

## **Impact on Management Practice after Completing the DBA**

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### **Published version**

BREESE, Richard, ISSA, Samah and TRESIDDER, Richard (2021). Impact on Management Practice after Completing the DBA. In: 2021 Engaged Management Scholarship (EMS) Conference, Miami, FL, 9-12 Sep 2021.

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## **IMPACT ON MANAGEMENT PRACTICE AFTER COMPLETING THE DBA**

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Acknowledgement : The authors wish to acknowledge the contribution of Blerim Islamaj, the Project Researcher who assisted with the pilot study.

**ABSTRACT** – The contribution of DBA research to management practice after the researcher has completed their thesis requires further investigation. The evidence so far is based on small scale studies, often in the wider field of professional doctorates, rather than being specifically focused on the DBA as a management qualification. A pilot study of five DBA alumni from Sheffield Business School revealed a wide range of different impacts in the workplace, covering changes to their own practice, wider applications in their organisations/work with clients, producing materials for professional bodies/networks, publishing findings for a wider audience and use in teaching at universities or other education bodies. This suggests promising avenues for further research on the impact on management practice after completing the DBA. A large scale, international study does not seem to have been undertaken so far, and would enable a more detailed understanding of the role of the DBA in relation to changes in management practice to be obtained than has been hitherto achieved.

Keywords: DBA, management practice, impact

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## **IMPACT ON MANAGEMENT PRACTICE AFTER COMPLETING THE DBA**

**ABSTRACT** – The contribution of DBA research to management practice after the researcher has completed their thesis requires further investigation. The evidence so far is based on small scale studies, often in the wider field of professional doctorates, rather than being specifically focused on the DBA as a management qualification. A pilot study of five DBA alumni from Sheffield Business School revealed a wide range of different impacts in the workplace, covering changes to their own practice, wider applications in their organisations/work with clients, producing materials for professional bodies/networks, publishing findings for a wider audience and use in teaching at universities or other education bodies. This suggests promising avenues for further research on the impact on management practice after completing the DBA. A large scale, international study does not seem to have been undertaken so far, and would enable a more detailed understanding of the role of the DBA in relation to changes in management practice to be obtained than has been hitherto achieved.

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## **Introduction**

The DBA at Sheffield Business School (part of Sheffield Hallam University) started in 2000, so it is one of the longer-running courses in the UK. The DBA programme has developed over the years, including international collaborative courses with Business School Netherlands (no longer recruiting), Munich Business School (MBS) and Zagreb School of Economic and Management (ZSEM). There are over 60 alumni, but hitherto no systematic attempt has been made to identify the impact of the completed DBAs on management practice.

Because of the expansion of the course in recent years, there are about 110 current students. Therefore, we expect that the number of completions will rise significantly. Current and future students could benefit from examples of how DBA research has been used to influence management practice. While the thesis provides details of the contribution to practice as a key part of the requirements for a DBA, how does that contribution develop after the DBA is completed? Are potential benefits for management practice realised? Are there further benefits achieved which were not anticipated when the thesis was drafted?

Support for a pilot study was obtained from an internal Sheffield Hallam University 'Connecting with professional practice' programme' with the aim being *'to develop the professional practice contribution of the DBA, by reviewing the changes to practice arising from DBA research'*. The project was required to identify and analyse five examples of practice contributions by DBA alumni.

The next two sections describe the pilot study method and the findings. Then a literature review summarises some of the studies so far on the impact of professional doctorates. A final section identifies potential research questions, opportunities for further research and seeks collaborative approaches to further projects.

## **Pilot Study method**

The DBA course leaders identified potential case studies from their own knowledge of DBA alumni and sought suggestions from other key individuals who had been involved in the course over its lifetime so far. The aim was to achieve a mix amongst the case studies, on a number of criteria including year of thesis completion, 'home'/collaborative courses and professional background.

Individuals were approached using documentation and ethical protocols for qualitative research. Five DBA alumni agreed to take part, and none of them sought anonymity, so their names can be used later on in this paper. The five interviews were carried out, in May, 2021, lasting between 40-80 minutes each. A common semi-structured approach to each interview was used, covering the following,

- Professional background
- Timelines – especially thesis completion date and any subsequent milestones
- Subject matter of the DBA thesis and contributions to practice in the research itself, eg if action research
- contributions to practice claimed in the thesis
- Contributions to practice following the completion of the thesis, such as (this list is illustrative)
  - changes to your own practice
  - wider applications in your organisation/work with clients
  - producing materials for professional bodies/networks
  - publishing findings for a wider audience, eg in a published book
  - use in teaching at universities or other education bodies.
- Possible further contributions to practice

- Documentation (if any) available on your contributions and its status – publicly available or not
- Further opportunities for collaboration, approval of case study summary and further outputs, any further issues.

The five case studies are summarised in Table 1.

**Table 1 : The five participants in the pilot study**

Name	DBA Course	Thesis date	Professional Background	Thesis title
Dr Michael Benson	SHU	2020	Food manufacturing/retailing	Value Creation in Category Management Relationships in the UK Grocery Market
Dr Christopher Chamberlain	SHU/Munich Business School	2019	HR, particularly in Engineering companies	Explorative study of HRM integration within DAX30 German Automotive manufacturer
Dr Caroline Cole	SHU	2007	Financial Services	The emotions of individuals during strategic and organizational change: a hermeneutic exploration
Dr Gerard Ekhart	SHU/Business School Netherlands	2019	Manufacturing Operations/Supply chain	Made @ Europe – manufacturing location decisions for the 21 <sup>st</sup> century
Dr Sarah Fidment	SHU	2016	Higher education	Who do you think you are? A hermeneutic study of leaders' identities

### **Pilot Study Findings**

The findings are summarised under the five headings in the interview schedule, with each theme in the findings relating to one or more of the cases. Some of the contributions identified apply to more than one of the five categories. In particular, there is an overlap between ‘wider applications in your organisation’ and ‘use in teaching at universities or other education bodies’ as two of the participants, Michael Benson and Sarah Fidment, are full-time academics at Sheffield Hallam University.

### Changes to your own practice

- Topics for doctoral research were chosen to explore approaches to professional practice in the workplace during the DBA researcher's career so far
- The DBA deepened understanding of those topics, leading to more confidence in making changes in the workplace (as employee or consultant)
- In at least one case there was an explicit goal to develop models to use in future practice, which was realised
- In some cases, there were unexpected insights from the research, altering or strengthening future practice.

### Wider applications in your organisation/work with clients

- In one case, major strategic changes were made in a new job, started after completing the DBA
- In another case, clients were advised to take a particular approach to change in the organisation – DBA research being translated into specific organisational contexts
- Development of new teaching materials, involving innovative pedagogy (overlap with 'use in teaching at universities').

### Producing materials for professional bodies/networks

- Presentations for practitioner conferences (overlap with 'publishing findings for a wide audience')
- There was a case of Involvement in a professional network, where the researcher perspective helps to address difficult issues and resolve tensions between different stakeholder groups



- In one case, the DBA researcher was subsequently involved in developing national standards for HE courses, in collaboration with professional and statutory bodies, where the approach they took was influenced by their DBA research findings (overlap with ‘use in teaching at universities or other education bodies’)
- Articles for industry publications (overlap with ‘publishing findings for a wider audience’).

Publishing findings for a wider audience, eg in a published book

- There were many examples of conference presentations, including practitioner conferences, academic conferences and conferences to address the theory-practice divide (overlap with ‘producing materials for professional bodies/networks’)
- In one case, a book for a wider non-academic audience being written
- Articles for industry publications (overlap with ‘producing materials for professional bodies/networks’)
- Article on research methodology and professional practice in a DBA (overlap with ‘use in teaching at universities or other education bodies’)
- Article for an academic journal developing the theoretical contribution of the thesis.

Use in teaching at universities or other education bodies.

- Development of new teaching materials, involving innovative pedagogy (overlap with wider applications in your organisation/work with clients)
- National standards produced, in collaboration with professional and statutory bodies, influenced by DBA research findings (overlap with producing materials for professional bodies/networks)

- Contributions to DBA teaching/supervision
- Article on research methodology and professional practice in a DBA (overlap with publishing findings for a wider audience).

These contributions suggest a wide and varied range of benefits arising from the DBA research. The question of attribution arises (Boud et al., 2021; Breese, 2012). Could these benefits have occurred anyway if the participant had not undertaken their DBA? Such questions are hypothetical, of course, and for our purposes the key point is that all these contributions are tangible and can be evidenced through associated documentation.

### **Literature Review**

Much of the literature relates to the wider category of ‘professional doctorates’, and there is little research undertaken specifically on the impact of DBAs, as a sub-category. Therefore, this review covers professional doctorates, while aiming to single out DBA contributions, where possible.

Professional doctorates have increased in popularity in recent years as a part of the development portfolio of leading professionals and advanced practitioners in the workplace (Costley and Lester 2012). This popularity has been driven by the belief that such doctorates bridge academia and practice via knowledge exchange (Boud and Tennant 2006) and provide an effective development route for talented professionals across many sectors. One key element of professional doctorates is that, beside the expected contribution to theory, they are required to deliver impact on personal and professional practice in the workplace (Boud et al., 2018; Mellors-Bourne et al., 2016).

Antonacopoulou (2006) suggests that the impact of employee's academic learning on their organisations has generally been difficult to measure and evidence. Few studies have investigated the impact of professional doctorates on individual practitioners and their own professional life (e.g., Costley and Stephenson 2008; Lester 2004; Nixon et al. 2008) and literature on the impact of such doctorates on the workplace itself and on practice in its field of application has been limited (Wellington and Sikes 2006; Boud et al., 2018). Interviewing 25 professional doctorate graduates from the criminal justice sector, Creaton and Anderson (2021) have attempted to conceptualize the impact of professional doctorates as socially constructed in professional contexts through cooperation between students, employers and professional networks. The analysis shows that impact construction is a complex and nuanced process, involving interactions between graduates and significant others beyond the realm of universities. However, it might be questioned to what extent Creaton and Anderson's (2021) findings are specific to criminal justice contexts.

In an investigation of the effect of EdDs on graduates' personal and professional lives, Wellington and Sikes (2006) suggest that the doctorate is seen as being largely beneficial to the individual rather than the professional or organisational practice (see also Lee et al., 2009 and Stephenson et al., 2006). Similarly, Smith (2013) found that there was little impact of professional doctorates in nursing within the workplace. Fox and Slade (2014) suggest that the personal impact professional doctorates leave on graduates may lead to alterations to interactions within their organisations indicating different possible forms of what could be seen as potential impact. However, due the complexity of the professional learning process, Fox and Slade (2014) discovered no straightforward links between undertaking doctorate degrees and achieving organisational impact. Costley and Abukari (2015) also found that professional doctorate graduates might be able to make organisational change due to being perceived as more credible by their colleagues (potentially due to personal skills achieved via the doctorate

such as increased confidence and insight, empowerment, and greater writing and research abilities, as suggested by Stephenson et al. (2006)). Although there is a growing literature identifying the personal benefits of undertaking a professional doctorate, the evidence of wider impact on the workplace remains limited. Haggis (2011) and Pratt et al. (2015) suggest exploring graduates' activities in a multi-level manner focusing on personal, professional as well as workplace impact. There is a lack of long-term longitudinal research, an exception being a study of the Work-based professional Doctorate in Public Health at the University of New South Wales, which has been running since 2009 (Meyer, 2020).

Using a random sample of 9 alumni of a professional doctorate at Middlesex University, London, Boud et al. (2018) undertook interviews between three to seven years after their graduation. They found that there were multiple signs of influence on organisations and professional contexts. They found that graduates' reputation and their practitioner research experience have enabled them to make organisational impact. In a more recent study, Boud et al. (2021) looked at wider effects of professional doctorates post-graduation to determine potential continuing long-term impact on professional practice of the graduates. The study was conducted as a collaborative enquiry by a group of academics and seven non-discipline-specific professional doctoral alumni. They found that there was considerable impact on the wider context of the alumni, but these effects were due more to the capacity-building effect of the doctorate than the outcomes of the study undertaken.

Mellors-Bourne et al. (2016) identified limited robust evidence of the impact of professional doctorates on the workplace, and called for more research on this topic. However, the value of professional doctorates is multi-faceted (Hawkes and Yerrabati, 2018). While there have been some recent studies to explore impact, these have been small scale, and there are still significant gaps in the literature.

The literature on the impact of DBAs is limited. There are some examples of reports of research in progress (Foster et al., 2016), and of findings seemingly only disseminated in conference papers which are not accessible.

### **Discussion and research opportunities**

The pilot study of the Sheffield Business School DBA suggests that a focus on the longer-term impact of DBAs is required, to see if the contributions to practice might be differentiated from the wider field of professional doctorates. Could it be that the management orientation of DBAs can lead to a different type of impact than for other professional doctorates, where the emphasis is more on the profession? Relevant factors here might be

- Sponsorship by the employer
- Type of employer/self-employed status
- Changes in employer during or after the DBA is completed
- Specific impacts achieved by DBA researchers who are already in academia.

Another issue concerns the scale of previous research projects. They tend to be small scale and focused on one institution. A bigger study with international partners may produce more robust findings.

A further issue concerns the theoretical underpinnings of the research. There are many different options here, and a multi-disciplinary, intersecting concepts approach (Meyer, 2020) may be appropriate. The ‘critical reflexivity’ which is associated with DBA research provides competencies for the practitioner environment (Farrell et al., 2018), but needs to be linked more closely to the contributions to practice arising from the DBA.

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