

Professional Doctorates in Education: What's the Story?

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Research Domains

Postgraduate scholarship and practice (PGSP)

Abstract

Professional doctorates 'epitomise' the contemporary model of higher education (Blackman, 2016), carrying potential to develop practice, partnerships (Tennant, 2004) and organisational impact (Lundgren-Resenterra & Kahn, 2019), whilst enhancing social justice and widening participation (Hedges 2022). Yet, there remains scope for further investigation of the realisation of this potential, particularly in the context of ongoing questions regarding the model's role and status relative to the PhD (Clark and Dobson, 2024). Focusing on professional doctorates in education, this collaborative study employed storyboard workshops (Naicker, et al 2020) across three UK universities to investigate student journeys through the lenses of accessibility, motivation and impact. This approach involved capturing, and then co-analysing, a series of visual and textual narratives (Illingworth, 2024). Its findings deepen understandings of students' motivations for, and experiences of, undertaking a professional doctorate and offer illustrations of the potential for impact across personal, professional and organisational domains.

Full paper

Professional doctorates (PDs) have been described as "epitomising a model of higher education for the 21st century" (Blackman, 2016, p. 1). As a model of doctoral study, they are viewed as offering significant potential to enhance the political, economic, and social relevance of universities (Wildy, Peden, & Chan, 2015), amid focus on the creative and knowledge economies (Blackman, 2016). For the education sector, the PD facilitates 'mid-career professionals' (Boud, et al 2018), including teachers, lecturers and leaders, to become active 'researching professionals' (Burnard, et al 2018). Students undertake a part-time taught phase with a consistent cohort, prior to a supervised practice-based research project within their professional context. As a result, there is enhanced potential for the co-production and co-

ownership of impactful doctoral research, which sits between the workplace and the academy (Tennant, 2004).

This model has led to two important arguments about impact potential. Firstly, it has been argued that PDs have the potential to promote social justice, both through widening participation at doctoral level and by supporting efforts towards enabling social change in professional contexts (Hedges, 2022). Secondly, PDs have been positioned as powerful tools for driving personal growth and social impact, enabling civic contributions which benefit diverse communities and stakeholders (Lundgren-Resenterra & Kahn, 2019; Parr et al, 2024). Yet, there is scope for further work to investigate the realisation of this broader value (Boud et al, 2018), particularly in the current financial climate in higher education, where some PD programmes may be seen as vulnerable due to their smaller student cohorts (Robinson, 2018), their requirements for research experienced teaching staff; and the longstanding tensions around their status relative to the PhD (Birks and Watson, 2017).

For PDs to be impactful, therefore, it is necessary for students and institutions to understand and harness students' motivations for undertaking a PD in the first place. To consider this, the present paper is informed by the first stage of a collaborative study which sought to capture the experiences and impacts of professional doctoral study from the perspective of students across three post-1992 higher education institutions in the UK. The research focused on eliciting illustrations and understandings of the characteristics, contexts and rationale for graduates' decisions to undertake a PD and of the personal, professional and social impact of their studies. In two English institutions the work focused on an established EdD programme, and in the third located in Scotland, the work focused specifically on educators enrolled in a broader PD pathway. Engaging with storyboards as an exploratory, arts-based, approach, the study involved coordinating three workshops offering opportunities for students at each institution to engage with questions about why they were doing a PD and how they perceived its impact on their development and their work.

The use of storyboards was adopted as an inclusive and reflexive means to consider student journeys across the institutions. Informed by recent research from one of the team (Illingworth, 2024), we adopted a consistent template and set of provocations, which we used to capture textual and visual data, alongside informal dialogue, to understand personal narratives, learning and decision making (Naicker et al. 2020). Anonymised storyboards and field notes were then co-analysed using a thematic approach. The analysis took an iterative approach, drawing on Dobson and Clark's (2024) previous theorisation of the nature of the PD in education. This theorisation characterises the PD as contextual, relational, producing mode 2 knowledge (Gibbons et al, 2024) and having enhanced potential to reach wide and diverse audiences.

The project's findings offer potential to deepen understandings, and provoke discussions, regarding students' motivations for, and experiences of, undertaking a PD. This included

exploring understandings of the PD as creating pathways for 'non-traditional' doctoral students and considering the significance of creating a sense of belonging through a consistent taught cohort. By capturing a series of narratives, relating to students at different stages in their doctoral journal, and across different regions of the UK, we were able to develop rich and varied illustrations of the potential impact of the PD across personal, professional and organisational domains. We were also able to consider understandings of how this potential impact might be achieved through the use of non-traditional methods and forms of expression.

This work may have utility for colleagues across higher education who are involved in studying, teaching and leading on PDs. In particular, it provokes discussion of the role and value of PDs with higher education and how we might capture, maximise and evidence their broader social and economic contributions (McSherry et al, 2019).