

Constructing the Professional Doctorate: 'what counts' for academic advisers (0278)

Harman Kerry¹, Irem Inceoglu¹, Natasha Shukla¹, ¹Middlesex University, London, United Kingdom

Paper summary

Various commentators have written on the conditions contributing to an increasing interest in professional doctorates, both in the UK and Australia with many attributing this, at least in part, to the emergence of the knowledge economy and shifts from Mode 1 to Mode 2 knowledge production (Lester, 2004; Scott, Brown, Lunt, & Thorne, 2004). Usher (2002) describes these shifts as a move from discovery in one context (traditionally this has been the academy) and application in another to discovery and application in the same context.

Furthermore, the emphasis in recent government policy in the UK on university-industry collaborations, both in research and teaching and learning (BIS, 2009; CBI, 2008), as well as an emerging literature on the co-production of knowledge for action (Antonacopoulou, 2009) suggest that professional doctorates will continue to be of interest as a way of organising doctoral education in the UK. However, as Usher (2002) has pointed out, the intertwining of governments, universities and workplaces in innovation processes is not always unproblematic. There are different stakeholders associated with the production, circulation and consumption of workplace knowledges and the interests of these stakeholders are not necessarily aligned.

Research is currently being undertaken at a UK HE institution exploring the question of 'what counts as learning, and for whom, in a professional doctorate'? This question links with a broader interest in the politics of work based learning and an exploration of power relations in the production, distribution and consumption of practice-based knowledges. We contend that the professional doctorate provides a rich research site for examining intersections between workplace discourses and discourses of Higher Education. The conceptual framework underpinning the study is Foucauldian poststructuralist theory, which draws attention to relationships between language, power, social institutions and subjectivity (Weedon, 1987). We are exploring alignments and contestations around what counts as knowledge and how it might be produced for different players in the field of Work Based Learning (WBL) including professional doctorate candidates, WBL academics and examiners of professional doctorates. The overall study includes the collection and analysis of various texts including: electronic copies of research projects undertaken as a major component of a Professional Doctorate Award; the Module Handbook provided to candidates which provides a guide to candidates completing the research component of their award; interviews with Module tutors and advisors working on the Professional Doctorate programme; and examiners reports of the doctoral level research.

The focus of this paper is on 'what counts' for WBL academics. Interviews exploring: *what makes a 'good' professional doctorate?* have been undertaken with advisers working on a Professional Doctorate programme in a UK university. The interviews were conducted with the aim of establishing a model of 'best practice' for the induction of new advisers working on WBL programmes. However, rather than reading the interview texts in order to develop normative themes as to how the DProf 'should' be, in this paper the interviews have been analysed with a focus on language, identity/ies, academic practices and values. We are interested in how the DProf is constituted by academic advisers and the implications in terms of how it might be assessed.

We found that in many of the interviews that WBL academics slipped into a binary ordering where the professional doctorate was constructed in opposition to the PhD. For example, advisers spoke of development versus research, practice versus theory, relevance versus rigour; with the former often privileged over the latter. There was also a great emphasis on the importance of 'self' development reinforcing a notion of professional doctoral candidates as autonomous subjects, separable from relations of power in learning relationships. We suggest that the binary separation of practice and theory evident in the interview texts is limiting as it overlooks the complex processes whereby practice and theory are intertwined.

The analysis also points to tensions and contradictions in the interview texts. For example, at times the WBL academics drew on more traditional discourses associated with the academy, such as the value of academic literacy, while at other times organisational discourses seemed to be privileged. The DProf can thus be understood as a mechanism for bridging the space between academia and workplaces but arguably these two institutions have (at times) quite different purposes, practices and values. We propose that the 'in between' spaces of WBL, where the discourses of workplaces intersect with discourses of HE, provides a site for examining the ongoing renegotiation of academic identity/ies.

The paper provides a more nuanced account of struggles around 'what gets to count as learning' in professional doctorates that foregrounds the tensions experienced by WBL academics rather than trying to smooth them over. For example, professional doctorates (as they are organised at this particular university) provide a challenge to the authority of academia and the disciplines as WBL awards seek to recognise knowledges produced in workplaces and workplaces as sites of learning. However, in the process of certifying such knowledge WBL academics are also inserting their own norms, standards and values into this space. In drawing attention to values and what counts for WBL advisers the analysis contributes to ongoing discussions and questions around doctoral level learning within the academy and how it might be assessed.

In summary, there are different stakeholders associated with the production, circulation and consumption of workplace knowledges. The interests of these stakeholders are not necessarily aligned and the ways doctoral level learning in HE is organised both comes out of and contributes to the mobile and contingent force relations in play. It is important that academics involved in the organisation and assessment of professional doctorates have a good understanding of where they are positioned, and how they position others, in these intersecting discourses.

References

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