of feedback on their writing by academic tutors.

Students were asked to identify the most positive aspects of the programme. A selection of responses is shown in Table 3.

Table 3 The most positive aspects of the programme

Quotes from Respondents
<i>The freedom to work at your own pace; experiencing alternative ways of studying.</i>
<i>The support provided by the academic staff.</i>
<i>It provides an opportunity to develop education, knowledge and skills to a level which would not have been possible with other programmes.</i>
<i>Ability to use existing practice within my research and develop those ideas further.</i>
<i>Meeting up with the other students in the cohort, as we spur each other on.</i>
<i>Flexibility as to how long it takes to complete. Re-evaluating my work and my ideas.</i>
<i>Good to put aside and get my own dedicated time.</i>
<i>The opportunity to study something I really enjoy - its for me!</i>
<i>Interaction with a cohort of people from different disciplines and seeing how common themes emerge even from quite disparate areas.</i>
<i>Recognition that applied industrial based research is a valid as pure academic traditional PhD research.</i>
<i>An opportunity to reflect on one's career and work towards doctoral status.</i>
<i>This process has helped me to make sense of my working life.</i>
<i>Gives me a sense of achievement and maintains my interest in the sector I work in.</i>
<i>The taught sessions and cohort days help to keep you 'on target'.</i>
<i>Stepping outside of the normal run of things in the workplace and taking an informed view of the wider picture.</i>
<i>It has improved my ability to think critically and raised my self-confidence to a very high degree. And I am still very excited about what I am doing.</i>
<i>Framework & delivery approaches works very well for my learning style. It is enjoyable for sure & I have no hesitation whatsoever in recommending it to other professionals.</i>

Developing the ability to think more critically and deeply.

The consistent focus on the need for your thoughts and emerging work to make a contribution to your profession. This is really important as I feel strongly that what I am doing should and must have a real impact on my profession and this doctorate facilitates this. I am thoroughly enjoying the programme and really gaining a significant body of knowledge and personal professional development.

Made me review my career in a structured way; allowed me to see my career contribution in a new light; meet new people.

The responses to this question were pleasing in that they identified a number of positive aspects to the programme. In particular, the students greatly valued the cohort experience, and the way in which they were able to interact in a safe environment with professionals from other backgrounds. They also welcomed the structured nature of the programme, and found the days away from work a welcome escape from their busy professional environments, in which they could think and discuss their professional issues with tutors and peers. The deadlines for coursework were also seen to be a positive aspect, and something which they were all used to working to within their own work context. The personal impact of the programme and the way in which it enabled them to explore, and hence better understand their own professional issues, also came out strongly from the responses. Finally the students clearly greatly valued their interaction within academic tutors, and the different lenses through which they could view their work issues.

The respondents were asked about their employer perceptions of the professional doctorate and how much support they had from their employer. The results are shown in Table 4.

Table 4 Employer perceptions

Quotes from Respondents
<i>Change of management has altered their support. Formerly had fees paid but now have to pay them myself.</i>
<i>Change of job: which impacts on my project.</i>
<i>Redundancy: questioning whether I can continue.</i>
<i>My employer will charge me out for £200 a day more when I graduate.</i>
<i>Studying for the doctorate has raised my profile in the organisation; I have presented on it to other senior managers.</i>
<i>My boss doesn't understand what I am doing.</i>
<i>My company need me to have the doctorate for expert witness work.</i>
<i>My employer has given me a new regional role as a result of my doctoral work.</i>
<i>The directors see my project as key to the future of the company.</i>
<i>It made me see things more clearly and was one of the reasons why I decided to leave the organisation.</i>
<i>I keep it under the radar at work.</i>
<i>The boss asked me how much of his time I would take up by doing this.</i>
<i>I'm giving something back to the profession.</i>

This area of questioning revealed some quite different responses. Some employers were very positive, others less so. Sometimes this changed as management personalities and strategies changed with organisations.

Analysis of the data: identification of themes

The qualitative data were analysed to identify themes, using a content analysis approach (Berelson, 1971). The following four themes were evident:

- Cohort experience. In general the students were very positive about working with a cohort of students from different backgrounds, and felt that there was much to be gained from this experience.
- Structure and academic support. A number of issues regarding the structure of the programme and of the final doctoral submission were raised by the students. The students also greatly valued interactions with academic tutors.
- Personal impact. The students seemed to indicate that studying on the programme had made a big impact upon their professional practice. This was evident from a range of students, including those who were relatively new to the programme.
- Mixed employer perceptions. The students indicated a mix of employer reactions to, and perceptions of, the programme.

Each of these four themes are explored and discussed below.

Cohort experience

It is very clear that the students greatly welcome the opportunity to work with, and learn from, each other. They particularly welcome the opportunity to work with students from other professions, and alternative communities of practice. They feel that there is much to be gained from discussing their experiences with others, and from gaining the views of other students who work within a different disciplinary and subject context. This concurs with the concept of the 'practitioner doctorate' proposed by Lester (2004).

They perceive (and enjoy) an element of peer pressure, and a sense of competition, within their cohort group. The students spur each other on; the study days where they all meet are keenly anticipated and are seen as an opportunity to compare progress on their doctoral projects. They enjoy the shared learning journey, and feel a shared sense of achievement when one of them undergoes a successful oral examination and graduates. They enjoy the

presentations from other students, and feel that there should be more on them on the programme. It is important that 'Chatham House rules' are observed during discussions within the cohort group; students feel able to 'open up' during those sessions in a way that they may not have done had the cohort consisted of others who were all from the same professional area.

Structure and academic support

The students welcome a structured, yet flexible, approach to their doctoral studies. Although they are all senior, very successful, professionals, and hold postgraduate qualifications, they want to be 'taught' and greatly respect the views of academic tutors. They are sometimes looking for clear, straightforward answers which may not exist, and can become frustrated with this.

They welcome days away from work, and their own space to reflect upon their experiences and develop their own practice within a 'safe' environment. They are also looking for structure in their final doctorate submission and want their tutors to give them a recipe for this. If this is not forthcoming they feel disappointed. They greatly respect tutor advice (usually), although sometimes they may take it personally and find it difficult to accept. Although they have all undertaken major projects in the past at postgraduate level they still struggle with doctoral level academic writing.

Personal impact

The students recognise that the programme builds their confidence, often more than they expected. The programme allows them to benchmark themselves with others and to formalise models and practices. They start to see their own professional contribution, and the impact they are making within their own communities of practice, much more clearly; although they may need help from academic tutors and their cohort group to do so. The programme seems to make passionate people even more passionate about their work! This resonates with the theme of the 'impacting self' referred to by Costley and Stephenson (2005) and 'the development of the profession self' identified by Burgess and Wellington (2010).

Mixed employer perceptions

The students indicate very different, and conflicting, employer views of the professional doctorate programme. Some are very positive; others less so. This seems to depend on the seniority of student, and how they are perceived within the organisation. This matches the findings presented in the UKCGE (2002) report, which also identified contrasting employer attitudes to the professional doctorate. It seems that there remains work to be done to convince employers of the value of practitioner doctorates.

It is also very evident that we are living, and working, in very dynamic and changing times. Many students are experiencing massive change in their role within the organisation, their organisational structures and the resources available to them. Several students are experiencing a change in the level of support from their employer. Sometimes this is because a particular manager, who had supported and championed their case, has left the organisation. In other cases this is purely as a result of financial restrictions. In two cases students had been made redundant. In such changing times we need to explore how doctoral programmes can transcend work with individual employers and focus on impact upon communities of practice.

Conclusions

This study provides further evidence that professional doctorate programmes are especially relevant to today's practitioners. It has demonstrated that these developing programmes have an increasingly important role to play in the future of doctoral education.

The survey of students has identified a number of themes which resonate with other similar studies (Costley & Stephenson, 2005; Lester, 2004), and hold lessons for the further development of professional doctorate programme. In particular, we have highlighted the importance of the cohort experience, and the need for structure, yet flexibility within programmes. It is very clear that studying on a doctoral programme makes a big impact upon the professional practice of students. However, this impact is not always recognised by employers who continue to have mixed perceptions of such programmes. This suggests that it is incumbent upon those universities which offer such doctoral programmes to collect case study material from graduates, emphasising (and where possible quantifying) the

impact the research has made on practice. Finally, there is a need to ensure that programmes are flexible enough to take account of the highly dynamic professional working environments in which our students now operate.

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John Fulton is a Principal Lecturer in the University of Sunderland, Faculty of Applied Science. He has a background in mental health and in nurse education and has worked at the University of Sunderland since 1993, teaching on a variety of sport and health related programmes. He has been involved with the Professional Doctorate at the University since its inception, and is particularly interested in the ways in which methods of enquiry can direct the process of the professional doctorate. His research interests are social exclusion and ethnographic approaches to social enquiry, and he has recently completed an ethnographic study on amateur and professional boxing.