Challenging the PhD: Managing the alignment of an EdD programme alongside a traditional PhD pathway.

Val Poultney[1]
University of Derby

Abstract

The impact of undertaking a professional doctorate on professionals is now well documented (Butcher and Sieminski, 2006; Wellington and Sikes, 2006). However, the cultural and pedagogical challenge the EdD brings to the traditional research PhD is less well recognised. The aim of this paper is to examine the cultural and pedagogical changes currently being experienced by one University in two aspects: (1) from the 'master/apprentice' (Professor/student) model traditionally reserved for PhD degrees to a more flexible and responsive pedagogy; (2) managing the integration of the EdD within already well-established university systems that do not easily support its wide and diverse approach. This paper raises issues related to the means of securing robust doctoral provision, whilst maintaining diversity across a range of doctoral routes, which complements a work-based learning and widening participation agenda. Further, it challenges university staff to develop an understanding of an emerging pedagogy which is equivalent to, but different from, a traditional PhD research route. Finally there are considerations of making more effective operational working practices related to administration and support of doctoral programmes perhaps effected by locating them all under a central Research Office, rather than within separate Schools/Faculties.

Keywords: Professional doctorates; EdD; PhD; Pedagogy; Parity of provision; Level 8.

[1] Email: v.a.poultney@derby.ac.uk

Introduction

This paper argues that the best practice of PhD and EdD routes can be used for the mutual benefit of all doctoral participants. Gaining a level of parity for doctoral provision across the range of programmes (PhD, New Route and Professional Doctorate) is giving rise to tensions within certain sectors of the University as numbers of participants on the EdD programme outstrips the traditional route (PhD) coupled with faster completion rates. Coming to terms with the 'challenger', in this case the EdD has not been easy for the institution, but the thesis here is that while pedagogy might be different for the traditional and professional route there is much to be gained in opening up Research Offices to allow equity and opportunity for both PhD and EdD participants. Furthermore, the opportunities to bring national and international PhD and EdD groups together for study would enhance the research capacities at level 8 as well as provide a solid basis for on-going staff development offered by both doctoral routes; currently many university staff undertake the more flexible EdD route, as compared with the PhD route. This dichotomy between the 'research route' and the 'taught route' may be legitimised on the basis of knowledge classification (commonly known as Mode 1 and Mode 2 knowledge) and the purpose to which it may be used by the student during and after the period of study. This will be discussed later in the paper.

Students undertaking doctoral programmes demonstrate an ability to work at the one of the highest levels of academic attainment in a university, commonly referred to as level 8. It requires them to plan, implement and execute original research which draws on a deep and meaningful understanding of a broad range of research methodologies. The recognition of the originality of a thesis is agreed by examination (Viva Voce) in accordance with a University's regulations. Research programmes cover a wide range of qualifications: the PhD (including New Route and PhD by publication), and all forms of taught or professional doctorate (QAA, 2004). Put simply, to be successful in a doctorate (of any type) a candidate has to "demonstrate that one can produce new knowledge that contributes to the disciplinary community" (Walsh, 2007: 320).

Who are the professionals on our programme?

There is a wide diversity of students applying for the doctoral programme; which operates a national programme for predominately UK-based students and an off-site provision in Cyprus for Israeli students. UK students also comprise students who travel from their place of work overseas: currently USA, Russia and Switzerland and Greece. The range of UK student professional backgrounds is also varied, drawing from predominately Education, Health and Business. There is also a large number of University staff who are registered on the programme. While there are staff registered on the PhD programme (mainly PhD by publication), the professional doctorate serves the majority of University staff studying at this level. The flexibility of the EdD award in particular is acknowledged by both national and international cohorts at the University. Internationally there is a large cohort (over 70) of Israeli and Arab students who similarly face the challenge of the status issue of the EdD in their own country. Israeli universities do not recognise the EdD as a doctoral qualification (only the PhD); therefore many successful students have to undertake a further viva with the Ministry of Education in order to validate the degree for its doctoral worthiness in Israel. Rather than adversely affecting recruitment to the programme this has not been seen as a barrier by busy Israeli professionals who value the opportunity to undertake research into an area of their professional expertise on a part-time basis. Indeed, the EdD is seen as an alternative means of securing a doctoral route which allows students to study independently of traditional research professors who utilise PhD students to help with their research. Successful completion of the second viva has also encouraged continued participation in the award.

The programme has enjoyed good retention these past years and those students withdrawing are doing so with good reasons; life changes such as new roles, family commitments and similar. Retention is more effective during the taught phase of the programme as compared with the thesis stage; arguably the change in pedagogical approach is harder for some to manage alongside a professional career. Whereas the New Route PhD undertakes its taught component via distance learning (modules online) the personal approach to the teaching of the EdD modules is valued highly by the students (as evidenced in student evaluations). The sessions, tutorials, supervisions and personal correspondence with students are valued for not only the expertise of teaching,

but also to form networks and critical friends essential for many students during postgraduate study. Indeed, many of these bonds eventually take the form of small study groups especially seen in our international cohort that last until and beyond the final examination. Equally, the reliance, in the main, of a PhD student on two supervisors is not the experience of the EdD student; who has, during the course of study established networks with other EdD students and with a range of staff who deliver on the course. The development of a student's research area over the taught component of the programme may also contribute to better retention well into thesis stage, although there is often a period of adjustment to the secret garden pedagogy associated with supervision.

The university context

The University's origins lie in vocational education and it has had, until very recently, a large Learning Through Work (LTW) route ranging from foundation to doctoral degrees. It has supported its own staff and other professionals on continuing professional development programmes and has made bids for a Centre of Excellence in Teaching and Learning (CETL). The institution has been dominant in leadership of the LTW both regionally and nationally, yet the opportunity to harmonise or indeed embed the Professional Doctorate with LTW has never been explored. Rather, the inception and evolution of the doctorate since the late 1990s has been the result of locating it geographically with the staff who were to lead the programme; there has been no policy of review and reflection (beyond normal programme quality assurance audits and revalidations) that has posed the question of why the location of the programme is held within Faculty rather than centrally or within WBL routes. Seen as an education degree the doctorate was (and remains) located in the School of Education; there have been no moves to explore the nature of the professional knowledge and the type of research that might be undertaken by students that could be better supported elsewhere in the University. Researching in professional contexts pedagogically provides challenges to both the professional and programme designers who have to meet burgeoning agendas demanded by (a) the learning outcomes of the award itself, (b) professionals working as both researchers and professionals in situ, and (c) responding to the changing nature of the professional doctorate which provides alternatives to the purist or traditional nature of research as exemplified by the PhD route.

Methodology

This work is not based upon any empirical research but centred on personal reflections of a relatively new programme leader for the Education Doctorate. Therefore, any conclusions must only be seen as speculative, tightly context bound (one university) but which illuminates the 'struggle' for recognition that is only just being fully recognised at a wider university level. It might appear, even given the widening participation agenda, that a post-1992 teaching university would give increased recognition to the professional doctorate. Taylor's (2008) point about older research-led universities using the increased numbers of EdD students to strengthen their research base has not been captured in the same sense by this University. The management and leadership of all professional doctorates resides within faculties rather than within the central University Research Office that exclusively manages the PhDs. Neuman (2005) notes a similar situation in Australian universities. This emergence of a 2-tier system may indeed strengthen Neuman's (2005) perception of a different status for the professional doctorate, which is reinforced by these very University systems. Only recently has it been recognised that recruitment, retention and completion rates on professional programmes is impressive and therefore programme leaders have been invited to share expertise at Faculty and University Research meetings, previously held exclusively for staff supervising PhDs. The recent validation of a New Route PhD (although less 'new' now) would appear to reinforce a separation between the PhD routes themselves; given that this is a route for non-masters qualified entrants. However, such variance in doctoral programmes could, one might argue, provide a strong suite of awards suited to cover a range of requirements for students working at this level. It is possibly now the time to review how doctorates are led and managed, with a view to equalising the statuses between traditional, new and professional routes. Additionally (and very recently), the University has validated another Professional Doctorate in Health which will undoubtedly face similar challenges of parity as the Doctor of Education.

However, these challenges posed by the rise of Professional Doctorates are not all centred on the operational management of the programmes or concerned with their physical location in the academy. Rather, they are concerned with those less equipped to undertake the pedagogy of professional research as compared to pure academic research

which has been seen as the traditional means of preparation for an academic career. The epistemology of professional knowledge and how it is somehow distinct from, but nevertheless equivalent to (in its doctoral level status) the PhD can be problematic when trying to shape the doctoral curriculum. The inclusion of a taught phase, although now more accepted since the inception of the New Route PhD still serves to place the EdD as a taught doctorate (with award of appropriate credits) and the PhD as a research doctorate. While the dichotomy is unhelpful, it does serve to justify the administration and support of Professional Doctorates in Faculties which are separate from Research Office which administers and supports PhD and New Route PhD awards. Therefore challenges to existing hierarchies in the University will continue to pervade until acceptance of doctoral provision is fully understood in its broadest terms by those firmly wedded to PhD provision. As Usher (2002: 152) maintains:

> "There are and there will continue to be important hierarchies in the production, reading and evaluation of research. The power of the disciplinary community and academic gatekeepers should not be underestimated and these can act as significant inhibitory forces in institutionalised diversity in doctoral education".

Nor indeed should they be maligned; rather the engagement of 'gatekeepers' and the 'academic grooming' is vital to redistribute the professional pedagogy with the sole advantage of improving the academy's understanding of the nature of the knowledge espoused in such programmes.

The rise of the so-called 'knowledge economy' over the past decade has brought some changes to the way in which universities hold and disseminate knowledge. They no longer hold the monopoly over the generation and production of knowledge and there is a tangible shift towards an engagement with the contemporary knowledge community (Tennant, 2009; Usher, 2002). The characteristics of Mode 1 and Mode 2 knowledge have been described elsewhere in relation to doctoral programmes (Usher, 2002; Tennant, 2004; Walsh, 2007; Taysum, 2007), but it remains that the distinction between the two modes still divides the systems the academy uses as its justification of how professional doctorates are managed within the institution. Mode 1 knowledge, whilst vital to sustain academic communities and especially research-based universities covers

a too narrow a range to meet the new global market demands. Competition for students on doctoral programmes, flexibility of learning, different routes to doctorate, national and international programmes are key to institutions maintaining a foothold in the economic market which presupposes engagement with a range of different types and sources of knowledge. Mode 2 knowledge lurks on the periphery of academic contexts; the quality assurance of PhD programmes is for internal consumption, that is, research and teaching in HE whereas outcomes of Mode 2 knowledge appear to rest with the end-users back in the professional context. Mode 1 knowledge rests with hierarchical 'command and control' systems of the University whereas Mode 2 knowledge transcends disciplines and requires a less hierarchical approach, which makes it ever more challenging in both organisational and pedagogical arenas.

Institutions competing in the global marketplace are therefore drawing on a wider, more diverse range of students whose knowledge lies within their professional roles. Their engagement with knowledge production has not been through explicit or codified knowledge acquired from texts or teachings guided by others; typically Mode 1 knowledge, but through personal experience shaped by a particular professional context: Mode 2. This knowledge involves a developing understanding of processes (usually collaboratively), which provide solutions to professional problems or advance ideas in the professional field. However, such knowledge forms are not distinctive; they do not neatly fall into a dichotomy where one applies to PhD 'traditional Mode 1 knowledge' and EdD 'applied Mode 2 knowledge'. The demands of the award mean in reality that students on professional doctorates are meeting the requirements of both types of knowledge by using their professional contexts as arenas to underpin their research thesis. Additionally, they are charged with undergoing demanding research training through taught elements of the programme that allow them to rehearse their research methodologies, to meet the academic requirements of the institution as well as make a difference or impact for change in their professional workplaces. To some extent then EdD students hybridize their research knowledge, drawing on learnt skills which enable them to make a difference to practice, policy and to contribute to further research in the field. The changing nature of professional doctoral research methodology has been brought into question by Costley and Armsby (2007), who have questioned the focus of the doctorate in favour of the practitioners taking a more applied view of research in

contrast to the purist nature of research that currently is required for study at doctoral level.

Recognition and understanding of the pedagogical differences between the routes is now becoming more widespread throughout the institution; the impact of a successful Masters in Education award is now actively feeding doctoral routes and increasing numbers of students. Institutionally the organisation and management of doctorates is now in need of review, in a sense not only to improve efficiencies in day to day running, but to bring about a sense of shared understanding between academics and administration of all (rather than just PhD) doctorates. Swift recognition of the changing landscape of doctoral provision will enable the institution to meet and exceed the expectations of its doctoral students. There is a range of provision from the traditional PhD, through to the Professional Doctorates and the Work-based doctorates and within the provision itself: taught doctorates, practice–based doctorates and different means of assessment: by thesis only, presentation and thesis, inclusion of coursework and so on. The diversity of students is also apparent, with representation of a range of professions, ages, backgrounds – the 'non-traditional' student (Tennant, 2009).

The PhD and EdD routes compared: pedagogical issues

The success of the EdD progamme has been sustained over a decade and demonstrates that professional doctorates are by no means static and are becoming the preferred pathway for doctoral awards for busy professionals who would not otherwise be able to study at this level. The route is also preferred by those wishing to impact on their professional practice or to use their years of experience to gain accreditation for the work they do. The EdD provides a pathway for doctoral study to a group of professionals who would otherwise not have the opportunity because of professional/personal commitments. While the level of the awards is not contested here (both being doctoral, level 8), what remains less clear is the distinction between the two awards beyond that of applied research (EdD) and pure research (PhD). The means for such debate, discussion and clarification of these differences is now emerging and is further focused by a proposed suite of professional doctorates following a similar format to the Doctor of Education.

Admissions to the EdD have been strong since its inception in 1999 and continue to be so with the minimum of marketing for the course. Admission criteria show that the main attractor to the course is the weighting placed on professional experience of the applicant, and anecdotally to 'make a difference' to their professional practice. Many presenting for interview do not even consider the PhD options (either Traditional or New Route), nor have a grasp of the different options available for them to progress to the doctoral award. The current validation operates totally at level 8; applicants must be qualified at master's level and must have been operating in a professional field for at least 3-5 years. Pedagogically speaking, such students start at level 8, whereas PhD students contestably work at level 7 until they are formally 'rolled over' from MPhil to PhD. Arguably, PhD students are constructing their methodologies at level 7 whereas EdD professionals are being charged with working at level 8 from the outset. This arbitrary levelling is not criterion referenced in detail at level 8 (as compared with level 7, which is), and therefore it has been more difficult to convince the institution that professional students should be working at this higher level, evidenced by some resistance at recent revalidation of the programme.

A philosophical debate is now overdue in respect of the level students work at in the initial phases of their award. Professional doctorates must meet the same core standards as traditional doctorates but they will have more of a focus on the applied knowledge (Mode 2) and impact on professional ways of working, rather than just pure research. Parks (2007) notes that commentators on doctorates might be likely to point out that the focus on coursework (at the expense of the research) might infer the professional doctorate is of "lesser quality", yet this has yet to be proved and rarely voiced explicitly (Parks, 2007: 35). He further challenges institutions to respond to the diversity of doctoral degrees: "How are the regulations for the PhD and professional doctorates similar and different?" (Ibid: 6-7). Similarly review of University regulations needs to keep pace with supporting professional doctorates and a helpful starting point is an alignment with the PhD route. The removal of credits from the EdD programme would allow the institution to rename the award as a 'research' doctorate as opposed to the current 'taught' doctorate. This would allow entrants to the programme to begin working at level 8 from the outset, rather than having to undertake a further year working at masters' level 7 before embarking on level 8 work in Year 2 of the programme. The EdD programme is thus beginning to (rightly) challenge its position

not only geographically and physically within the institution but also where it sits within the regulations governing the academy. Indeed, employers looking to support health colleagues undertaking a Health Doctorate will refuse funding if the first year of study is repeating any modules at masters' level (level 7). Such a concern was raised as a line of enquiry at a recent Doctor of Health validation.

Managing integration of the EdD by alignment with the PhD

By locating professional doctorates within faculties and not centrally within the University, this University (as with many other institutions) maybe in danger of setting up a 2-tier system which operationally reinforces balkanisation of the two programmes between the PhD and the EdD routes. This distance is reinforced by the complete separation of the administration of the two awards with the PhD administered from a central Research Office and the Professional Doctorates from within Faculties. Interestingly, with similar student numbers on the PhD (whole University) and the EdD (one Faculty), the number of staff working full-time to administer the PhD programme is far in excess of the part-time staff serving the EdD programme. Maintaining professional doctorates behind the 'back door' has given further weight to this 2-tier system between the traditional and professional routes. University meeting structures have also previously served to reinforce this symbolic culture; however, areas of commonality between the two routes are now being actively explored through the same meeting structures. While this is mainly positive, this type of culture can still exclude a group of doctoral students; an example recently occurred where invitations were only sent to PhD students for a Postgraduate Research conference taking place in the New Year.

If the EdD currently inhabits Scott *et al.*'s (2004: 3) "twilight zone" then it does so both pedagogically and operationally, with the professional student placed at the centre of a research degree who is accorded a service commensurate with that view. The nature of the doctoral programme on which the student is enrolled is important here. Professionals might study on PhD programmes but there are usually fewer of them in

comparison with more purist research students who are learning their 'master-apprentice trade'; that is, how to become a *bone fide* researcher, possibly with a career mapped out in Higher Education. Conversely EdD students are looking to make more sense of their professional knowledge and practice, to undertake a course that in many cases rejuvenates their professional working lives and potentially makes some personal impact on them, both personally and professionally. While they may very well go on to work in Higher Education or similar organisations, many take their research skills back into their professional contexts (with all the restraints of their professional guidelines) and use their research skills to make significant improvement to their practice. Working and studying for a doctorate in professional issues also has a significant impact on practice during the course of study (Ibbotson *et al.,* 2008). PhD students are arguably not seeking that focus on change or impact professionally; they are yet to establish (in the majority of cases) their career path. The tension arises between the academy and the students' professional practice because there appears to be little consensus of the differences between the PhD and the EdD routes. The career aspiration of the PhD student may not already be set in stone, whereas for the EdD student they have experienced many years of a particular career and are now seeking some form of confirmation/affirmation for the work they have achieved and the experience they have gained over many years. This form of "vocational mission" described by Butcher and Sieminski (2006: 62) is different from the tightly focused research-driven agenda of the PhD student. Alignment of the level 8 programmes would enable not only operational consistency and quality of the doctorates but would also level the academic landscape for both students and staff. It would also promote the philosophical debates required to come to some collective understanding across the institution of the differences between the doctoral routes. It would give the university the opportunity to recognise and celebrate both its diversity of student body and doctoral provision whilst simultaneously assuring a quality provision meets both external and internal drivers of change. As Tennant (2009: 227) points out in relation to risk management issues governing such programmes:

> "...a uniformity of processes, procedures, standards and general outcomes will permit diversity in doctoral provision and in the population of doctoral candidates, while at the same time provide assurance about the nature and worthiness of a doctoral qualification".

Conclusions

As EdD programme leader I am coming to the conclusion that the flexibility and impact on professions offered by the EdD is not in any way 'inferior' to the PhD programme. Indeed, there have been few barriers to students transferring from one programme to another, which, in terms of quality and standards, moves us towards parity between the programmes. Any resistance to professional doctorates have grown up through a lack of understanding of their pedagogy, yet many university staff actively seeks admittance to the programme across the subject range. The route provides the pinnacle of staff development and the benefits to the individual and the institution are very tangible. Such impact is currently being researched by the teaching team and particularly focused on professional impact. Additionally, further validations of Professional Doctorates will serve to gain a critical mass which will force the institution to evaluate how effective doctoral provision is being led, managed and administered. I am heartened that recognition of the EdD cohorts at this University is now becoming more widely recognised at the central University level, which might indicate a cultural 'shift' in those academic staff previously wedded to the PhD philosophy (Boud and Tennant, 2006). The struggle continues.

References

Boud, D. & Tennant, M. (2006). 'Putting doctoral education to work: challenges to academic practice', *Higher Education Research & Development,* 25 (3), pp. 293-306.

Butcher, J. & Sieminski, S. (2006). 'The challenge of a distance learning professional doctorate in education', *Open Learning,* 21 (1), pp. 59-69.

Costley, C. & Armsby, P. (2007). 'Research influences on a Professional doctorate', *Research in Post-Compulsory Education,* 12 (3), pp. 343 – 355.

Ibbotson, J., Davies, D., Morgan, S., Dolan, J., Parker-Jenkins, M., & Kreindler, M. (2008). 'Illuminating the professional doctorate: the purpose, role and relevance of the professional doctorate of educational practice'. *Paper presented at British Educational Research Association Annual Conference, Heriot-Watt University, Edinburgh, 3-6 September.*

Neuman, R. (2005). 'Doctoral differences: Professional doctorates and PhDs compared', *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management,* 27 (2), pp. 173-188.

Parks, C. (2007). *Redefining the doctorate (Discussion Paper).* The Higher Education Academy: York.

Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) (2004). 'Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education. Section 1: Postgraduate research programmes - September 2004'. Available from:

http://www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure/codeOfPractice/section1/default.asp#precepts [Accessed 1st June 2010].

Scott, D., Brown, A., Lunt, I. & Thorne, L. (2004). *Professional doctorates: Integrating professional and academic knowledge.* London: Open University Press/McGraw Hill Education.

Taysum, A. (2007). 'The distinctiveness of the EdD in producing and transforming knowledge', *Journal of Educational Administration and History,* 39 (3), pp. 285-296.

Taylor, J. (2008). 'Quality and standards: The challenge of the Professional doctorate', *Higher Education in Europe,* 33 (1), pp. 65-86.

Taysum, A. (2007). 'The Distinctiveness of the EdD in producing and transforming knowledge', *Journal of Educational Administration and History,* 39 (3), pp. 285 – 296.

Tennant, M. (2009). 'Regulatory regimes in doctoral education' in D. Boud and A. Lee (Eds.) *Changing practices of doctoral education.* London and New York: Routledge.

Tennant, M. (2004). 'Doctoring the knowledge worker', *Studies in Continuing Education,* 26 (3), pp. 431 – 441.

Usher, R. (2002). 'A diversity of doctorates: Fitness for the knowledge economy', *Higher Education Research & Development*, 21 (2), pp. 143 – 153.

Walsh, A. (2007). 'Researching in the workplace: A chance to avoid researchers, reality shock'? *Research in Post-Compulsory Education,* 12 (3), pp. 319 - 330.

Wellington, J. & 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), pp. 723-734.