

Towards a third generation of professional doctorates managed by the learners themselves?

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Context of the research

Professional doctorates are on the increase in the UK, Australia and elsewhere, attracting professionals from a wide range of work scenarios into work-related study leading to academic recognition at the highest level. In reviews of professional doctorates in Australia Seddon (2000) and Maxwell (2003) have identified a move towards a 'second generation' of provision consistent with a shift from Gibbons et al's disciplinary to trans-disciplinary modes of knowledge (1994). The first wave of professional doctorates, according to Maxwell and Shanahan (1997), 'had a sameness about them' with a course-work plus thesis model which 'appeared to be dominated by academe' (p138). The second generation is characterised by the shift of the primary focus of the programme into the professional environment with varying degrees of support and input from the university. Scott et al's studies of twelve UK professional doctorates in the fields of Engineering, Business and Education (Scott et al, 2004) confirm this shift from university to the work-place and present five modes of knowledge within the same broad continuum - disciplinary knowledge, technical rationality, dispositional and trans-disciplinary knowledge, critical knowledge and 'hybridity'. These debates have largely been concerned with the implications for modes of knowledge and knowledge construction arising from a changing balance of *institutional* and *professional* influence on content, research methods, quality assurance, programme focus, programme outputs and final assessments. The study of the Middlesex University (UK) professional doctorate we are presenting at this conference is focused on the *learners* themselves and formulates the possibility of a third generation of professional doctorates in which control of content, research method, context, assessment, and partnership between university and the profession lies with the participant within a generic framework of procedures and support offered by the University. Further studies, it is argued, should focus on the learner-managed pedagogical issues that arise.

Professional Doctorates at Middlesex University, London, UK

The Middlesex University (MU) professional doctorate (D.Prof) programme is currently one of the largest professional doctorates in the UK with over 150 enrolments and 45 successful completions. The MU D.Prof falls within a paradigm of Lifelong Learning which is learner-centred and experience-led. Its generic form has application to any field and is predicated on a form of trans-disciplinarity that has been evolved and researched within the community of practice over the last ten years (Costley, 2000). This new kind of professional doctorate, although designed to be equal in level and rigour to a doctoral thesis, has a different doctoral conception based on

- (a) recognition of candidates' critical reviews of their existing professional experience and achievement,
- (b) the acceptance of a wide variety of final products proposed by the candidate as the basis for final assessment (such as project reports, book, policy documents, sets of guidelines and regulations describing programmes of action designed to achieve significant impact in the professional context),
- (c) a critical commentary embracing the candidate's professional achievements as a whole as well as the specifics of the final products,

- (d) assessment of all work, including critical reviews of previous learning and achievements, judged against generic levels of performance relevant to doctorate programmes as a whole, including PhD, and
- (e) involvement of representatives of the appropriate profession as appropriate at key stages of the programme.

The modular structure of the programme allows candidates to negotiate their preferred balance of weighting (credits) between recognition of prior learning, credit for professional experience and final products. The generic nature of the MU DProf requires its structure and procedures to be appropriate for candidates drawn from a wide variety of professional fields. As a consequence, like Scott et al's dispositional mode, the MU DProf is 'essentially concerned with the individual and their own practice' (p51). The diversity of specialisms represented by the cohort of learners does not allow intellectual imperialism based on pre-defined contexts or methodologies. This paper aims to present the candidates' experience of the programme, and explore the implications of their perspectives for professional doctorates of similar mode.

The Study

After 6 years of operating the programme, MU initiated a major research programme to understand and articulate participants' experiences on the MU DProf programme in order to gain insights into

- (a) the motivation of senior professionals to engage in mid-career in doctoral level work,
- (b) the key processes involved in institutionally supported work-based learning, and
- (c) the impact of work-based doctoral work on candidates and their professional activity.

The aim was to make informed contributions, based on research evidence, to the development of theories about work-based learning and personal, professional and organisational development, and make suggestions for the further development of doctoral level provision for senior professionals. This report is the first to emerge from that work.

Methodology

A grounded theory approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967 and Strauss & Corbin, 1997) was chosen for two main reasons. First the researchers wished to begin the process by engaging directly with candidates' experience with the minimum of contamination by debates about the nature of professional doctorates as a whole. Secondly, some of the research group members were involved as programme managers and wished to distance themselves as much as possible from their own perceptions, particularly in the initial data gathering and analyses phases. The sequence of activities was;

- 10 graduates of the scheme were helped encouraged to articulate their 'reflections on their personal learning histories' covering their times before, during and after the programme.
- Analyses, based on multi-level coding of data from open-ended interview transcripts, were used to allow tentative issues and agenda to emerge from the experience itself.
- Emerging issues were checked for fit with the full data gathered (as opposed to researcher bias).
- Themes relevant to the emerging issues were identified for exposure to the academic community to encourage debate on their wider applicability.

All graduates of the programme were invited to participate. The cases were chosen on an opportunity basis (e.g. availability and willingness). Lengthy open-ended interviews were conducted by a colleague who had not been personally involved with the cases. Respondents were encouraged to talk freely within a loose chronological sequence covering the period before they applied, their experience of the programme and the period after graduation. This loose autobiographical and temporally sequenced

structure allowed respondents to make their own connections and construct a personally coherent account of the experience as a whole. All interviews were recorded and professionally transcribed, with the final text approved by the subjects. All texts were dis-aggregated into numbered bite-sized components. Initial coding was based on the loose interview structure, i.e. why they joined the programme (motivation), what happened on the programme (process) and what happened afterwards (impact). Codings were checked with a small team of co-researchers for appropriateness and consistency and the text components were sorted accordingly.

Subsequent levels of coding and sorting were carried out within each of the initial coding areas (motivation, process and impact). Second and third level coding broke down each of these areas into issues specifically raised by the subjects. Final coding and sorting at levels four and five were used to synthesize generic issues arising from the details. Finally, general propositions about the candidates' experiences of the DProf arising from the analyses were checked by others for consistency with the original transcripts as a whole.

Profile of the cases

At the time of their application, all ten cases were in senior positions of responsibility with an ongoing or emerging real-time work project with potential for development into a doctorate programme. The generic nature of the programme is illustrated by the specialisms of the sample: a head teacher, a senior internment manager for a major city, administrative head of a national religious group, an architect / lawyer, physiotherapist, vocational qualification consultant, psychotherapist, senior researcher for national assessments of school pupils, government advisor on special care services, and a university quality assurance manager. Two were close to the end of their careers, the rest were in mid-career.

Unsurprisingly all ten were attracted by the relevance of the programme to their work and the extent to which they could fit it round their personal and working time-frames. Seven of the 10 had explicitly rejected the idea of pursuing a conventional PhD as being inappropriate to their needs, being attracted by the DProf's work-related framework, credit for previous achievements and the opportunity to take responsibility for their own development.

Initial Findings

For the purposes of this paper we give particular attention to the candidates' experience of the programme itself. But first, a brief summary of findings on their motivation to join the programme and its subsequent impact:

Underlying motivators

All ten showed concern for securing personal and / or professional credibility, developing their personal and professional capability, and facilitating their continuing development.

- **Credibility** concerns were focused on securing personal status, external recognition for their ability and credit at the highest level for their professional achievements. Eight of the ten had educational qualifications which they felt were less than appropriate for their level of professional responsibility either because of promotion through ability and achievement rather than qualification or through difficulties in early schooling, or in some cases, both.
- **Capability** factors included a commitment to continuous learning, enhancement of their personal abilities and qualities, extending their awareness of specialist issues, the development and testing of their intellectual skills and their interest in managing their own development.

- **Continuing development** concerns included being better prepared for new directions or careers, working on innovative ventures, improving their effectiveness in existing jobs, improving their professional field and pursuing more interesting themes for their future development.

Impact of the programme

In all cases the DProf experience had impact on themselves and their work. Direct impact on work came, of course, from work activity contained within their specific projects (a focus of another report under preparation). However, there was significant impact from the DProf experience consistent with their motivation to join the programme: credibility, capability and continuing development. As mentioned earlier, the autobiographical open ended nature of the interviews enabled candidates to unravel their own coherent accounts.

- (f) **Credibility**, for instance, was associated with significantly enhanced self-confidence in themselves as individuals and as professionals, manifesting itself as perceived greater status with clients and colleagues and recognition from professional groups for the doctorate level of their achievements.
- (g) **Impact on their capability** was expressed mainly in terms of enhanced and proven high level intellectual skills, usually wrapped up in skills of synthesis, better judgement of levels of achievement and 'seeing the broader picture'. Their prowess as self-motivated learners was also confirmed.
- (h) **Impact on continuing development** shows itself in continuation of their doctorate projects as real-time ongoing activities at work, knock-on effects on colleagues and clients, renewed interest in further learning, and productive engagement in debates relevant to the professional wider field.

Experience of the programme

An examination of the full transcripts of the 10 cases suggests that the following DProf processes have significantly contributed to increased credibility, capability and continuing development. Each was observable in the accounts of at least nine of the ten. A few indicative statements are presented.

- **Control**; The candidate has control of and responsibility for the purpose, direction and conduct of the programme, thereby enhancing the extent to which it is the candidate as a person and the candidate's work that are at the centre of the process.

The constraints, they aren't external. You're managing the constraints more successfully. You're much more in control which is why when I went down a 'blind alley' and started getting stressed and stuff, upset about it, I forgot that I was the person who walked down the alley

- **Legitimation**, in response to personal initiative and achievement. The programme tests and affirms the candidate's previous experience, current activities, programme achievements and professionalism as comparable in value and level to that achievable by PhD, **in both the academic and professional community**.

It did make me realize for myself in the outside world that I have actually achieved a fair bit already so it was very, very confirming. Although there was a slight anxiety that I still hadn't quite achieved enough.

that was a good sort of stamp of a bit of confirmation from somewhere else that what I'd done wasn't sort of 'off the wall' and it was credible, good quality

- **Justification**. The programme places the candidate in the position of repeatedly having to articulate and justify achievements, plans, programmes and relevance to key **academic and professional**

stakeholders, either to achieve credit for previous experience and achievements, explain the nature of the programme to colleagues more familiar with conventional programmes, gain approval for plans, secure external involvement, or receive final recognition.

How am I going to make this bit of (current work-place) work fit both the Doctorate criteria and my own criteria and the things I wanted to achieve from it?... “How does the client see it? Where can we bridge and actually do things that are going to... How can I do what the client wants, get what I want out of it and write it up into a project?” That to me became a much more real process and a much more engaging one because it was much more closely linked to something that was practical

- **Integration.** By requiring the candidate to present the different strands of previous experience, current work activity, wider professional context and intended post-programme professional consequences and intentions, the programme encourages the development of deeper understanding of links between components and stakeholders and an awareness of the wider picture. Personal mastery of the University's **Level criteria** used to identify comparability of all these components with doctorates in general plays a key role in the integration of this process.

I do think that that has been incredibly helpful to me. The ability to see the connection between different pieces of work and to draw lessons over and above that are greater than the sum of the parts of the pieces of work. It has been very helpful to me

- **Support** from the programme and the professional field is responsive to candidate initiative, readily available and focused on helping candidates with their personal and professional development in the context of the DProf framework and criteria.

I knew the help was there if I needed it.

They (helpful responses from the professional field) were from organizations in North America and Australia, mediators, some lawyers, some antagonistic lawyers, and that was very useful.

What they (DProf candidates) do need is to know that they've grasped sufficient to know that they've got the capability which is why the structure is so good, and secondly that what they're doing is on the right lines and meets the quality criteria which has been set out; and without that confidence then a lot of your time can be spent wasted going down the wrong track..

- **Engagement** with and support from the wider professional community, as sources, contacts, partners, signatories or assessors, are key means of enabling the candidate to secure legitimation from the profession and develop useful and relevant projects.

You don't realize what edge that has of course until you have to sell what you're doing. In my case I had the Law Society and that was quite tough.... That was quite tough....

What I was doing at the same time was helping the profession to define what it was and this was a process that had been going on for forty or fifty years and it hadn't got ...it got...it had moved forward in a number of directions but through that piece of work I was beginning to make that process gel and to come up with something like “this is what we are ...these are the fundamentals of what we are” and start to identify themselves around that framework.

- **Reflection** on previous experience, current activities, wider professional involvement and the level of achievement are key ways in which capability is enhanced.

It made me for the very first time look at what I'd done in terms of the three major skill areas – cognitive transferable skills in an operational context and I thought let's look at this in a way I'm used to looking at things which was to deconstruct the skills in terms of a context, you know, where were these skills demonstrated?

- **A forward direction** or orientation in terms of your own development is maintained via the Programme approval procedures, reflection, and engagement.

The programme actually made you think - in really establishing a project that you wanted to do plus, trying to have that combination which again no other programme had of 'what are your individual goals here?'

Emerging proposition

Because the above features emerged from coherent accounts of the experience as a whole, there is a certain consistency and relationship between them, making it possible to construct a proposition about how the dynamics of the learning process enhance credibility, capability and development in this kind of professional doctorate. We are therefore encouraged to re-present the same features as a coherent model of what appears to be the central pedagogical process that helped these candidates derive the benefits they claimed. Inevitably, there are variations in the balance of individual candidate's experience but a re-reading of the full transcripts shows that the model holds for each of them.

Central to this process of enhancement of credibility, capability and continuing development is the pivotal position of the candidate as the **principal agent of control** of a programme situated within critical and demanding academic and professional contexts. It is down to individuals, not the university, to make the running, to expose their status and professionalism to critical comment, build and gain approval for their programme and demonstrate their achievements. And it is on these elements of candidate control and justification to self and others that the benefits are built.

The key processes appear to include the following:

- Candidates, whose main achievements, experience and expertise lie by definition within the world of work, have to **justify** their professional prowess and intentions in the challenging and different environment of academe and, **at the same time**, justify their intended academic credentials in their professional field.
- The process of justifying their past and current professional worth is much more a risk to professional and self esteem than is demonstrating mastery of university-provided knowledge, techniques and skills. As a consequence positive responses lead to strong personal and professional **legitimation** in both contexts which in turn leads to enhancement in credibility, belief in their power to perform and commitment to continuing to develop. The process of justification also involves **critical self reflection** of past and planned activities and requires **positive engagement** with the field.
- The **programme structure** contributes significantly by requiring the candidate to judge their own professional performance as a whole, - including past, current and planned activities - against **generic criteria** consistent with the highest level of academic achievement thereby facilitating the capacity for **intellectual integration, synthesis** and judgement of good practice.
- **Support from tutors** on the programme is particularly helpful when it a) is focused on generic issues relevant to programme procedures, particularly the criteria for judging doctoral level of achievement, b) helps candidates to formulate, articulate and justify their achievements and intentions; c) is responsive to candidate initiative and suggestions, d) is focused on helping candidates take themselves forward and e) is readily available when required.

Implications

Learner managed Learning

One implication of this study is that debates on the nature of different models of professorial doctorates could usefully give further emphasis to the pedagogical aspects of doctorate level work-based learning particularly in the context of reflective practice (Schon, 1978), meta-cognition (Biggs,

1985; Jackson, 2004), tacit knowledge and tacit learning (Polanyi, 1967), self-regulation (Zimmerman), communities of practice (Wenger, 1998) and the development of personal and professional capability (Stephenson and Yorke, 1998). Of particular interest is the work of Cairns (2003) who identifies three key elements of learner managed learning that have relevance to the outcomes of this study. They are place, agency and mindfulness (PAM).

- **Place:** In Vygotskian terms (Vygotsky, 1978), the adult learner who is capable of managing their own learning does not actually need to be “pulled” or “led” through the learning Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) by someone more capable (as may be the case in some first generation professional doctorates), but rather is moving as a self managed learner into the zone (or a similar conceptual place). Such a learner will seek a “mentor” or mediator (be it by e-learning, book, other person or whatever) if and when the learner sees the need for additional support or explanation. All candidates in the present study referred with satisfaction to their tutors being available when needed. In terms of *situated cognition* (Lave and Wenger, 1991) in which there is active interaction with the social situation, the self-managed learner decides whether and how to engage. All candidates in this study decided for themselves to engage more fully with their working environment, not just as working colleagues but as part of the process of justifying their professionalism to gain the award.
- **Agency** The importance of personal agency for LML is shown by Bandura (2001) who described it as '*intentionality and forethought, self regulation by self-reactive influence, and self-reflectiveness about one's capabilities, quality of functioning, and the meaning and purpose of one's life pursuits*'(Abstract). Such agency allows legitimate self-attribution which, when associated with positive responses, leads to growth in confidence in one's self-efficacy.
- **Mindfulness:** (Langer, E.J., 1989). Effective self-managed learners, Cairns argues, are mindful of their pedagogical places of learning and their role as primary agent in those places. As a consequence, self-managed learners are aware of sources of additional support and mentoring and ways of securing them.

The process model emerging from the MU study appears to support Cairns's theoretically modelled features of learner managed learning. It is a key role of the tutors to assist the development of all three, but it is the student who has prime agency in seeking any support.

What mode?

So where, on the basis of this evidence, does the MU DProf fit on the scale of professional doctorates? Gibbons et al's distinction between Mode One and Mode Two knowledge, Scott et al argue, is limited. Much more important, they argue, is "the way universities understand and in the process construct relationships between academic and professional knowledge'. (p42) On the evidence of this study, because of the importance of learners having to justify their individual programmes to both the university and the profession, the relationships between the professional context and the university are forged by candidates themselves within a general framework established by the university to assure the level of the final academic award.

Of the five modes of knowledge presented by Scott et al (disciplinary knowledge, technical rationality, dispositional and trans-disciplinary knowledge, critical knowledge and 'hybridity') the closest to the MU DProf is the dispositional and trans-disciplinary model in that it is 'essentially concerned with the individual and their own practice' (p51). The MU programme, as previously mentioned, resists 'methodological imperialism' (p48) in that each programme is distinctive in field and method.(p48). As with Scott, credibility in the MU model comes from recognition amongst professional colleagues as much as academe. The MU evidence is also consistent with the observation that the programme's structure, the basis of assessment and tutorial support is the most important way in which the university directly impacts on participant benefit.

However, the pivotal role of learner control is underplayed in Scott's dispositional model. The evidence of this study is that greatest benefit for the candidate derives from the exercise of the candidate's sense of agency within critical environments and comes as much from the a structure that supports and tests the exercise and outcomes of that agency. Payoffs to the field come from greater self confidence, intellectual development and commitment to further development of the candidates themselves rather than any significant 'new' professional knowledge.

Finally Scott et al's claim that 'co-production or knowledge has the potential to enrich the workplace' (P158) is vindicated but as suggested above, that enrichment is more likely to come from enhanced personal capability and commitment to continue developing than from any obvious co-production of knowledge. And that is more likely to come from the candidate's control of the process within a demanding and relevant environment.

Conclusions

This study of candidate experience of a generic professional doctorate has focused attention on the learning processes involved and adds a different slant to current debates about professional doctorates focused on curriculum models and forms of knowledge construction.

Evidence from the cases included in this study suggest that the candidate is the primary agent of control and that the exercise of this agency within critical academic and professional environments is the basis of the benefits that accrue to both the individual and the profession. Successful justification of professional worth at doctorate level, in both fields, is the engine that drives the enhancement of personal and professional credibility, capability and commitment to continuing development.

Partnerships between university and professions are driven by the needs and initiatives of the candidates themselves, within rules of the university supported by professional expertise and judgements employed by the candidates themselves as appropriate to support each case.

We are left with a further thought. Are we describing a third generation of professional doctorates based on learner managed learning, or does a similar picture emerge from similar investigations of the personal accounts of candidates on other kinds of doctorate programme, including PhD? It would be useful to find out. Consistent with grounded theory, we would be very pleased to receive any such information and to engage in serious debate about the pedagogical underpinning of professional doctorates.

END

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