

Tensions in the purpose and impact of professional doctorates

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This paper explores the emerging and often surprising tensions for those who have undertaken a professional doctorate and the impact on their doctoral identity. Data are drawn from online interview questionnaires, doctoral theses and face-to-face and telephone interviews. Our earlier research, on the purposes and impact of doctoral study, enabled us to explore changes in discourse and implications for the personal lives and professional careers of those undertaking doctoral study. This extension of our research and findings reveals that identity; values, workplace tensions, self-development and personal growth are all significant aspects of undertaking and completing a professional doctorate. The complexities of 'border crossing' between academia and the workplace, for those who have studied a professional doctorate creates both connections and friction, constantly challenging values, professionalism and identity.

Keywords: professional doctorates, impact, tensions, doctoral identity

Introduction

Our earlier research (e.g. Burgess & Wellington, 2010; Wellington & Sikes, 2006) has highlighted interesting tensions in the 'impact' of professional doctorates (PD). Using extensive data from two sources (narratives by successful students and content analysis of over 50 completed dissertations) we were able to categorise students' self-reflections on the impact of their PD into 3 main groups: impact on personal lives, impact on professional careers and impact on discourse. We decided to take our research into the impact and

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purposes of the PD further, both by collecting additional data from successful students in other areas, and by continuing our joint analysis of data and key concepts in this area.

In continuing to collect data on the impact of the PD, we included a cohort of students from a third institution who were undertaking a Doctorate in Professional Studies (Health). The narratives provided by these students confirmed that the above categories or themes from students' self-reflection are still valuable in conceptualising the purposes and impacts of the PD. However, we now feel that we can highlight, and present for discussion, certain interesting surprises and unexpected tensions which have implications for the future of the PD. In particular a new question emerged for us around understanding doctoral identity.

The shifting context of doctoral identity

There has been a diversification of sites in the production of what counts as doctoral knowledge from the traditional PhD to the new route PhD, the EdD, DSocPsy and work based doctorates (Usher 2002; Powell & Green, 2007; Neumann, 2003 and 2007; Park, 2007). In the European arena, the passage from Bologna Process to the European Higher Education Area has encouraged the development of models of structured doctoral studies with implications for doctoral curricula design and future strategy for training the next generation of researchers. In the UK, alongside this proliferation of doctoral routes has grown a framework of regulations (such as QAA, 2004) that attempt to contain, constrain and make doctoral knowledge conform: the era of 'new managerialism' as Deem (1998) termed it or 'the managerial climate' discussed by Cribb and Gewirtz (2002). For example, institutional accountability around doctoral students, particularly international students tracks both progress and location of doctoral students (HEFCE 2005, 2007). More recently, completion rates, audits and generic skills training require doctoral studies to be of a certain length, content and to demonstrate specific research skills, often based on the notion of the 'knowledge economy' (McWilliam & James, 2002). Doctoral knowledge therefore becomes categorised in a particular way and evidence of these on-going attempts to classify doctoral knowledge into a set of research skills is demonstrated most recently through the requirement that PhD by publication should evidence a range of research skills and research methods.

Meanwhile, the range and structure of professional doctorates has continued to evolve from a first generation of course work plus thesis model (Maxwell & Shanahan, 1997), to a second generation that moved towards a learning environment that provides diverse support to facilitate learning by doctoral students (Seddon, 2001). The evolution of doctoral programmes continues. Models of professional doctorates where workplace realities, knowledge and the improvement of the profession aligned with the rigour of the academy have been brought together in new relationships (Maxwell, 2003). These new and diverse models stretch the imagination of doctoral learning and yet continue to be juxtaposed to the PhD whether traditional or newly structured.

Scott and Morrison (2010) argue that professional and work based knowledge is being reconstructed within the academy, the profession and the workplace and that what was once a specialised academic identity is being replaced by fragmentation and variation. Consequently, they suggest, the implications of reforms in doctoral programmes are profound and threaten existing knowledge structures in UK universities.

Alongside the shifting context of doctoral identity are the voices of the students in our research who reveal the tensions and challenges facing them as they present their reasons for doctoral study, the purposes for which their doctoral qualification will be used and the impact that undertaking doctoral study has had on their personal and professional lives. Their voices also reveal the complexities of 'work based learning', the interesting dynamics of the 'workplace' and the varying responses with which their hard-earned 'professional knowledge' is greeted in their working lives.

Methods and methodology: a summary

In this second phase of our research (building on Burgess & Wellington, 2010) we continued with the key 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?*

(Burgess & Wellington, 2010:161)

The study has been extended to include participants from a professional doctorate in health, which recruits clinical practitioners and managers from across the health and social care sector. This third data group has provided an opportunity for some data triangulation in considering the above research questions. We also decided to include interviews as a data collection method. Initial feedback from potential participants indicated that they would prefer to be interviewed, by telephone, at a negotiated date and time. There may have been other therapeutic benefits for the interviewed participants. A study undertaken by Allmark et al (2009) noted the potentially cathartic and therapeutic nature of the research interview, and the importance of ethical procedures. Examples of such ethical issues could include situations where interviews become emotional and sensitive, and viewing consent as a continuous process that is sought throughout the interview (whether to continue to record or not). The need to retain an impartial role was also noted, so as not to influence participants in their responses or slip into a role of therapist. Ten semi-structured interviews were conducted for this research, each lasted between 30-40 minutes and included the opportunity for informed consent; they were advised that at any point they could leave the interview and / or ask that their data was not included. Every effort was made on the part of the researcher interviewer to remain impartial in asking the questions to enable the participants to respond from their own experiences. The main benefit to the participants in being interviewed, seemed to be convenience in having a definite date and time (rather than having to complete a questionnaire within their own busy schedule). In terms of any possible cathartic or therapeutic benefit gained by the participants from the interview, they may have found it interesting to reflect upon the impact of their doctorate on their career and personal development.

Overall, this research study has involved seeking ethical approval from each of the three collaborating institution researchers where data was gathered. The data from the third group of participants, obtained by telephone interview, and thematically analysed has

proved a useful comparison with the earlier data gathered via written narrative responses to the questions and quoted text from documentary analysis of past professional doctorate dissertations.

Findings to date

This is an on-going study and the research team plan to extend the study in order to further examine examples of professional doctorate impact. However, findings to date indicate that the process of undertaking a professional doctorate and the final product; the learning experience, contribution to their profession and development, and the award itself, have profoundly impacted upon their personal and professional lives. This impact is a complex web of tensions that contribute to understanding professional doctoral identity.

In the sections which follow we use a small selection of quoted text from successful dissertations, written narratives from our research participants and transcribed voices from the semi-structured interviews to illustrate some of the tensions or complications that we have come across in our recent data.

Tensions in doctoral identity

In the minds of many alumni, their past experiences as 'non-traditional learners' (which sometimes included vividly remembered past incidents such as 'failing my 11 plus') had shaped their motivation for undertaking a professional doctorate and consequently its impact for them had been largely a matter of personal development or a matter of 'proving themselves' (Leonard et al., 2005).

As someone who was labelled a failure at school, I was able to rebuild my learning identity (from a successful dissertation).

I think for me the doctorate felt like the end of a journey, coming from a very working class backgroundThe PD felt very much that it was the sort of pinnacle, there was nothing else that anybody could say to me, well why don't you do this and I think that was a sort of, it felt like a bit of a full stop (interview data).

Thus their personal learning experiences during the PD, i.e. the process of the doctoral journey rather than its product, had been paramount.

By far the most beneficial aspect of the whole process was the way I myself developed as a student and as a researcher (from another successful dissertation).

We return to this issue shortly. Another DProf student described the process of studying for a doctorate:

A bit like a car crash – you know it was terrible but you can't remember the details.

Tensions between process versus product

One of the issues we raised in posing our questions to participants was the debate over the product of the doctoral journey as compared with the process which the student has been through (a distinction discussed helpfully by Park, 2007, and followed up in a supervisory context in Wellington, 2010, pages 78-80).

Two interviewees provided valuable insights into this issue based on their own, very personal experiences:

The product was out of date by the time I'd handed it in and also very commercially sensitive so it's got lost in the system because I couldn't really publish from it nor do anything with it at all. So in terms of product, yeah I have a nice folder on my shelf at home and you know I do occasionally look at it and go ooh. That's the sort of tangible stuff. The huge, huge, huge, huge side that is just much more intangible is the personal development. So that bit is huge and the product bit is kind of incidental.

I suppose at the time when I was doing it, the product seemed the most important part... But if you come out of the process and then begin to work

professionally at that level, I think I understand that actually the process is much, much more important and valuable to you as a person rather than the products. Because you can replicate the product at any time in your career on different subject areas around your specialist subject.

Identity and values as researcher and practitioner

Another tension encountered relates to the difficulty in their dual role as a researcher in their own workplace versus their previous and continuing role as a practitioner in the same setting. For one student, their previous nursing training embedded certain values about how to act as a professional and undertaking a doctorate meant re-evaluating those values:

The bit I struggle with, and each week I struggle with this, is the values I've taken through a 29 year career. You have to dig quite deeply with professionals now I find, ...my values haven't changed but they are more deeply embedded. And the DProf confirmed that for me.

The comment is also indicative of the way doctoral study for students makes them not only re-evaluate their own practice but that of their working colleagues and how they can relate to them.

Another student narrative highlighted the delicate balance between being critical and yet maintaining good relationships in the work place:

My experience has given me a critical edge but this needs to be managed within the context of professional circumstances. In some situations, a critical approach may be challenging for less reflective colleagues. The critical edge needs to be balanced with relationship building (Student narrative, Health).

It is even more explicitly explained by the student below:

By undertaking my research I made a fundamental change in my thinking about patient involvement and engagement; to focus on patient's quality of

life as a result of involvement (not just changes to services, re-design etc.) this has significantly affected my thinking and actions in this field.

Further tensions in identity in the workplace: self-perceptions and the perceptions of others towards them

We saw in the data in the above section that a student's improved ability to be a reflective practitioner may be 'challenging' for fellow colleagues. This point is illustrated further in the data below. The first set of quotations show those students' perceptions of themselves and their self-esteem, in both the cognitive and the affective domains, increased as a direct result of the doctorate. However, there was sometimes a tension between this 'self-perception' and the perceptions of others towards them.

So firstly, on the one hand, undoubtedly their confidence and their ability to think conceptually, and to apply this in everyday practice, had improved for many of our participants, as illustrated by several voices:

It's expanded my learning, expanding my thinking, given me four or five years of intellectual challenge.

I suppose the greatest thing I took from the doctorate was that it drives you to have conceptual flexibility.

...the doctorate taught me how to be more investigative. I also think that the research framework and the framework that I came across during my literature review, I've applied quite frequently into my day-to-day practice.

It's opened, for me, it opened the door, the research door, and it gave me a broader understanding.

I've got an increased awareness and insight into things that probably is much deeper than I had before I did it.

Their self-perceptions of their own development were not only in the cognitive domain (of skills and understanding) but also in the area that Bloom et al. (1956) first termed the 'affective domain'.

I think it undoubtedly gives you confidence as does any level of study and achievement.

I think if it's done anything in terms of attitudes...you get to appreciate the contributions of more people, more widely than before.

However, on the other hand, this improved confidence, attitude, ability to question and challenge, is not always to everyone's liking:

I think the biggest impact on me is the way I think... I am more critical, more questioning and challenging.... not everybody likes that.

I have to be careful with a lot of the people I work with, I have to be careful that I don't use too much academic or management speak else it just puts them off.

I think the whole process made me realise that I'd never considered myself an expert and through that process I came to realise that I did have expertise and felt like an expert. So that was very much a process of realisation. I think the second perspective would be how people behaved differently to you when they find out you are undertaking a doctoral programme and definitely once you've got the accreditation.

In addition, one student (at least) found that the issue of recognition of the PD and its parity of esteem with other doctoral qualifications still persists:

there's actually still quite mixed responses to the title, which I found ...when you work in healthcare, that when you say it's a professional doctorate, and then people often say it's not a proper doctorate, you still get those responses

which is quite disappointing. So I think that is still something about, it's still not probably positioned or has got the recognition that perhaps it deserves. I think that people don't understand that it's a robust type of doctorate.

Identity, self and self-development

The way in which students felt upon completion and continuing onwards with their career and professional life was illuminating. The impact of undertaking a doctorate did not stop with the gaining of the qualification, students had to reassess their lives and where they were going from this point on.

The PD felt very much it was the sort of pinnacle.... it felt a bit like a full stop. And then the breathe in to say well okay, what does the professional life feel like at this point took some working through.

In the case of another student a key aspect of undertaking the doctorate was greater self-awareness of their own values in relation to their working life.

There was another key revelation, later in the leadership module, where a tension and dilemma relating to my ethical values and commitment to altruism and self-preservation was revealed. Establishing these two key and core aspects of my professional identity was enlightening...simply put, the professional doctorate has helped me to 'know who I am'.

For many, achievement was an important factor.

The PD took me out of my comfort zone and passing this test of character is a source of personal pride (from a student narrative, Health)

Incidentally, within this group others had suffered from the problem of 'parity of esteem' mentioned earlier, even in the final stages of their doctorate (including the viva in one extreme case) when the issue of comparability with the PhD reared its head.

In short, the reported experiences and written reflections in the theses of many students focused more on their own personal development rather than improvements to their profession as a whole. This often showed itself in greater self-esteem and improved confidence i.e. the affective domain alluded to above:

I am more confident of my knowledge base and as an expert in my field which has enabled me to confidently challenge practice.

I feel considerably more confident in myself and my ability to look at things differently. My biggest area of self-development was grasping the concept of critical thinking and applying it meaningfully to professional practice (both from student narratives, Health).

Other data from our narratives indicate that upsetting the delicate balance between improved self-confidence whilst also showing sensitivity to peers can sometimes result in cynicism from colleagues, evidenced by the occasional sarcastic remark. On a more positive note, some reported that the participants in their research might well have been helped in their own professional development by, for example, being given the 'opportunity to reflect on their own theory and practice'.

Two students in the individual interviews raised one final issue in the area of identity and self. They discussed their personal and professional identities and their eagerness to sort out a work-life balance.

...it was about finding myself quite burnt out after the completion of the DProf. I took a big step back for about six months. I kept working but took a big step back and really sorted out my home life balance and my professional life and my personal life and I tend to manage them much more strongly now. So I suppose my identity around my professional life became much stronger and much clearer but I realised that wasn't my whole life.

My personal life changed a lot and I'm much more guarded now in terms of the boundaries between my professional and personal life and I manage the time much more strictly between them.

Sustaining their identity and personal growth

The sustainability of the potential change in identity of professional doctorate graduates is an interesting point that has been considered by a number of researchers in terms of a comparison with the traditional PhD award (Maxwell, 2003). Latterly, Scott and Morrison (2010) have considered the complexity surrounding the identity change of professional doctorates, in comparison with the PhD. They concluded doctoral researchers found it highly complex having to grapple with developing and maintaining a researcher identity along with that of their professional identity. They considered that there was a difference in identities, one held as academic, and the other being a professional identity:

During the various rites of passage from competent professional, to novice doctoral initiate, through to finally achieving doctoral status at the convocation ceremony, "schizophrenic" tendencies are averted for some students by the compartmentalisation of identities whilst at university and in professional employment - one being "academic" and the other "professional"(Scott & Morrison, 2010:25).

Scott and Morrison go on to consider one aspect of sustainability only in so far as they consider propositions for doctoral students in general, as being:

Students may conceive of the experience of doctoral study in different ways. The first of these is that the student learns the rules about how they should behave and adapt temporarily (Scott & Morrison, 2010:25).

This suggests that for some doctoral students, a research identity is something they take on during their research programme; though discard it later after graduation. This is an important point when considering the impact of the professional doctorate on the identity of the graduate. In particular our findings to date indicate a long-term impact on the professional doctorate graduate, and how they use the skills and abilities they draw from the process of undertaking a doctorate. Some examples of our data demonstrate this point,

and have been linked to two key themes that have emerged from our analysis of the interviews; research based and evidence based practice, and second, fighting battles, making 'cases', and winning arguments in professional life.

Research based and evidence based practice i.e. their improved ability to use evidence and research in a professional context

I'm much more research aware now and use research and a variety of evidence, not just qualitative but quantitative as well in work now and I'm very comfortable in meetings... now trying to help people understand situations and get some perspective from different and eclectic evidence bases... it's just become the way I do my business now, I show people evidence bases and I work with evidence bases more. (Interview participant).

I think the biggest impact on me is the way I think... I am more critical, more questioning and challenging, not everybody likes that, but I tend now to look at trying to get a balanced argument, so that then I apply that into my professional practice.... the doctorate taught me how to be more investigative. I also think that the framework, particularly the research framework and the framework that I came across during my literature review, I've applied quite frequently into my day-to-day practice. (Interview participant).

The above quotes demonstrate the continued use that PD graduates use the research skills and understanding that they have gained through their research experience. Essentially, it gives some indication of the criticality that they have developed as a consequence of their work based learning research. In terms of sustainability of the impact, the participants of this study had completed their doctorate between three and six years ago and still seem to be attaining their critical researcher identity. Furthermore, the participant responses indicate active use of reflective practice in their professional role, in working relationally with others so as to *help people understand situations and get some perspective from different and eclectic evidence bases (extract from the above quote)*. The above quotes also

infer a disseminating role, where the doctoral graduate use their research skills and encourage other to see the benefit of evidence based and research practice.

Fighting battles, making 'cases', winning arguments in professional life

The interview data alluded to an ability, gained through the rigorous process of preparing a research thesis, to make a more reasoned and balanced case in presenting an reasoned argument. The level of criticality is emphasised in, for example being able to consider a range of potential approaches, rather than only one option in understanding possible strategic development. This draws out the ability of their influencing and negotiation skills:

I think the whole doctoral experience gave me a much greater level of maturity it developed my thinking and my ability to build arguments and so on and so forth when fighting battles. (Interview participant)

I think the main thing that has changed with me again is around the thinking and the application of a research framework and I think that then when you are putting a case together or presenting or again developing your business cases, whichever it is you're doing, I look at how far, am I giving the right messages and the right information to the right people, you know to try and get them on board with what I'm doing. So I think that again it's around the thinking and the critical appraisal of things has changed my behaviour instead of just probably going in with one idea and one solution, I'll go in with perhaps a variety of options and get people to engage and that way they will come up with a solution that suits them and then I've got stronger engagement in what I want to do and get more people on board. (Interview participant).

The above responses from separate PD graduates, provide an interesting insight to the type of development experience that they are able to draw upon in a range of ways. From the perspective of an employer stakeholder, it could be argued that it has potentially increased the level of professionalism and competitiveness of the individuals. Though perhaps more elusive to tie down than more outcome or competence based professional development,

the PD would seem to enable these practitioners to develop a form of practical wisdom; phronesis, a recognised quality in the development of transformational leaders (Adair, 1989:74).

Discussion

The data presented above, selected from our analyses of dissertations, written narratives and individual interviews raise a number of issues and questions that require further consideration. We have seen in this study that many students, as a result of their PD, developed their ability to reflect on their practice, to apply evidence bases and to challenge others with a new degree of confidence. However, this was not always well received in the workplace. This raises at least two questions: can students, who have developed their personal capacity to be 'reflective practitioners' as a result of their doctoral journey, be truly reflective in their own workplace, if the 'ecological conditions' are not conducive to growth? i.e. How many workplace settings are 'learning organisations' which can accommodate reflective practitioners ... does reflection sometimes fall on stony ground?

We have seen that for many students their personal development (in the affective and cognitive domains) was one of the major impacts of their doctoral journey. This raises the key question about professional development: can a profession as a whole develop as a result of the gradual aggregation or accretion of the development of the individuals within it – or would this take a ridiculous period of time?

There is a continuing tension around the distinction between the process of undertaking a doctorate and the product of this process. If the product of the PD is to be a means for the development of the profession, how can this occur without full and effective dissemination (assuming again, that this does not fall on stony ground)? There is a long established framework for the growth and evolution of academic knowledge via networks, conferences and journals – is this as clear or well developed for the development of 'professional knowledge'?

We hope that the discussion and illustrative quotations presented above help to illuminate some of the tensions that occur in the identities of students who have completed a PD. We

also hope that they highlight the complexities of switching or 'border crossing' between academia and the workplace. There are clearly tensions and discrepancies between the two domains which professional doctoral students face during and after their doctoral journey (tensions which often do not trouble the traditional PhD student).

A more general question can also be raised over the future of the PD and the notion of work based learning at the doctoral level: what exactly is the nature of the connection between professional doctorates and the workplace? The *raison d'être* for the PD is that there certainly should be a relationship between the two. But is it a symbiotic relationship or a loose association?

The term 'symbiotic relationship' implies a close association between two entities (usually organisms in the strict sense of symbiosis) in which the relationship or interaction is of benefit to both parties. Do our data on the impact of the professional doctorate (PD) support the presence of symbiosis or is it more a case of tenuous connection or even occasional friction? This is certainly an area for further research, partly by interrogating our own data further but perhaps by conducting further empirical work (probably workplace based) into the following areas and questions:

- Are PDs 'recognised' in the workplace – this begs the question, what does it mean to be recognised?
- On the contrary, how often, if ever, is the PD ever deliberately ignored or more negatively treated with scepticism (at best) or derision, ridicule and cynicism (at worst)?
- Does a student's PD lead to an 'enhanced contribution' in their workplace?
- Does either the product (dissertation or publication) or the process (personal development, added generic skills) resulting from the student's PD lead to development of the profession? If so, how?
- How does a PD learn how to apply their critical research learning in the workplace, and what happens when research findings conflict with accepted employer views or practise?

From the workplace or employer's perspective further research could explore:

- To what extent does the employer work symbiotically with the student in the learning process?
- Is the employer involved in the assessment process of the PD?
- Are workplaces/ employers involved in shaping the curriculum or the pedagogy of the PD in their discipline? (E.g. are employers present on steering / advisory groups or programme committees?)

Implications of our research

We feel that outcomes of these debates have implications in three key areas for the continuing development of the professional doctorate:

1. For practice: how should students be 'taught'? (Indeed, should PDs ever be referred to as 'taught doctorates', if we are to overcome the persistent problem of parity?). What should the curriculum of PDs be and how should they be assessed? How should PDs be examined (and by whom) at the final stage?
2. For policy: how does the PD differ from the PhD? Should certain students be targeted and recruited rather than others? Are there still issues around parity of esteem?
3. For theory: how should we conceive of 'professional knowledge' and its impact as opposed to academic knowledge? Is the notion of 'criticality' – a stated requirement for a doctorate in most UK universities- the same for a PD as for the PhD? Do we have any useful theory, or at least a conceptual framework, for examining the dissemination of professional knowledge? In the current era, is the process of the doctorate more important than the product? What is 'doctorateness' in the 2011 context?

All these questions pose issues for those concerned with doctoral research, training and programme design. Through addressing some of these issues we hope to encourage understanding around doctoral identity and the relevance and value of doctorate education in the twenty-first century.

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H. Burgess, G. Weller and J. Wellington

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