



# Growing a Doctoral community within a teaching intensive HEI

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## The research framework and rationale

The study investigated the early developmental stages for an EdD within the context of a teaching intensive HEI and the experience of the students on the Doctorate. The main task of the EdD team at the time was to begin to build a Doctoral community which would engage the EdD students who were mainly members of the University teaching staff, often at senior levels within the organisation.

The EdD began in September 2012 somewhat tentatively as the first professional Doctorate in the institution. In 2014 its operation was revisited and thoroughly reviewed resulting in a significant shift in its focus and pedagogical approach towards a broader methodological and theoretical orientation and appeal. This included applying perspectives drawn from the arts, literature and historical subject areas and intellectual traditions in addition to social sciences. As part of this reorientation, and indeed perhaps at its very core, was a move away from some of the more ubiquitous conventions of 'teaching' within the education field to be superseded by a growing engagement with group supervision as a basis for the module stage of the award which had previously been taught in a conventional fashion. Therefore, in short, the more established notion of the EdD as a 'taught Doctorate' was largely rejected by the team after the first couple of years in favour of the arguably more innovative and nuanced notion of a structured Doctorate based on group supervision. The experience of the students within this emerging Doctoral community provided the data for the research.

## Using the notion of event

The idea of event, often associated with the work of Alain Badiou, features prominently in current philosophical debate and is arguably worth some application and exploration in the area of the student experience on an EdD too. An event is, of course, when something happens; yet it is also typically more than the sum of its parts. In a sense an event writes its own history backwards. After the event has happened other aspects of the learning are seen as leading up to it or are identified and articulated as consequences of it. The event justifies and foregrounds much else which would have passed by largely unnoticed without the event taking place. In addition, perhaps crucially, an event changes our frame of reference and understanding, moving us on rapidly in a compressed period of time.

An event cannot simply be explained away, therefore, by reducing it to its causation or circumstances. In educational and learning terms the curriculum inputs and outputs remain only weakly aligned or may indeed be completely incongruous and mismatched. Something happens with an event to change the meaning of the event itself. For example, the study undertaken indicated that in peer group learning at Doctoral level, when students are reading together and thinking out loud, they help to maintain a belief in each other, their projects and the efficacy of their research learning. They begin to talk about themselves as readers of theory and methodology and explore how that feels and what it may mean for their Doctoral learning and research interests. In the EdD under consideration ideas became central to the learning event. Perhaps it could be argued therefore that ideation – the production and intellectual application of ideas – is a key characteristic of group supervision.

## Producing an EdD course conspectus

The focus of this study is the notion of group supervision, which is a concept that arguably demands some further attention, particularly from the perspective of the primary participants and practitioners. The research therefore looked at the experience of group supervision as a form of impact expressed in terms of an EdD course conspectus.

The collection of data from the students was undertaken using an elicitation approach rather than interviewing which provided a greater scope for freedom of response and a step away from the power dynamics at play in one to one professional interviews. The elicitations identified points for departure in a critically reflective conversation, lines of stimulus and inquiry which then handed the thinking over to the students. The gathering of this material into an investigative and evocative EdD course conspectus was the result. Furthermore, in order to provide a theoretical lens on the data and to move the discussion of group supervision forward, the notion of event was adopted and adapted within the EdD and research learning context.

However, we simply do not yet know enough about group supervision. What is group supervision and how does it work? In what ways, if any, does group supervision differ from more conventional teaching and pedagogical methods? Does group supervision have its own logic, ethos and impact? Perhaps the notion of event and more particularly the eventual learning involved in group supervision may offer us a useful lens for further exploration and critical reflection in this rather neglected but important area.



## An EdD course conspectus

### Data from elicitations: four starting points in critical reflection

Elicitation starting point one: some initial experiences of the EdD, hopes and concerns at the outset, motivation for doing the programme, links to professional context and practice...

*"Excitement, the lure of a Doctorate, an entirely different language, I have been exposed to new concepts and have been changed, I have become more open and receptive to new ideas."*

*"Really enjoyed reading Bourdieu's notion of epistemic reflexivity. I am really interested in critical theory particularly as it relates to power, Foucault and his panoptical culture in the context of education. I think that it is a struggle between structure and agency. It's great, this EdD stuff, particularly the opportunity to talk to others, it's really empowering."*

*"Initially I was concerned that I was not up to it and that my work would not be at an appropriate standard. I was also concerned that I might not have enough passion to see it through."*

*"I did initially feel like a fraud when I first enrolled but was put at ease by the first few sessions when I realised that I was actually part of a learning community with like-minded people who have similar fears to my own."*

Elicitation starting point two: thoughts on the Level 8 experience, becoming a Doctor, undertaking practice-based research, the workplace as a place of research...

*"I want to become a Doctor and visualise that happening. I have had a space in which to produce work that I felt I was not capable of producing."*

*"My fear of not being able to write a Doctorate has slowly disappeared. The assignment style has suited me really well as I have been able to build on my research interest over time. Each assignment has been geared to this so I felt that everything I wrote and read was totally relevant to me personally."*

*"I have come to the conclusion that the EdD is not necessarily just an award to prove and validate your level of study but that it is also a way of being. Making change equates to being changed."*

Elicitation starting point three: thoughts on assessment on the EdD, the evolution of assessment whilst on the EdD, formative assessment, working as a cohort and getting feedback/feedforward...

*"I have found the assessments challenging but useful – they have given me the direction to explore new areas. It is also quite clear how they relate and lead to the end piece of research."*

*"The formative presentation sessions and feedback from these was useful – and did build my confidence."*

*"Interestingly and unexpectedly my ideas about how I approach my thesis have already changed, my perceptions have changed and I am now excited by the idea of using innovative methods such as using Lego to explore identities. This is a real departure for me. The support which results from the collaborative nature of the EdD is invaluable."*

Elicitation starting point four: exploration of theory, engagement with theory and methodology whilst on the EdD, the theory and practice relationship, the impact of theory...

*"I have found that I can relate theories to the literature."*

*"Exploration of theory has introduced me to ideas and concepts – the sessions on different philosophers were great."*

*"The exploration of theory has been very engaging and somewhat challenging – which is all fine but I think that we would all have benefited from a clearer overview of the territory we were about to cross and the extent to which engagement with theory would be expected to be articulated in our submissions."*

*"Above all the EdD has given me a kind of authority to give time to study and reading – that still feels like a kind of luxury and I am not good enough yet at guarding my time."*

*"The exploration of methodology has been particularly challenging but also very rewarding. It has been fascinating to explore the degree of ontological challenge."*

*"The sessions where people have shared their personal perspectives have been very powerful."*

*"The EdD so far has given me a very welcome space to think, to challenge and to feel for the first time in ages, my head hurting through thinking and that is a really good although not always comfortable experience."*

## Some further reading:

Alain Badiou: Philosophy and the Event

John Fulton, Judith Kuit, Gail Sanders and Peter Smith: The Professional Doctorate

Robin Mellors-Bourne, Carol Robinson and Janet Metcalfe: Provision of Professional Doctorates in English HE Institutions

Gina Wisker: The Good Supervisor