



Developing Professional Doctorates in Social Work

Introduction

On 11 March a group of 24 representatives from 20 universities met to consider three doctorate level models designed. The day was organised by Dr. Jonathan Scourfield and delegates heard from Dr. Elsbeth Neil (University of East Anglia), Professor Imogen Taylor (University of Sussex), Professor Andrew Cooper (Tavistock Clinic) and Professor Ingrid Lunt (University of Oxford).

What are professional doctorates?

'A professional doctorate is 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, and which develops the capability of individuals to work in their professional context' (UKCGE, 2002). It is a highly applied doctorate which is usually structured into discrete tasks, including a research-based thesis which is shorter than for a PhD.

Examples*

Different models	Location	Link to event presentation about each model
Three year part time MA (Advanced SW) (PQ), two year part time research thesis	Tavistock and Portland Clinic, University of East London	http://www.swap.ac.uk/events/swapevents/110309swdoc.html
4 year part time programme Phase 1: common taught component (with Education) (exit award of PG Cert) Phase 2: developing critical perspectives (exit award of MA in social work education) Phase 3: research component (Doctorate)	University of Sussex	http://www.swap.ac.uk/events/swapevents/110309swdoc.html
6 years part time structured doctorate for social workers	University of East Anglia	http://www.swap.ac.uk/events/swapevents/110309swdoc.html

*These are the models discussed at the event on 11 March 2009. According to Scourfield's research (see Further Reading) there are 14 postdoctoral programmes currently running in the UK, 5 at pre-92 universities and 9 at post-92 universities.

Why consider developing them?

Speakers and delegates suggested a number of reasons for developing professional doctorates. These included:

- Offering proper scope for professional development in social work
- Means of bridging the practice/academic divide
- Means of developing research capacity and evidence-based practice
- Opportunity for experienced social workers to acquire skills in care analysis and research and to explore and develop areas of theory, policy and practice at a high level of enquiry.

What are the issues ?

- Relationship between practice and research.
- Ensuring senior professionals are enabled as students within the academy not disempowered by lack of familiarity with rules and expectations
- Proliferation of names for the programme may be a barrier to professional recognition
- Assessment can be at different stages of the programme and in smaller chunks than a traditional PHD
- How much M-level credit should be allowed? (QAA says up to a third)
- Lack of champions at Faculty and University level can make validation process difficult
- If small numbers of students are registered it can be difficult to build peer group support and momentum
- Nature of professional knowledge (and practice): what counts?
- Who assesses professional doctorate? i.e. assessment criteria and nature of examiners.
- Who defines competencies?

Further questions

If you are considering developing a professional doctorate programme you may have be interested in the new SWAP JISCLIST professional_doctorates_social work. To join please email swapenquiries@soton.ac.uk with professional doctorates list in the subject header.

Further Reading

Fenge, L.A. (2009) Professional Doctorates—A Better Route for Researching Professionals? *Social Work Education*, doi: 10.1080/02615470701865733

Scott, D., Brown, A., Lunt, I. and Thorne, L. (2004) *Professional doctorates: Integrating Professional and Academic Knowledge*. Maidenhead, Open University Press.

Scourfield, J. and Maxwell, N. (2009) Social work doctorate students in the UK: a web based survey and search of the Index to Theses. *British Journal of Social Work*, doi: 10.1093/bjsw/bcn/139.

Scourfield, J. (2008) Professional doctorate programmes in social work: the current state of provision in the UK. *British Journal of Social Work*, Advance Access, doi:10.1093/bjsw/bcn139.