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Curriculum Considerations for International Students on Professional Doctorate Courses: A Perspective from the United Kingdom

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Extended Abstract

“Any ‘student abroad’ learning experience needs to be supported by a curriculum that adequately prepares for that experience that is a curriculum that develops international awareness and international competence” (Caruana & Spurling, 2007:29).

The aim of this round table discussion is to consider academic and personal challenges associated with the increasing recruitment of international students to university programmes as highlighted by Trice (2003), which includes professional doctorate courses. Current economic factors and changes to the UK higher education system have led to increasing initiatives to recruit overseas students. Globalisation has been occurring on large social and economic scales for many decades with populations finding easier communications, collaborations and information sharing opportunities due to developing technologies and inter-country mobility systems. For example, in Europe the Bologna process was introduced to facilitate the internal mobility of students, teachers and administrative staff, due to the nature of this increase in international mobility of students (Cardoso et al, 2007).

This ‘globalised knowledge market’ requires changes in the sector. Kehm (2007) suggests that doctoral education is no longer just a pursuit of knowledge but that knowledge assists in becoming a strategic resource in changing times. An international student may no longer be wishing to migrate for better working conditions; rather they may be wishing to develop the knowledge base for their own professions within their own countries of origin. McAuliffe and Cohen (2005) argue that research can answer local questions and identify patterns, meanings and relationships from professionals such as nurses’ own native perspective and then compare these across international and cultural boundaries. According to Taylor (2007:154) ‘Doctoral education is set in the middle of this changing context for the university sector, and is subject to these wider imposed imperatives’.

Coupled with our own experiences of international students at the University of Huddersfield in the UK, it is appropriate to explore the unique challenges and issues that arise in the professional doctorate arena. There are academic aspects that create an impact for this specialised and diverse group of students. Wellington and Sikes (2006) suggest that doctoral students present with wide ranging academic, personal and professional needs. In addition, studying in a second language, which is often the case, in a different cultural context, or climate, presents complex situations for the student and the teaching/supervisory teams. Bartram (2008) suggests that socio-cultural needs take a priority over academic and then practical needs of international students. We believe that the cohort nature of a professional doctorate course may help to provide some valuable interpersonal support for all students. Furthermore, we acknowledge that we as senior academics can do more to influence these factors within the professional doctoral experience for our international students.

Suggested items for discussion within this round table forum are: pre-course information, pedagogical issues and academic supervision.

Pre-Course Information

According to Evans and Stevenson (2010) the initial months and transitional stages of the doctoral course are a critical time for overseas students, requiring considerable support and structured input. This structured input should begin with the provision of clear information about requirements of undertaking a professional doctorate and ways of putting this message across to candidates from overseas. Communicating the differences of a professional doctorate with a traditional PhD route to home students is challenging enough, to communicate the uniqueness of such courses to overseas students can add to this challenge. This need to clearly identify structures, approaches and requirements of courses also involves identifying educational equivalencies clearly, outlining entry requirements explicitly and ensuring the candidate understands the required level of qualification prior to studying at doctoral level. Providing students with a full and unambiguous outline of the course structures and requirements is important. As increasing flexibility is being

incorporated into many programmes, students need to understand their roles and responsibilities and instructional/ assessment approaches, which may differ from previous experiences.

Pedagogical Issues

The different learning styles of international students need considering. Intercultural learning approaches and research etiquettes are important aspects with a view to increasing social capital and collaboration (Evans and Stevenson, 2011; Wang & Li, 2011). It is important to recognise that students from differing cultural backgrounds have differing approaches to and expectations of learning and the educational environment. For example it is known that some cultures prefer authoritarian and formal pedagogical techniques, whereas others prefer a freer, more participative, adult oriented approach. A professional doctorate course requires students to attend teaching and to show initiatives in the research process. The nature of supervision will therefore be very different for students of diverse backgrounds. It is impossible to be aware of every cultural nuance but Carroll and Ryan (2005) suggest there is a need to gain a meta-awareness of cultural differences relevant to education and research. In doing so there is a chance the student, supervisor and teaching team can build relationships that minimise these challenges and help gain shared perspectives.

Academic Supervision and Pastoral Support

Academic supervision, particularly when it involves research, should provide the necessary structured guidance that enables all doctoral students to attain their coveted award. The emphasis in research programmes is to ensure they interact with the material, and approaches at the right level. This requires course teams to ensure adequate learning support mechanisms are aligned with supervision to facilitate the student in delivering work that is at the correct level of criticality and analysis.

By its very nature, research supervision functions best when it is responsive and flexible to each student's character, approach to study, confidence and ability. However, in addition to the usual difficulties such as accessing relevant literature,

understanding various methodologies, determining the true foci of the research and grappling with ethics committees, international students may require further assistance in recognising cultural differences and approaches. It is important for supervisors and academic tutors, who have the remit of pastoral support, to make special efforts to identify cultural norms and differences that could potentially be problematic in designing, conducting and reporting upon the research.

We have offered some of our thoughts here and look forward to a fruitful discussion that will yield shared ideas on how to address some of these important challenges.

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