Why do a Professional Doctorate? Evidence from prospective EdD students

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Abstract

With growing policy-maker interest in professional doctorates in the UK, demonstrated by the Higher Education Funding Council in England (HEFCE) funded professional doctorate project, and a growing desire to motivate more students to take on research degrees through the PhD and research master's loan scheme proposed in the March 2015 budget, it is timely to consider what motivates a student to undertake a professional doctorate. In addition, the broader question is whether the student's motivations to complete programmes, such as our EdD, are aligned with the desires of the policy makers to promote engagement with professional doctorates as a way to address the perceived skills gaps in the UK labour market.

This study used two years of interview data collected from our potential EdD students. These data show that the most often reported reason for doing an EdD is having a *long term problem of practice*. The prospective students often reported having observed this problem of practice as practitioners for some time and wanting to find answers, to make things work better in their work places and for their students. This problem of practice has usually led to the development of their EdD proposals . Additional motivations included hoped-for changes in career, a push by employers to have a doctorate and the structure of the EdD programme itself.

The misalignment between the motivation of policy makers to plug a skills gap and that of potential students to address the *practice problem* is evident. This paper discusses the implications of this mismatch for programme leaders of professional doctorates, both aiming to fulfil the need to ensure that the student's desire to undertake the programme is met and helping to plug the skills gaps in the labour market in the future.

Keywords: professional doctorates; EdD, professional development; CPD; problem of practice; researching professionals

Introduction

Professional Doctorates have existed within the UK Higher Education sector for over twenty years, with many of the more established programmes starting around the mid-1990s. Since then there has been a steady increase in the number of programmes available until the early 2000s, when the number of professional doctorates available expanded rapidly. Data from the UK Council for Graduate Education have suggested that the number of professional doctorate programmes increased exponentially from 109 in 1998 to 191 in 2005 and then to some 308 in 2009. Of these 308 programmes, some 38 were professional doctorates in education, such as the EdD, with a number of students reaching 2,228 in 2009 (Brown & Cooke, 2010).

Recent interest in Professional Doctorates shown by policy makers has been inspired by a wish to attempt to map out the current landscape of Professional Doctorates in English

Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), which in turn is motivated by this rapidly growing and evolving aspect of doctoral provision. The project funded by the Higher Education Funding Council in England (HEFCE) is soon to be completed by the Careers Research and Advisory Centre with Vitae supported by researchers at the University of Brighton. It is likely to lead to more interest in professional doctorates as a means of professional development, as well as continuing education and an attempt to standardise provision.

Doctoral level education is also increasingly included in the thinking around the knowledge economy and the need for a highly skilled workforce. In the March 2015 budget, the UK government's growing desire to motivate more students to take on research degrees was demonstrated through the PhD and research master's loan scheme. In November 2015, the government's response to the consultation on postgraduate study loans was produced and clearly signalled that professional doctorates would be included in the £25,000 loan scheme for research degrees (BIS, 2015). It is clear that doctoral education and professional doctorates are of growing interest to policy makers.

With such policy interest in professional doctorates, and higher degrees in general, being linked strongly to general desire to invest in the human capital stock in the UK to build towards a knowledge based economy, it is timely therefore to consider what motivates a student to undertake a professional doctorate. This paper will seek to consider what motivates students to take professional doctorates such as our EdD programme and then to provide a reflection as to how well these motivations are aligned with the policy makers' desires to promote engagement with professional doctorates as a way to address the perceived skills gaps in the UK labour market.

The potential misalignment between the motivation of policy makers to plug a skills gap and those of potential students to undertake a professional doctorate will highlight that, whilst policy-maker focus is on the development of research skills, the motivations of our professional doctorate students are often much more related to professional development and continuing education than to the development of skills per se. This paper discusses the implications of this mismatch for programme leaders of professional doctorates, aiming both to fulfil the need to ensure that the students' desire to undertake the programme is met and to help to plug the skills gaps in the labour market in the future.

Literature Review

Student motivation to undertake doctoral level studies, and especially professional doctorates, is a relatively under-researched area of education. Much of the work in this area has been completed after the seminal text by Scott, Brown, Lunt, and Thorne (2004), which attempted to build a conceptual framework for work on professional doctorates in various aspects, including the student motivations to undertake these degrees. Scott et al. set out three broad groups of motivations. These consist of two groups of extrinsic factors, Career Development/Professional Initiation and CPD/Professional Continuation, and one group of intrinsic factors, around personal motivation and personal satisfaction.

Wellington and Sikes (2006) built onto this framework to interview a small number of students about their professional doctorate programmes to explore both their reasons for doing an EdD and their reasons for selecting a professional doctorate over a PhD. The approach used by Wellington and Sikes has become the basis for the work in this area, and most of the studies looking at the motivation of students to complete professional doctorates,

usually EdDs, have used similar approaches to interview students about the existing programmes of study and attempt to group their responses in line with the three broad groups of motivations set out by Scott et al. Table 1 summarises the various papers focused on EdD programmes and the motivations of students undertaking these professional doctorates.

One exception to this general approach was a larger study of all higher degree students (PhD and professional doctorates) within an institution, which used a principal components analysis approach. This work, by Guerin, Jayatilaka, and Ranasinghe (2015), identified just career progression as the factor explicitly related to taking a professional doctorate. The other four factors identified in this study are largely considered to be for the larger cohort of PhD students and are therefore not included in Table 1.

The first group of extrinsic motivations for taking a professional doctorate in education is related to Career Development and Professional Initiation. Within this section, the studies reviewed found that, for some students, the professional doctorate in education is a part of the career journey. These students may either be compelled to take a doctorate for job-related purposes or to think of it as a useful tool for career progression, either within their current areas of education or as a step to moving into another area. This group also includes factors associated with developing the credibility to speak on education-related issues within education and broader communities.

The second group of extrinsic motivations is linked to this special edition's focus on continued professional development. This professional continuation group focuses on issues of developing the practice of the professional doctorate student and benefiting the wider profession through making a contribution to professional practice. This motivation is often linked to the benefits to the profession as well as to the individuals themselves, although the students often see this as part of being educationists. It is not clear from the literature, however, whether this same focus on the profession is likely to be found in all professional doctorates. For example, studies considering Doctor of Business Administration (DBA) students have not reported this focus on the contribution to the profession as motivation for undertaking a professional doctorate, focusing rather on the above-mentioned extrinsic or intrinsic motivations (Gill & Hope, 2009; Stiber, 2000).

Table 1: Summary of Literature on Student Motivation Factors for undertaking a Professional Doctorate

Motivation	**Source**
Extrinsic Motivation – Career Development/Professional Initiation	*Scott et al. (2004)*
Desire to speak on educational issues with confidence and authority	Loxley & Seeley (2012)
Credibility	Clark (2007)
Need a doctorate for job security	Wellington & Sikes (2006)
To meet requirements of current job	Jablonski (2001)
To make a career move	Jablonski (2001)
Academic pathways	Clark (2007)
Career progression	Guerin et al. (2015)
To enhance current position/salary	Loxley & Seery (2012)
Extrinsic Motivation – CPD/Professional continuation	*Scott et al. (2004)*
Enrichment of practice	Loxley & Seary (2012)
Professional renewal	Wellington & Sikes (2006)
To integrate professional experience	Jablonski (2001)
Make a contribution to knowledge	Loxley & Seery (2012)
Enhance professional regard of adult education	Loxley & Seery (2012)
Altruism/concern for the public good	Loxley & Seery (2012)
Qualification	Clark (2007)
Benefitting the profession	Clark (2007)
Intrinsic Motivation	*Scott et al. (2004)*
Intellectual challenge/ Personal satisfaction	
Learn new (research) skills	Loxley & Seery (2012)
Skills	Clark (2007)
Developments in ICT	Clark (2007)
Intrinsic driver to learn	Loxley & Seery (2012)
Cognitive interest	Clark (2007)
Enjoyment, love of learning	Clark (2007)
Knowledge quest	Wellington & Sikes (2006)
Desire to write	Loxley and Seery (2012)
Reaching educational goals previously thought impossible	Wellington & Sikes (2006)
To realise personal goals	Jablonski (2001)
EdD rather than PhD	
Cohort	Loxley & Seery (2012)
No isolation	Wellington & Sikes (2006)
Social simulation	Clark (2007)
Structure (researching professionals)	Wellington & Sikes (2006)
Type of programme	Jablonski (2001)
Locational of programme	Jablonski (2001)

Note: Guerin et al. (2015) paper, only the factors related to professional doctorates included

The final group categorised from the literature is intrinsic motivations. This is a much more diverse group of motivations. There is some evidence of interest in skills development (Clark, 2007; Loxley & Seery, 2012), which is aligned to the policy agenda for the focus on professional doctorates and a knowledge-based economy. However, the more commonly reported factors are a love of learning and a desire to prove oneself, neither of which are aligned particularly with the motivations of the policy makers.

Following Wellington and Sikes (2006), most of the studies reviewed asked the students two questions, what their motivations were to undertake a professional doctorate, and why they selected a professional doctorate rather than a PhD. In this area of motivation for an EdD rather than a PhD three main factors were expressed: actively seeking a cohort of students due to the belief that the PhD is a lonely journey, preferring a structured programme of study due to the belief the PhD is not a very clearly defined process, and finally the focus on professional based research due to the belief the PhD is less suited to researching professionals than it is to professional academic researchers.

The four areas identified in the literature, career development, continuing professional development, personal challenge and structured peer learning, represent the factors that most programme leaders would expect as motivations for undertaking professional doctorates. These are, however, largely unrelated to the policy makers' focus on a knowledge based economy and the desire to provide research skills.

Method

This study took a slightly different approach to look at students' motivations for undertaking professional doctorates. At the UCL Institute of Education, all students are interviewed by the EdD programme leader and potential supervisor before being entered into the programme. The EdD programme leader asks a standardised set of questions, starting with "Why do you want to do an EdD?" In this study we used the administrative data records from two years of interviews (for cohorts starting the programme in October 2014 and 2015) to look at the responses of some 113 potential EdD students.

The use of existing administrative data has various advantages over the interviews and surveys undertaken with existing students reported in the literature. First, it provides access to the responses of students who were not admitted to the EdD after the interview; those who would otherwise have been excluded in the other research designs. This method enabled a cross-section of the successful and unsuccessful applicants to be studied. Of the 113 interviewed, 45 offers were made in 2014 and 51 in 2015.

Second, one problem with interviewing current EdD students is that they are being asked to recall their motivations for applying for the professional doctorate. This has the potential to introduce two biases to the responses obtained. The first is that their perceptions of their motivations may have been influenced by their experiences in the programme. By asking candidates at interview why they applied, this potential bias was removed. Secondly, current students' responses may be subject to recall bias. For some interviewees, some time could have passed since they had thought about why they originally wanted to do the programme. By using interview data this issue of recall bias was eliminated. However, the use of the application interview data does not eliminate bias completely. It is possible that the candidates might have filtered their responses, based on what they believed the interviewers wanted to hear.

One limitation of using secondary data analysis is that the questions have not been framed with a particular research question in mind. In this case we are interested in what motivates students to start an EdD programme but in the interview data we find a mixture of student responses to the question "Why do you want to do an EdD?", including both their motivations as well as their reasons for selecting an EdD over a PhD according to the characteristics of the programme. Therefore, in this paper, we have decided to write up both the motivations and the programme characteristics.

The cohort interviewed has characteristics very similar to those of the general EdD student body within our institution, as documented by Hawkes and Taylor (2014). Of those interviewed, around a third had come from schools or further education colleges, another third from higher education and the last third a mixture of medical educators, those in various education related policy roles and others connected more loosely to the education sector.

Results

Table 2 below presents the main factors identified and coded from the interview record in response to the question, "Why do you want to do an EdD?" The motivations that were reported by particularly large proportions of the students are highlighted in grey. In dark grey are those that were reported by 20% or more of the students and in light grey those reported by 13-19%. The students were able to give more than one answer and therefore the responses are multi-coded.

It is worth noting that the factors identified in this study are broadly in line with those found in the earlier studies reported above. In the first group of extrinsic motivations – Career Development / Professional Initiation – there were responses linked to being pushed to get a doctorate in order to work in higher education, or looking to use the EdD for career progression or career change. In the second group of extrinsic factors – CPD / Professional Continuation – there were some self-related factors, for example professional development or having a specific problem of practice they would like to address. The intrinsic factors included learning and research, especially linked to lifelong learning and interest in research. We also found some factors associated with the programme.

This initial glance at the data suggests that the groupings are similar to those suggested by Scott et al. (2004). These, with the addition of programme structure, form a comprehensive set of motivations for undertaking a professional doctorate.

We will now step through each of the groupings presented in Table 2: personal, career-related, profession-related, research-related, EdD programme-related and learning-related, to provide more understanding of the individual factors found to be important in doing a professional doctorate.

Table 2: Interview Data on Student Motivation Factors for undertaking an EdD

Interview responses to *"Why do you want to do an EdD?"*	**2014**		**2015**		**Total**	
	freq	**%**	**freq**	**%**	**freq**	**%**
Personal factors						
Professional/Personal Development	15	25%	14	26%	29	26%
Develop Own Practice	6	10%	9	17%	15	13%
Become a credible voice through having the title of Dr	3	5%	11	21%	14	12%
Time to do it (including after raising children)	6	10%	2	4%	8	7%
Career-related factors						
HE push	10	17%	9	17%	19	17%
For career change/progression	7	12%	8	15%	15	13%
Profession-related factors						
Problem of practice	13	22%	17	32%	30	27%
Interested in education and teaching	11	18%	14	26%	25	22%
Practitioner focused	10	17%	7	13%	17	15%
Personal educational experience	3	5%	3	6%	6	5%
Research-related factors						
Interested in research	8	13%	4	8%	12	11%
To learn research skills	2	3%	2	4%	4	4%
EdD programme-related factors						
Liking the structure of the course	7	12%	9	17%	16	14%
Looking for the cohort	7	12%	3	6%	10	9%
Learning-related factors						
Lifelong learner	4	7%	10	19%	14	12%
Enjoyed masters	6	10%	5	9%	11	10%
Number of candidates	60	100%	53	100%	113	100%

1. Personal factors

The first grouping of factors in Table 2 includes those personal to the candidates themselves. Although many of our students are partly or wholly employer-funded, the most reported factor in this section was professional/personal development. This desire for professional development and the view that the EdD will provide a forum for it was reported by around one quarter of the interviewees.

A unique response in this study was the rather small number (7%) reporting they had time to do the EdD because, for example, their children had grown enough to allow the time and mind space to devote to their own professional development. This reason was reported by some fathers as well as mothers.

2. Career-related factors

The second grouping in Table 2 is concerned with career motivations. For those working within the higher education sector, around a third of those interviewed, approximately two-thirds reported a push to undertake and complete a doctorate. 83% reported that they preferred to do an EdD over a PhD because the former was linked explicitly to their day jobs. For these higher education teachers the need for a doctorate was often the first factor reported in the interview, often followed by a statement that the EdD was preferred because of its link to their identities as university teachers. With the introduction of the Teaching Excellence Framework in the UK, it will be interesting to see whether this push for university teachers to become "research active" and complete doctorates maintains.

3. Profession-related factors

The strongest motivation within the interview data for wanting to do an EdD was having a specific profession-related problem to address; some 27% of the interviewees reported this. It was not only the applicants engaged in front-line teaching roles who reported this reason, but also those in the third-space group of professionals. This motivation for students coming to a professional doctorate also represents one of the benefits to the academics supervising these students, as they get real-life views of the worlds they study.

Many applicants (22%) reported a genuine interest in education and teaching. This may also have been expressed as wanting to do an EdD because it is practitioner focused. What was clear from the interviews is that a large proportion of our applicants had a genuine interest in education and wanted to help to improve it.

4. Research-related factors

Relatively few of the interviewees (11%) reported wanting to do an EdD because of an interest in research, although they had reported the desire to use that research to make their practices better. Only 4% of the interviewees mentioned learning new research skills, or any skills, as a reason for doing the professional doctorate. This highlights the large gap between the students' motivations to undertake professional doctorates and the policy makers' interest in this degree as a means to develop the human capital needed for a knowledge-based economy.

5. EdD programme-related factors

The question, "Why do you want to do an EdD?" prompted some of the applicants to talk about the importance of the structure of the course (14%) and belonging to a cohort of students (9%) as important factors in their selection of the EdD over the PhD. For some, a previous attempt at a PhD had led them to look for something more practice focused, less isolating and more guided in structure. For these students the choice of the EdD was about making the goal of a doctorate possible by considering the suitability of the scaffolding available to support them to complete it.

6. Learning-related factors

Finally, it is heartening to see that some of the applicants who were working in the wider education sector came to an EdD application following a positive experiences in their masters studies (10% of those interviewed) and wanting to signal the importance of continuing education as a reason for their EdD applications (12% of those interviewed). Many reported that being students made them better teachers and that experience of the world from the other side of the fence would be helpful to their relationships with their students. Whilst this may not be one of the skills mentioned explicitly in the knowledge-economy agenda, it is clear that being in the student role is useful for those dealing with students.

Conclusion

This study used two years of interview data collected from our potential EdD students to consider their motivations for undertaking professional doctorates. The data have shown that the most often reported reason for doing an EdD was having a long term practice-related problem, that had been observed over a period of time and for which a solution was needed. Additional motivations included hopes for changes in careers, push by employers to obtain a doctorate and the structure of the EdD programme itself. Many of our students reported an on-going commitment to professional development and to continuing education, clearly signalling a love for education and teaching as well as a desire to improve practice.

A misalignment is evident between the policy makers' motivation to plug a skills gap and the students' to address practice-related problems. For professional doctorate programme teams the focus is often on developing research professionals, sharing enough research skills to help the students to address the problems of practice they want to solve and helping them to share their solutions with the wider academic community. This focus of the programme team is clearly not necessarily helping to plug the skills gaps in the labour market in the future but it is providing much needed continuing professional development for those who engage with professional doctorates.

These findings suggest that the design of the professional doctorate in education to enable research professionals to address their long-term problems of practice meets a valuable demand in the continued development of those working in the education sector. It is therefore vital that EdD programme teams and supervisors continue to support their students in developing theses that answer the problems of practice they face in their day jobs. Enabling education practitioners to develop the research skills to answer such problems of practice is a valuable part of their continuous professional development and has the potential to make a real difference to education practice more broadly. With regard to education policy makers, acknowledging the value of this type of continuous professional development, which seeks to address long-term problems of practice identified by experienced professionals, is as

much part of the development of the knowledge economy as teaching them the research skills themselves.

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Author's profile

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