Education Doctorates: reconstructing professional partnerships around research?

Marie Brennan
Central Queensland University

Background to the EdD

The existence of a professional doctorate in Australia, as elsewhere, is relatively new (Holdaway, 1994; Burgess, 1994). The Higher Education Council in 1990 recommended the introduction of "doctoral programs more suited to professional settings in fields such as engineering, accounting, law, education and nursing" (Higher Education Council, 1990, p 28). Such a recommendation clearly continued the federally-led emphasis on vocational education and on the service role of universities in the production of useful knowledge to provide Australia with economic advantage in a global economy.

The first Education Doctorates (EdDs) were introduced in Australia in 1990 and most universities in the country now offer professional doctorates or plan to, not just in education but in other professional fields. These doctorates have elicited two main kinds of reactions, both of which tend to be accommodative at best or, more often, dismissive. One is to see them as a necessary pragmatic reaction to the pressure for increased credentials among professional groups, thereby enabling the university to live up to its 'service' function for professional groups and attract student numbers for funding faculty continuation in times of competitive pressure. A second reaction treats them as second-class degrees, a compromise which allows for the necessary expansion in higher degrees but does not compete with the central function of the PhD as an induction into research and the academy generally.

There are also two main approaches in those universities which offer the award: one treats it mainly as a continuation of masters' coursework studies, somewhat on the lines of an American doctorate with pre-set content units and a smaller dissertation or thesis. The second aims to develop the degree still as a research degree but one which offers a more structured approach to the development of major research projects. Usually, in this case the final product is a portfolio of research-oriented work, including a dissertation

Both the reactions to the EdD and the approaches to its practice embody quite divergent views about the nature of universities, knowledge production and the place of the intellectual. In particular they reveal the habituated dualisms between vocational and academic education, between theory and practice, and between knowledge workers in universities and in other institutions. In this paper I argue that professional doctorates such as the EdD offer a means for reconstructing relations between academic and other sites of knowledge and practice by demanding a reconfiguration of university research relations with professionals in the field. In turn, I suggest that this change of relations is only made possible by altering the ways in which universities have conceptualised and taught research. In developing this argument, I focus on the Education Doctorate as a particular instance of professional doctorate work which reflects a range of issues facing universities and their teaching of research generally at the current time.

Students of the EdD

If the reconstruction of research relations is to occur, it will be closely tied to the location and characteristics of the students of the first years of doctorates such as the EdD. In the field of education studies, entry to doctoral level work has mainly not been through the traditional route of an Honours degree because the undergraduate qualifications have been focussed on preparation for teaching, usually constrained by requirements for professional registration. Most postgraduate students in education are considerably older than their counterparts in the sciences, since the majority practice teaching for some time before taking up further study. Without many Honours degree candidates, it is only rarely that doctoral candidates in education can attract a scholarship for full-time study, a factor which keeps full-time, on-campus research student numbers low. (This is also true for other professional groups such as nursing.) Students will often come to doctoral-level work through a coursework masters. Part-time, off-campus study is thus a more likely doctoral study avenue for those in the field.

For many students in the EdD, working in the education sector at a time when it is highly politicised and the subject of much 'workplace reform', the EdD offers an opportunity to think through the practice of professionalism on site. In a largely feminised occupational field, gender issues are likely to have salience, especially as restructuring has tended both to reduce the numbers and the percentages of women in senior positions while at the same time valorising workplace practices that ostensibly support EEO. A number of students report that the perspective offered by the dual positioning as worker and researcher attached to a university offers a perspective that enables them to be more critical as well as more strategic in the development of the job, even for some to the extent of 'surviving'. Students' own work positions clearly offer different opportunities for research-oriented work. A senior manager, policy officer or a school principal are likely to have different constraints on the kind of research work they are likely to be able to engage in, from the teacher or local educational adviser or training officer. Each kind of position is under different kinds of scrutiny and offers opportunities for workplace reconstruction. What needs to be remembered by those in the universities is that the students are likely to be experienced in their field, and also under pressure for changing that world, both of which have implications for the kind of research training explored in the EdD.

The characteristics of the student population for doctoral work—older, professionally experienced in a field undergoing massive politically-directed change, with a majority of women who are not necessarily aiming for academic work as the goal of the doctorate—raise important issues for teaching research and the kinds of projects which might be undertaken. The existence of the EdD and its students brings to the fore questions about the purposes of doctoral work: questions which have also been raised with some urgency by the expansion of PhD students in the education discipline, at a time when education faculties have experienced large scale cuts[1].

Doctoral work has until very recently been treated mainly as an induction or preparation for those intending to be academics or researchers. The Education Doctorate, however, implies a strong place for the researcher as a contribution to the development of professional workers *in the field*. This may provide possibilities for different directions in the field more generally, including a different focus for PhD exit-points. If doctoral level students do not necessarily see themselves as apprentices for university positions, then the kinds of research undertaken and supervisor-student relations are likely to be able to alter.

Research partnerships in the field of education

Relations between those in an academic field and those located elsewhere in the field are never static. Pressures to change these relations in particular directions have a dominant emphasis at the present time on narrow versions of training, largely based on a transmission model of passing on packaged information. Even though this model has been challenged significantly, the organisational context for developing these relations around knowledge have been restructured almost entirely. In order to explore the directions of these changes and the possibility of seeing the Education Doctorate as one contribution towards the reconstruction of knowledge relations, some historical background is necessary.

For much of this century, state education departments had a strong capacity for research in curriculum, policy and planning. During that time there were opportunities for exchange of roles between university/college staff and those in departments, for membership on research projects' steering committees, for example, and many reasons for professional exchange around research between those in departments and those in universities. Thus, in the field of education, there were a considerable number of people actively engaged in a wide variety of research, much of which was not oriented towards awards. This period peaked in the 1970s with large-scale research projects sponsored in education departments.

Since the mid 1980s, however, constant restructuring has resulted in the atrophying of this research capacity, and with the demise of formerly large curriculum, policy and planning divisions in state departments. This has significantly limited both the production and the use of research within the largest 'partner' of university-based research in education, the state education departments. The termination at the federal level of the Curriculum Development Centre and the Commonwealth Schools Commission in the late 1980s has further limited the range of interactions around research. Ministerialisation of educational policy directives has also tended to reduce the need for research as either a precursor or an accompaniment to major initiatives. In many state departments, there is now not even the capacity to predict staffing needs or plan adequately for new demographic shifts and their implications for schooling, let alone conduct major research projects in curriculum.

Since much of the restructuring was accomplished under the rhetoric of corporate managerialism and its particular emphases on efficiency and productivity, the research now sponsored tends to focus mainly on short-term outcomes, often oriented to implementation studies or development of materials under directions set by state or federal instrumentalities[2]. Cuts to money available for inservice activities for teachers have also restricted the opportunities for university-based researchers to interact with teachers. Moves to centralise control of school curriculum have not only taken up teachers' time; they have emphasised the role of teacher as implementer of new central initiatives, thereby removing much of the incentive for teachers to develop their own curriculum and look for new materials and ideas outside their own area[3]. With this shift has been a concomitant reduction of support organised to assist teacher research in curriculum.

At the same time as this downturn in formal and informal research activity, there has been a growing number of those in teaching and non-school based education jobs undertaking postgraduate award courses, mainly at Masters level. The conjunction of the changes in workplace conditions in both schooling and university sectors at the same time as this expansion of postgraduate study offers possibilities for significant partnership work. These possibilities, however, are considerably constrained by the dominant training approach and funding limitations. There seems to be a growing tendency to restructure the relationship between students and staff in coursework postgraduate areas to downgrade research dimensions, and to focus more on the packaging of materials to meet short-term changes in the field.

It is into this context that the EdD has been introduced. Because it has primarily been designed for part-time study by full-time workers in the various sectors of education, the changes occurring in the field necessarily shape the nature of the work undertaken. The presence of the EdD offers a different kind of research-oriented relationship between those in universities and those in other parts of a highly professionalised sector[4]. There is a danger that if these possibilities are not taken up then the redefinition of research, necessarily occurring as the 'information revolution' becomes more obvious, will not be strongly enough influenced by those who are active practitioners of research. The professional doctorate therefore offers both a widening pool of people who are actively engaged in research work and also resources and contexts which allow for a wider range of issues to be taken into account when engaging in such re-formation of the processes of knowledge production.

Democratising professional authority

The classic approach to defining a profession has always included a gatekeeping role in relation to entry, usually via qualifications. This has positioned universities in particular as having a stake in a certain kind of élitism, based around setting norms for the production of knowledge. The restructuring of professions around workplace reform, enterprise bargaining and corporate management has the potential to narrow even further the relationship between universities and their postgraduate students. Despite much of the rhetoric of professionalism that marks the debate on the future of teaching and the education sector in general, the experience of many through these changes has been of a reduction in control of work and a continuous need to adjust to new demands of government. This moves the focus away from responsibility to 'clients' towards management imperatives, and defines knowledge as what management can measure or persuade government to be necessary. In such conditions, which tend to affect university staff as much as their students' workplaces, there is a need for outside perspectives relatively independent of the priorities of the site, and a capacity to problematise the practices of the power-knowledge relations of professionals and their credentialling systems.

Anna Yeatman (1994, p 38) points out that for policy makers and other intellectual professionals the "requirements of their practice environments impose first loyalties to something other than 'knowledge'", loyalties which are usually given––not necessarily unproblematically—to the state or to a specific profession. The engagement in research will, almost certainly, create a crisis of competing loyalties for both the student and for the university. If the university is to resolve its own crisis about its role in knowledge production, the only option is not to identify immediately and in an instrumental way with the priorities of its 'clients' (whether these be 'industry', government or management of a public sector department, or individuals or groups of professionals). There is the possibility of creating research partnership work which denies neither the loyalty of those in universities nor the priorities of those in other parts of the sector, but which is also able to problematise those loyalties for all concerned. This requires a level of mutuality across the partnership 'divide', something which is presently largely unattainable because of the hierarchical relationships established around research supervision and the tendency to treat doctoral work as induction to the status quo.

Developing shared knowledge about practitioner research

When starting up the EdD at both Deakin and CQU, the dearth of material for advanced research work by practitioners was immediately apparent. There is a significant body of literature on action research and some important debates among feminist and postcolonial scholars on committed research and everyday life as problematic (Smith, 1990). Yet even these are generally written from the perspective/position of the academic researcher external to the situation. Apart from these materials, there is little that explores the issues for research methodology from the position of an ongoing participant who is a great deal more active than an 'observer' of a situation by dint of participating as a worker. Workplace-related research, which is the basis of both kinds of EdDs I referred to at the outset, raises important methodological and ethical questions, most of which are not covered by the various

literatures called upon to explain and justify the dominant methodological stances.

This situation poses issues for the supervisor and university system as much as for the student. The student is put into the position of developing an as yet embryonic methodological literature while still coming to grips with advanced research debates more generally. The supervisor who is skilled at university-based research and its issues may not have understood the dimensions of participant research, or only from the perspective of one methodology such as action research. The supervisor may thus not be in a position to advise the student adequately on the pitfalls arising from particular approaches to research. It may not be possible for a student, for example a senior officer in a department, to undertake action research and make it public, or initiatives chosen for study may change so quickly given the political context that they are not suitable foci for research.

In turn, this is likely to affect the ways we understand and justify particular methodologies, and also favour certain methods rather than others. The approach to the literature search, for example, may need to focus less on received knowledge already in the refereed system and more on the only partially articulated knowledge of other practitioners in the field, and emphasise the development of new kinds of knowledge. Supervisors will have to work alongside their students to develop the criteria for what might count as 'worthwhile' knowledge in such instances—and then convince examiners and university research committees of possible changes consequently required to judge these different approaches to the generation, reporting and situating of knowledge production. The danger here is that universities will merely replace one pantheon of methodological frameworks with another—reified as 'practitioner research'—which may then be used to continue the expert-practitioner hierarchy *without* problematising the nature of knowledge and the interests at stake in its construction.

With the profound changes to tenure, and to the practice of career paths more generally in education, it is likely that only a minority of students will be able to carry out longitudinal-type studies as their doctoral work, for example. Some may be in a position to foresee an overall 'project' at the start of their candidature, and connect all the parts of their structured research tasks to the development of an 'oeuvre' leading to a dissertation. Others may have to pursue theme-related multi-site studies, in order to generate a substantial body of scholarly work. Still others may have to engage in more theoretical explorations because specific reporting of workplace initiatives may contravene work contracts or ethical professional practice, especially where such accounts may be critical.

Those in universities will have to come to terms with the implications of the changed conditions for their postgraduate students and their implications for research methodology, including the ethics of different kinds of professional research. The criterion of research as investigative work made *public* in particular offers a number of challenges not currently covered by the ethical guidelines or habitual understandings of how truth or epistemological issues more broadly can be approached. This suggests that in order to do this quickly enough, we may need to pool our understandings, both in terms of cross-university cooperation and by the use of cooperative methods of supervision. More importantly, staff in the universities will have to learn more from their students, requiring a much more equal relationship, recognising the different expertise and interests of both parties in the supervisor-student relationship (Brennan and Walker, 1994). Perhaps the term 'supervisor' itself may need to be superseded as the appropriate descriptor for this research relationship.

When the dominant model for postgraduate research induction—enshrined in AVCC documents, institutional rules, application forms and entrenched set of practices between individual supervisors and students—is heavily biased towards induction into received institutional and scholarly approaches, it is not an easy task to offer significant alternatives which are systemic rather than isolated individualised efforts. The Education Doctorate and other professional doctorates do provide an important focus for such an effort. I am suggesting here that active engagement with the nature and politics of professionalism offer opportunities as well as constraints for re-establishing relationships around research in education that have important implications for both our students and our own pedagogical practice around educational research.

Conclusion

The place and definition of research must always remain contested. Students, while caught between the need to perform within older norms of what counts as good research and the need to be at the forefront of methodological and substantive material, can provide an important impetus for working through the emerging challenges to research. Certainly in the present context of struggles over control of universities, over research work within them and over the 'service' role of the universities, there is a danger of 'instrumental capture', as research outputs and student numbers become central to productivity measures and management accountability. This may be increased by calls for 'relevance' from professional students as well as from other parts of the sector, such as DEET or governments. However, the existence of the professional doctorate also provides significant opportunities for developing new approaches to research and new partnerships between universities and the rest of society. The push for democratising knowledge is one dimension of the current context which can best be addressed by working through research issues *across* what have come to be boundaries—and sometimes even barriers—between research in universities and that conducted elsewhere.

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Footnotes

1. I note here that education staff have been disproportionately affected by the construction of the Unified National System, since so many teachers colleges were targeted as the 'junior' partners in amalgamations, and arguments about lack of demand for teachers have provided a rationale for cutting numbers significantly.

2. The issues associated with conducting research under such conditions are not able to be explored in this particular paper. Some of them can be seen in McTaggart and Blackmore (1990).

3. The significant exceptions are the on-going DEET-funded National Schools Network and Innovative Links projects. Their presence on the scene helps keep alive something of the tradition I am concerned with here, while both renewing it and breaking new ground in this respect. See Yeatman and Sachs (1995).

4. It should however be noted that a number of university staff themselves are enrolled in EdDs, an option they find assists them to address the pressure for higher qualifications, conducting research and the realities of work in a Faculty which is often undergoing massive reorganisation and large teaching loads.