



Ensuring Doctoral Research Is Relevant to the International Nursing Community

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Nursing Praxis in Aotearoa New Zealand

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A common experience for many nurses undertaking doctoral study is their isolation from the rest of academia alongside a need to develop a network to support and promote their work. At the start of any research, the question the supervisor should be asking of the candidate is the “so what?” of research, not only in the local context of the research but nationally and globally.

Nurses are professionally obligated to understand the world within its wider global health and policy context to shape sustainable, high quality and affordable services to meet individual and population needs (Salvage & White, 2020). The responsibility for us all, as doctoral candidates, established researchers or those somewhere in between, is to find ways to establish that broader engagement, become part of the bigger network and share our research more widely to improve healthcare. The starting point for this is to think about how our work may have international relevance at the *design* phase rather than seeing this as something to address on completion. This is a challenge for individual candidates and supervisors as well as for the discipline as a whole.

Nursing research faces many challenges in establishing itself as a prominent and well-funded discipline (Castro-Sánchez et al., 2021). As a result, and certainly for doctoral candidates, it is very easy for us (as supervisors) to limit the way they think about their research projects, seeking the reassurance of a contained and controlled undertaking. This is a particular issue for candidates on Professional Doctorate programmes that are embedded in particular and often unique work contexts. It can cause problems as we seek to encourage the development of a community of researchers and seek to promote nursing research endeavours more widely. As an example, Dan’s own doctoral work focussed on the way professional identity was developed among UK nursing students in the first year of their professional preparation (Butcher, 2017). At the time Dan, like many research candidates starting out, did not think seriously about the relevance or significance of this work on a broader stage, nor how he might maintain the momentum in the post-doctoral phase. Like many doctoral candidates, the qualification was the goal.

Historically, PhDs have been associated with preparing individuals for research or academic careers, while Professional Doctorates have focused more on the transformation of professional practice through the application of research skills to address practice-based problems and the development of professional identity (Fulton et al., 2012). The first Professional Doctorate programme in Aotearoa New Zealand was offered by Auckland University of Technology in 2002 (AUT, n.d.). Prior to this, nurses travelled to Australia to complete a Professional Doctorate degree. Despite the intent of these two qualifications, the distinct boundaries between doctoral qualifications are often blurred as many nurses undertake practice-based PhDs. Professional Doctorate programmes are intended to support senior nurses working from within their practice to develop new ideas and knowledge which can be applied to their professional practice domain (Fulton et al., 2012). Programmes are designed to recognise the candidates’ prior work experience as entry criteria, have taught components, and accommodate continued work responsibilities (Rees et al., 2019).

By contrast, many PhD programmes (candidateships) in well-established science and medical fields are designed to embed successful candidates in research teams, research centres, departments, groups and communities often with a shared and very specific interest on established and ongoing funded research programmes (Horta et al., 2018). This research infrastructure affords candidates on qualification further post-doctoral research study opportunities (Jull, 2023). However, for nurses the lack of a structured research career pathway means many newly completed doctoral graduates, regardless of qualification awarded, return to education, practice, management, and policy roles whilst trying to consolidate their research skills and interests, unable to access ready-made research communities (Farquharson, 2023). A recent inquiry by Farquharson (2023) has successfully illuminated the factors that impede nurses from assuming a leading role in funded research. A lack of multi-disciplinary collaborations and not having access to a research-supportive environment were two key factors. At the end of Dan’s own doctoral education, he found himself in this exact situation, unsure of how to establish himself

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in this new community. For Aotearoa New Zealand nursing researchers, this dynamic can feel intensified by geographical isolation, and a small population size that promotes a sense of being remote and, possibly, overlooked.

During the COVID-19 pandemic Aotearoa New Zealand, had globally the strictest and longest border closures and isolation procedures (Hales, 2021). While lockdowns and quarantine measures presented significant challenges for our profession and our colleagues across the globe, it also saw a considerable increase in international communication and research collaboration over the Internet. It was during COVID-19 that Dan's collaborations with researchers in Aotearoa New Zealand began.

In writing this editorial we are attempting to find ways to address the challenges outlined above by taking advantage of the opportunities we are presented with in supporting doctoral candidates, and indeed all nursing researchers to promote and make research relevant to the global nursing community. Our engagement with the literature must consider topics from an international perspective even when issues may have a local genesis (Libório et al., 2023). While much research seeks to address local issues, it is important to adopt a global health perspective on the issue where possible, engaging in the breadth of literature available. In doing so, we are suggesting that we must always think globally about nursing and health issues but act locally to ensure that the *impact* of our work happens within our communities first and foremost (Salvage & White, 2020).

Attendance at conferences provides a useful way of both hearing from and speaking to others involved in your area of research. While attending as a remote delegate is a very different experience from in-person attendance, it is possible to engage in discussions from which we might previously have been excluded simply because of location, time

zone or financial restrictions. Finally, discussions with colleagues that focus on ways to look at our research from a broader perspective are also valuable. Being challenged to think critically about how elements of our work can reach beyond the immediate setting, national and regional borders can help us to examine much that is taken for granted.

Given our privileged positions in supporting doctoral candidates, we recognise the significant responsibility we bear to establish and nurture a robust research scholarship community from the outset for the Professional Doctorate programmes. Together, we set about the task of establishing a nursing research community between our 2022/3 Professional Doctorate candidates at Oxford Brookes University, United Kingdom and Victoria University of Wellington, Aotearoa New Zealand. Through cultivating a research-supportive environment we aim to foster international engagement that offers a unique space within our programmes for our candidates to share their ideas, join in online learning modules, attend research school presentations, and connect with each other. In doing so, over the next four to six years of their enrolment in our programmes, the candidates will have opportunities to become familiar with other academic institutions and health systems, broaden their knowledge and learn from and help each other, together with making new research networks along the way (Dusdal & Powell, 2021). We hope that our intended vision, influence and global partnership in this Professional Doctorate space supports the application of research that goes beyond its original location, circumstances, and context that is crucial for the establishment of global nursing research communities.

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