The design of doctorate curricula for practising professionals

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Abstract

Expansion and changes in doctoral education globally have challenged universities to meet the needs of practising professionals. Values and purposes, structure and content and pedagogy of the provision are key considerations. This curriculum evaluation work investigated the views of 68 higher education staff mainly from Europe and North America involved in the development and delivery of professional doctorates on current issues in designing an appropriate curriculum for practitioners. Analysis of views from two international workshops suggested that while the social benefits of practitioner research were acknowledged, staff struggled with tensions in their higher education contexts to manage practitioner-focused elements, including the balance between theory and practice, recognition of practitioner methodologies and provision of appropriate supervision. The paper concludes that a wider understanding of the values and purpose of doctoral education within and beyond the academy is required that recognises the production of knowledge through practice, and supports ethical social action.

Key words

doctorates;
professional doctorates;
curriculum design;
practice based learning;
values

Introduction

The recent expansions in doctoral provision together with the complex and changing scenario in doctoral education have challenged universities to provide relevant programmes (Boud and Lee 2009; Mellors-Bourne, Robinson, and Metcalfe 2016). The continued discussions on how doctorates can be configured, including in conjunction with industry (Borrell-Damian 2009)**,** and the development of different types of doctorate, invite consideration of what a doctorate is, and what it is for. Demand for a credible alternative to the PhD is from those who want to develop professional practice to the highest level, not necessarily to pursue an academic career (Scott et al., 2004). The international context of PDs is complex. For example in the US variable quality is reported (Golde and Walker 2006), which has led to the Carnaghie Project on the Education Doctorate initiative (Golde 2007). In Australia where PDs have flourished there is still much scholarly publication on the subject (Evans 1997; Lee, Brennan, and Green 2009). Not all countries recognise PDs but in the majority of those that do parity between doctoral qualifications is asserted (Kot and Hendel 2012).

PDs have been developed in several countries to accommodate various niche markets, such as Engineering (DEng), Law (LLD), Psychology (DPsych) and Business (DBA). Some of these provide a license to practice. A review of several prominent types of PD by Fell, Haines, and Flint (2011) showed that there are commonalities, for example, in the aim to develop professional practice, albeit each type having its own history and focus. The advanced development of professional practice has implications for doctorate curriculum design internationally. The UK Quality Assurance Agency's (2015) 'doctoral degree characteristics', for example, encapsulate the increasingly more complex variants, and the notion of 'doctorateness' has been coined, which Wellington (2013) suggests can be explicated through a search for the purpose, impact, regulations, examination process and 'voice' of supervisors, examiners and students in the doctorate. Notwithstanding these endeavours to define or synthesise common features of contemporary doctorates the question arises whether some types of doctorate, notably those for practising professionals, require specific curricula.

Muller's (2009) analysis of forms of knowledge suggests 'two modal types of curriculum and qualification: one that aims to produce disciplinary adepts,…the other that aims to produce knowledgeable professionals, and is thus oriented more to the demands of the workplace'(217). The knowledge needed in workplaces by 'knowledgeable professionals' is rooted in an inter/transdisciplinary mode and this paper further clarifies how some universities are now reflecting these knowledge priorities and interests. Research can bring a variety of approaches to knowledge production across disciplinary and occupational boundaries (Bleiklie and Byrkjeflot 2002). This is evident in much of the knowledge production of PDs that is often driven by 'real world' and 'real time' imperatives with a focus on professional, creative or artistic knowledge playing a central role. Doctoral curricula can draw upon and link the theory and scholarship of higher education with practitioner knowledge arising from specific communities of practice in both generating and applying knowledge (Costley 2013).

The present research aimed to develop understanding of the role of practice in shaping curricula for practising professionals by investigating the current experiences of staff, mainly from the Europe and North America, involved in designing and delivering PD programmes.

Doctoral curricula

Theoretical questions of the relationship between knowledge and curriculum structure and the drivers which legitimate any given curriculum (Luckett 2009) admit of a number of context-specific answers. While some educationalists point to types of curriculum design as a content-neutral activity, for example in technology enhanced learning (Harris, Mishra, and Koehler 2009), others emphasise the social and constructed dimension of the curriculum (Smith 1996, 2000). The flexible nature of much curriculum design in PD programmes noted by Evans (1997) has been accentuated in recent studies (e.g. Hartcollis, Cnaan, and Ledwith 2014), creating increased awareness of choices and challenges for students and curriculum developers alike. Student-centredness and engagement in the curriculum (Barnett and Coate 2005) and, on the performative side, the privileging of stakeholder interests that require programmes to 'take into account vocational, individual and civic elements of education' (Winch 2015, 168), have been highlighted. Gilbert's work (2004) on mapping out a framework for evaluating the doctoral curriculum anticipated and articulated many of these tensions, drivers and changes, including: government, industry and community as consumers of research; changing conceptions of research, including moves towards more inter- and trans-disciplinary research; debates over competing research paradigms and concern about outcomes and impact of doctoral study.

Recent research into doctoral curricula shows no lessening of the rapid pace of change forecast by Boud and Lee (2009). A significant, recurring theme in the debate has been awareness of the tensions and synergies in curriculum design for professionals as 'practitioner researchers' (Drake and Heath 2015). Our own understanding of curriculum draws on Gilbert's as well as other critical, holistic conceptions, notably that of Barnett, Parry, and Coate's (2001) conception of 'modern curricula as an educational project forming identities founded in three domains: those of knowledge, action and self' (438) and of Provident et al.'s (2015) notion of transformative learning in curriculum design in post-professional doctoral education. Three areas of enquiry that incorporate the main facets of curriculum design, outlined by Warren (2016, 12), the *why*- 'values and purposes', the *what* - 'structures and content' and the *how* -'pedagogies' encapsulate these ideas about doctoral curricula and are considered in the following sections.

Values and purposes

In considering the *why* of curriculum design, there has been an increasing drive for doctoral education to reflect current societal needs, including sustainable change, economic growth and a return on investment and to develop the knowledge economy (Fink 2006). PDs have been compared with the more well-established PhD (Neumann 2005), and Taylor's (2008) account of the discussions at Cambridge University regarding the possible introduction of the doctorate in engineering illustrates the influence of academic scepticism about their value. Similar debates about the credibility of PDs have emerged in Australia and Europe (Kot and Hendel 2012).

East, Stokes, and Walker (2014) consider the purpose and value of professional education on a conceptual level, from the perspective of 'whether a university education should be seen as a public or private good' (1619). Govers (2014) explored ethical issues in programme design decision making and found that concerns related to five groups: students; industry; the educational institution; society and colleagues in other institutions. Responsibilities to these groups were found to emerge from a 'complex interplay of utilitarian and communitarian discourses' (790), for example, in the former to satisfy as many people as possible, and in the

latter to care for the community. Govers (2014) concludes that an ethical framework for examining programme design practice could be used to help practitioners consider 'the right thing to do' (791).

Mellors-Bourne et al. (2014) noted that in England 'several institutions mentioned PDs as a possible growth area' (2) as an alternative to not being able to provide PhD studentships through doctoral training centres. "[T]eaching and supporting PGRs [postgraduate researchers] is resource-intensive and providing PGR programmes may represent a net overall "cost" to HEIs' (HEFCE 2005,12): with the increasing financial pressures on universities, it could be argued that the demand for PDs has provided an opportunistic solution through recruitment of full-cost or surplus-making students. PhDs have traditionally been seen as 'loss leaders', with candidates often being taken on as research assistants with career goals closely predicated on those of their supervisors, to align with specific university-defined subjects of interest and to support funded research projects. PD candidates do not usually fulfil these criteria. Sponsorship and disparities in pay between different professional groups will mean that some professional areas may be better able than others to afford PD fees.

Ek et al. (2013) describe a range of drivers that lead to the marketisation and also to the academisation of programmes, and note that universities need to balance these and make choices about what they will provide. Strengers' (2014) discussion of the tensions candidates endure in undertaking a doctorate in collaboration with industry concludes that there are particular difficulties in the academy because of the 'different discourses permeating the doctoral candidature' (556). Townsend, Pisapia, and Rassaq (2015) argue that the kind of interdisciplinary research that industry collaboration often requires is supported by academic staff, but requires university leaders to play a role 'in changing the research quality processes at the national level' (672). These studies point to the importance of ethical leadership in engaging with and articulating the decision making of universities and their staff (Shapiro and Stefkovich 2010) to negotiate the complex set of values and purposes that underpin the curriculum design of PDs.

Structure and content

PDs are normally structured around a substantial undertaking of research that can appear in many different forms, for example, a thesis, project, portfolio or artwork (Neumann 2005)**.** The approach taken to the research is often practitioner-led, that is, requiring a focus upon practice and outcomes of the research that have some direct implications for practice (Mellors-Bourne, et al 2016). The relationship between theory and practice, especially in comparison to the more long-established PhD, can be of a reflexive nature with practice informing theory (Costley 2013). Curriculum models and programmes of study can be modular and include the teaching and learning of combinations of research methods, research proposals, professional knowledge and reflective essays and recognition of prior learning. While programmes emulate the kind of postgraduate training found in most doctorate study, they usually also fall within the remit of university-wide quality assurance processes by virtue of their 'taught components' (QAA 2015). Design of curricula for PDs, in particular the 'taught' component, needs to be sufficiently flexible to enable a deep, reflexive engagement with theory and practice, and the development of research skills at a high order, and also the formation of what might be called timely, impact-driven connections to professional practice (Lee et al. 2009).

Scott et al. (2004) suggest that the practice-based knowledge emanating from PDs may be at

odds with the dominant, disciplinary knowledge provided and accredited by universities, contending that PhDs and PDs can sometimes be almost indistinguishable, while acknowledging that PDs may have a different epistemological perspective to that of PhDs. The methodological approaches used by PD candidates are often those that lend themselves to practitioner-led approaches and knowledge production (Lester 2012) and a more contextualised understanding of practice, for example, case study, action research and grounded theory (Costley and Armsby 2007). PD research often leads to direct interventions in practice or recommendations for change. The *what* of curricula design therefore needs to include a range of approaches that address the practice needs of the research questions and may not necessarily be driven by a subject discipline.

Pedagogies

Pedagogy, the *how* of curriculum design, characteristically encompasses activities such as teaching and learning methodologies and assessment (Leach and Moon 2008); it is also increasingly about construing these and related activities in more systemic, collaborative ways (Zeegers and Barron 2012). The nature of the PD, not least through its 'taught component', highlights the added importance for pedagogy of fostering and building on relationships, professional conversations and learning cultures within a wider social context, in ways that extend beyond the HE institution to work based and other community settings.

From the perspective of the developer of professional doctorates, salient issues now also include: peer learning strategies (Boud and Lee 2005); signature pedagogies (Golde 2007; Shulman 2005) and blended learning approaches aiming to develop community-building and transformational learning, including in the use of online PD curricula (Provident et al., 2015). Danby and Lee (2011) have called for a doctoral pedagogy that attends equally to design and action. These issues inevitably influence not only learning and teaching strategies but also 'supervision' processes (Lee 2008; Boud and Costley 2007) and have attendant staff training requirements.

Research approach

To explore the role of practice in shaping curricula, a naturalistic enquiry (Lincoln and Guba 1985) was planned that involved the authors working with those groups of academic developers closely involved in curriculum design. This approach was selected as it enabled the researchers to work with the participants ethnographically, so that 'meanings are accorded to phenomena by both the researcher and the participant' (Cohen, Manion, and Morrison 2000, 138). Academic developers in particular, have been recognised as having some autonomy in developing curricula for practising professionals (Mellors-Bourne et al., 2016). Hence the study was intended to be a broad-based collective curriculum evaluation, aimed at outlining relevant issues and areas for curriculum development (Warren 2016). Two workshops were arranged entitled 'Issues in the design of professional doctorate curricula'. These took place at two international conferences, one in Europe and one in North America in 2014 and 2015, respectively. The purpose of the workshops was to develop knowledge and understanding of issues in designing and delivering PDs for practising professionals. All participants gave their consent to participate. The workshop also set out to explore the place of various stakeholders in the design of PD curricula. A detailed analysis of this part of the results (see 'Findings') is planned for forthcoming publication.

As Europe and North America are major providers of PDs, these two locations were selected to facilitate access to groupings of local staff as well as a smaller number of other international delegates who were at different stages of working on and designing PD curricula. The spread of countries and programmes (DBA, DProf, DPsych, EdD, etc.) represented at both workshops was consistent with that of the conference's published list of delegates. For workshop 1, the spread was approximately two-thirds from Europe and one-third from other continents; for workshop 2, approximately two-thirds were from the North America and one-third from elsewhere (mainly Europe). A range of professional areas was represented in both countries, but the EdD was more prevalent in workshop 2. A representative sample was not sought but it was felt that these conferences would provide a range of international contributions. Workshop participation was voluntary so this constituted a convenience sample. However, contributors' status as attendees at a conference about PDs means that it could be described as critical-case sampling. This method of sampling includes those who have significant characteristics of relevance to the study, and is consistent with the naturalistic approach (Cohen et al., 2000). The first workshop was attended by 44 participants, the second by 24, making a total of 68.

Naturalistic enquiry style workshops provided a natural context for discussion and an opportunity to collect and debate views on what was perceived by participants as the most pertinent issues in their practice. This practice-oriented, experiential approach mirrored that of PD candidates, and was selected largely for its potential to 'triangulate experience through an investigation of personal meanings alongside the [perceived] meanings of engaged others' (Usher 2009, 183). The workshop facilitators/authors were participant observers and convened the workshops as an opportunity to share knowledge among all participants.

Following an initial plenary briefing by the facilitators, workshop participants joined one of three facilitated interest groups to explore one of the three themes: 'Values and purposes', 'Structure and content' and 'Pedagogy'. Facilitators attempted to explore participants experience and knowledge of these themes. The data collection and analysis process followed broadly that described by Cohen, Manion, and Morrison (2000) for naturalistic research. In situ field notes on issues raised by participants were collected and synthesised by one nominee in each group who was asked to check findings with the group before reporting. These took the form of verbatim comments and summarised observations and remarks, and these formed the main 'units of data analysis'. Following this stage each group presented its findings to the plenary with further discussion and clarification that resulted in adding more units of analysis. All participants were invited to contribute further issues to either of the two groups that they had not been able to attend by adding written notes to the presented posters, and these formed additional units of analysis.

In total 100 units of analysis or discrete ideas were collected in the three theme areas. This qualitative data were analysed within each sub-group and across each sub-group in the workshops (Miles and Huberman 1994). The three researchers independently read the units of analysis collected at the workshops, together with their own notes and records of the group conversations. One researcher then coded the units in a matrix under broad domain headings, returning to the dataset several times until all material had been assigned to one or more categories. Summarising led to the identification of 'key areas for subsequent investigation' (Cohen et al., 2000, 149) under seven main headings. A distillation of the research data in six of the seven categories is presented here through the critical lens of the researchers who are also practitioners in the field of doctoral education.

Findings

The practitioner focus or purpose of PDs was a core feature throughout all groups. Both workshops addressed the same three themes, and while there was a degree of similarity in the emerging data there were some differences in emphasis. The first, Europe conference group focused more on the experiential and practical aspects, whereas the second, North America conference group focused more on theoretical and knowledge aspects. In the Europe conference, the discussion was more often around 'programmes', 'learning' and parity of standards of PDs, despite some differences in approach and purpose. The North America conference workshop featured 'knowledge' and 'data', and questioned PD academic standards *because* the purposes were not academic and the candidates were not academics. This difference is discussed further below.

The following includes some illustrative examples of the units of analysis in each of the six categories selected here (see 'Research Approach'): social purposes; university concerns; supervision; methodologies; candidate experience and academic practices.

1. *Social purposes* of PDs centred on the idea of the practitioner as an agent of social action and change which could lead to increased impact and achievement of social justice. It was also stated that practitioner researchers' production of knowledge could contribute to the development of organisations and professions:

> *There is value in projects for other organisations and professions.*

> *Research in the community may be more important.*

The social purpose of PDs was also noted as being explicit in some curriculum developments, such as those on the EdD in North America:

> *The Carnaghie Project theme includes 'social justice'.*

These issues showed that the wider social benefits of PDs were recognised and these presented a positive picture of the work emanating from PDs. Concerns about this and other issues were voiced in the second theme.

2. *University concerns* were particularly prevalent in the data, perhaps because the participants were mainly university staff involved in the management of PD programmes. This theme included a number of overlapping sub-themes. One focused on negative aspects of managing PD research, notably the tensions PDs caused in universities over the credibility of practitioner knowledge. Another area of concern was in relation to the status of 'taught' versus 'research' elements and, within the research element, the status of practitioner research approaches such as action research. Acceptance, recognition and respect for practitioner research were major concerns for participants, and were in contrast to the positive perspective illustrated in the social purposes theme, as exemplified in the following comments:

> *Are we training advanced practitioners or developing researchers?*

> *… some of my academic colleagues advise the best PD candidates that their work is good enough for a PhD!*

A related sub-theme was managing university structures, for example, situating work-based interdisciplinary projects within the university's disciplinary culture and structures, and organising quality assurance and enhancement processes for 'taught' and 'research', credit-rated and non-credit-rated aspects of PD programmes. Within university processes these were often set up to manage 'taught' or 'research', credit-rated or non-credit-rated programmes. These curriculum design challenges caused difficulties for those managing PD programmes, and confusion for some participants less familiar with PDs:

> *It confuses one how many sorts of programmes there are on professional doctorates. On behalf of my University of* [X]*, now strengthening its emphasis on such programmes, where shall I first and foremost seek advice about structure and content?*

Another university concern was the perception of PDs in the wider domain. Concerns were also voiced over financial and resource imperatives in relation to the increasing marketisation of HE and the costing of doctorate programmes.

3. *Supervision* covered a range of issues, for instance challenges to faculty's ability to supervise PDs. There were at least two strands to this: academic supervisors' credibility to work with practitioners and practitioner supervisors' ability to facilitate learning, which the following respectively illustrate:

> *From the candidates' perspective, their understanding of the EdD is often greater than faculty.*

> *Clinical faculty used for supervision don't understand teaching/supervision.*

There was recognition of the diversity of candidates, their existing expertise and the need to manage power relationships. Participants felt that effective supervision was integral to candidate's success. Cohort and peer experience were important, but supervision provided critical opportunities to work with candidates to ensure research, theory, language and writing fitted in a contingent political context.

Supervising PDs was largely seen as a specialist activity that often only a few academic staff was qualified to undertake. This was a problem for participants endeavouring to find supervisors and internal examiners for their expanding programmes. With the reported negative attitudes of some colleagues to practitioner research (see below), participants suggested that at the least potential supervisors should be positively disposed to practitioner research. Ideally, for many, a supervisor would have credibility as an academic and practitioner. However, the vast majority of academic staff in most universities did not fit this profile and there was a marked interest in PD supervisor training as a means of preparing new supervisors.

4. *Methodologies*. There was a clear focus on research and use of appropriate methodologies. Some issues surrounded the focus of research. Methodological approach was thought to be moderated by PD researchers often being 'insiders' in the research. Their practitioner-researcher status and professional learning enabled them to bring research findings to a point where recommendations for significant change in practice were possible. Sometimes actual changes in practice made an impact in their work settings or professional fields.

Methodological approach therefore meant planning for the outcomes of research and development, paying attention to definition of problems and issues arising from practice. Participants suggested that existing methodologies needed tailoring to meet the needs of practice rather than disciplines.

Discussion of the value of insider research and limitations of research approaches often brought about disagreement over the robustness of particular methodologies, which reinforces findings outlined in *University concerns*. Some thought a variety of methods and methodological approaches were appropriate. For example:

> *Practice research needs to be approached by whatever research methods provide appropriate data.*

Others had a more traditional view of 'high quality methods'. Some in the North America group questioned whether action research was 'proper research'. These differences may depend on how practitioner research is viewed, although given the diversity of professional areas and disciplines represented in both groups, it is perhaps unsurprising that different viewpoints were expressed on appropriate methodologies. That said, a commitment to methodologies that produced credible research and outcomes was evident in both groups.

5. *Candidate experience* cross-referred with *Supervision*, forming a related theme. Supervision was thought to be an integral part of candidates' experience and its contribution to successful doctoral study. How professional experience of candidates and the HE focus upon critical reflective practice were integrated into appropriate methodologies was a key point of discussion. Also the balancing of practitioner situatedness and objectivity with theory and practice was raised as a significant area of PD curriculum development:

> *There is a need to link professionals' practice and research, creating a scholar practitioner.*

In terms of managing theory and practice in candidates' projects at doctoral level it was suggested that:

> *Advanced professional practice requires translation and a transdisciplinary approach, ability to synthesise and insight.*

Other issues included developing academic writing for practice purposes and theoretical grounding of candidates' research projects, particularly those concerned with change and creativity in practice. These issues are equally relevant to other doctorates but for PDs participants noted the need to ensure that the process integrated research, theory and practice.

6. *Academic practices* encompassed a wide range of issues regarding pedagogy, including those academic staff faced in curriculum delivery. Whereas PDs focused at least to some extent on candidates' practices, aligned to practice-based outcomes, the importance of working with individual candidates was stressed, to ensure research, theory, language and writing 'fitted' in the wider, contingent political context referred to earlier. Several participants cited trans- or interdisciplinary frameworks as helpful lenses for conceptualising research in PDs.

Pedagogies that could facilitate this goal would require educators to:

>*deconstruct experience and engage* [students] *in this process. Sometimes unlearning…*

A range of individual and group pedagogic approaches were outlined in discussions, including utilising cohort, peer and collaborative groups, discussion, participative enquiry and action learning. While no one pedagogic approach appeared dominant, approaches exemplified a focus on group methods to investigate professional knowledge and learning, perhaps in recognition of the social nature of practice.

A key goal of curriculum design in many PDs was providing adequate support in the development of academic writing. Candidates are often senior level practitioners with high-level abilities, but were perceived as needing to 'translate' their understanding into academic discourse, and develop their ability to integrate research, theory and practice.

Discussion

Discussion of the findings is presented in relation to the three main areas of curriculum enquiry.

In relation to the first, 'values and purposes', PDs were perceived as a private good to the extent that curricula are designed to develop candidates' personal and professional knowledge, abilities and reflective practice and to produce scholar-practitioners. They were also amply recognised as contributing to the public good through practitioners' research and social actions aiming to have real-world impact. This dual benefit concurs with findings that university staff involved with professional education are broadly sympathetic to incorporating professional capabilities in curricula which contribute to the social good (East et al., 2014). Similarly, Gover's (2014) view of ethical programme design combining a utilitarian and communitarian approach was discernible in participants' discussion of dual-benefit curricula.

For some, changing financial models and resource priorities overall were having a direct impact on universities' understandings of the underpinning values and purposes of PDs. Increased risk aversion was seen to undermine the continued development, provision or sustainability of some PDs and reduce curriculum innovation. Since HEFCE's (2005) UK-based analysis of the costs of training postgraduate research students, there has been little in the published literature on this, but our findings suggest it has been a topic of some discussion in universities. Scales of charges range considerably between universities both in relation to differences between PDs and between PDs and PhDs, indicating that the development of PDs in the UK could well be an opportunistic solution for universities with no doctorates funded by the research councils (Mellors-Bourne et al. 2014), as well as constitute a creative opportunity for academics to develop programmes for practitioners (Mellors-Bourne et al., 2016).

While participants acknowledged the relevance of PDs to the knowledge economy (Fink 2006), the major focus of discussion was on candidate and university issues and with delivering a practice-based curriculum in university contexts (Drake and Heath 2015). Wellington's (2013) work on doctorateness has suggested that doctoral purposes can be found by investigating stakeholders internal to the university; certainly this internal focus preoccupied many of our participants in their concern to defend PDs within the academy. The

value of embedding inter- and trans-disciplinary forms of knowledge in curricula emerged as a potentially powerful way of engaging a wider range of perspectives both in the research and for problem solving more generally. However, as Townsend et al. (2015) have concluded, developing effective curricula in this spirit needs to engage interest at all levels, notably on the part of research and other bodies which control funding.

The current study found that the wider value and purpose of doctorates outlined by Gilbert (2004) was seen as increasingly relevant for PDs. It also found a level of support among developers for broadening the scope of what and who is involved in curriculum design. This could include, for example, developing understanding of the global drivers and needs for *practice* development. This may require ingenuity and intelligent self-interest but also a relinquishing of a certain degree of academic power. It will thus call for ethical leadership at all levels – programmes, university and policy/funding– to ensure a strategic focus that develops more inclusively designed PDs, based on a critical analysis of stakeholder needs and balancing various interests (Shapiro and Stefkovitch 2010).

In relation to the second area of enquiry, 'structure and content', in most universities the privileging of discipline over practice-based knowledge remains the norm (Scott et al. 2004), creating systemic and operational barriers to fitting inter- or trans-disciplinary, practice-based curricula into existing disciplinary structures. The 'taught' element of PDs also marked them out as lower in status for some. Notwithstanding the trend for PDs and PhDs to have similar inflections, such as a strong alignment to real-world problems (Scott et al. 2004; QAA 2015), PD-vocationally oriented work was widely reported as being held to lack the depth and quality of the PhD. One explanation proffered for these beliefs was the credibility of practitioner knowledge and practitioner research in the university (Taylor 2008) and in the wider academic community. Participants across the different countries and PDs represented reported that they frequently found themselves grappling with contexts that were suspicious, even hostile to the notion of the PD (Kot and Hendel 2012).

This apprehension was notably the case in relation to the use of 'insider', practitioner-led and action research, the last of which continued to be problematic for some disciplines and professional groups (Strengers 2014). Methodologies for research in PDs are well documented (Costley and Armsby 2007; Drake and Heath 2015) and encompass approaches used for a range of purposes, including developing and extending practices and the knowledge that underpins them to effect change. This can be done in a variety of ways, and in this study participants felt that where PD candidates are experienced professionals, the inclusion of their expertise in a nuanced evaluation of their research and critical reflective practice can be important components of the overall approach and impact on an area of practice knowledge. This sits well with Provident el al.'s (2015) transformative curricula discussed earlier. It was acknowledged that these claims needed further research which could allay doubts about the quality and value of PDs. This may be achieved by building on Lester's (2012) work that identified approaches to knowledge production and professional impact in PDs.

Lee, Brennan, and Green (2009) suggest that the PD process needs to offer a reflexive engagement with theory and practice so that research that contributes to knowledge and impacts on practice can be designed and implemented, building an understanding of the dynamic relationship between these elements. While the landscape of doctoral education is changing towards more dynamic methods of engagement (Boud and Lee 2009), our findings suggest that in universities curriculum innovation is held back, largely by divergent views

about the form a research degree for practitioners should take. The twin drivers of academicisation and marketisation (Ek et al., 2013) may play out differently in various universities and programme types, but the tensions candidates often feel in undertaking a PD (Strengers 2014) continue to need sensitive management by academics involved in PDs. This latter was a negative aspect for managing PD research, but as the 'guardians' of PD curriculum design, participants advocated that candidates needed to synthesise research, theory and practice, and balance this with their practitioner situatedness. This complex relationship between theory and practices in PDs is different from that of the traditionally oriented 'theoretical' PhD (Neumann 2005) and points to the possibilities of enabling a wider contribution to knowledge (Costley 2013).

Concerning the third area of enquiry, 'pedagogies', candidates' access to data and level of seniority in a professional area were understood to make a difference to the level and type of change possible in any particular piece of practitioner research activity. How candidates are situated in their research presents several complex challenges to academic pedagogic practice. These include but are not confined to: the need to acknowledge throughout the supervision and assessment processes the importance of professional experience; developing critical reflective practice; and integrating this understanding into dialogue with stakeholders (Boud and Costley 2007). Our findings thus highlighted the perceived value for many academic developers of framing or re-framing PD pedagogies in a number of complementary ways, as: structures for managing taught and hidden curricula in a student-centred approach (Barnett and Coate 2005); vehicles for design and action (Danby and Lee 2011; Winch, 2015); and strategies for exploring 'the problematic natures of relationships between teaching, learning, and knowledge production' (Zeegers and Barron 2012, 20). Our findings concurred with Mellors-Bourne et al., (2016), that cohort, peer (Boud and Lee 2005) and collaborative processes are typical pedagogies used to facilitate this learning in PDs.

Supervisor training can be an issue across different forms of doctorate (Lee 2008), and some work on delineating the important factors has taken place (Boud and Costley 2007). Our findings suggest the importance of developing ways to ensure that universities and their staff understand how curricula for practising professionals may be managed. This is more a difference in emphasis than of kind, but it is a difference that requires academic practice and supervision that supports and respects the values and purposes of practitioner research.

Conclusion

This research explored common themes expressed by HE practitioners involved in the development and delivery of doctoral curricula designed for practising professionals in how practice is included in PD curricula. Our findings suggest that current curricula focus on candidates' professional learning but recognise the importance of the wider context and stakeholders. Participants managed their internal university context to provide a curriculum for practising professionals that was tailored to their purpose, focused more often on needs arising from their contexts and professional practice than on discipline. However, the university context shaped curriculum development to a greater extent than did the needs arising from the wider context. We suggest that the values and purposes of doctoral education are currently still dominated by disciplinary knowledge production and would benefit from being informed by the production of knowledge through practice that supports ethical and sustainable social action.

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