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COMMENTARY

Notes on the emergence of EdD (Doctor of Education) programmes in the United Kingdom

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Notes on the emergence of EdD (Doctor of Education) programmes in the United Kingdom

Abstract

The Doctor of Education (EdD) award has been offered at universities in North America for about a hundred years, but emerged in Britain and Australia only in the 1990s. In Singapore the National Institute of Education (NIE) is just beginning to offer its own independent EdD programme. The issue of whether or not the EdD should be seen as equal in standing to the longer-established PhD is therefore a matter of current concern, especially as in the near future scores of those working in education in Singapore (school principals, educational administrators, and teachers) may choose to study for an EdD as a form of advanced professional development. This paper briefly refers to the EdD in North America and Australia, but focuses principally on its increasing profile in Britain over the last 20 years. A personal view is provided on the EdD in British universities, informed by a wide reading of recent scholarly research on doctoral education and on the concept of "doctorateness". A conclusion contains suggestions on how the reputation and utility of the EdD – in Britain but also in Singapore – can be safeguarded and enhanced, despite a climate in which academics in the UK appear to hold differing positions on its value as an award as compared to, for instance, the PhD in an education area.

INTRODUCTION

Almost a century has passed since the Doctor of Philosophy was introduced into the United Kingdom (UK), with the first DPhil enrolments at Oxford University in 1917 and graduations in 1920 (Simpson, 1983). Although certain universities (such as Sussex) continue to award a DPhil rather than, or in addition to, a PhD, the latter reigned almost alone as a mark of high distinction in British academic circles until the 1990s. Then a number of new doctorates emerged, such as the EdD (discussed here), the EngD (for engineers), and the DBA (Business Administration). These degrees (and others, including Doctor of Clinical Psychology) have come to be known collectively as "professional doctorates" (Bourner, Bowden and Laing, 2001), though not all British academics regard this as a useful or valid term.

This paper considers the emergence of the EdD in Britain during the last 20 years, comparing it with the PhD in an education area in terms both of esteem and of the skills and knowledge acquired. Such a comparison is, perhaps, of some topicality since the National Institute of Education (NIE) at Nanyang Technological University

is beginning to offer its own EdD programme. Soon, it seems, scores of those professionally involved in education in Singapore – teachers, lecturers, managers, and civil servants – will be pursuing an EdD as a form of career development.

My background provides me with a relatively unusual vantage point from which to examine these matters. In the 1990s I was a part-time PhD student at the University of Reading (UK), but never submitted my thesis due to an adverse constellation of personal, professional and supervisory issues. At present I am close to completion of the EdD programme at the University of Bath (UK), and I am currently analysing interview data from experienced academics in the field of education towards a thesis on "doctorateness" and the EdD in British universities. There is, I suppose, a possibility of bias in this paper given that my experience of the EdD has been more positive than of the PhD. However, although what follows is essentially a personal perspective based on reading and thought, I shall strive to ensure that observations are supported by evidence or explicit reasoning.

MODELS OF "DOCTORATENESS"

The term "doctorateness" (Trafford, 2003) flouts the morphological rules of English, since the suffix "-ness" is normally added to adjectives. Consequently "doctoralness" is sometimes preferred. However, "doctorateness" is framed after the model of "graduateness", an equally inelegant word first coined by the erstwhile UK Higher Education Quality Council (Wright, 1995), referring to "general attributes common to all – or most – graduates" (Ross, 1996, p.2). Bringing the story up to the present day, the UK Quality Assurance Agency for High Education (QAA, 2001) provides, for the guidance of British universities, a set of descriptors for "D Level" which reads as follows:

> **Doctorates are awarded to students who have demonstrated:**
>
> i the creation and interpretation of new knowledge, through original research or other advanced scholarship, of a quality to satisfy peer review, extend the forefront of the discipline, and merit publication;
>
> ii a systematic acquisition and understanding of a substantial body of knowledge which is at the forefront of an academic discipline or area of professional practice;
>
> iii the general ability to conceptualise, design and implement a project for the generation of new knowledge, applications or understanding at the forefront of the discipline, and to adjust the project design in the light of unforeseen problems;

iv a detailed understanding of applicable techniques for research and advanced academic enquiry.

Typically, holders of the qualification will be able to:

a. make informed judgements on complex issues in specialist fields, often in the absence of complete data, and be able to communicate their ideas and conclusions clearly and effectively to specialist and non-specialist audiences;

b. continue to undertake pure and/or applied research and development at an advanced level, contributing substantially to the development of new techniques, ideas, or approaches;

and will have:

c. the qualities and transferable skills necessary for employment requiring the exercise of personal responsibility and largely autonomous initiative in complex and unpredictable situations, in professional or equivalent environments.

Note that these descriptors cover both personal skills or attributes (such as "transferable skills") and thesis-related matters (such as "creation...of new knowledge").

The QAA descriptors can be examined alongside a scholarly model of "doctorateness" provided by Trafford and Leshem (2009, p.310), who state that "the notion of doctorateness represents a template that is used by examiners, supervisors and candidates to assess the scholarly merit of a thesis." The authors appear to see "doctorateness" as a characteristic of a thesis and not of a candidate, and this is discernible in their 12 components of "doctorateness":

- contribution to knowledge
- stated gap in knowledge
- explicit research questions
- conceptual framework
- explicit research design
- appropriate methodology
- "correct" data collection
- clear/precise presentation
- full engagement with theory
- cogent argument throughout

- research questions answered
- conceptual conclusions

Trafford and Leshem (2009) also argue that a thesis passable at doctoral level must demonstrate "synergy", stating (p.308) that "inherent in doctorateness is the notion of synergy", and that "synergy is a major determinant of doctorateness" (p.315). In their view, the whole must be greater than the sum of the parts.

In passing, it might be suggested that the emphasis above on the written thesis could be used to support an argument that UK (or, perhaps, Singaporean) universities should adopt Australian practice and abolish the doctoral viva voce examination altogether, while strengthening assessment procedures for the thesis itself.

It is significant that both the QAA descriptors and the Trafford and Leshem model are couched in terms designed to accommodate both the traditional "research doctorate" (PhD) and the so-called "professional doctorate" (such as the EdD). For instance, the QAA descriptors (above) refer to "systematic acquisition and understanding of a substantial body of knowledge which is at the forefront of an academic discipline or area of professional practice", and Trafford & Leshem (2009, p.309) see the genesis of a doctoral thesis in the identification of "a gap in knowledge, or professional practice" (my emphasis in both cases). Implicit is the notion that a thesis displaying the same key characteristics is required for successful completion of either PhD or EdD. However, it also should be noted that although generalisations in print about the British EdD tend to emphasise linkage with professional practice and applied research, by no means all universities require EdD students to choose a thesis topic which relates closely to issues springing from their experience of work. Despite the QAA's all-inclusive doctoral descriptors, some British academics in the field of education might wish to argue that the PhD is inherently superior to the EdD. For instance, Taylor (2008, p.71) states that "in the eyes of many academic staff and some employers the PhD represents 'the gold standard' and any other form of doctorate is, at best, an inferior award and, at worst, jeopardises the whole meaning and understanding of 'a doctorate'." However, he also points out (loc. cit.) that "it can…be argued that the professional doctorate and the PhD are actually different routes to the same endpoint (the doctorate)…. By this interpretation the professional doctorate is awarded for work of an equal standard as (sic) the PhD."

I am currently conducting research into the views of a sample of academics teaching and supervising on EdD programmes at 16 UK universities, and both questionnaire and interview data have been collected. The general theme of the research is doctorateness seen in the context of the EdD, and its main foci are the EdD compared to the PhD in an education area; the criterion of original contribution to knowledge in relation to the EdD thesis; and the role and conduct of the viva

voce examination in establishing whether a given EdD thesis/candidate displays doctorateness. It is far too early to report any results, but what can be said with confidence, I think, is that this data (which will be completely anonymised in terms of both individuals' and university names in both my thesis and any subsequent publications) reveals a considerable degree of variation in evaluation of the EdD. On the one hand there are those who regard it with a degree of cynicism and distrust, seeing it purely as a product of the entrepreneurialism required of universities in the wider context of declining government funding. This view sees the emergence of the EdD as a means of reaching a new market (education professionals in full-time work, who have no intention of pursuing PhD study or becoming university academics), thus producing a new revenue stream for universities. Such lecturers also tend to see the EdD as a second-rate doctorate, some way below the PhD in terms of rigour and scholarly achievement. In contrast, there are lecturers who declare that the EdD, though different in scope and clientele from the PhD, is and must be of equal intellectual standing. Poultney (2010, p.82) gives her personal view as an EdD programme leader that "the flexibility and impact on professions offered by the EdD is not in any way 'inferior' to the PhD programme", but she also notes "resistance to professional doctorates" and ends by declaring that "the struggle continues". It may well be that the true extent of this cleft in opinion and outlook across the population of British EdD academics remains hidden from public view. Those who hold less positive views on the EdD may find it politic to hold their peace lest they undermine recruitment to their university's programme, endangering, indirectly, their own jobs.

THE UK EdD IN THE INTERNATIONAL CONTEXT

The EdD originated not in Britain but in North America. It is sometimes claimed that Harvard (in the 1920s) or Toronto (from 1895) launched the first EdD, although the Canadian university's award was actually entitled Doctor of Pedagogy. The first EdD programme in Britain began at Bristol University in the early 1990s, but today EdDs are awarded by numerous UK universities. In England alone more than 40 universities run EdD programmes, and these include both post-1992 universities and those with much longer histories, such as King's College, London. The University of Cambridge has also recently launched an EdD. Key drivers of this remarkable growth in EdD programmes in Britain in the last 20 years include globalisation (Nerad and Trzyna, 2008, p.300), and the increasing emphasis on employability skills (Park, 2005, p.193).

In reviewing current trends in doctoral education around the world, Nerad and Trzyna (2008, p.304) point out that "doctoral education for the sake of curiosity, exploration, or the love for a specific field seems to be disappearing." Instead, as the 21st century unfolds, doctoral students find themselves striving, in a globalised

world, to differentiate themselves from others in the job market. Obtaining a doctorate has become, for many, an exercise in "positional competition" (Brown, 2000, p.633) in which the overriding aim is to influence positively "how one stands relatively to others" in terms of credentials. The EdD may have emerged in Britain partly to meet this need, although as Taylor (2008, p.78) points out, some universities may also see it as a way to generate additional revenue streams by reaching a market separate from that for the PhD, consisting of mid-career professionals working in education and ready to study part-time on a modular basis (Taylor, 2008, p.78).

Recently several publications (Nerad and Heggelund, 2008; Powell and Green, 2007) have highlighted existing practice in doctoral education internationally, including changes being contemplated or implemented in the context of globalised competition for jobs (Usher, 2002). Not surprisingly, perhaps, the picture is mixed, with some countries apparently clinging to conceptions of the doctorate which have served them for decades, while others are seeking to revise and extend forms of doctoral study open to potential students. This disparity in approach has produced, in itself, a degree of international misunderstanding or mistrust. For instance, in summarising how the so-called "Bologna process" has contributed to the debate on the future of doctoral education, Bitusikova (2009, p.206-207) notes that the trend towards greater diversity of awards is not universally welcomed. Most notably, she suggests that "the emergence of professional doctorates in the UK and Ireland is observed in parts of continental Europe with suspicion." This is evident in documentation emanating from the European University Association (EUA), in which references to "professional doctorates" often occur in close proximity to cautionary words about the need to maintain "standards" and "quality". There are also suggestions (EUA 2006, p.14) that rather than being called professional "doctorates", perhaps "different titles" could be used.

Across British universities, the structure of EdD programmes varies somewhat, but tends to feature first a number of courses or modules (assessed through assignments) and subsequently the writing of a thesis. Many universities also offer more than one EdD programme – perhaps a "generic" EdD, and others which cater for particular specialists, such as English language teachers, those working with children with special educational needs, or health education professionals. This is achieved by providing different "pathways" through a suite of modules, among which some may be compulsory (such as a research methods module) and others optional. As an example of programme structure and assessment, the Durham University EdD requires students to complete 6 taught modules successfully before writing a thesis of up to 60,000 words on a topic of their choice, while the University of Bath programme entails 4 taught modules (2 compulsory and 2 optional) – each assessed by an 8,000-word assignment – and a thesis of approximately 40,000 words. In all cases, it is asserted, EdD written work (whether module or thesis) is

assessed at doctoral level (as indicated by the QAA descriptors). As with the PhD, the EdD candidate must undergo a viva voce examination as well as submitting a written thesis. It is observable that EdD programmes normally require the candidate to write (module assignments plus thesis) a total number of words similar to that of the "big book" thesis (Dunleavy, 2003) attempted by PhD students. This kind of benchmarking is, perhaps, understandable when a "new" kind of doctorate needs to gain acceptance alongside an older (the PhD), but it is interesting to speculate how the required length of the PhD thesis itself came to be! Is there some ineffable reason why a PhD candidate in an education area can demonstrate doctorateness in, say, 100,000 words, but not in 70,000? Reaching the end of some PhD theses the reader might, like Dr. Samuel Johnson when contemplating Milton's *Paradise Lost*, take the view that "none ever wished it longer."

CONCLUDING REMARKS

In framing concluding remarks I shall begin with something which may, at first sight, appear to be entirely irrelevant: a comparison between W.H. Auden and Graham Greene. Both Auden and Greene were born in the first decade of the 20th century, came from upper middle-class families, attended Oxford University and went on to fame and fortune – so there are certainly similarities between them. The former was often regarded, during his life, as the greatest British-born poet, while the latter was frequently seen as the greatest British novelist. But does it make sense to assert that Auden was a better writer than Greene, or vice versa? Probably not, since while some common qualities may be required of both a poet and a novelist, the skills and aptitudes required in order to produce each of the two types of literary artefact may well be rather different. Argument by analogy is, by definition, always to some extent misleading, but could we argue that something similar is true when comparing the EdD holder and the PhD holder? In other words, is it possible to say that while the EdD holder and the PhD holder (in an education area) have much in common, it is rather meaningless to suggest that one is superior to the other? According to Gregory (1997), the former has become "a scholarly professional", while the latter is, or has the potential to be, "a professional scholar" – a distinction which, for instance, the University of Exeter website (see references) appears to allude to and to endorse (albeit grudgingly) when differentiating the EdD and the PhD for prospective students:

> It has become a cliché to suggest that undertaking a PhD provides a good grounding for those who wish to become professional researchers while an EdD does the same for those who wish to become researching professionals – but it remains a useful distinction.

Doctor of Education programmes on opposite sides of the Atlantic do not appear to share exactly the same philosophy (for instance, in the USA the EdD seems to be seen more rigidly as a site for the solution of professional problems than it is in the UK). However, the fact that in America and Canada, the EdD "brand" is somewhat tainted by jibes such as "low-end PhD" and "PhD-lite" (Shulman, Golde, Conklin Bueschel and Garabedian, 2006, p.25-27) and occasionally has its future called into question (Allen, Smyth and Wahlstrom, 2002) nevertheless has an effect on how British EdD programmes are perceived. However, initial scanning of my interview data suggests that some EdD lecturers in Britain hold more positive views: that EdD study takes the doctoral candidate to the same endpoint as the PhD in an education area; that in some ways it offers more than does the PhD; that all doctorates are and must be doctorates, assessed at the same level; and that the EdD offers high-level professional development to those in education who do not aspire to be full-time academics. Commenting on the idea that perhaps all UK doctorates should be called PhD, an experienced British EdD lecturer and programme director states:

> I... wouldn't have a problem what we called the various doctorates – so long as we all (internationally, not just nationally) shared the same terminology and thus understood what the different labels meant. Though... I suspect we're too far down the EdD line now to be attempting to unpick what already exists.

In Britain – and elsewhere – the EdD seems to be here to stay, despite its detractors. Whether in the UK or in Singapore, it is likely to thrive if it genuinely provides a challenging and re-invigorating experience for mid-career education professionals seeking to broaden their horizons. To do so it must be facilitated by teams of academics who truly believe in what they are offering, and overseen by external examiners or advisors who insist on the same academic standards in EdD assignment work, theses and viva voce examinations as for the PhD. Only in that way, will the EdD cement its reputation as a credible alternative to the PhD for those who seek a more broadly-based doctoral experience.

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