1 Choosing to do a Doctorate in Education

Choosing to study for a professional doctorate is a major decision and, for many, it is often the first step of a journey towards building and extending skills and knowledge about educational enquiry. It is a research journey that will allow you to pursue an area of personal interest and a research investigation in depth and in a way that you will not have had the opportunity to do before. Conducting your own research can be both exciting and rewarding as you uncover new ways of looking at events in educational settings or thinking about theoretical perspectives. As well as many highs during the process of your research there will also be some lows, and knowing how to manage your research throughout each different phase will help you to achieve your goal of a doctorate in education (EdD). There are a number of different issues to consider, as you will discover in later chapters, but we will begin by asking a question. Why do research for an EdD? Why is this an appropriate route for you rather than some other kind of higher degree such as a PhD? There are no doubt several reasons why you have selected this route to your doctorate. Whatever those reasons may be, it is relevant to know what lies behind gaining a doctoral qualification. In this chapter we will cover:

- **the professional doctorate and the EdD;**

- **why do an EdD?**

- **key issues – knowledge, the practitioner and reflection on practice.**

A brief explanation about the emergence of the professional doctorate, including the EdD, will provide some context.

The professional doctorate and the EdD

Professional doctorates in the UK emerged for a variety of reasons, depending on the subject area. For example, the engineering doctorate (EngD) was promoted by the Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council (EPSRC) and developed to provide a high status route for young engineers pursuing industrial careers; the business

doctorate (DBA) grew out of the highly successful MBA as a means to extend professional development further. The education doctorate developed through the initiatives of universities rather than a professional body or research council. As a consequence, the structure and length of EdD programmes may vary considerably, with some having more restrictive entrance requirements than others and often varying in length from 3 to 7 years. A majority of professional doctorates, including the EdD, are studied part-time. The UK Council for Graduate Education (UKCGE) notes that the EdD 'has developed to bring a demonstrably high level of research enquiry to bear within a practical context. This route is particularly relevant for experienced education professionals and is almost invariably undertaken on a part-time basis' (UKCGE 2002: 19).

The Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) has recognised the relevance of the professional doctorate for educational practitioners and welcomed the development of such programmes in universities. The *Postgraduate Training Guidelines* (ESRC 2005) now include a section of guidance for the professional doctorate (termed PD) where it is described as an exciting innovation within the field of doctoral study. The term 'professional doctorate' incorporates the range of doctorates in the UK, including the DBA in the field of business and management and the DClinPsy or DEdPsy in psychology as well as the EdD. A distinguishing feature of a professional doctorate is the undertaking of an original piece of research and, therefore, a grasp of research methods is required. The ESRC state: 'Professional doctorates aim to develop an individual's professional practice and to support them in producing a contribution to [professional] knowledge' (ESRC 2005: 93).

While the development of professional knowledge is seen as particularly important within an EdD, a number of other features are identified by the ESRC. For example, the requirement of an independent piece of research expected to include 'real-life' issues concerned with practice, and an expectation that close interaction with professionally related problems would lead to opportunities for personal and professional development through the processes of research. It is suggested that research training should include a range of methodological approaches. The way in which the professional doctorate provides a link between theory and practice and how the overall pedagogical philosophy underlying the doctorate supports students during their research are considered by the ESRC to be key issues for all professional doctorate programmes.

The EdD, therefore, is a professionally-oriented doctorate that allows professionals to develop and refine their research skills, to carry out a substantial piece of research and to reflect upon their own practice. This is often indicated in the prospectuses of those universities who offer the EdD and such documentation normally makes explicit the aim of linking professional practice, professional knowledge and research. For example, one university prospectus states that the EdD is:

An innovative programme designed for professionals in education and related areas who want to extend and deepen their knowledge and understanding of contemporary educational issues. It is characterised by

a substantial taught element and a modular structure. It aims to develop skills in research and enquiry and to use these in order to carry out research that will contribute to professional knowledge and practice. A growing number of professionals regard this style of doctoral programme as being a more appropriate vehicle for their further development than the traditional PhD.

(Open University 2004: 19)

A wide range of professionals are attracted to study a doctorate in education, from primary and secondary schoolteachers to heads of further education colleges and staff in university departments. In addition, those who work in educational administration or in local education authorities may embark upon an education doctorate. Very often, the EdD student population will include professionals from related fields such as medicine and social work. Students on EdD programmes come from very diffuse backgrounds, and one of the issues that the professional doctorate in education has had to contend with is how to create a recognisable identity and a coherent structure that will support the variety and range of research topics such a body of students will choose to follow. For many programmes, that coherence is achieved through a modular structure with a taught element embedded in the course. The taught element ensures that the part-time doctoral students engage in regular dialogue with their supervisors and a community of other student researchers, allowing them to reflect on their own progress and avoid the feelings of isolation that have, until recent years, been associated with part-time PhD study. The perceived nature of the EdD as a manageable, structured route to a doctorate is essential for many who study by this means, as one EdD graduate indicated in an anonymous evaluation at the end of an EdD programme:

The process of submitting assignments on a regular basis was essential. The EdD is very focused because of the word limit. Having to work to deadlines suited my lifestyle and meant that work was completed in the allotted time.
The structure and support which helped me stay on track whilst holding down a job that takes me all over the country is quite difficult to balance without that underlying structure.

(EdD Graduate 2004)

As evidenced by the comment above, the taught element of the EdD is particularly important to students. The structure supported by the completion of regular assignments appeals to busy professionals working full-time who want to research their own practice.

Why do an EdD?

Taking the decision to register for a doctoral programme is a huge step. It requires a vast commitment to several years of research and study, giving up other activities and hobbies, and very often giving up much of a social life until it is completed. So what is the motivation

for those who decide to follow this route? For some, the EdD is seen as a pathway to being involved in doing research that has personal professional relevance and is applicable to real-life educational practice. As one EdD graduate has remarked:

> *I would never have embarked on or completed a PhD. I am ideologically opposed to research into an esoteric area of study that has no application to the 'real' world.*

(EdD Graduate 2004)

Some choose to do a doctorate in education because it appears more manageable in terms of completion and for those who are mid-career professionals this can be a key issue.

> *I have many colleagues who have begun a part-time PhD. Most have given up along the way.*

(EdD Graduate 2004)

Many students undertake an EdD, not because they wish to further their careers, but simply because they have a curiosity and interest in an aspect of their own work that they would like to investigate further. They would like to develop and extend their professional knowledge and undertaking an EdD provides the opportunity to do so. The aim is to know more about something at the end of the process than you do at the beginning. Pole and Lampard (2002) suggest that when research is reduced to very simple characteristics it cuts away the mystique that can sometimes surround it and focuses upon the actual processes of doing it. From simple beginnings it is possible to build up to more complex questions about the nature of educational research that you would like to undertake and the relationship between the research question, the research methods and the generation of knowledge through data. Right from the beginning of your research you will need to think about some of the key issues that it will be important to address if you are to achieve your doctorate successfully.

Key issues – knowledge, the practitioner and reflection on practice

There are many factors that will contribute to you gaining your EdD and to some extent these will vary from other EdD participants depending upon your personal and work circumstances. Some issues, however, will be present for all, although how you might resolve them will be different. In this book we have devoted individual chapters to some of the key issues, such as managing your time and your supervisor, getting to grips with your literature review, developing a theoretical perspective, analysing and collecting data, ethical issues and the writing process. Throughout each of the chapters threads of our central themes are used to link together the processes of doing research.

These themes may well be central to all doctoral programmes, such as contributing to knowledge, linking the academic and the professional, developing a rigorous approach to your research, reflection upon the research processes and reflection upon practice.

As an educational practitioner entering an EdD programme you will find that you have much to offer in terms of your previous academic study and work experience as well as much to learn. It is important, as Pole and Lampard (2002: 5) suggest, to pose a number of questions about your proposed research:

1   **Why am I doing this research?**

2   **What is the need for this research?**

3   **Where will the research lead?**

4   **What are the issues I wish to address and/or the debates to which I wish to contribute?**

While these are simple questions that you may have already begun to think about if you have had to write a proposal to gain entrance to your EdD programme, they are worth keeping in mind throughout the various processes of your research. Such questions help to keep you focused and continually explaining to yourself what it is that you are trying to investigate. A clear rationale about why you want to do your research and where you hope it will lead will help to keep you motivated and moving forward in your research studies. It will also help you to refine your professional knowledge as you make links between your workplace setting and the assignments or progress reports that you are required to undertake for your doctorate. Scott et al. (2004) have argued that on EdD programmes the relationship between course content and practice is ambiguous, uncertain or implicit. They suggest that the relationship between programme content and professional practice therefore emerges through written assignments or personal reflection and informal discussion. While the connection between practitioner experience and an EdD programme may occur implicitly, there is often great value to be gained by individual students from working in this way, as one EdD graduate revealed in an end-of-course evaluation:

The EdD is closely related to practice and the link between theory and practice. Study complemented my professional role, both informing the other. Research findings were immediately applicable to my day-to-day work.

(EdD Graduate 2004)

A carefully chosen topic linked to a workplace setting can greatly enhance the knowledge of a practitioner and provide a means for improving practice. Researching your topic will allow you the opportunity to reflect upon your role in your workplace

and may well bring to the surface issues that you were only vaguely aware of in your daily routine. One of the principal aims of a professional doctorate is the development of the reflective practitioner (Scott et al. 2004). Such reflection is not necessarily about improving practice, particularly when many doctoral students are at a stage in their careers where they are already highly experienced practitioners, but rather it is about gaining a deeper and more profound understanding of the practice setting. Two EdD graduates give their views of the reflective processes at work in an EdD programme:

It has led to greater reflection on learning processes, linking theory to practice and seeing the two as inseparable.

I believe I am developing an ability to reflect critically on my own work. In particular I am building on work studied on the MA course on critical self-reflection and the 'reflective practitioner' in reflecting on the shortcomings and strengths of the methodology used.

(EdD Gradutes 2004)

In the above examples, reflection is evident in a number of different ways. The first example shows how one EdD student is able to focus on learning processes and move between the workplace and academic study making connections between the two. For this student, the reflective processes led to theory and practice merging into being 'inseparable'. The second graduate used reflection as a means to develop skill as a researcher through focusing upon the methodology used in her study and she felt a connection between her earlier studies and current research as an EdD student. Reflection allowed these students to develop procedural and technical knowledge. Procedural knowledge is described by Wenger (1998) as the characteristics of a community of practice (see Lave and Wenger 1991). Dependency relationships established within a community result in developing shared practice that has specific forms of communication that may not be evident to an outsider. Learning processes in an educational setting may well have such 'shared practices' embedded within their design and structure. Technical knowledge is described by Shulman (1987) as those areas of knowledge that practitioners need to be acquainted with in order to carry out their job effectively. These areas span content knowledge, pedagogical knowledge, principles and strategies of management and organisation, curriculum knowledge, knowledge of learners, knowledge of educational contexts and knowledge of educational purposes and values. The development of such practical professional knowledge through reflection on educational practice can also lead to new areas of research study, as another EdD graduate revealed.

As my research heads towards a conclusion I am increasingly confident, having extensively reviewed the literature, that this is a unique piece of research. It will be of interest to serving Heads … but it should also be of relevance to a wider audience with new, albeit limited insight into understanding how a Head's autonomy is perceived to impact on a school's effectiveness.

(EdD Graduate 2004)

In this case reflection led to an understanding of the uniqueness of the research undertaken.

The issue of originality within an EdD thesis is one that both students and examiners have tussled with in the past. How do you know that your research is original or of significance? Some EdD programmes may have criteria for assessing theses that require a significant contribution to the theory and practice of education. Views on originality and significance may be wide-ranging and one group of examiners, at The Open University, in an institutional exercise to standardise and moderate their use of marking criteria, suggested the following:

Criteria 2: 'makes a significant contribution to the theory and practice of education'

The majority of examiners agreed that a thesis that fulfils this criteria:

- *Could realistically be used to shape future research or practice at a national, or more likely, local level.*
- *Presents rich sources of data and indicates areas for further research.*
- *A 'significant contribution' entails the criteria of originality and relevance. It is demonstrated by evidence of advancing professional knowledge and understanding of the theory and practice of education at an individual, institutional or national/global level.*
- *Is of interest to other professionals working in the field.*
- *Is of publishable quality.*

(OU Co-ordination Exercise 2003)

These criteria identified by the examiners reveal some of the tension between the professional and theoretical aspects surrounding studying for an EdD. Research for an EdD thesis is usually small and local so the contribution is likely to be most relevant to that local setting and it may not be possible to generalise much from the findings. The examiners argue, however, that the contribution should link to earlier research and may give insights relevant to the local setting which are new or innovative.

The growth of professional knowledge through reflection on practice will, therefore, be a central part of your developing EdD thesis. That reflection will be linked to both your workplace setting and your developing academic knowledge. It will be the processes of doing your research that will enable such reflection and that may lead you in new directions in the future, as one EdD graduate commented:

I now understand my role as [Head of Department] better and can see the flaws in the senior management of the school … the way I will manage my department will be different, as will the way I will introduce innovation and deal with members of my team.

(EdD Graduate 2004)

There are many changes that can flow from undertaking a piece of doctoral research, whether it is gaining a better understanding of workplace roles, or dealing with management and innovation. One thing is certain when you start your research

for your EdD. The processes you will undergo as you carry out your doctoral research will lead to many changes in your life and work as you reflect, research and study.

Conclusion

In this chapter we have tried to convey what is distinctive about studying for an EdD in the context of a wide variety of other professional doctorates. We have explored reasons why professionals study for an EdD and some of the benefits they have gained from doing so. In identifying some key issues that we consider have relevance for all those who undertake a professional doctorate, we hope that you will continue to revisit ideas surrounding professional knowledge and practice and reflection on practice as you study. In the next chapter we explore organising and planning your research.

Research is an engaging and all-consuming activity and once you have achieved your doctorate you may find it hard to let go! We hope the advice in the following chapters will help to support you on your journey towards achieving your EdD and becoming a competent researcher in the process.