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A learning-centred blended model for professional doctorates

Innovative impact

A solid pedagogy can ensure the achievement of the learning outcomes set for any university qualification, whether at undergraduate or postgraduate level. Currently there is an urgent need for a wider consideration of appropriate pedagogies for doctoral programmes.

This paper looks in particular at the characteristics of professional doctorates, which are typically studied part-time and focus on researching a professional setting. Based on the needs of these programmes, it proposes a learning-centred blended mode of delivery that fosters students' engagement with activities anchored in the set learning outcomes. The range of activities aims at facilitating the multiple interactions necessary for competent researchers by making use of the resources, tools and spaces within two main learning environments: the virtual and the physical.

This model prompts universities to consider appropriate pedagogies for the delivery of professional doctorates and suggests the need to ensure the alignment of their approaches with available technologies, educational policies, and practices of teaching and learning in their institutions. In order to ensure a successful implementation, such a consideration must also include effective action for the development of the relevant academic staff.

Introduction

During the past decade, the fundamental value of doctorate programmes has shifted from getting an award to developing as a life-long researcher by means of research skills training, research management, team working and effective communication, among others. This movement has brought a focus on learning outcomes at doctoral level which in the UK are based on the expectations set up by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (2015).

Scott et al. (2004) highlighted the neglect of pedagogy in doctoral programmes; surprisingly, they found out that this issue also affected professional doctorates in Education. Since then, the UK has experienced an increase in the provision of professional doctorates (Mellors-Burne et al., 2016), putting pressure on the development of solid pedagogical approaches suitable for this level and mode of study.

This article aims at outlining the elements of a blended approach to the study of professional doctorate programmes. The proposed approach intends to be a contribution to the pedagogical principles that could guide effective teaching and learning at doctoral level.

Thinking of pedagogy at doctoral level

From the point of view of the students' learning experience, the elements of a blended model could be conceived as the building blocks that support the learning outcomes at level 8 (SEEC, 2016). These components are crucial for the systematic acquisition and development of knowledge, understanding, skills and attributes of students working and researching in a range of contexts and professional settings.

Pedagogy is a broad concept that is concerned with "interactions between teachers, students, and the learning environment and the learning tasks" (Murphy et al., 2008, p. 35). A learning-centred blended pedagogy not only motivates students by means of facilitating activities for the learning of knowledge content using digital technologies, but it also makes possible "knowledge use and the development of new literacy skills" (Churchill, 2017, p. 242).

When pedagogy is appropriate to the context and activities are clearly framed, the set learning outcomes are achieved.

Characteristics of professional doctorates

Professional doctorates are research degrees undertaken by individuals commonly investigating their own places of work. They are based on professional experiences and aim at producing a significant

The Doctorate in Education at the Open University in the UK

The blended approach described here has been applied to the design of the Professional Doctorate in Education (EdD) at the Open University in the United Kingdom.

This is a distance learning programme that focuses on four main specialist clusters which are not exclusive and normally overlap – Childhood and Youth, Educational Studies, Language and Literacy, and Technology Enhanced Learning. It has been offered for the last 20 years and during this period of time, it was transformed from a reliance on print to a wide use of appropriate technologies. The programme website offers students and supervisors a digital home.

Each doctoral researcher has typically the support of two supervisors and a Third Party Monitor who provides pastoral care. In addition, multiple types of interaction are encouraged throughout the programme giving students access to peers in different cohorts, other postgraduates doing a PhD and other supervisors in workshops, seminars, work in progress presentations, both in virtual and physical environments.

References

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- Fell, T., Flint, K., & Haines, I. (2011). *Professional Doctorates in the UK 2011*. Staffordshire: UK Council for Graduate Education.
- Mellors-Burne, R., Robinson, C., & Metcalfe, J. (2016). *Provision*

original contribution to practice and practical knowledge in a specific professional field – for instance, Education, Medicine, Business, or Engineering. These programmes are, therefore, driven by practitioners and make an impact “both on the workplace environment and on the employer’s capacity to develop innovative strategies to resolve professional challenges as they may arise” (Fell et al. 2011, p. 15). The degree also aims at contributing directly to the holder’s professional career.

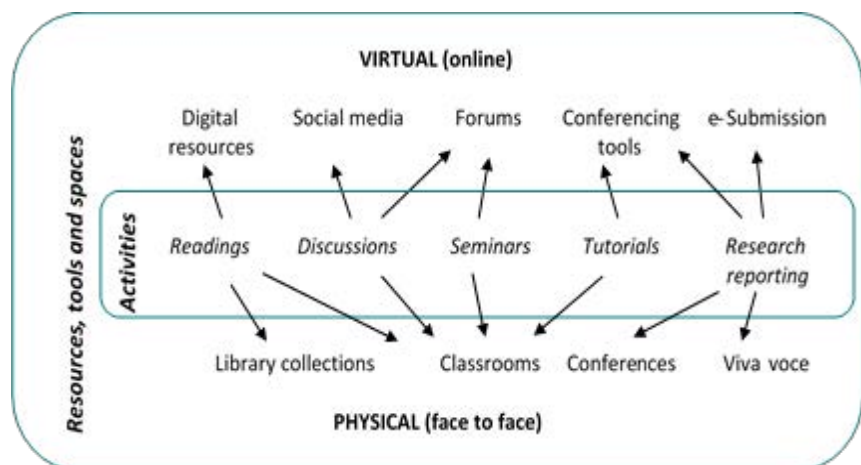
Professional doctorates are usually studied part-time (while working full-time), and are highly structured with a taught component that is sometimes delivered in modules, units or a set of resources. Lectures, coursework, and crucial final summative assessment with a written component (thesis) and an oral component (viva voce examination) are all part of the training process of these postgraduate degrees.

Given the nature of the professional doctorates, the offer to study them at a distance has grown in the UK, which seems to have made them more attractive to international students (Mellors-Burne et al., 2016).

A blended model for professional doctorates

A blended approach that integrates online, face-to-face and independent learning is the preferred study mode offered by institutions for professional doctoral researchers (Mellors-Burne et al., 2016). However, little is known and shared about what this means, in practical terms, for different universities.

A blended model for these programmes needs to facilitate doctoral researchers’ interactions among themselves, with supervisors and other academic and administrative staff, with resources as well as with relevant digital technologies. In the proposed model here, each learning activity involves one or more of those interactions and has two potential environments where it could be realised: a virtual one which happens online, and a physical one for face to face encounters.



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Murphy, P. (2008). Defining pedagogy. In K. Hall, P. Murphy & J. Soler (Eds.), *Pedagogy and practice: culture and identities* (pp. 28-39). London: SAGE publications.

Powell, A., Rabbitt, B., & Kennedy, K. (2014). *iNACOL Blended Learning Teacher Competency Framework*. Retrieved from: <https://www.inacol.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/iNACOL-Blended-Learning-Teacher-Competency-Framework.pdf>

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Scott, D. Brown, A., Lunt, I., & Thorne, L. (2004). *Professional Doctorates: Integrating Professional and Academic Knowledge*. Milton Keynes: Society for Research into Higher Education & Open University Press.

SEEC (2016). *Credit Level Descriptors for Higher Education*. Luton: Centre for Learning Excellence, University of Bedfordshire. Retrieved from: <http://www.seec.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/SEEC-descriptors-2016.pdf>

Activities can also take place simultaneously in both of these environments, for instance, when digital resources are used in classrooms.

Higher education institutions can choose the degree to which they want to utilise these environments to maximise doctoral candidates' feel of the research community within and outside their More importantly, the design of the model on the one hand, should be sensitive to students' personal needs, for instance, in terms of their locations or disabilities. On the other hand, it requires a set of activities that contribute to the achievement of the learning outcomes and the fulfilment of formative and summative evaluation criteria. In the process of becoming researchers, students need to be able to develop a set of relevant skills and subject knowledge. A main quality indicator for universities is that students are able to do learn about research in a supportive environment.

Conclusion

In professional doctorates, the popular blended approach needs to ensure learning-centred principles, and solid guidance and training for supervisors. The most recent review of the provision of professional doctorates in English Higher Education institutions highlighted the importance of supervision teams and wondered about the extent to which these could be fully effective at a distance (Mellors-Burne et al., 2016). The blended learning teacher development framework organised into four domains — mindsets, qualities, adaptive skills, and technical skills — and 12 competencies (Powell et al., 2014) could be used as a tool for the development of members of staff guiding doctoral researchers.

If higher education institutions aspire to integrate quality pedagogical practice in postgraduate programmes, not only do they need clear pedagogical models, but they also have to ensure the alignment of their proposed guidelines with technical infrastructures, other educational policies, and practices of teaching and learning in their institutions.