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## **The role of the professional doctorate in Ireland from the student perspective**

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Similar to many other advanced capitalist societies, Irish higher education policy is in the process of constructing a new role and identity for doctoral students which has at its core the desire to produce what have been referred to by the Irish Universities Association as ‘knowledge entrepreneurs’. This conception of doctoral education meshes with, at least in policy terms, the desire for a knowledge-led economy, in which all forms of knowledge can potentially become commodified. This study examines interview data from 27 professional doctoral students regarding the relationship between their motivations to undertake advanced study and their conceptions of and purposes for academic and professional knowledge. The authors argue that current Irish policy is underpinned by a restrictive and narrow understanding of doctoral education, as it marginalises those students who in their professional practice neither wish to view themselves or be positioned as knowledge entrepreneurs.

**Keywords:** continuing professional development; policy analysis; professional doctorate; professional education; knowledge creation

### **Introduction: constructing knowledge factories or knowledge communities?**

The introduction in 2004 of the professional doctorate in education in the Republic of Ireland has, anecdotally at least, been greeted with much enthusiasm. However, this level of eagerness at the practitioner level has not been replicated by policy makers at either the national or institutional levels. As we will argue, the policy emphasis in the Republic is resolutely focused on the expansion in numbers of, and changes in, the mode of education of PhD students much to the detriment of its younger sibling, the professional doctorate. We argue that, as well as attempting to increase the volume of students, there is also an attempt to construct a very particular kind of doctoral graduate who is intended to be a carrier of commercial entrepreneurial values and practices, whose *raison d’être* is the generation of knowledge (which either is or can be) transformed into an explicit commodified form. However, it should be noted that this is only one of a number of possible forms of entrepreneurship to be found in the literature (see for example, Leadbeater and Oakley 2001)

This new model of graduate is foregrounded in recent Irish policy documents. However, whilst this particular doctoral archetype is not a new construct (see, for example, Usher 2002; Mendoza 2007), it has, in the Irish context, become a feature of the dominant discourse across policy-making arenas. For those academics and students who work in domains such as education, health and social care, where,

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generally speaking, a public service culture, ethos and tradition permeate doctoral study, this new doctoral graduate role is problematic in two main respects. First, it is at odds with this public service ethos and, second, alternative forms of doctoral education are excluded from the debate, which by virtue of their absence become, at the very worst, delegitimised modes of study and knowledge generation and, at best, seen as marginal and irrelevant in the context of economic instrumentalism.

The purpose of this article is to build on the work done by Delamont, Atkinson, and Parry (2000), Scott et al. (2004) and Wellington and Sikes (2006). It discusses critically two themes that have emerged in a small-scale study of students' motivation to enrol on a professional doctorate programme, and the impact it has had on their conceptions of knowledge and the potential uses of their own research. The first part of this article will offer a brief sketch of the topography of conceptions of research within the higher education context in the Republic of Ireland. This context setting is important as, since the late 1990s, research in higher education institutions, in both a symbolic and substantive sense, has developed from being a marginal activity to one which is now seen as being a social and economic imperative. As a consequence, this foregrounding of research in institutions has shifted the terrain in which doctoral, and more generally continuing professional development, is now located. The second half of the article shifts the focus from these macro policy manoeuvres and onto the perceptions and experiences of a group of practitioners 'working' their way through a professional doctorate programme. What we wish to highlight is that, despite the policy rhetoric around the commodification of knowledge, and with it the need for 'entrepreneurial academics', this is a position far removed from the motives and experiences of the students. If anything, their identities as practitioners and emergent researchers in the public service domain are deepened and reinforced.

It is useful to preface any discussion of professional doctorates with the changing nature of academia (e.g. Maxwell 2003; Maxwell, Hickey, and Evans 2004; Scott et al. 2004). The form, function and purpose of the university have historically always been fluid (and contested) in the generation, management, organisation and circulation of knowledge (Rashdall 1895; Rothblatt 1997). For instance, one important development around the role of the (European) university appears at about the end of the eighteenth and beginning of the nineteenth centuries, with the emergence of the so-called 'German University' (Simpson 1983). As a result of this, the knowledge-creation role (as opposed to its conservation and transmission) became a dominant template for universities. Moving to the present and mindful of these past trends, Kerr (2001) argues that at least three models can be identified. He refers to these as the British/liberal model, the German/research model and the American/public service model. In the first model, exemplified by the universities of Oxford and Cambridge, the university is viewed as at the service of its students, rather than either a research agenda or the wider society. The university is a place of the development of the self by means of leisurely contemplation, the social contact with other privileged and (self-selected) intelligent contemporaries, and engagement with 'culture'. The most lyrical articulation of this notion of the university can be found in Newman's *The Idea of a University* (1873/1927).

The German model is due in most part to the work of Humboldt in his reform of the Prussian education system, and the founding of the university dedicated to scholarly research as the search for universal truth in academic freedom, which produces the researcher-teacher. The idea of the American university as a servant of society (Kerr's 'multiversity') becomes particularly well focused in the Second World War,

when publicly funded laboratories were attached to universities to aid the war effort, though federal grant universities to service developing industry and agriculture (see for example, Clarke 1973; Bok 1982, 2003; Kerr 2001) date back to the 1860s. It is arguable that an amalgam of the 'German' and the 'American' models has found expression in the Irish policy and structural context, not only by groups within higher education institutions and the Government, but also in non-governmental organisations both inside and outside of Ireland. This coupling of the two models has been frequently debated both inside and outside of the academy (see for example, Barnett 1990; Smith and Webster 1997). It could be argued that, within this coupling, a tension between the two models is evident in the discourses around doctoral education. However, the debate is not neatly polarised around the 'professional' versus the 'conventional' doctorate. It is much messier, since the 'conventional' PhD appears, at least in the Irish context, to be metamorphosing into quite a different model that it is becoming more like a professional doctorate, with its emphasis on transferable skills and relevance to the non-academic 'world'.

### A little bit of context goes a long way

The generation, capture, protection and exploitation of intellectual property (IP) is a central theme of any world-class research environment. As such the transfer of knowledge and technology, encompassing intellectual property, from HEIs (higher education institutes) and Public Research Organisations into the market place is recognised as being of crucial importance in the establishment of a strong research environment and a knowledge-based economy, as are robust linkages between the third level and enterprise sectors. IP management and commercialisation should be seen as a central part of the [higher education] institution's mission with equal standing alongside the conventional activities of teaching and curiosity driven research. (Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment 2006, 34–35)

The higher education sector in Ireland, often referred to as the 'third level sector', is relatively small: seven institutions of university status and a further 14 institutes of technology encompassing some 124,980 (20,456 part-time) undergraduates and 20,700 (11,239 part-time) postgraduate students (2008/9 data). It has, in recent years, come under intense governmental pressure to be positioned (and to position itself) at the forefront of the so-called knowledge economy. This in itself is not uncommon, as it has been noted by a number of writers that in the context of post-industrialisation, countries jostle to gain or maintain a positional advantage over each other in the milieu of what is euphemistically referred to as economic and cultural globalisation (see for example, Usher and Edwards 1994; Waters 1995; Aronowitz 2000; Edwards and Usher 2000; Giddens 2002; Beck 2007). In the Irish context, at least, a number of reports and policy assertions, since the 'Celtic Tiger' escaped from Milton Friedman's economic zoo in the early 1990s, have had no compunction in positioning the higher education sector at the forefront of this process. However, there is a very distinctive and dominant discourse at play in these texts around *what* constitutes knowledge and, more importantly, what it is *for*. This is not to deny that other forms of 'knowledge function' discourses are in circulation, but the preponderance of the *economistic* appears to have taken on a near hegemonic form in the Irish context, and has pushed to the very margins other forms and conceptualisations of knowledge.

This debate notwithstanding, there has been in Ireland since 1998 with the launch of the Programme for Research in Third Level Institutions an unprecedented expansion

in the scale of investment in research in higher education settings. This is significant, as Ireland, unlike many other European states, has had no research capacity worth mentioning, and is trying to make up for lost time. Most notably, there has been a significant increase since the mid 1990s in competitive funding available to higher education institutions under various schemes. Most of this, however, has been in the area of techno-science, with the express aim of promoting what Slaughter and Leslie (1997) and Slaughter and Rhoades (2004) refer to as ‘academic capitalism’, with its primary aim to feed into the so-called ‘knowledge economy’. The motivation for this high level of investment is frequently echoed and the following quote would not be atypical of such aspirational language:

It is no coincidence that those nations [e.g. USA, Sweden, Japan, etc.] which have achieved long term competitiveness all have high levels of investment in research. They have universities and research institutions that produce world class talent and they have dynamic industries that make use of that talent by investing in the research and innovation that leads to world class products and services. World class research, world class people and world class enterprises with the drive to succeed, and the resources to do it: that is what our strategy aims to deliver. (Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment 2006, 24–25)

The research funding and infrastructure (physical and organisational) in Ireland has multiple strands, but tends to come under the aegis of two government departments: the Department for Education and Science (DES) and the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment (DETE). Under the DES, €865 million has been allocated between 1999 and 2010 under the Programme for Research in Third Level Institutions (PRTL); this has been used to fund capital projects (new buildings) and specific inter-institutional research programmes, of which only €30 million (5%) was distributed to the social sciences, which included no education-related research activities. Other initiatives have come in the form of Science Foundation Ireland (SFI) which has responsibility for the distribution of €1.4 billion of funding to specifically underpin research and development in the domains of information and communications technology, biotechnology and sustainable energy. One of the critical ‘engines’ of this expansion is the ‘Strategy for Science, Technology and Innovation 2007–2013’ (DETE 2006); itself part of the National Development Plan 2006–2013. As envisaged by this strategy, which is underpinned by €1.88 billion:

Success will be marked by increased participation in the sciences, increased numbers of people with advanced qualifications, enhanced contribution by research to economic and social development, transformational change in the quality and quantity of research, increased output of economically relevant knowledge, increased trans-national research activity, an international profile for Ireland and greater coherence and exploitation of synergies nationally and internationally. (DETE 2006, 8)

### **(Re)Generating the doctors: a new regime for postgraduate education?**

The DETE (2006) *Strategy for Science, Technology and Innovation 2007–2013* document traverses a large array of issues, of which one is the education of new researchers. Part of the rationale for change in this domain appears to be couched in the form of a moral panic over the perceived state (and status) of graduate education in Ireland. The old *laissez faire* model, based more on serendipity than good planning in ‘producing’ doctoral graduates (see Delamont, Atkinson, and Parry 2000), has become a new point of neurosis for policy makers. What is required from the perspective of this

strategy is a more corporate approach to postgraduate education, which is ultimately aligned to national aims and objectives. Within this new postgraduate educative ‘grid of intelligibility’ (see Foucault 1979), the strategy has proposed a model that is intended to cover the following processes and activities:

- quality-led training of early stage researchers in multi-disciplinary environments;
- structured, relevant generic and transferable professional skills training, enabling the PhDs produced to develop their careers in diverse sectors of the economy, including intellectual property management and commercialisation skills;
- industrial placements and modular, transferable postgraduate courses, both practical and theory-based with built-in industrial expertise; and
- further training for industrial researchers requiring skills/knowledge upgrading. (DETE 2006, 31)

More specifically, the Irish Universities Association (2008) has identified some 34 separate ‘skills’ organised around seven themes, such as ‘research skills and awareness’, ‘communication skills’ and ‘entrepreneurship and innovation’. As well as this attempt to bring about a qualitative change in the nature of doctoral education, there is the aim to double the number of PhD graduates from 543 (2005) to 997 (2013) in science, engineering and technology, and 187 (2005) to 315 (2013) in the humanities and social sciences (DETE 2006). Although the ‘Strategy for Science, Technology and Innovation 2007–2013’ sets out the broader terrain in the pursuit of ‘world classness’ in research, it is the Strategic Innovation Fund (SIF) which functions as the main mechanism to instigate changes within higher education more widely. Essentially, the Fund amounts to €510 million being allocated to Irish universities (between 2006 and 2013) to reconfigure their own practices, with the emphasis on ‘new approaches to enhancing quality and effectiveness within higher education and research’ (Higher Education Authority 2008). The range of ‘projects’ funded so far is quite diverse in scope; some are long overdue, such as ‘widening access’ and numerous initiatives under the heading of ‘enhancing teaching and learning’, whilst some are highly contested, such as ‘exploring full economic costing’. However, in relation to doctoral studies it is the much vaunted development of ‘fourth level education’ and, in particular, the ‘knowledge entrepreneurs’ (see Leadbeater and Oakley 2001; Coulson-Thomas 2003), which are most pertinent to this article:

The development of 4th Level Ireland means a new and very different research environment in our universities; one which is characterised by flexibility, responsiveness and innovation. 4th Level Ireland will provide a new cohort of researchers at the doctoral and postdoctoral level, our future innovators and knowledge entrepreneurs. (Irish Universities Association 2008, 3)

What this represents is a ‘re-fashioning’ of the postgraduate sector to create the impression that, although it is still connected to the undergraduate world (the ‘third level’), by definition of being the ‘fourth level’ it exists as a separate institutional, as well as inter-institutional, domain. This semiotic shift is significant, as it functions as a sign to create a sense of coherence and unity around postgraduate education in a number of different ways. First, as a phrase the fourth level fashions a new student identity based not solely on the training of a new generation of academics, but

producing individuals capable of entering the commercial world and commodifying their skills and knowledge. Second, as there is not any prior institutional *ancien régime* to be judged against (except of course via international comparisons), the fourth level is able to construct an entirely new social, cultural and organisational dynamic for itself. But it is a dynamic which not only mirrors the commercial world in its new habitus, but has strong roots in the academic as well. Hence the boundaries between the university and the commercial domain are seen as being osmotic. Third, the fourth level will be largely defined by some variant on the graduate school model. At this stage a number of joint institutional ventures have been initiated either under the Programme for Research in Third Level Institutions (PRTLTI), the SIF or the Graduate Research Education Programme. And lastly, the fourth level will operate in the highly competitive (as well as lucrative) international postgraduate arena, competing for academics and students alike.

However, despite proclamations by the Irish Universities Association (IUA) to the contrary, this is a fourth level which is distinctly unbalanced in the highly noticeable bias towards the physical and natural sciences. As well as being apparent in the PRTLTI and SIF resources, this imbalance is also marked by the disparity in funding for such ‘bread and butter activities’ as scholarships. In 2008 the Irish Research Council for Science, Engineering and Technology (IRCSET) announced the provision of €11.8 million for ‘early career formation ... for up to 165 doctoral and masters researchers’. It should be noted that the amount of money for the scheme (at approximately €71,000 per student), is slightly less than the *total* budget of €12.5 million for the Irish Research Council for Humanities and Social Sciences (IRCHSS). The lack of attention paid to doctoral education, research careers, and the humanities and social sciences more generally has been noted by the influential Royal Irish Academy (2007), whose report fed into the decision by the Higher Education Authority, in conjunction with the IRCHSS, to set up the ‘Foresight in the Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences’ ‘to provide a comprehensive review of the contribution which a thriving humanities and social sciences sector can make to social and economic development’ (Higher Education Authority 2008, 1).

Taken together, these two broad policy initiatives (the expansion in research activities and concomitant reconstruction of the researcher as ‘knowledge entrepreneur’) have at both the macro-level (in the form of institutional, national and supra-national structures, resources and strategies) and the micro-level (programme design and academic socialisation), at least on the level of discourse, permeated into the life-world of the Irish university. However, it would be churlish at this point to suggest that this discourse has become instantiated across the sector in any significant and/or uniform way, as this is still yet to be assessed. Additionally, given the messy and uneven interweaving of policy into academic life and across different disciplinary domains, it will be interesting to see how academics make sense of, resist, acquiesce or just simply ignore this repositioning.

### **A view from the professional doctorate**

However, despite this expansionist agenda in both research and graduate education, these shifts do not bode well for named domain-specific professional doctorates such as DEd or DEng. Firstly, no mention has been made about them in any of the policy and planning documents produced so far. If anything, this silence is somewhat

profound, and particularly so given the 2006 National Qualifications Authority's recommendations for further study into the role and function of professional doctorates in the Irish context. A further notable absence is to be found in the document *The Future of the PhD in Ireland* (IUA 2004), which sets out a structured variant of the PhD and makes no reference to the professional doctorate. Although slightly less silent on the matter, the European Universities Association (2007) report devotes just two short paragraphs to the issue of professional doctorates. These blandly state that they need to be as rigorous as the conventional PhD, and may need to be differentiated by title. The subtext here is that they are really best ignored as they do not fit the third cycle model; this role is filled by the structured PhD. However, despite this marginal status and the small size of the Irish higher education sector, there are 14 professional doctorates of which four are in the domain of education. The others can be found across subject domains such as theology (though some would argue that this would constitute the archetypal medieval doctorate), psychology, engineering and business. The growth of professional doctorates (and more specifically in education) in the UK and Australia, in particular in the 1990s, has been well documented (see for example, Bourner, Bowden, and Lang 2001; McWilliams et al. 2002; United Kingdom Council for Graduate Education 2002; Scott et al. 2004). However, although there is a policy impetus to increase the number of doctoral-level graduates, they will not come under the aegis of the professional variety. If anything, the lacklustre interest (or understanding) in professional doctorates by policy makers, and the funding mechanisms for graduate education may well see them disappear as quickly as they have appeared.

### The study

However marginalised these professional doctorates may be from the recently recast agenda for research and graduate education, they still enjoy a large degree of popularity, and admissions to these programmes have seen steady growth in the last years. One such programme is the doctorate in education at Trinity College Dublin, and the second part of this article examines the motivations for enrolling and the subsequent changing conceptions of knowledge and its uses in this group of students. The study is conducted against the backdrop of the new cultural dynamic of graduate education and its consequent new student identity, discussed above.

The DEd programme began in 2005 and the first thesis submissions were received in autumn 2009. Six taught modules accompany a practice-based research project. The modules are assessed by means of four 5000-word essays, and the expected thesis length is between 70,000 and 80,000 words. At present there are 35 students enrolled in the programme. This study began in 2008 and is ongoing, collecting data at the end of each academic year. In 2009 data was collected with a focus on causal connections between theoretical and practical knowledge.

Taking as our starting point the work done by Wellington and Sikes (2006), we structured the inquiry around a number of guiding questions. As both of us are lecturers on the programme (and one of us, Loxley, the programme director), we knew the students quite well and, given this, we opted to adopt a very informal *modus operandi* towards the interviews. Hence the data consist not only of direct responses to questions, but also the interaction between participants (resembling the data achieved from a focus group). More formally though, the data were constructed around the following questions:



- (1) What were your intentions and motivation for choosing a doctorate?
- (2) Why a professional doctorate rather than a conventional PhD, and what is the nature of the cohort effect? In particular, has there been a sense of collective intellectual/critical growth?
- (3) How do you conceptualise the kind of knowledge that your work will generate?
- (4) What are your expectations after the doctorate?
- (5) What effect (if any) have your studies had on your professional life?
- (6) What effect (if any) has it had on your personal life?

There were 27 individuals in the first study group (13 men and 14 women) from all educational sectors and beyond (two primary teachers, eight post-primary teachers, eleven from the third level, two from support services, one schools inspector, one information technology consultant, one civil servant and one educational psychologist). Four students are engaged in third-level education but in fields as diverse as engineering, culinary arts, computer science and sociology. One participant works in the area of adult education, one in psycho-analysis and one in mainstream second-level education. This diversity is not unusual to this sample of the 31 students currently enrolled on the DEd programme, but echoes the diversity of the whole group. A number of group and individual interviews were conducted with 25 of the students during 2008. They were carried out for the most part at the university, usually around a scheduled teaching session for the group. Students were invited to come either early to the session or to remain after. The interviews, conducted jointly by the two authors, lasted approximately 60–90 minutes in each case, and were recorded. One of the interviews was carried out by telephone. The data were then transcribed from the tapes and responses coded. It is intended to try to interview all the students enrolled on the course (34), so that the data presented here represent only a first round of data collection. We have also planned to interview academic staff involved in the programme as well.

## **Findings and analysis**

### ***Intentions and motivation for choosing a doctorate***

What seems clear from an examination of this first phase of data is that those engaged in a professional doctorate in education, at least at Trinity College Dublin, do not seem to fit into the mould of the ‘European citizen under construction’ (Fejes 2008). The themes of mobility and flexibility as motivators for engaging with fourth-level studies are almost completely absent from responses, with only one participant voicing the idea that he might change career significantly on completion. Not one of the participants indicated that they might use the qualification in order to travel and work in another European state. Neither is there any sense in the data that the participants were moved to gain further qualifications by the threat of future risk of redundancy in employment. The qualification is not regarded as a safety net or shield for future economic insecurities that might threaten personal prosperity. The factors that were presented as motivators were: the enrichment of practice, being able to make a contribution to knowledge in the field of study, to learn new (research) skills, to enhance the professional regard of adult education, to enhance a present position/salary in education, the intrinsic drive to learn, the desire to write and the desire to

speak on educational matters with confidence and authority. The participant from the engineering field did express the notion of ‘currency’ as being a motivating factor:

I was in industry and I came back into academia, or into academia, in engineering and I thought I wanted to do a doctorate for currency ... I wanted to do a doctorate for currency but also because I thought it would be useful ... has this changed ... I don't know, the last year's been a bit of a blank. (A)

However, a much stronger motivation, common to almost all of the participants, was altruism and a concern for the public good of research:

That is the interesting thing about what we are doing. All of the work that we are doing on the DEd. In some ways, all of us are trying to improve the lot of somebody or some group as a common goal for all of us ... at the end of the day, we are trying to improve the lot of a group. (Mi)

Caution is required here lest this group of educators be seen as a noble band of altruistic, public spirited, transformative intellectuals, but there is certainly no evidence either that they are ‘entrepreneurial customers’ engaged in accumulating individual academic capital (Liesner 2006). An important factor in this response may lie more in the median age and average number of grey hairs present in the group rather than their left-leaning politics. All of the participants (and almost all of those involved with the DEd.) are at a point in their careers where struggling for badly-paid post-doctoral positions and fighting to have their names pushed up the author list on a peer-reviewed journal article are not matters of concern:

One of the things I would put a note in about is: we are a reasonably mature group. Some are younger ... most are in a phase in life and are less concerned, if you like, about the rat-race and the competition element. We do not have the competition element; we are supportive of each other. (Mi)

It could be argued, therefore, that the very sense of occupational stability, for most (but not all) of them, removed from their personal ‘calculus’ the necessity to acquire formal academic capital for explicit career development.

### ***Why a professional doctorate rather than a conventional PhD?***

An examination of the responses on the theme of the conventional PhD vs. the professional doctorate revealed that half of the participants had actively considered the conventional PhD route, and one participant had written a proposal for which he found it impossible to find a supervisor with the necessary expertise. In two other cases, interestingly perhaps, the desire was to engage in further studies but in something broader than their specialised work in computer science and engineering. The evidence suggests that, for the most part, the participants had no prior knowledge of the nature and structure of a professional degree, as compared with a conventional PhD, other than the realisation that there would be a cohort of students travelling the road together. Thus, while some might have been attracted by the professional degree only, it would be safe to assume that many might well have begun a PhD had the DEd route not been available. The notion that the DEd would be more practically and professionally based, rather than being academic and theoretical (Goodson 2003), was not mentioned by any of the participants. Among the effects of the programme has

been the way in which the participants, in many cases, have changed their view on theory, its importance and role. More specifically, responses on the DEd vs. PhD theme seem to fall into three categories: content, structure and psychological/personal considerations.

In the case of content, there was a strong view that an extended engagement and struggle with research methods and concepts of ontology and epistemology helped with the construction of informed views:

Yes, all this ontology and epistemology. I thought: I can't deal with this. Drop that, I will go back to computer science. They deal with numbers. That was the hardest for me. (G)

This engagement with ontological and epistemological questions was not only beneficial, but even defining, and has, in some cases, changed their whole notion of the nature of research:

It has been very good, don't get me wrong ... It has turned mine [thoughts about knowledge] upside down a little bit in that to say that there is not going to be a prescriptive model for this, there is going to be a series of conclusions around pieces of data I have gathered and some experience I have, and it looks like this and take what you want from it. That's about the best I can do now. I would not have thought that two years ago. (A)

The second notion of structure comes out clearly in this extract:

You do learn that you have to have a certain amount of work done when we meet every month. You can't just come from a lecture the day before and not have an idea of what is happening. The good thing about the DEd is that it puts that constraint on you in a certain way. You have to have a certain amount of groundwork done in order to make it meaningful for yourself. An advantage over the conventional PhD is that sense of direction is always there. (Mi)

For this participant in particular, the structure of monthly seminars and the discipline of having to prepare for these gave a sense of organisation, progression and order to the process. This was not an uncommon response from the other participants, and again was a critical factor in choosing the DEd over a PhD. The overtly teleological structure of the DEd, with the use of external markers of varying significance (seminars, assignments, upgrades, etc.) provided by the programme, was set against the more nebulous and amorphous PhD route.

Thirdly, not unexpectedly, the data reveals the psychological importance, or as Giddens (1991) would put, it the 'ontological security', of the cohort aspect of the DEd in avoiding the loneliness of the long-distance PhD jogger:

I was encouraged by the supportive element of the professional doctorate. In the conventional doctorate you come in and work with your supervisor and anyone I have met that did a PhD said it was a lonely road. In library on your own. The nice thing about the professional PhD, you have people from similar backgrounds and that can help you on the course. (Mi)

First it is the relationship, bonding, all in the one boat, not so much the academic. For that we had the lecturing team for that. It was more to do with friendship. You are not doing this on your own. (F)

We speculate that their knowledge of the PhD being a 'hermetical' or 'monastic' pursuit is based on academic folklore. Previously, university prospectuses provided

very little detail on the structures and process of PhD study, so the sources of this knowledge were probably limited.

The heterogeneity of the group, and the diversity of backgrounds and research interests, are considered to be important and valuable by the group. Significant critical instances were reported where individuals were made aware of possibly previously unconsidered directions of inquiry by other members of the group working in very different fields.

### Conceptualisation of knowledge

We asked the participants about the ways in which they conceptualised the knowledge that they hoped to generate. Linked to this were changes they had noted in the course of the first years of the programme in their notions of the nature and purpose of knowledge. The intention was to examine the responses within the framework of the discourse of the constitution of knowledge as product or process, and its exchange and use-value as instrument and power. It is helpful to place these notions against the backdrop of the three types of university as formulated by Kerr (2001), to see whether DEd students' thinking is 'aligned' with the economic, cultural and social aims of the university. The responses revealed some traces of a number of these themes, but were as interesting for what was omitted. There was, significantly, no mention of the notion of knowledge that dominated all of classical, medieval and modern western thought: the search for truth (possibly with a capital T). More evident is a tacit acceptance of some elements of the postmodern condition of many truths and the under-determinacy of data. More explicitly, there seems to be a degree of reflexivity evident around their struggle to assimilate and accommodate (in Piagetian terms) different truth claims relative to their own value positions:

The big thing for me was the evidence claims and I am still struggling with that. No matter what work you do philosophy informs that. And the question whether this is truth or this is knowledge is one that you have to live with. It is an emotional thing as well as intellectual. Can I say this? Or is it a load of nonsense? (Ma)

And:

I would like to use the metaphor of an onion. When you are in education you come up with theory, come up with reading pieces of theory or lit and find hmm ... that's interesting! Doing a doctorate was about getting to the core of it. That you can actually build on those levels yourself. There is not just one truth but several levels. Sometimes it leaves you going away with a bad smell but. (P)

The positivist in the group has suffered the most:

I suppose I started with the notion that I was going to build a model of how to develop research centres and it would have been quantitative. The longer I have gone on the more I have dropped this notion. You have done that! (A)

There is evidence that the learning that has taken place in the critical engagement with knowledge has been disruptive and challenging (Scott et al 2004). However, there is no indication that this disruptive factor has caused a rejection of theory, and a flight to the relative security of the practical and the 'real world' of the practitioner. On the contrary, as the following exchange illustrates:

I know someone doing it in [a UK university] from XXX [another Irish university]. I said: have you worked out your philosophical position yet? And she went ... 'what???' (Ma)

That is terrible! (P)

I think it is. I would much rather the route where you see the bigger picture ... From the psychological point of view, if you go into it intensely it does change you and you have to be careful. You don't mess with your head too much. You can go into a fog and you have to be careful. (Ma)

The understanding of knowledge as utility and instrument was also present, but it is not 'alienated' from self-development and reflexivity. Furthermore, the utility has a distinct public dimension, rather than an academic or even economic form that can be cashed in:

I hope it will better inform policy for one thing and better inform legal opinion and argument, but having said that the beneficiary is the student, the child in the school. (Mi)

You have the idea of transformative learning. It has been tremendously empowering. While I had the idea of currency what I take away from it is the sense of the journey. (P)

But reading Foucault before I would have felt divorced from it. It had nothing to do with me. But now incorporating it into something that I am doing it is empowering and giving opportunity to do something with it, that is useful for others. (P)

For one participant his changed view of knowledge has changed the level of expected utility:

Yes, but I thought it was going to be of more use! (A)

### **Conclusion: linking the data with the debate**

In conclusion, it is possible to group some of the themes emerging from the data with three features of the debate outlined in the first part of the article. First, with regard to the notion of commodifiable knowledge and its objectification in manifest skills as articulated by higher education policy, the knowledge of the DEd reveals a sophisticated interconnectedness among aspects of intention, course structure and forms of knowledge. While, to a certain extent, intention is *a priori* (i.e. pre-course experience) and an individual factor, it appears to have been shaped also by the structure of the programme. There is also evidence of an emergent shared understanding in the group of the *public* purpose of knowledge and research and their own studies. This knowledge is for the betterment of educational and societal groups, is functionally altruistic, and is not designed to be commodified. This was an unintended outcome, as students were selected for the course only on the basis of their proposal and their professional role (e.g. university lecturer, primary teacher, civil servant etc.), rather than on any underlying value systems – of which we had no knowledge. One explanation for this result may lie, in some degree, with the influence of the culture of the course and the teaching team. A second possible explanation may lie in the more general shared assumptions of the students around professional identity in public service employees in Ireland.

Regarding the first explanation, a possible relationship can be made between the structure of the course and the conceptualisations of knowledge that are evident in the

data. To a large extent, we speculate that these conceptualisations are contingent upon the kind of teaching and learning experiences on the programme, which are intended to be dialogical, challenging and even provocative. For instance, a number of sessions explore the connection between the state and education, using material as diverse as Machiavelli's *The Prince*, Hitler's *Mein Kampf* and Castiglione's *The Book of the Courtier*.

As well as problematising the nature of knowledge itself, this engagement would seem, further, to highlight the complexities surrounding the so-called knowledge–practice divide. These students are senior, mature professionals who already bring relatively sophisticated understandings of this debate to their studies. Knowledge, for them, is not constructed in the sense of absolute truths or certainties, and there is, rightly or wrongly, an almost ‘postmodernist’ take on the notion of truth which could also be construed as pragmatic sense (see, for example, Rorty 1991), though we suspect that it is more the latter than the former which appears to emerge in their written work. This conceptualisation of knowledge appears to be framed within a set of values that we could, for want of a better phrase, term ‘benign utilitarianism’. It is essentially, for them, about use-value rather than exchange value in a marketised sense.

A second emerging theme concerns the models of the university outlined earlier and the positions of these students, as reported, with regard to the interaction of personal development, scholarship, research and public service. Their declared orientation towards the valorisation of knowledge and research in terms of public service echoes and resonates perhaps most obviously with Kerr's American model of the university. However, the data seem to indicate a strong position taken by the students on notions of scholarship for its own sake. This suggests a rather conventional notion of graduate studentship that takes pleasure in developing an academic persona without any direct connection to professional or practical concerns. It cannot, however, be claimed that these students do not possess any ‘entrepreneurial’ characteristics. If the term ‘entrepreneurial’ concerns a broad active engagement with change in the world, whether through development of new products or new services, then these students seem to be becoming critical social entrepreneurs. They see themselves not only generating critique of their own theory and practice, but also attempting to instantiate new modes of practice and thinking.

Returning, finally, to the broad framework of the restructuring of contemporary doctoral education in Ireland, there would seem to be a tension at work between grand rhetorical statements about the entrepreneurial nature of ‘fourth’ level education and the expectations and experiences of this group of professional doctoral students. It would seem that this discourse speaks to a different constituency, more aligned to the commercial world and the early-career PhD than to not-for-profit organisations and mature, mid-career professionals. However, it seems possible to keep a space open for a wider notion of entrepreneurial enterprise that accommodates this particular constituency, but this needs to be reflected to a greater extent in policy development.

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