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Summary of the 16 November 2018 “The Professional Doctorate in South Africa: Changes in ethos and practices” workshop, UJ, Johannesburg

Introduction

Dr Henriëtte van den Berg

Universities experience pressure to increase their postgraduate output significantly, and many stakeholders in Postgraduate Education express concern that the quality of postgraduate students’ research output may suffer because of the continuous growth of postgraduate enrolment. The professional doctorate might present an alternative to improve the number of doctoral enrolments and graduations, especially in professional disciplines where research doctorates attract relatively small numbers of doctoral candidates. Many overseas institutions offer professional doctorates, but this is a very uncommon PhD pathway in South Africa, and many South African academics are not in favour of offering professional doctorates because of their perception that the professional doctorate is inferior to the research PhD. During the workshop, the speakers will present their own views and experiences regarding the professional doctorate.

The professional doctorate: tainted by trade? Gatekeeping or innovation?

Dr Ria Vosloo, Director: Policy, Benchmarking, Monitoring and Research, Postgraduate School, University of Johannesburg

Many of the lecturers at the University of Johannesburg feel that a professional doctorate is not as valuable as a traditional PhD. Though there are many ways to define a professional doctorate, it is generally more concerned with problems in industry and building practical knowledge than the traditional doctorate. Many of these problems are interdisciplinary or transdisciplinary in nature. Most professional doctorates have a coursework component. The practical nature and additional support provided means that this structured PhD appeals to skilled mid-career professionals who complete the degree for promotion purposes. Professional PhD candidates are more likely to work in consulting, industry, or the NGO sector than in academia.

Offering a professional doctorate can benefit universities as students conduct research using external resources and co-supervisors, which lightens supervisors’ loads. Another potential advantage of a professional PhD is that it includes additional support through a coursework component, and this support could improve the graduation rates and quality of the research produced by the candidates. The practical and transdisciplinary nature of a professional doctorate mean that it can produce research that offer solutions to the problems facing South African society.

Despite these advantages, a traditional PhD is seen as the ‘gold standard’ and some academics believe that candidates who require any coursework are not ready to embark on a PhD journey. Currently faculties with a stronger focus on practical research and stronger links to industry, such as, management and engineering faculties would be more likely to offer a professional doctorate. Unfortunately, the National Research Foundation does not provide as much subsidy for coursework Master’s programmes and would provide less



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subsidy for professional doctorates. Ensuring that candidates in professional doctorates conduct their research in industry while under the supervision of experts in industry could also prove costly. A possible way forward would be for academics to meet with industry partners and ask whether they would be able to fund the programmes or to sponsor some of the students. Presentation [slides](#)

Is a professional PhD in education the poor cousin of a PhD or the rich aunt?

Prof Chris Reddy, Professor of Curriculum Studies, Faculty of Education, University of Stellenbosch

In the United States of America, all PhDs have a coursework component, but this is not as common in South Africa where we assume that all PhD candidates can conduct independent research. Despite resistance from some colleagues, the Faculty of Education, University of Stellenbosch is planning a professional doctorate offered in partnership with the University of Bath, focusing on areas such as, Psychology of Education, Philosophy of Education, and Sociology. The Higher Education Qualifications Sub-Framework (HEQSF) contains guidelines for universities wanting to offer professional PhDs, and the Minimum Requirements for Teacher Education Qualifications includes diploma qualifications that are equivalent to degrees. Thus, in education the professional pathway would be advanced diploma-postgraduate diploma-professional Master's-professional doctorate.

Although diplomas are less valued than degrees in South Africa, practitioner research is very important for educators, which is why academics in education need to ask themselves if it is really better for principals and administrators to have a traditional D.Ed. than a professional PhD in education. Since theory and practice are not separate and education degrees teach practitioners to apply theory in practice, the professional doctorate as a means of conducting practice-based research could be very valuable for educators and administrators. As part of the professional doctorate in education at the University of Stellenbosch, candidates will submit a portfolio of evidence that comprises of practice-based research activities.

While academics are currently opposed to professional doctorates, Professor Jonathan Jansen said in 2011 that many PhDs contribute little to the field because their scope or findings have limited significance for the field. Ideally, the findings from scholarly professional doctorates focusing on practice-based research would be more significant than findings from many traditional PhDs that contribute little to practice. By utilising practice-based knowledge, or general knowledge combined with scholarly knowledge, professional doctorate research can increase practitioners' understanding of the nature and context of education problems. The goal of professional doctorates in education would be to interrogate educator practices in order to improve them. Presentation [slides](#)

Doing the doctorate differently: the emergence of a professional doctorate in South Africa

Dr Ronel Blom, Former Dean of Research, Da Vinci Institute

When the PhD programme offered at the Da Vinci Institute was re-accredited, the Council on Higher Education decided that due to the degree structure it should be offered as a professional doctorate, instead of a traditional PhD. Dr Blom and staff at the Institute believe that the degree is not a professional doctorate and is rather an alternative kind of PhD. She argues that the degree is a traditional PhD, because 2



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the coursework component of the degree in non-credit bearing, the thesis is as long as a traditional thesis, and the findings produced by the candidates are very significant. During the professional doctorate candidates, produce scholarly and relevant findings while under the supervision of both an academic and a practitioner in industry with a postgraduate degree. These graduates also receive valuable input from a panel of industry and academic supervisors from a range of disciplines, which supports candidates as they attempt to address complex transdisciplinary problems.

Professional doctoral degrees, where supervisors are based in many fields in industry and academia, can support transdisciplinary research to solve complex problems facing society. However, if universities consider Research PhD degrees as better than professional doctorate degrees, professional doctorate degrees will not gain the recognition that they deserve. In order to increase the subsidies from government and contribute to the GDP of the country, universities are under pressure to increase the numbers of staff with PhDs, to improve PhD graduation rates, and to improve the quality of the research PhD graduates produce. Negative comparisons between professional doctorates and professional degrees will not help universities to meet these aims. The professional doctorate could be one way to assist practitioners to obtain PhDs, but possible candidates may not want to enrol in a professional doctorate if universities value these degrees less than traditional PhD degrees. Presentation [slides](#)

Doctoral Qualification Standards

Professor Stephanie Burton, Vice Principal Research and Postgraduate Education, University of Pretoria

The Council on Higher Education is developing new standards for doctoral qualifications. The Doctoral Standards Reference Group have been working on the formulation of these standards and a revised draft of these standards was released during September 2018 for feedback. According to the revised HEQSF, at least 60% of the credits in a professional doctorate must be awarded for the research component of the degree. PhD candidates' preparedness differs and coursework could better prepare candidates to undertake a PhD, but coursework should not be seen as a way of preparing 'second-best students'. Supervisors are struggling with their workloads and coursework offered during a professional doctorate could help lighten supervisor loads. Supervisor workloads could also be lightened by the use of peer learning or cohort supervision in professional doctorates. Additional support for these candidates could also be provided at training centres supported by faculties and postgraduate schools or centres. This additional support could mean that enrolments in PhD programmes increase as mid-career professionals enrol in professional doctorates. Better support could also mean that the candidates enrolled in professional doctorates have better graduation rates than the majority of PhD candidates. Better partnerships between industry and academic may mean that graduates from professional doctorates are better prepared for careers in industry. As the research produced from professional doctorates is practice-based and transdisciplinary, professional doctorates could also help candidates to produce more innovative research that can be better applied in the knowledge economy of today.



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Despite the potential that professional doctoral degrees have to help candidates acquire skills and knowledge and produce innovative research, the 'professional doctorate' label carries negative connotations. To prevent this stigma the Doctoral Standards Reference Group will most likely recommend that all PhDs with a coursework component should be labelled coursework PhDs rather than professional doctorates. Since coursework degrees receive less subsidy from the government, universities offering coursework PhDs should work with alumni to raise funds to support these degrees. Alumni can help universities to find suitable research projects in industries, and to find industry specialists who can so-supervise doctoral students.

Global and local perspectives on the DPsych Programme: Lessons learned from the accreditation of a Doctorate in Child Psychology programme

Dr Henriëtte Van Den Berg, Research fellow Industrial Psychology, University of Free State and former programme coordinator of the PhD Child Psychology programme.

The University of Free State has offered a PhD Child Psychology degree with coursework for more than two decades. The coursework was non-credit bearing but was assessed with assignments, oral and written examinations. Candidates completed a mini-thesis or three publishable articles to fulfil the research output requirements of the degree. SAQA recommended accreditation of the programme as a professional doctorate when the programme was submitted for re-accreditation in 2015. The course coordinators used the experience gained during the last twenty years to transform the course into a professional doctorate and the DPsych (Child Psychology) was accredited by SAQA in October 2018. When the degree was re-accredited, the university was able to gather input from 60% of the PhD Child Psychology graduates regarding the structure, content and value of the programme. During the last twenty years the graduation rate was 73%, with an average completion time of 5 years.

The DPsych (Child Psychology) is aimed at advanced scientific training for registered, practising psychologists enabling them to act as specialists in the field of Child Psychology. The programme includes coursework, which spans over a period of three years, and includes a mini-thesis or two publishable articles. Candidates are selected from registered psychologists with a minimum of five years practical experience. Graduates of similar degrees in the United Kingdom, the United States or America (University of Kansas) and Canada (University of Alberta) register in a specialist category as Child Psychologists. Currently, the South African Scope of the Psychology Profession does not include a specialist category to register as a Child Psychologists, yet, large numbers of practitioners specialising in work with children have enrolled for the course during the last twenty years, and for the new intake in 2019 when the course will be presented as a professional doctorate. Despite this, candidates find the degree helps improve their practice as child psychologists who work with complex needs in a rapidly changing society. Most of the candidates are older, the average age is 39 years, and are self-employed and self-funded. At present at least 20 applicants apply for the programme, which can only accommodate six students per intake.

The assessment of the candidates was planned carefully to ensure that the mode of assessment evaluates applied competencies and includes case studies, oral presentations, and a mini-thesis or two publishable articles. The degree supports candidates to research interventions in practice, and is very rigorous. At present



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the students are taught and supervised by a broad range of specialists, of whom 40% are South African psychologists, 40% are international specialists in child psychology, and the remaining 30% are specialists, such as, paediatricians, and family advocates.

Colleagues who are not involved in teaching the degree have complained that the former three articles by publication was not enough for a PhD thesis and that candidates should produce five articles. Yet, a few years later the Higher Degrees Committee changed the requirement for full research PhD's to three publishable articles and this resulted in a reduction of the research output of this course to two publishable articles. Presentation [slides](#)

Question and answer session

Facilitator: Prof Bloodless Dzwaïro

Most of the discussion focused on how important it was in some fields for professional bodies to recognise professional doctoral graduates, but that many of these professional bodies are highly political and difficult to work with. The question was raised how early in the accreditation process one should involve the professional bodies. Many professional bodies are only concerned with accrediting graduates of undergraduate degrees and some professions do not have a single regulating body representing the profession. For professional degrees that do recognise Master's level graduates, these graduates are currently the most recognised by the professional body and may not want the professional body to award special status to PhD graduates. There was consensus that professional degrees or coursework PhDs can reduce the workload of supervisors, is well suited to cohort supervision and increase the graduate quality and output of graduates. The participants also emphasised the importance of greater recognition of the need for coursework doctorates for applied and professional disciplines.