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The supervision of professional doctorates: Experiences of the processes and ways forward

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SUMMARY

The doctoral research terrain is changing, as new-styles, for example professional doctorates, are being developed (Park, C., 2005. New variant PhD the changing nature of the doctorate in the UK. *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management* 27(2), 189–207). There is a scarcity of literature aimed at supervisors (Gatfield, T., 2005. An investigation into PhD supervisory management styles: development of a dynamic conceptual model and its managerial implications. *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management* 27(3), 311–325) and this is particularly so in relation to professional doctorates.

In this position paper we argue that the supervisory approach required for a professional doctorate student is different than that required for a PhD. Professional doctorate students, like PhD students, are required to make an explicit contribution to knowledge. Their emphasis, however, needs to be in producing knowledge that is theoretically sound, original, and of relevance to their practice area. This is of increasing importance within healthcare with the growing emphasis on patient driven translational research. As such, the students and their supervisors face unique challenges of balancing academic requirements with praxis. We suggest this requires specific tools to make explicit the dialogical relationship between a particular project and the cultural, social, educational and political aspects of its environment. We expose the potential of soft systems methodology as a means to highlight the emergent aspects of a doctoral practice development project, their respective and evolving supervisory interactions. This focus of this paper is therefore not about guiding supervision in a managerial sense, but rather at offering methodological suggestions that could underpin applied research at doctoral level.

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Introduction

The scarcity of literature aimed at management of doctoral research supervision (Gatfield, 2005), begs a number of questions around how do supervisors gain, develop and share knowledge of the appropriate tools to facilitate the doctorate as a successful and smooth process. Whilst this assumption is true for PhD supervisors, it applies even more to the new and evolving art of professional doctorate supervision. This is further complicated by the majority of current supervisors having experienced, both as student and supervisor, doctoral research in the PhD format.

The current policy demands of research training that is in line with employer demands were identified in the Roberts review (2002) and have been strongly emphasised in later governmental reports and reviews (Leitch Review, 2006; Warry Report, 2006; Sainsbury Review, 2007). The position of the professional doctorate as doctoral training that is strongly located within the professional area means that it is ideally suited to address these policy issues. Indeed within the most recent policy initiatives there is a further

development on the theme of applying research to practice in that the agenda not only includes translational research, but also transformational research (RCUK, 2008).

Professional doctorates have emerged out of the perception of traditional PhD studies as divorced from the world of practice (McKenna, 1997; Edwards, 2009). Whilst professional doctorates have been part of American universities portfolio for over half a century, they have only recently been introduced in the UK (Ellis, 2005). Despite this history, there is paucity of literature on the supervision endeavour. Edwards (2009:2) contrasts the functions of the traditional PhD and professional doctorate study, clarifying the characteristics of latter as ‘the field of study is that of a professional discipline rather than academic enquiry...’. It is generally agreed that the emphasis of the PhD is to train people in academic research. Professional doctorates however, need to be “permeated by what may be called the triple helix of practice, theory and research” (McKenna, 1997). In a sense, this article is thus symptomatic of a shift in the debate about professional doctorates, from their nature and place in academia, to the ways in which they can be best operationalised with relevance to practice. In the context of a professional doctorate, the research undertaken often takes the shape of a practice development project. In this, the

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dialogical relationship between a particular practice development project and the cultural, social, educational and political aspects of its environment needs to be made explicit. We therefore suggest the supervisory craft required to support a professional doctorate student may be different to that required for a PhD. Professional doctorate students, like PhD students, are required to make an explicit contribution to knowledge. Their emphasis, however, needs to be in producing knowledge that is theoretically sound and original, and of relevance to their practice area. The contribution to knowledge of such projects, Winter et al. (2000) establish, has been characterised as combining innovation and originality in practice. Students and their supervisors face unique challenges of balancing academic requirements with praxis.

Holligan (2005) describes a landscape of doctoral research as “politicised and economically informed” (2005: 268), in which students are more consumers with choices and rights than “disciples with duties and obligations”. She describes the dominant discourses of PhD programmes as informed by such market forces, and as dominated by a quantitative agenda of performativity, in which supervisors may be inclined to adopt particular management styles in order to ensure timely completions. This is corroborated by Neuman (2007), who also describes, in humanities, a move towards a ‘science’ model of supervision, in which there is generally a closer synergy between doctorate topic and supervisor’s expertise. In the context of increased time pressures on university staff and emphasis on timely completion, practices such as group supervision of several students by the same member of staff, have emerged. Petersen’s (2007) description of a supervision model where the relationship is that of a double and reciprocal apprenticeship (practice expertise and methodological insights), in which neither party aims at mastering the other, but simply borrows from it for the duration of the doctoral project is perhaps most akin to the approach we favour.

Park (2005) calls for: “a wholesale revision of assumptions and expectations about what the PhD is, or could conceivably be today, given the new and still emerging context within which it is situated and constructed.” (2005: 190). He highlights the development of ‘new style’ PhD such as professional doctorates, as requiring adjustments in the expectations of students, supervisors and examiners (Park, 2007). We share the adjustments we are developing by drawing on two strands of our experiences. One strand is our experience of research activity in a University Research Centre with an overall focus on translational research. This nurtures a culture of development for professional doctorate students, and enables supervisors, as they grapple with the complexities of practice development, to provide them with a sympathetic whilst demanding level of support.

The other strand is our experience as academic supervisors of students studying at masters and doctoral level, and in particular, those studying on a Professional Doctorate in Health and Social Care programme. This paper therefore has two purposes (1) it proposes a methodological means of supervising professional doctorate students; and (2) it offers a conceptualisation of the professional doctorate process underpinned by soft system methodology, and as such opens up the possibility for academics to study the PhD/doctorate system in a way that acknowledges the very issues highlighted by Park (2005). In particular, we expose how soft system methodology (Checkland and Poulter, 2006) has helped us untangle complex and evolving situations in a way that acknowledges and works with the fluidity of practice worlds.

Situation appraisal: organisational and individual learning

At the core of practice development focussed research is the need for management of the interplay between individual students

and the organisation in which they function. This section provides a critical appraisal of the professional doctorate research and supervision situation, and the processes and roles to facilitate this interplay.

Cowley (1995) argues the inappropriateness of separating organisational and professional learning. She advocates the idea of ‘organisations being seen as a collective that can learn as well as the individuals within it.’ This is especially so in relation to students endeavouring to achieve practice development as part of an academic programme. In order to undertake academic study in a university setting, the student is physically separated from their organisation. However, there appears to be a perception that there also needs to be an intellectual separation. An important issue is that the individual student is assessed, and there can appear to be a need to question the ownership of the practice development. The outcome can be an inappropriate, fracturing of the practice development intent between practitioner/student and organisation. This may be due to the practice development belonging to the student’s organisation or profession whilst the reporting and analysis of it belongs to the academic environment. In this respect, practice/profession and academic worlds can be seen as two distinct and sometimes irreconcilable or competing learning environments.

It is for these reason that we advocate that each professional doctorate supervision team includes a practice advisor. The student is encouraged to identify an individual in their organisation who has a strategic or management role and who can represent the organisation in the supervision process. This addition to the supervision team has two drivers. The first is to ensure a stakeholder balance in the practice development endeavour. The second is an acknowledgement of the fact that for research so fundamentally practice driven, academic supervisors have close links with but are not actually located in practice.

The practice development continuum

Many types of activity may be justifiably labelled as practice development, from a small change to a comprehensive reworking of an approach to practice. It may refer to the practice of an individual or to a team of practitioners. It may refer to the practice of a single profession or to the practice of multiple professions. It may occur in a rather informal way with practitioners sharing ideas, reflecting and developing their approach to praxis. At the other end of the continuum it may be highly formalised. So the term practice development can describe a wide range of activity, which always includes, to a greater or lesser degree, the combining of practice and research. Therein can lie a major tension, as practice development straddles these two worlds, in common with translational research, whose main tenet is to provide a bridge between these two.

Another well reported challenge to practice development research has been the barriers created by an unreceptive culture (Reed and Procter, 1995). Over recent years health and social care practice has become much more accepting and indeed welcoming to research in practice (Cooksey, 2006). The practitioner researcher is now a relatively common sight. Indeed, the establishment of professional doctorate programmes is evidence of the growth and acceptance of the practitioner researcher. We would suggest that the greater challenge is currently at a methodological, rather than a cultural level. By this we refer to the reported differentiation in the role and purpose of research when undertaken from a practitioner perspective compared to that from an academic standpoint. In essence this situation can be summarised as:

...“practitioners need research to give them pragmatic answers, whether these can be predictive or explanatory, which can

contribute to their role as a patient care provider, while academics need research to generate new generalisable knowledge.” (Clarke and Procter, 1999:976).

We may add to this that research undertaken at doctoral level demands conceptual depth and contribution, as is explored further by Winter et al. (2000).

We would suggest that in the current context, this division need not be so clear cut. As academic researchers we have a need to generate generalisable knowledge, but not as an exclusive outcome. Often we are working collaboratively with practitioners to also facilitate practice development. Practitioners who engage in research, especially at doctoral level have such a dual outcome agenda.

The dominant challenge is that of finding the means of conducting research which sits comfortably in the real world of practice and which does not demand a divorcing of practice generalisable outcomes and study for a doctorate (in need of a theorisation that makes explicit a contribution to knowledge). This is an acknowledgement that practice development research cannot be a demarcated activity. We need tools to facilitate practice development research that do not rely on isolation or freezing of activity, and that straddles paradigmatic worlds to enable full engagement from all stakeholders.

Clarifying the problem

Health and social care is a complex and dynamic scenario. It is a rarity for us as academic researchers to complete a service evaluation project in a static context. In a reflection on recently completed projects the following were some of the practice developments that concurrently occurred; a new care pathway, senior management changes and consequent priority change, organisational restructuring, new practice guidelines.

Soft system methodology (Checkland and Scholes, 1990; Checkland and Poulter, 2006) permits making explicit links and possible interaction between multiple and particular contextual elements and the development activity. It is particularly suited to situations which require consideration of many perspectives and interests, and the balancing of cultural, managerial, technical, ethical, political and economic issues. This is the case for most practice development research undertaken within the framework of a professional doctorate.

Soft systems methodology (Checkland and Scholes, 1990) was developed as a means of making sense of complex situations in the real world. It is “an organised way of tackling perceived problematical (social) situations. It is action-oriented. It organises thinking about such situations so that action to bring about improvement can be taken.” (Checkland and Poulter, 2006: xv). Rather than following a linear way of thinking, soft systems methodology adopts a set of processes that allows recognition of different roles and views. This seems particularly suited to what Winter et al. (2000) describe as the way in which social and political changes nurture a kind of uncertain, erratic progress towards the appreciation of complexity rather than a linear accumulation of knowledge in doctoral studies. The purpose of the methodology is to create a set of models that illustrate how particular ‘systems’ seem to work and impact on one another. The diagrammatical representation of models provides an instant visual summary of the complex systems under study. This serves as an ideal support to debates about models, which helps the collaborative development, thinking and decision making about improving the particular part of the system that is being focussed on. It enables the practice developer to put the aspect of his or her practice that is in the process of being developed in its cultural, social and political context. This, in turn, enables the possible impacts of the practice develop-

ment, as well as effects of the practice development on the environment, to be debated.

The supervision craft

Moving on to supervision experiences, the issues reported here cross several education programmes, but resonate particularly with students undertaking research as part of a Professional Doctorate in Health and Social Care programme. These students are active practitioners, involved in research, which is required to be relevant to their practice area, at doctoral level. The context of their research is therefore mostly linked to their area of practice, but there is an inherent reciprocal impingement between practice and research. Doctoral students/practitioners have to develop an agility unique to the setting of a professional doctorate, in that whilst researching, they do not cease to practice, and whilst practicing, they do not cease to research. As such, what happens in the landscape of practice inevitably impacts on the development endeavour. Equally, whilst the aim of the professional doctorate is the academic development of students, there has to be evident implications for the service in which they practice. They are intended to act as a catalyst for practice development in their work place, creating a ripple effect of research interest and change. This can be schematically represented as follows: (Fig. 1).

One factor that influences and adds complexity to this representation, is the dimension of time. Indeed, the research and practice development endeavour of these students happens over a period of 3 to 5 years. Political, structural, cultural and personal evolution over these years has an inevitable impact on this endeavour.

It is highly likely therefore that the context at the development stage of the research sets the scene, but that this initial contextualisation may well change over the course of the research. This needs to be accommodated, as it will have implications for the timeliness and pertinence of the development endeavour for the practice area.

This scenario creates frustration and concern for students. A practitioner enters the doctorate programme with a practice development issue and develops a research question. They explore and debate the issues with colleagues – practice is scrutinized and they begin to make changes. A ripple can become a wave. In many ways, this sequence of development is exactly what the professional doctorate supervisor hopes to hear as evidence that practice is changing and improving. We encourage students to record evidence of examples of cumulative change and impact that their doctoral research appears to make throughout the 5 year process. However, methodological developments are required beyond this support, in order to document and accommodate changes in the practice landscape and timescape, as exposed above.

Manoeuvring muddy waters

Professional doctorate research students often face many dilemmas and challenges. Indeed they report experiencing high levels of vulnerability with respect to the focus of their research and the opportunity for it to mature. They can feel that their research is being overtaken by contextual developments. In other words the waters can, and often do, become very muddy. The supervision team must therefore provide a means to find a way through these often murky phases that also captures the processes and theoretical developments inherent in the inevitably messy nature of doctoral level practice development. The solution we are offering is based on our process of utilisation and adaptation of soft systems methodology. We believe this could assist students and supervisors in identifying and accommodating the kind of evolutive complexities described above.

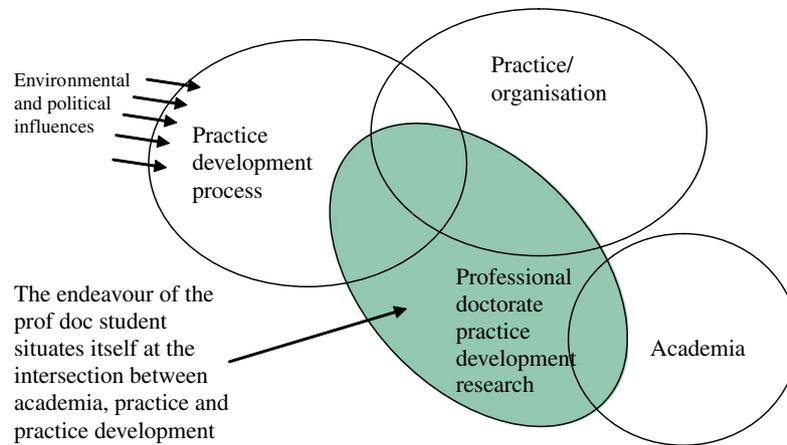


Fig. 1. Professional doctorate practice development research systems.

Two aspects of the methodology are particularly effective; system mapping and visual communication. During the taught phase of the professional doctorate programme, students are encouraged to engage in an ongoing mapping of the system as it is initially understood and as it evolves through their theoretical deliberations. This includes collaborative system mapping in their practice context allowing the research idea to be shared and co developed with other service providers. It also allows the perspectives of team members other than the researcher to be exposed and included. The research supervision process begins with a sharing of this mapping history and impact on and movement in the systems is an ongoing aspect of discussion. This provides a mechanism for students to record a live commentary on the practice context, to accommodate and manage change and to take appropriate credit for influencing change.

Case example

This section of the discussion is developed around an example of the supervision of a fictional professional doctorate student, whose practice project was to study expert to novice practice transfer, through a 24 h telephone advice line for professionals dealing with palliative care. The advice line itself was staffed with palliative care professionals, so that the most appropriate advice could be given to generalists having to care for someone at the

end of their life. As such, the advice line had an educative function, as well as one of linking and bridging professional practices. However, during the course of the project initial barriers to the development project were lifted, which meant that the student could then afford to be more ambitious conceptually and practically. Indeed, three key things happened, which could change the scope of the development project: a change in senior staffing meant that the practice area's philosophy was altered to become more multidisciplinary; a policy direction appeared, which favoured the implementation of care pathways; and the practice area employed a new member of staff to look specifically at the dissemination of palliative care knowledge in the area. We use two phrases to categories such contextual changes; incoming system impact factors (ISIF) (issues in the practice context influencing the research) and outgoing system impact factors (OSIF) (ways the research is influencing the practice context) (Fig. 2).

This initial system mapping enabled the student to identify knowledge transfer as one system among others in the context of the local palliative care provision. Thus clarifying what the research is focussed on and what is peripheral. This provides a means for students to anchor their thinking as the practice development endeavour can easily mushroom. It is perhaps important to acknowledge that this point, that the fact that these practitioner are registered as professional doctorate students, means that that they are enthusiastic and ambitious for practice improvement

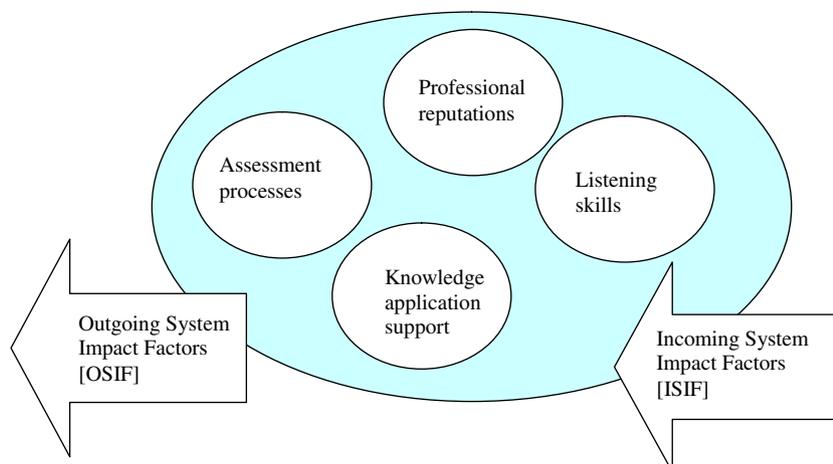


Fig. 2. Summarises the system mapping related to this project.

and change. She established this mapping in collaboration with colleagues, and identified incoming and outgoing system impact factors.

- Incoming System Impact Factors [ISIF] – changes that were occurring external to the research/practice development but with the potential to influence; changes in team dynamics, staff changes, new policy introduction are examples.
- Outgoing System Impact Factors OSIF – changes that were occurring in the practice context as a consequence of research activity, and which had a potential to influence the wider practice context. Heightened awareness of a service provision need, changes in one service impacting on the demand for, increased reflection on practice processes are examples.

The visual impact of using a graphical representation of the systems enables the student–researcher–practitioner to communicate her ideas in the practice surroundings, therefore generating discussion and fostering interest in the practice development process. The student herself becomes the agent and catalyst of enhanced reflective practice among fellow practitioners.

Mapping of the core system then allows the sub systems relevant to it to emerge as the research progresses:

- Assessment processes: assessment without visual input, assessment based on another perception of a patient need.
- Knowledge application support: processes of encouragement and support required to apply newly gained knowledge.
- Listening skills; identify all cues, promoting for additional information.
- Professional cultures: issues of professional maturity impacting on advice seeking, interprofessional protocols.

Accommodating the ISIFs, being clear about ownership of and responsibility for the OSIFs and developing the theoretical concepts encapsulates the professional doctoral endeavour and supervisor needs and roles.

Professional doctorate supervision system

As a result from these reflections, the practice, the research, the student and the supervisor can be situated and represented in one last system: the system of professional doctorate supervision. In this case, the research undertaken by the student becomes a sub-system, with its own, but not necessarily divorced, incoming and outgoing impact factors (Fig. 3).

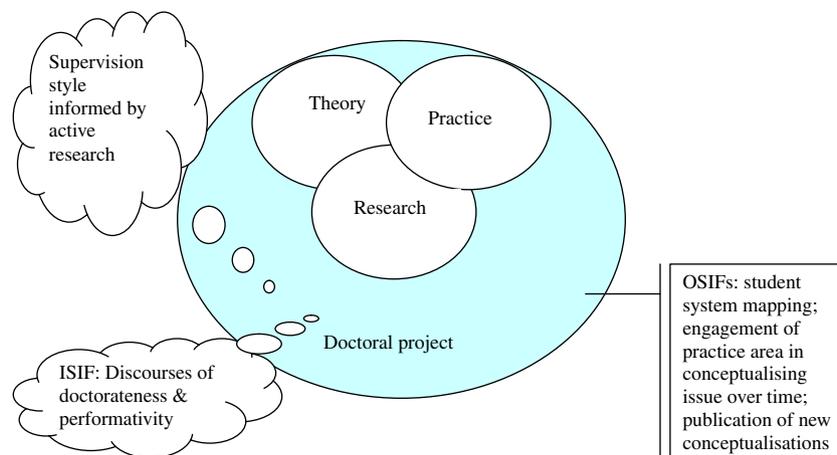


Fig. 3. The system of professional doctorate supervision.

The incoming (ISIFs) and outgoing (OSIFs) system influencing factors, as tools, bring cultures closer, by visualising what the practice development research is trying to achieve. This is done in a way that encompasses conflicting and evolving worldviews, so that every existing or emerging element with a potential impact on the project is taken into account. The process also has the potential to make a contribution resolving some of the practice and education cultural differences inherent in international doctoral research supervision (Evans, 2007).

Summary and conclusions

The emergence of professional doctorates challenges the traditional expectations of the PhD (Park, 2005) and indeed the nature of doctorateness. New supporting methodologies, such as the one proposed here, are needed for both students and supervisors, to manoeuvre the muddy waters of practice development research at doctoral level.

Whilst we advocate the use of soft system methodology for the supervision process, we do not wish to impose this as a way of working, and resolving situations, for every doctoral student. As exposed here, we found soft system methodology helpful in encouraging students to formulate comprehensively their initial project, but the resolution happens on the longer term, as they progress with their doctorate. For them, continuing to use SSM should help them accommodate for contextual changes in structure and climate, and let those inform the process of their study.

Our use of the methodology is not to solve problems per se, but to visualise the 'problem situation' in all its complexities, and to acknowledge environmental changes, not as hindrances which could challenge the relevance of their research, but as system impact factors. This process helps students to conceptualise their doctoral project as process rather than merely driven by output. In other words, the importance for our students is to engage with the process of doing a doctorate in the real world, whilst capturing the cumulative and dynamic changes in their practice area, rather than focus only on an eventual addition to knowledge.

This paper complements supervision structural discussions (HEFCE, 2003; Thomson et al., 2005) and adds to the current debates around the craft of PhD supervision, in highlighting potential strategies of undertaking and supervising professional doctoral research. In this process, it fosters the creation of new discourses, more suited to professional doctorates, with an emphasis on practice engagement in a way that constructs meaning out of the 'swamp' of practice in a way that is theoretically underpinned, that

results from a rigorous engagement with research process and is meaningful to the student's professional arena.

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