



Professional Doctorates in the UK

by Carol Costley

The purposes of professional doctorates (PDs) are usually to research and develop an original contribution to practice through practitioner-research thus giving greater primacy to practice knowledge. The first examples of PDs in the UK, in the 1980s and 1990s were in the social sciences, in particular, education (EdD), psychology (DPsy, DClinPsy), engineering (Eng D) and business (DBA). Currently PDs are a fast-growing qualification, adopted by several professions in different subjects offered by a significant number of UK universities.

A survey ([UKCGE, 2010](#)) found that between 2005 and 2010 there had been an approximate 30% increase in the number of programmes as well as an expansion in the range of specialised subject areas in which such programmes are available (almost tripling between 1998 and 2009). The conclusions from this initial survey highlighted the diversity of professional doctorates on offer in the UK, an increasing proliferation of titles and little standardisation of nomenclature of awards. Apart from Medicine, all subjects have shown an increase in the number of institutions offering a professional doctorate and increases in student numbers.

PDs may be strongly focused in a single discipline or more multidisciplinary, such as those in the field of education, business and management or sometimes in a general degree for professional studies. In a few professions, PDs have become the qualifications needed for professional individual accreditation, for example the EngD is a qualification that must be acquired for individuals to be eligible for chartered engineer status and in clinical psychology, the DClinPsy must be acquired before being admitted to clinical practice. However, most PD graduates are mid-career professionals undertaking a PD to develop themselves, their work and their organisation or profession, enabling them to situate their practical knowledge in an academic and theoretical context. Doctoral learning that seeks to enhance practice and develop benefit to communities and organisations in professional contexts values the knowledge contributions of PDs undertaken by practicing professionals who in most cases are not intending to join the academic community.

Common elements appear to be emerging in PDs, for example there are a variety of approaches to knowledge production as articulated by Scott *et al.*, (2004), often across disciplinary and occupational boundaries. Understanding of the wider knowledge contributions of doctorates is being developed across higher education and professional communities. Practitioners who undertake PDs make a personal and professional difference to a specific community (Bourner *et al.*, 2001) resulting in the major products of the PD

research process providing useful and innovative contributions to professional work. Closely allied to this is the focus on individual practitioners and their experience as the starting point. The nature of support also changes from a supervisory one to an advisory one (Boud & Tennant, 2006) as the doctoral candidate becomes regarded more as an ‘autonomous self’ (Tennant, 2004) rather than a part-time student. Approaches to knowledge production and the more mature professionals found on many doctorate programmes has led to changes in pedagogy, for example a differently ordered approach to ethical issues of research, assessment and peer review (Costley, 2013). Wellington & Sikes (2006) contend that the variety and diversity of PD candidates has important implications for the curriculum, the pedagogy and the assessment of PDs. The diversity of doctoral provision in the UK is seen by the EUA–CDE (2010) as an area in which the UK can play an important role by sharing experience and practice.

The regulatory and guidance framework for UK doctorates is based on equivalent levels of academic achievement for all doctoral graduates whatever kind of doctorate is being undertaken. The Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) UK provides several codes, guidelines and regulations to both support and regulate providers, for example the ‘distinctive nature of the doctoral research degree as a qualification rooted in original research’ (QAA, 2011), irrespective of context. [Doctoral Characteristics](#) summarises UK doctoral qualifications, highlighting similarities and differences. The guide is intended to provide definitive information about UK doctoral programmes, including their structures, content and titles, their purposes and assessment methods. The Frameworks for England, Wales and Northern Ireland is at:

<http://www.qaa.ac.uk/Publications/InformationAndGuidance/Documents/FHEQ08.pdf>

Other sector-wide bodies that influence standard-setting and guidance for doctoral education include the UK research councils (RCUK), professional, statutory and regulatory bodies, some of which accredit individuals in some professions and Vitae (<http://www.vitae.ac.uk/>), funded by the research councils and responsible for promoting the personal, professional and career development of doctoral researchers and research staff in higher education institutions and research institutes. UK doctoral regulations and guidance account for similar reference points internationally, particularly the ‘Dublin Descriptors’ which are set out in the National Framework of Qualifications – Towards the European Higher Education Area Bologna Process <http://www.nqai.ie/documents/bolognasummary.pdf>- Appendix: The Dublin Descriptors

Finally, the following two links provide case studies examples of PDs in the UK:

<http://www.dba-compass.com/Programs/Bradford-University-School-of-Management/Doctor-of-Business-Administration/George-Madine#top>

<http://www.mdx.ac.uk/courses/postgraduate/Professional-practice/iwblprof.aspx>

Prof. Carol Costley
Head of Research and Research Degrees, Institute for Work Based Learning
Middlesex University

References

- Boud, D. and Tennant, M (2006) 'Putting doctoral education to work: challenges to academic practice', *Higher Education Research and Development*, 25 (3): 293-306
- Bourner, T., Bowden, R. & Laing, S. (2001) 'The adoption of professional doctorates in English universities: why here? why now?' in, Green, B. Maxwell, T. W. and Shanahan, P. (Eds) *Doctoral education and professional practice: the next generation?* Armidale, NSW: Kardoorair Press
- Bourner, T., Bowden, R. and Laing, S. (2001) 'Professional Doctorates in England', *Studies in Higher Education*, 26 (1): 65-83
- Costley, C. (2013) 'Evaluation of the current status and knowledge contributions of Professional Doctorates' Quality in Higher Education Vol 19 No 2 <http://eprints.mdx.ac.uk/11307/>
- EUA –CDE (2010) Annual Meeting of the European Universities Association Council for Doctoral Education 4-5 June, Berlin <http://www.international.ac.uk/media/1519056/Annual%20Meeting%20of%20the%20EUA%20Council%20for%20Doctoral%20Education%20June%202010.pdf>
- Scott, D., Brown, A., Lunt, I. and Thorne, L. (2004) *Professional Doctorates: Integrating Professional and Academic Knowledge*, Milton Keynes: Open University Press.
- Tennant, M. (2004) 'Doctoring the knowledge worker', *Studies in Continuing Education*, 26(3): 431-441
- UKCGE (2010) [Professional Doctorate Awards in the UK \(2010\)](#)
- Wellington, J. and Sikes, P. (2006) 'A Doctorate In A Tight Compartment': Why Do Students Choose A Professional Doctorate And What Impact Does It Have On Their Personal And Professional Lives, *Studies in Higher Education*, 31(6): 723-734