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Kirshbaum, Marilyn and Burton, Rob

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Passing the Baton: A Longitudinal View of a Professional Doctorate

Dr Marilyn Kirshbaum and Dr Rob Burton

Background:

At our university in the UK the Professional Doctorate in Human and Health Sciences has recently welcomed its third group of multi-professional practitioners; they exhibit the recognizable enthusiasm, excitement and slight apprehension observed in most students on the first day of 'school'. What these particular students see throughout the application process, induction and course handbook reflect several years of focused perseverance based on the original course leader's vision and resolution of challenges within the university's network, and experience obtained after two years of implementing the programme. A subsequent course leader has been given the responsibility of building upon the existing foundations and sets out to develop the second phase.

Aim:

This presentation will illuminate a series of stages and themes indicative of the process of one professional doctorate programme as identified and reflected upon by two course leaders.

Method:

A mind-map diagram was initially generated to aide reflection of the one person's experiences of completing a doctorate in education and developing a professional doctorate for eight human and health sciences. A second mind-map was created by the current course leader based on her most recent reflections and plans. A freeform audio-taped discussion was held between the past and present course leaders. Qualitative analysis was conducted of the diagrams and content of discussion.

Findings:

Three longitudinally perceived stages emerged from the analysis: initiation, development and maturation. The overlapping themes were: suggestions for development, application for the job, course planning, research governance, teaching and learning, post validation,

challenges, strategies for the future (sustainability) and strategies for the future (philosophy, vision and integrity).

Initiation

The original course leader had studied a Professional Doctorate with the first cohort of The Doctor of Education Course within the university. This proved to be a good grounding of what could be expected in such programmes, including experience of both the taught element and the research/thesis/viva stages. A few years later and as course leader for a Health Professional Masters programme, the notion of developing a professional doctorate in the School of Human and Health Sciences was suggested to him by an external examiner. The school had previously set about discussing such an issue, but it had lain dormant for a number of years. However once again the issue took impetus and a substantive post for developing the course was organized.

To develop the course it was ascertained that the course would require scrutiny via both the teaching and learning processes within the university and the research development processes of the School. In close association with experienced EdD course staff from the School of Education, the research regulations were scrutinized and adapted and forwarded for appraisal and approval via the university graduate education group, research committee and ultimately the University Senate. This included identifying the structure and processes required for all university professional Doctorates and the named awards to be given. These were challenging times, not least because of the need to overcome resistance to the idea of a Prof Doc when compared to the traditional PhD and similar routes. However after much discussion and debate the proposal and changes to the regulations were accepted.

On the teaching side an outline programme had to be developed and these had to be ratified in a school level meeting and also at university level with external scrutiny. One of the challenges here was leading and coordinating a team that comprised staff that were much senior to the course leader in developing modules that were constructively aligned, that met teaching and learning regulations whilst setting the student up to become part of the university research processes. This included research modules and a professional

development module to focus on the requirements of a research based professional doctorate.

Modules related to research theory and design, research skills, developing research proposals and personal & professional development were designed. It was agreed that after the taught component students would then be able to enter onto the research stage where they would follow research progression approaches. The modules were given credit as from the experience of the EdD it was noted that those who did not always progress to the research phase still needed some form of exit awards. Therefore, a range of awards from PG Cert to PG Dip was included. Finally if the student wished to complete a shorter research based dissertation rather than a full Doctorate thesis one they could exit with an MRes if so desired.

It was decided to teach the content in blocks so that students travelling from a distance could cover the material in an intensive period. It also gave the opportunity to incorporate sessions involving peer coaching and reflection. These blocks also lend themselves to the development of a cohort support system which has been commented on as a strength of the course.

Development

Internal and external review, module and course evaluations, re-validation and interactions with students are the key drivers for development. Intuitive observations and reflections shared between the previous and current course leaders and the rest of the course team also impact on the courses' development. On the surface, the philosophy and structure of course and its four modules remain virtually the same compared to their inception. Interest in pushing individual boundaries of achievement and contributing the evidence based of a practice profession continue to be observed through a steady stream of applications, insightful discussions and outputs of varying academic quality. While on the course, students are challenged by the work and the necessary time that is required to devote to study, analysis and writing. Conflict with work and family demands are accepted as a huge challenge. However, this year, in particular, there is tremendous instability in the public sector – which includes the NHS. The uncertainty and continued reduction in resources is

placing further demands on our students, many of whom are senior NHS managers and practitioners. This is an extra challenge for this year's cohort and indeed for the Prof Doc team.

Maturation

Strategies for the future will inevitably be linked to the politics of higher education and its financial implications. Our course has been fortunate since many of our students have been fully funded by Regional Strategic Health Authority. However, it would be naïve to assume this will continue into the distant future. We will need to be flexible and creative in our planning in addition to our teaching. Yet, our vision and philosophy for facilitating the highest academic achievement of committed and gifted professionals remains as clear as ever. Greater exposure to researchers at all levels is a current priority to encourage a more dynamic exchange within the community of professional doctorates.

Conclusion:

The metaphor of passing a baton from one team member to another, as in a relay race, has been used to demonstrate how the striving efforts and achievements of course leader number one are handed over to course leader two, who continues with fresh energy, strength and determination. It is expected that the resultant themes will reflect many of the concerns, challenges and visions shared by academic colleagues.