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Exploring the Value of Doctoral Study in College-based Higher Education: A Practitioner Perspective

Jane Davis

Associate member of the Centre for Technology Enhanced Learning, Lancaster University, UK

ABSTRACT

This paper takes the form of an 'on the horizon' piece, presenting the outcomes of a small pilot research activity that sought to explore the value of doctoral research undertaken by four practitioners employed in College-based Higher Education. (CBHE) The paper reflects on the thematic analysis of narratives provided through loosely structured interviews that sought the participants' perceptions of the value of their doctoral journey from aspiration to actualisation. The outcomes of the research activity are considered in the context of a range of literature that explores the value and impact of doctoral study. The discussion is widened by the consideration of references made by participants as to the way in which their experience could have been further enhanced through different forms of organisational engagement. The paper concludes by drawing together themes from the research that could be supported by a wider study of doctoral researchers in CBHE.

Keywords: doctoral research; value; College-based Higher Education.

Introduction

Whilst there are increasing numbers of doctoral programmes, whether PhD or EdD, that provide opportunities for education practitioners from school and college sectors, there appears to have been comparatively little focused engagement with the experience of doctoral researchers based within the further education sector. There is much research into the experience of doctoral students, and yet the duality of the professional role identity experienced by many practitioners in the HE in FE sector suggests a complexity not foregrounded by the full-time, university-based candidate. Indeed, Baker and Lattuca (2010, p. 823) suggest:

Students in professional doctoral programs are embedded in different learning and research cultures [...] Taylor's (2007) exploratory study found that these complex environments influenced how students in professional doctoral programs made sense of "being betwixt and between the university and the workplace", and also how they made sense of their own professional development and change processes.

This research activity sought to provide an initial exploration of such experience and to ascertain the degree to which a small group of doctoral students working in college-based education found value from their academic development and their research activities. By reporting the findings and analysis from a small-scale pilot study, this paper seeks to establish whether or not a wider research activity would be of benefit to the sector.

The research activity

The research activity initially focused on the value that was ascribed, by four HE in FE practitioners, to the process of undertaking doctoral study. The term *value* would, in this context, be assigned the meaning *positive value* or *positive effect*, this being clarified to

participants at the outset. Four practitioners, employed in differing roles within HE in FE and at different institutions, agreed to participate in the initial research.

Participants were known to the researcher, through either doctoral or professional networks, and responded to a request for participants in the study. All four practitioners were female and had worked in the sector for some years before deciding to start their doctoral studies. Two participants worked as middle or senior managers, whilst the other two worked as programme leaders in undergraduate and postgraduate curriculum areas. All participants worked within mixed economy colleges with substantial HE student numbers.

Interviews were loosely structured around four key areas of enquiry: the anticipated value of undertaking doctoral research, the value of the doctoral process or journey, the value of the award or outcome, and the opportunity to add any thoughts on the value of doctoral study that the interviewee wished to bring to my attention. The notion of value could apply to either the participant themselves or to others, as they wished. Each interview was transcribed and, once validated by the participant, thematic analysis of each narrative was undertaken. Themes were then tabulated and collated to bring together a core of meaningful outcomes for consideration against the literature.

Findings from the research

The anticipated value of doctoral study

All four participants told of their desire for personal development in seeking to undertake doctoral study, each having enjoyed Masters' study and wishing to extend the professional and academic journey they had commenced through the attainment of a postgraduate award, whilst also establishing their credibility as "an academic". Three of the participants had been undertaking professional or

practice-based research and described the way in which they considered doctoral study would support their professional activity through research that supported an alignment of theory and practice.

The value of an academic profile was reported as being of particular importance to two participants, who explained that they did not have a traditional academic background or route into teaching at higher level and for whom the writing of a doctoral thesis might have been perceived as unusual. A third participant saw the need for academic credibility, this being perceived as an essential qualification for a desired career in the university sector. The motivation for undertaking doctoral study is widely cited as being the route through which would-be academics establish credibility as they seek careers within the university sector (Thompson, Smith, & Cooper, 2012; Baker & Lattuca, 2010). The intrinsic motivation associated with lifelong learning is less evident in literature.

Two participants felt that their enrolment on a doctoral programme would provide value to their department(s) and in extension their college when seeking validation of postgraduate programmes, thus gaining financial support from their institution. This position reflects the increasing focus on the benefits of scholarly activity as colleges are subject to review by the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) or undertake the journey towards Foundation Degree-awarding powers (FDAP). Solvason and Elliott (2013) assert, "There persists the view that a college tutor gaining a qualification which results in a box ticked will, somehow, add to value", whilst Healey, Jordan, Pell and Short (2010, p. 241) consider that "student perceptions of staff research as cutting edge and industry-linked may become increasingly significant". Whether one or both perspective(s) be most appropriate, both literature and findings would support the reflection by Tutor D in the report by Solvason and Elliott (2013, p. 9), "I believe that now, within my institution, there is, at last, a growing recognition that those of us who deliver higher education need to undertake relevant CPD and higher courses of study".

The value of the doctoral journey

Changes to role identity

Barnacle and Mewburn (2010, p. 2) assert, "As anyone who has undertaken a doctoral-level degree will tell you, doing a doctorate changes you. Different people in different contexts and disciplines will change, of course, in different ways", a theme that emerged clearly from participants' narratives. All four participants reported a sense of becoming a different person. Their reflections included, "getting a better understanding of my own ontological and epistemological stance, in itself supporting self-criticality" (Participant D), the adoption of changing roles (Participants B and C), and the forward momentum of the changes: "I didn't want to go back to being a practitioner alone, which was where I'd come from" (Participant B). Baker and Lattuca (2010) consider the conceptual association between intellectual growth and subsequent changes to doctoral students' perceptions of identification and role identity, highlighting also the impact of "perceptions of others who influence one's understandings" (p. 809). The duality of influence experienced through doctoral students working within predominantly further education culture but associating within higher research communities would thus seem to provide a psychic tension and a dissonance in terms of role perception.

This sense of change and the tensions associated with the development of new role identities seemed particularly relevant when considered in the light of the highlighted value of engagement with, and the enjoyment of belonging to, research communities, a view expressed by all participants. Barnacle and Mewburn (2010, p. 440) highlight, "individual research degree candidates will inevitably occupy different knowing locations and, as such, will participate within different networks". The impact of experiencing diverse epistemological networks and/or communities was reported as

being exacerbated for participants where the research focus did not directly relate to the further education context. Baker and Lattuca (2010, p. 819) comment, "Doctoral students may [...] perceive that they need to shed past identities (e.g. practitioner, artist, activist) that appear to conflict with the adoption of new identities (e.g. researcher, teacher)"; indeed, not one of the participants is working in exactly the same role as that held at the start of their studies.

Benefits to students and the college

All four participants reported that their own learning journey had value for the students in their institution. This was by far the most strongly emphasised perception of where the doctoral experience has provided added value.

In each case, the participant was better able to support the students within their own learning context due to their personal experience of developing cognitive skills, subject knowledge and professional engagement at doctoral level, a position also reflected by participants in the study by Solvason and Elliott (2013). Participant A commented, "The quality of my knowledge got better because I was actually living and breathing it", whilst Participant B reported, "It was better, it was more comfortable for me to push my students to [explore the unknown] because I could talk from my own personal experiences". The four research participants also reflected on their increased expectations that students should seek to work with greater autonomy, their own ability to provide more focused feedback and the way in which their activity proved an inspiration for students' own research. These findings help to provide a degree of counterbalance to the perspective of Solvason and Elliott (2013, p. 6), who report, "Many college tutors do not feel confident with a research based approach to teaching, as they, themselves, are not confident researchers". However, taking this perspective into account, the apparent lack of doctoral research being undertaken within college-based higher education would appear to be an opportunity cost.

Three participants also reported on the value that they felt their academic journey had brought to their management skills (at various levels in their organisation), whether this was through a greater ability to influence the culture of their team, a more critical and confident approach to writing management reports, or a willingness to ask the difficult questions that took their team into uncharted territories.

Reflecting on the value of completing the doctorate

The participants were asked to reflect on the value of their doctoral study, having completed or being close to completion of their research journey. All participants felt that they had gained credibility within the context of higher education or research communities. Only one participant felt that same degree of credibility was being accorded by their own organisation. Nonetheless, all participants expressed growth in their own sense of self-worth – a new confidence, a change in their expectations of the roles of teacher/manager and an appreciation of the importance of scholarly activity within college-based higher education.

Further thoughts on the value of doctoral study

Despite the initially stated focus of the interviews, all participants wished to draw attention to aspects of organisational or institutional culture that could be developed to increase the value of their learning and research journeys. Three of the four participants reflected that the value of their doctoral journey would have been enhanced if there had been greater interest in their activity from peers and managers alike. For example, Participant B reflected, "I don't particularly feel that managers, at that stage, were interested any longer [following programme validation]. And so, I think that if

you don't have the support network of your managers then you tend to sort of step back a bit"; and Participant D lamented, "It felt a bit weird because nobody wanted to really hear about the outcomes of my research – particularly frustrating as my research was practice based and had lessons that could be learned – perhaps it was perceived as being too abstract?" Participant A commented, "If FE colleges doing HE want to get more out of it then they need to get more involved and have more interest in those who are doing it to maximise the potential I suppose". In the case of Participant C, the research outcomes were discussed in the context of a relatively small discipline team, some of whom already had experienced the doctoral journey. In contrast with the other participants, C felt that her doctoral research had given her legitimacy; she felt now that others listened to what she had to say. She was passionate about the value of the scholarly activity she had undertaken, taking up the call for there to be greater potential for practitioner involvement in research-based activity: "I think teachers in FE need to be very, very brave about their claim [entitlement] to research and be part of a scholarly community. Otherwise, it's dead in the water".

Conclusion

This research has highlighted the way in which the perceived values of doctoral study, for practitioners in college-based higher education and for their students, may be counterbalanced, at least in part, by culture dualities and epistemic difference. Whilst a number of the themes align with those reported through the wider literature on the doctoral experience, the greater complexities impacting on the role identification experienced by doctoral candidates working within college-based higher education deserve further attention. Future research would involve engaging in a longitudinal study with a larger, mixed-gender group of participants as they undertake

their journey, using data not only from interviews but also recorded through contributions to diaries or secure social networking spaces. A phenomenographical approach to data analysis, undertaken and then recursively reviewed at stages of the doctoral journey, would inform a subsequent discussion as to the impact or otherwise of professional culture on the doctoral journey for those working in college-based higher education.

Furthermore, this paper brings forward a reflected desire, on the part of participants, for an enhanced experience of doctoral study through a greater sense of institutional or professional community engagement. This outcome provides an avenue worthy of investigation and would extend the ongoing work into scholarly activity being undertaken by the Mixed Economy Group of Colleges (King, Widdowson, Davis, & Flint, submitted for publication; King & Widdowson, 2010). It is not for this paper to advocate the institutional support of doctoral study within college-based higher education. However, this paper does propose that wider research into the value of doctoral research and the way in which colleges can support and engage with practitioners who undertake this journey would be of benefit to practitioners, students and college management alike.

Biography

Until recently, Jane Davis worked at Colchester Institute, a large mixed economy college, having strategic responsibility for higher education and taking the lead in two successful QAA reviews. Jane was recently awarded her PhD by Lancaster University and now works as an independent researcher.

LinkedIn: uk.linkedin.com/pub/jane-davis/49/838/238

Twitter: @janedavis13

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