

## Enhancing professional self-esteem: learners' journeys on a distance-learning Doctorate in Education (EdD)

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### Abstract

This article explores the motivations, experiences and perceived outcomes for Doctorate in Education (EdD) students in their journey through a relatively new form of doctoral education at a distance. The research draws on a range of individual EdD participant voices, both student and graduate, and is timely in focusing on an example of an under-researched but increasingly common phenomenon of part-time distance learning professional doctorates. The aims of the research were: to understand what motivated students to register for an EdD; to explore the factors which successfully sustained them on their journey; to identify common outcomes on completion. The researchers developed a case study of the student EdD journey in its distinctive professional context(s). Data was collected in a number of linked stages including postal surveys, semi-structured interviews, and students' reflective evaluations at different points. Key themes related to professional postgraduate learner transitions emerge from the data, which contrast with previous work on the traditional PhD and relate to: the deliberate choice by students of a part-time distance learning route; a broader and better-informed understanding of professional outcomes on a professionally-oriented doctorate; the value of flexible support systems for EdD students working in demanding educational roles.

**Key words:** professional doctorates, distance-learning doctorates, professional self-esteem

### Introduction

*I think the word 'journey' is a good one as it suggests something quite slow and gradual...which is exactly what it feels like. Sometimes it's so slow and gradual that it actually feels as if you're not moving at all, not getting anywhere. But then there are critical moments on the journey which help you to realise that, in fact, you have indeed made progress and moved further along the route. These critical moments seem to function a little like a yardstick against which you can measure the distance you've covered, and the distance that still remains. (EdD student in Year 3)*

The Doctorate in Education (EdD) is a relatively recent post-graduate innovation in the United Kingdom. The degree was first offered in 1992 and since then it has become increasingly popular and is now available from a growing number of universities. However, the notion of a professional doctorate goes back further than this, and in other countries it is more firmly established within postgraduate university provision. In the United States EdDs are well established qualifications that have been utilized by educational administrators as professional development pathways. In Australia the EdD has long been introduced as a key component of advanced professional development for education practitioners (Neumann, 2005). Jarvis (2000) interprets the rise of the professional doctorate as part of a broad movement of some research from the university to the workplace, reflecting the need for workers in the knowledge society to continually develop professionally.

Such developments indicate a previously unrecognized need amongst education professionals for a doctorate that better meets their needs. Bob Burgess, Vice Chancellor of Leicester University, commented on this need in an interview:

*In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, higher education needs to think about how it is going to speak to a changing world and its requirements. The professional doctorate opens up opportunities for higher education to talk with professional people who are interested in intellectual problems that arise from their work experience, and that seems to me to be appropriate.*  
(Burgess, THE 26<sup>th</sup> February, 2009)

Within the context of globalization and the growth of knowledge economies a consensus is emerging about the value of professional doctorates. Evans et al (2005) argue that the emergence of the knowledge economy places increasing emphasis on the requirement for individuals to develop sophisticated new literacies and advanced thinking skills if they are to survive and prosper in an increasingly complex world (p.120). According to Salmi (2002) it is crucial that the tertiary sector plays a significant role in supporting the development of a knowledge economy.

In this context, EdDs aim to meet a particular demand for a specific type of advanced professional development. Thus it is significant that Bourner et al (2001) emphasise the EdD addresses the in-service career needs of “researching professionals”. For them, the key professional rationale is the idea of a practical aim to doctoral study, of improving professional practice, as well as generating new knowledge. This is important for the EdD, which will be based on a topic relating to the candidate’s own field of professional practice and will be concerned with a problem relevant to their own institutional workplace. While debates about the purpose of doctoral study have resulted in lively exchanges in the academic literature, little attention has been paid to exploring the learning experience of EdD students, especially those seeking to enhance their professional understanding ‘at a distance’. It is this particular context, of professionals as insider-researchers investigating their own practice that we sought to explore.

In our experience EdDs can be seen as providing the opportunity for the creation of a hybrid of discipline-based and practice-site knowledge with new pedagogic structures. The EdD we report on is designed to be taken only as a part-time open and distance learning programme. Elsewhere, distance supervision of part-time professional Masters’ courses is reported as problematic, with longer than expected time for completion (Bruce et al, 2008). However, EdD students on the programme we researched can potentially complete their thesis within three years, and the majority of students (of the 200+ graduates so far, since its 1997 inception) have completed within four years (despite the competing work and personal responsibilities outlined later). This success can be attributed, in part, to the selection criteria for the Programme. Entry requirements include a Master’s degree in a relevant Educational discipline and evidence of advanced understanding of research methodology.

This EdD’s presentation model consists of a blend of pedagogic mediums. It is highly structured with parallel coursework/research components, and with supervisors providing regular and comprehensive formative feedback on work submitted. Students produce eleven progress reports over 3 years which provide the foundation on which to construct a fifty-thousand word thesis. These progress reports focus on the iterative development of a literature review, methodological approach and data analysis. Supervisors work with their individual students (at a distance) in a range of ways negotiated between them to meet a

diversity of learner needs. Students have a printed study guide to assist them with the preparation of progress reports. Central to the model has been the use of electronic conferencing, which is used for teaching (through a series of on-line seminars), supervision, and for individual student support. There are also residential weekend schools towards the start, midway, and at the end of the three-year programme. Peer and cross-supervisor support is encouraged through the electronic conferencing environment. Because students are part-time, with the majority engaged in demanding full-time employment, support on the EdD programme is highly structured, its intention to enable students to move toward the increased academic autonomy required at doctoral level.

Like other EdDs, the model we report on provides opportunities for students to acquire knowledge about education systems and structures, and through their research, to impact on policy and practice. The result of this scholarship is that students, who are also likely to be engaged in senior professional roles, become competent researchers who are able to contribute to debates in their chosen field of study. Students' acquisition of this knowledge is facilitated by the requirements of the degree which entail:

- identifying a professional focus within relevant academic traditions
- planning research to be of practical and professional relevance to others in education, and considering how it will affect practice
- clarifying the implications of the research for professional practice in education
- connecting their discussion of personal practice to the context of relevant policy initiatives
- contributing to reflection on theory/practice issues, making explicit researcher/practitioner roles.

## **Aims**

Our research sought to explore a gap in the growing literature around professional doctorates, by capturing the motivation of students to embark on a demanding and challenging (and in some cases marriage-threatening) professional doctoral programme when in mid-career. Most importantly, we wanted to know what EdD graduates had gained from their experience and what impact this had had on their own practice. What had been the result of the considerable commitment these practitioners had given to their research? We wanted to understand the transition in personal and professional development that had arisen from undertaking an EdD. Therefore, our aims were to:

- explore students' initial aims for taking an EdD
- compare students' perceived outcomes before and after graduation
- identify key factors to sustain motivation
- understand the development students' academic identities as 'researching educational professionals'.

We wanted to understand students' motivation to furthering their own professional development (often at considerable personal and financial cost) and to their steadfast devotion to undertaking a piece of research based in their own, very diverse professional contexts. We were interested to find out what students' personal aims were for undertaking an EdD and to be able to compare these with the outcomes they identified for themselves after graduation. We also wanted to be able identify important factors that sustained their

motivation over three or four years. This EdD programme has a high level of student retention and completion (80%), and we wanted to better understand the journey that enabled them to succeed.

## **Methodology**

The methodological approach taken was to develop a case study exemplifying how professional needs were met on a part-time distance-learning EdD. In order to address our questions, we adopted a mixed methods approach to data collection and analysis at different stages. Our rationale was that contextual information gained from structured questions was needed to construct the case. Initially, data was gathered, through a postal survey, designed to elicit information about the personal characteristics of the students and factors that motivated them to register for the degree. The survey also focused on the perceived outcomes once the doctorate had been successfully completed.

However, we were aware of the inadequacy of adopting a purely quantitative approach with a relatively small sample and never intended to establish statistical significance or to 'over-claim'. In order to investigate the factors identified through the quantitative approach, we chose to explore further with a sample of individual informants, the meanings they attributed to their successful journeys. Therefore we decided to combine small scale quantitative analysis with qualitative research which could provide us with authentic insights into EdD students' experiences.

In order to investigate further, we conducted follow-up semi-structured telephone interviews with a self-selected sample of six EdD graduates. We devised prompts generated from open questions, asking students to identify factors which helped sustained them on the programme, to articulate the professional orientation of their research, and the impact of this on their professional practice. These telephone interviews were recorded and transcribed by the researchers. Voluntary email responses from one researcher's current EdD students were also elicited to capture their ongoing journeys on the EdD.

To provide additional contextual understanding, student evaluations from annual residential weekends were scrutinised, and student's reflective comments on their end of Year 2 progress reports were explored, in order to gather data on the process of advancing professional learning. A series of electronic conference discussion threads were also consulted as students discussed (virtually) their preparation for vivas. As an additional insight, professional outcomes described in a sample of 10 doctoral theses' conclusions were analysed to understand the way students articulated the professional impact of their research.

The methods adopted enabled us to analyse the data through a three-part framework: why students embarked on their EdD journey (their motivation)? How learning transitions were supported during the EdD journey? What were the post-EdD outcomes? The two researchers undertook independent thematic classification of the data and compared results to check for consistency of interpretation. Any differences in analysis of the data were discussed and appropriate interpretations were agreed upon.

## Findings

### 1. Factors influencing student's motivation to register for the EdD (percentages n=47)

	Great extent	Some extent	Not at all	N/A
Achieving a doctoral degree	82	16		2
Developing new academic skills	74	24	2	
Gaining new academic understanding	71	26	3	
Link theory to practice	61	32	7	
Improve own practice	69	26		5
Increased professional standing	50	42	5	3
Disseminate new ideas	34	58	8	
Enhanced financial benefits		24	60	16
Improving promotion prospects	21	42	21	16
Develop new career	16	32	45	7

The most highly rated factors which motivated students to register for the EdD were the achievement of a doctoral degree and the desire to develop new academic skills, as well as the aspiration to acquire new academic understandings. This data complements the kind of findings reported in articles investigating prior study linked to an MA Education (for example Bird et al, 2005 and Bowman 2005). The latter comments:

[students] tended to locate the general value of the masters in its contribution to their stock of academic achievements...[and] more intrinsic concerns to pursue their subject further to develop their own expertise within their subject area. (Bowman, 2005, p. 242)

These factors were closely followed by a desire to learn things relevant to work and being able to disseminate new ideas and improve their professional practice: most hoping to link theory to practice and being motivated by a desire to improve their own practice. The majority wanted to increase their professional standing and related to this, most were interested in being able to disseminate new ideas emerging from their research. The desire to develop a new career and obtain enhanced financial benefits as a result of holding a doctorate degree were not as significant as those factors mentioned above in motivating registration. However, while a majority of respondents felt that holding an EdD might enhance the possibility of improving their promotion prospects, only a minority said that their decision to register for the degree was influenced to some extent by possible financial benefit (most feeling that this played no part in their decision making). The possibility of developing a new career was considered as influential for almost half of the respondents.

Qualitative data from one of the researcher's existing students explored these issues further in terms of professional and personal motivation:

*I think it is a fact that being able to say I am doing a doctorate has given me an element of status that I didn't have before...Although the demands of undertaking an EdD whilst working full-time were daunting the aspiration to make a difference to practice helped to sustain the journey...I think if/when I complete I will be really personally pleased with the achievement, that I have stuck at it etc, but see it more in those terms as a challenging mountain to climb, and managing all the obstacles as they arise, but feeling that though there will be times when I wonder why I am putting myself through all this that I will make it, that it is in the end just a process. No doubt the learning from both the literature review and the research will impact on my professional life, and I welcome that addition (EdD student Year 1)*

Email responses from another of the researcher's existing students developed this point about the starting point in the EdD journey:

*The notion of embarking on a taught doctorate was not my first thought but rather it evolved from an enthusiasm [about my topic] and thinking about ways in which this could be shared with other professionals ...this study had the potential to benefit practice. I considered therefore that the taught EdD would provide a framework that would give structure and an outlet to my ideas and it offered flexibility that would fit in with full time work and running a home and family. However, I was not totally convinced I was either sufficiently experienced or that the project was robust and suitable for doctorate level work. (EdD student Year 2)*

The desire to contribute to professional knowledge and to 'make a difference' by building on tacit knowledge acquired through practice was clearly a motivating factor for several informants. Achieving an EdD was seen as a means for them to obtain credibility for the knowledge and understanding they had generated through their research. Which they hoped they would be able to disseminate to colleagues and thereby contribute to developing good practice in the area that they had chosen to focus on.

## **2. The EdD journey**

For the EdD students in this study, part-time professionally oriented research was only possible if supported by a clear but flexible timetable of progress reports. This enabled research to be accommodated alongside busy and demanding professional and personal lives. Access to full-time research study was not a feasible option for these students. The structured support on the EdD enabled respondents to combine the academic demands associated with doctoral study with their professional lives. One informant explains how important the structure of the programme was for him:

*The requirement to present progress papers on a systematic basis forced a level of discipline and ensured a more systematic liaison with my supervisor...which might not have happened on a PhD... Having to work to deadlines suited my lifestyle... helped me stay on task whilst holding down a job that took me all over the country and meant work was completed in three years.– highly unlikely with a part-time PhD. (EdD graduate)*

The blend of occasional face-to-face supervisory contact with electronic and telephone contact, alongside meetings at residential schools and electronic conferencing was effective at counteracting the potential isolation associated with all doctoral research. The role of the supervisor in supporting students and helping them to sustain their motivation was noted by several students:

*My supervisor really helped me and gave me confidence which I did desperately need at different points...I do need reassurance and I do need to know that I'm on the right path,...I do need the touchstone, a reference point and the supervisor provided that quite definitely...( EdD graduate).*

The structure of the EdD, with the regular submission of assignments and comprehensive supervisor feedback was an important factor in sustaining student motivation and commitment to their research. The diligence of supervisors was noted by several respondents as being critical in their development. The risk of isolation was overcome by engaging in discussion and debate not only with their own supervisors but also with a community of researchers through electronic and face-to-face conferences and residential schools. The transition to a 'doctoral learner' is highly individualised:

*So whilst students who attend lectures or submit assignments in the traditional sense of, say, a Masters level programme will perhaps be more overtly aware of the learning as it occurs, the 'learning' that evolves within this taught doctoral programme I would suggest it is more driven by the student, prompted by the course structure and the skills of the supervisor in asking the student the right questions... (EdD student).*

The development of critical thinking skills was described by an EdD student when evaluating her progress at the end of her second year:

*I remember about half way into the second year, when I was doing a lot of reading, both methodology and also research studies related to my area of research. I was reading an article and it didn't seem to be very well written, and the methodology bit was just tagged on, as if the writer had stuck in a short paragraph because it had to be there. It didn't feel integrated and properly thought through and there wasn't enough detail to really get much of a flavour of what the research process had been. And I realised with a jolt that I was actually reading someone else's research critically, that I had views on how and what they had done, and that these views must have come from somewhere. ...I believe that I am developing an ability to reflect critically on my own work. In particular I am building on work studied in the MA course on critical self-reflection and the 'reflective practitioner' in reflecting the shortcomings and strengths of the methodology used...As the EdD progresses I am becoming more aware of the weaknesses and strengths of the way I have conceived and related major issues under investigation.*

The growth in academic skills and confidence was apparent in the responses from several of the informants. They expressed a significant degree of satisfaction about this aspect of their development. This in itself helped to sustain their motivation and served as a measure of how far they had already travelled on their journey towards completion.

### 3. EdD Outcomes

**Table 2: Evaluation of the importance of the factors having graduated – (n=47)**

	Great extent	Some extent	Not at all	N/A
Achieving a doctoral degree	84	13		3
Developing new academic skills	71	29		
Gaining new academic understanding	79	18	3	
Link theory to practice	68	29	3	
Improve own practice	63	34	3	
Increased professional standing	66	26	8	
Disseminate new ideas	45	50	5	
Improving Promotion prospects	18	37	29	16
Enhanced financial benefits	8	18	66	8
Develop new career	18	34	42	5

Inevitably the goal of achieving a doctoral degree was rated equally highly on completion of the programme as it was prior to registration. The desire to develop new academic skills and gain new academic understanding had been fulfilled for students who identified this as a factor motivating registration and for those who had not rated these two factors as being so important initially. All respondents reported that they had acquired (to at least some extent) these skills by the time of completion and almost all claiming that they had acquired a new academic understanding.

The main area of impact described in the questionnaire responses was in terms of the graduates' own understanding and practice skills. Exploring the impact of the EdD through a sample of follow-up interviews drew attention to the way researching an aspect of practice evolved. For example, one graduate conceptualised the professional aspect of doctoral study by objectives evaluated in terms of own learning:

*The EdD allowed me to examine my own practice...I needed time as a teacher researcher to do that. Greater understanding of the process of study allows me to support and challenge students.*

On completion virtually all respondents had found their doctorate studies helpful in making links between theory and practice, and claimed that undertaking the degree had resulted in improvements in their own professional practice. This is important because it marks out a unique territory for the EdD in relation to the PhD. For example:

*My research provided academic support for changes to teaching and learning and models of good practice.*

*The knowledge I developed benefited my teaching...my pupils became happier and more confident learners.*

Such quotations (and there were many others covering similar ground) begin to speak of a synergy between research and teaching, in which the student's advanced study for the EdD has a clear and explicit thread of professional impact. Even then, the transition can take until the end of the journey:

*I'm learning how to be self-critical and find the gaps in my own research. Everything is still outside my comfort zone, but maybe the comfort zone has expanded a bit...I think I won't really be able to say that I feel properly confident/competent until the graduation ceremony. When I know that other people have read it and think it's worth an EdD.*

A further question concerns the extent to which EdD graduates are able to contribute to practice and impact on colleagues by disseminating their research to a professional audience. Almost all graduates felt that their professional standing had been enhanced with the acquisition of the degree and that they had had some opportunities to disseminate new ideas. One graduate whose research focused on approaches to mentoring found that staff at his institution, were keen to hear about the practical implications of his research for practice. After disseminating his findings within his institution he found that there was wider interest in research and as a result of this he is now preparing articles for publication. He explained:

*I've ...delivered a session on our MA module on mentoring, generally reporting back on work I'd done and our external examiner invited me to be the keynote speaker at a conference at his university. (EdD graduate).*

The development of a new career and obtaining enhanced financial benefits as a result of holding a doctorate degree were not significant outcomes for EdD graduates. Only a minority of graduates reported that completion of the degree resulted in some financial benefit and for the vast majority, it had had no impact. On completion around half the students claimed that the qualification had assisted them in developing a new career. However, it may be too early to assess the impact on EdD on career opportunities and subsequent research undertaken in five years time may reveal different findings.

## Conclusions

A strong correlation was found between initial factors motivating registration for the EdD and the outcomes of the qualification on personal development and professional practice. Our findings lead us to suggest that this journey can be captured by a four-part model describing the professional orientation of EdD study at a distance (see Butcher and Sieminski, 2006). First, professionalism (reflection on the role/professional self) is facilitated by the EdD graduate's reflection on their professional practice, which gives rise to increased confidence about their ability to draw upon new understandings and apply knowledge and skills acquired through research in their professional roles.

Second, for the graduates and students in our sample, engaging in research towards an EdD was viewed as a part of their continuing professional development (CPD). In recent years

great emphasis has been placed on teacher CPD that has measurable outcomes in terms of 'improvement of pupil performance' (Bird et al, 2005). While a number of the respondents in this study felt that their participation in EdD research has made them more effective practitioners we cannot conclude that, where relevant, their own students' performance has been enhanced. The outcomes of research rarely have an immediate impact on classroom practice, but they may filter through at a later date (Hammersley, 2002). Gaining an understanding of the impact in relation achievement would require a different kind of investigation.

Several graduates intended to use the knowledge acquired through their research to introduce change within their classrooms or institutions. In relation to this, we found evidence to suggest that students' research has contributed to this second outcome of influencing professional practice. Some graduates have been able to use recently acquired insights to bring about changes within departments they are working in, to contribute to development plans, teaching plans and policies. These kinds of outcomes inevitably have an impact on the professional colleagues they work with.

Third, some EdD graduates had already had the opportunity to have an impact on the wider professional academic community through the dissemination of their findings at conferences and in academic journal articles. For these students the EdD was recognition that their research had led to increased professional standing. Underpinning all these outcomes is a fourth factor: several respondents felt that engaging in research for their EdD had an impact on their professional self-esteem, enhancing their perceived credibility as educational professionals.

In terms of personal and professional outcomes of EdD research, there appears to be some similarity with those developed on a learner-managed, professional doctorate described by Stephenson et al (2006). These authors suggest that significant outcomes for candidates were greater personal and professional credibility, enhanced personal and professional capability, and a strengthened commitment to continuing development. Their findings led them to suggest that key to this development can be attributed to the style of candidates involvement in the programme alongside a programme structure which incorporates a partnership between the university and the profession.

The EdD programme we researched does not have this partnership with professions and the programme structure is not negotiable. However, students do have to identify their area of research and convince their supervisors and examiners that their investigation is feasible, relevant to practice and that it will contribute to a greater understanding of the area/issue under investigation. Despite these differences in programme structures there appears to be similar benefits derived from engaging in professional doctoral research that has direct relevance to students' professional roles.

The EdD students in our study made the transition to competent and autonomous researching professionals, able to contribute to debates in their chosen field of study. The EdD has provided an opportunity for these students to grapple with the problems that arise in their professional settings and arrive at a deeper understanding of factors affecting these; and to identify ways forward. In this way, the EdD is able to meet the professional development needs of teachers and lecturers operating within the context of globalization and the knowledge economies, with an emphasis placed on advanced thinking skills to enhance practice. It is likely that the general growth in EdD programmes, with more students wishing

to study at a distance (making increasing use of e-learning), undoubtedly change the traditional apprenticeship model of doctoral study.

To achieve an EdD as a distance learning student requires considerable commitment, dogged determination, diligent attention to detail, much perspiration and no little inspiration. As the voices of EdD students in this research confirm, an EdD will augment an education professional's skills and knowledge, will impact on colleagues and the wider professional community, and, most significantly, will enhance professional self-esteem. Based on our research, the EdD journey to enhancing an individual's professional self-esteem appears to be a positive one. However, further longitudinal research will be required to track EdD graduates and establish longer term impacts and professional outcomes.

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