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Social work and social care professional doctorates in the UK: the current landscape and a research agenda

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ABSTRACT

The first aim of this paper is to provide an updated overview of social work and social care professional doctorates in the UK. This is done in three different ways. Firstly, a structured search of recent published papers and reports showed there to be very little published UK research about the nature of these doctorates or the experience of those involved. Secondly, a systematic Internet search found 21 UK universities offering professional doctorates that specifically cover social work or social care in 2025. Thirdly, a proof-of-concept bibliometric analysis of Proquest Dissertations and Theses Global gave some indication of the frequency of all doctoral completions (with methodological caveats), with 14% of all social work doctorates being coded as professional doctorates and 284 completions over 30 years. The paper's second aim is to outline a research agenda, to extend and deepen the evidence base in future and assess what contribution professional doctorates are making to knowledge for practice in the social work and social care field. The paper concludes with this agenda.

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Introduction

Professional doctorates are designed to allow for the critical application of professional knowledge, enhanced judgment and understanding of how research applies to practice (Lyons, 2003). While they share with PhDs the aim of producing an original contribution to knowledge within their discipline, they are generally thought to have a stronger emphasis on the application of research and theory to professional practice and to policy (Fenge, 2009). Their structure and teaching are different from the traditional PhD. The aim of this paper is to give an updated overview of UK professional doctorate programs in social work and social care, building on a previous one conducted 19 years ago (Scourfield, 2010), and to propose a research agenda for future.

Professional doctorates are designed for applying skills into practice-relevant contexts (Orme, 2003), with the aim of more emphasis on the field of practice than in a traditional PhD. Recognizing oneself as a 'practitioner' rather than an 'academic

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researcher' widens the arena and offers more access and participation in knowledge generation while building the ability to apply knowledge to practice (Fenge, 2010). A professional doctorate is sometimes characterized as a PhD with supporting coursework intended to cultivate and mold 'researching professionals' instead of 'professional researchers' (Kot & Hendel, 2012; Orme, 2003; Wellington & Sikes, 2006). Whereas many individuals undertake a PhD as a means of entering a career in academia (Jones, 2018), professional doctorates are primarily aimed at people who wish to gain advanced research knowledge and skill to use within their profession (Fenge, 2009). Professional doctorate programs aim to support substantial change to organizations and to practice fields (Lester, 2004) and are thought to be especially relevant to professions which apply research evidence. They are particularly well established in education (Robinson, 2018). Overall numbers of UK professional doctorate programs have notably increased over time, from 128 in 1990 to almost 400 in 2010 (Dos Santos & Lo, 2018). Some have argued that professional doctorates address the learning needs of professionals better than a traditional PhD, although evidence to support this claim is lacking, as shown by Chapman et al.'s (2024) systematic review.

Professional doctorates tend to be part-time, with a candidature between 4 and 8 years (McCrystal & Wilson, 2009; Mellors-Bourne et al., 2016). Candidates are often in their mid-30s to mid-50s (Dos Santos & Lo, 2018), reflecting their attraction to mature professionals who wish to maintain their practice while venturing into research.

In social science, at least in the UK, which is the focus of this paper, a PhD is typically one long thesis based on a single study or more than one closely linked study. Despite differences across these programs, the general structure of a professional doctorate includes taught sessions (compulsory modules) with seminars related to advanced practice and advanced research methods (McVicar et al., 2006) and the research phase, where the submission of a piece of work is required, often between 10,000 and 60,000 words in length, depending on the institution (McVicar et al., 2006; Rees et al., 2019). The taught component of the professional doctorate typically offers relevant knowledge of the field of practice, designed to apply to the workplace (Dos Santos & Lo, 2018; Robinson, 2018).

The growth of professional doctorates has occurred within a higher education environment increasingly characterized by expectations of impact, workplace relevance and responsiveness to professional needs (Hawkes & Yerrabati, 2018; Robinson, 2018). Professional doctorates are frequently promoted as vehicles for improving professional practice, organizational performance and service delivery, although evidence supporting these claims remains limited (Chapman et al., 2024; Creaton, 2021). At the same time, wider processes of professionalization and credentialisation have increased the importance of advanced qualifications in many professional labor markets (Tholen, 2014). Within social work, these developments intersect with growing expectations regarding evidence-informed practice and research engagement (Santos-Petiot et al., 2025). Professional doctorates can therefore be understood both as mechanisms for strengthening links between research and practice and as products of broader neoliberal transformations in higher education and professional work. In neoliberal terms, professional doctorates meet a market demand by providing the credentialisation of advanced practitioner knowledge.

In social work and social care, where practice wisdom, relational knowledge, lived experience, and evidence-informed approaches intersect in complex ways, the professional doctorate's claim to an epistemological basis which is quite distinct from a traditional PhD has been argued to have particular promise (Fenge, 2009).

There are different patterns of provision in different countries—e.g. Lee et al. (2023) describe the USA moving away from professional doctorate and toward PhDs between the 1970s and the 2000s, due to a perception of greater research rigor, and then, since the 2000s, a burgeoning interest in practice doctorates (Hartocollis et al., 2014, 2015). In the UK, the PhD in social work is more common, but professional doctorate programs have emerged in recent decades (Scourfield, 2010; Scourfield et al., 2018).

In 2007, Scourfield (2010) conducted a professional doctorate survey of universities who taught social work, plus personal communication with program leads. He identified fourteen universities actively recruiting to professional doctorate programs that included social work—six offered professional doctorates with 'social work' in the title and the rest were either fully generic programs ($n = 3$) or they covered 'health and social care' ($n = 5$). Scourfield found the median number of social work doctoral candidates on a program to be three, covering all stages of progression, so numbers were small except in two programs that had 17 and 20 active social work candidates respectively. All 14 were part of some kind of generic professional doctorate structure along with other professional fields, which was a deliberate strategy to help programs be sustainable. They varied in how many Masters credits they accepted toward the professional doctorate award. Scourfield commented that most were 'first generation' professional doctorates in Maxwell (2003)'s terms—i.e. they were 'rather like a Ph.D. divided into separate sections' (Scourfield, 2010, p. 580) rather than offering a wholly new format or genre of applied doctoral for professional practice. Robinson's (2018) online survey of all types of professional doctorate programs found 81 being offered by 37 HEIs in the broad category of 'health and social care'—the largest subject category. However, this broad category would include health-only programs, such as professional doctorates in Nursing.

Our paper attempts to update the UK picture for social work and social care. Our research question is 'what is the current state of social work and social care professional doctorates in the UK?' We answer this question with small studies on current provision in universities, numbers of completed theses, and amount of research activity about these programs. We then move on to outline a research agenda to expand and deepen the evidence about social work and social care professional doctorates.

Materials and methods

Systematic internet search for programs

Various methods were considered for identifying professional doctorate programs. Freedom of information (FOI) requests are sometimes used in higher education research (e.g. Yale et al., 2025) but our decision was not to use this option. Although information transparency is a principle we support, we know from various work contexts that FOI requests can be seen as adversarial, as they are often used by people with a campaigning agenda, and can be seen as an unasked-for burden (Pozen, 2017). Responses to such requests are not complete, despite legal obligations—e.g. in a methodological study by

Clifton-Sprigg et al. (2020) the response rate from universities was 78%. On the basis of wanting to preserve good relationships between researchers and researched, based on voluntary participation, and believing that FOI requests should be used sparingly, where other options are not available, we decided not to pursue an FOI request approach. A survey of academic staff was previously used by Scourfield (2010), but respondents were recruited from an academic social work e-mail list, with some non-response highly likely. Also, by 2025, response rates had been generally decreasing, in the context of survey fatigue (Eggleston, 2024). A systematic Internet search, however, whilst not risk-free (e.g. out-of-date information), has promise, as all universities are dependent on up-to-date information on programs for student recruitment. There are therefore likely to be a few false positives but no false negatives.

Professional doctorates in social care and social work were searched for. Firstly, this involved an open Google search of all UK universities. The search was conducted for the terms ‘professional doctorate,’ ‘taught doctorate’ and ‘practice doctorate,’ along with ‘social care’ and ‘social work,’ as well as ‘Doctor of Social Work’ and ‘Doctorate social science.’ Inverted commas were not used to make the results more inclusive. Secondly, the pages advertising postgraduate research programs were searched for each UK university in turn. For lists of university names, we used the Higher Education Statistics Agency and Universities and Colleges Admissions Service websites.

This search was initially conducted by Shenae Jonas in March 2025, then program availability was checked by Jonathan Scourfield in August 2025, by which time a couple of programs were no longer advertised so were removed from the list. Predefined inclusion and exclusion criteria established which programs to identify and retrieve. Inclusion criteria were: (i) the words ‘social work’ or ‘social care’ in the program title or inclusion of these clear from stated program scope (ii) program publicly listed on the host university website so assumed to be actively recruiting. Exclusion criteria were (i) discontinued or inactive programs; (ii) programs appearing in initial Google search with no viable link to university website; (iii) programs referenced on third-party websites but not on the host university’s own website page as actively recruiting; (iv) program whose titles only mentioned health or health care; (v) programs that were fully generic, i.e. covering any professional discipline, on the basis that it was not possible to know what input the teaching or supervision had from social work or social care academic staff; (vi) PhDs by portfolio, on the basis that these are PhDs, not professional doctorates. Where decisions were not clear, the two authors (Jonas and Scourfield) conferred.

Bibliometric analysis proof of concept

Proquest Dissertations and Theses Global was used to produce initial bibliometric analysis and to test the feasibility of this approach for the topic. This is the primary international database for doctoral thesis. It incorporates what used to be the Index to Theses (see Maxwell & Scourfield, 2010 for previous use of this in relation to social work).

Search strings were devised to locate doctoral theses with ‘social work’ or ‘social care’ in the title, abstract or meta-data (for example, subject classification). This was run twice, once to include PhDs and once to exclude them. Both times, searches excluded doctorates that might have relevance to social work but would not be

considered social work doctorates because they are alternative professional qualifications in their own right, namely doctorates in Medicine (MD), Clinical Psychology (D Clin Psy) and Educational Psychology (D Ed Psy). Education doctorates (EdD) were included, as the authors were aware of some social work academic colleagues enrolling on these for a topic focused on social work education, particularly in regions where social work or social care professional doctorates were not available.

A 30-year period was searched, from 1995 to 2024, on the basis that the survey by Scourfield (2010) identified no social work or social care professional doctorate program starting before 1997, so to go any earlier would be unlikely to uncover any hits. As an initial checking process, the authors looked up some doctoral theses they were aware of in their own university, to see how they were coded in the Proquest database. This was followed by a more systematic manual check of 100 (5%) randomly sampled theses to validate the coding of them as PhD or professional doctorate.

The manual check involved comparing the coding of doctorate type in the Proquest database, and in our data set derived from Proquest, with the type of degree as stated on the title page of the thesis, where full text could be located. In a few cases where full text could not be located, a citation to the thesis text in another published work was used if it identified thesis type. The manual check also involved a judgment call on the part of the lead author about whether the topic should in fact be plausibly classed as social work or social care. Definitional boundaries are always difficult, but where information in a thesis abstract indicated this was in fact social research on another domain of public services, most commonly health care, with no social care aspect at all, it was classed as wrongly coded as social work/care. Any topic where social care was an aspect of the focus, even if only a relatively small part, was considered as correctly coded as social work/care.

Structured search for published UK evidence

This involved selecting one electronic database with good coverage of social care, Scopus, and running the search string below for the years 2010–25. Scopus is recommended by many informetrics experts for its coverage of social sciences (e.g. Norris & Oppenheim, 2007). These dates were chosen to follow on from the paper by Scourfield (2010) which appeared to be the first empirical research on UK professional doctorates in social work and social care. The aim was to identify what empirical research, as opposed to commentary, had been conducted in the UK on professional doctorates in social care and social work. The title and abstracts of publications identified were checked by Jonathan Scourfield and Dan Burrows. In addition to this, Hawkes and Yerrabati (2018) found nine sources on social work professional doctorates (compared with 76 on professional doctorates in education) so each of these sources was looked up to check if they reported UK-based empirical research. Further, Burrows performed keyword searches for ‘professional doctorate’ in the journals *Social Work Education* and *Journal of Social Work Education*.

Search string:

(TITLE-ABS-KEY("united kingdom" OR UK OR England OR English OR Britain OR Wales OR Welsh OR Scotland OR Scottish OR "Northern Ireland" OR "Northern Irish")

AND TITLE-ABS-KEY("social work" OR "social services" OR "social care") AND TITLE-ABS-KEY(doctorate OR doctoral)) AND PUBYEAR > 2009 AND PUBYEAR < 2026

Results

Systematic internet search for programs

Twenty-one programs were identified (see Table 1). Only six of these had 'social work' in the title, but two were specific to just social care (one of which was 'social care education') and another to 'social practice.' The largest group ($n = 12$) were broader schemes covering both health care and social care. Finally, one was even broader—'health, education and society.'

These appeared to be research-based doctorates, not doctorates 'by practice' – even those with that word in the degree title. Several UK universities offer doctorates by practice portfolio, which are especially geared toward the creative arts. We only came across only one UK university (Lincoln) offering this explicitly for (health and) social care—the evidence of practice has to be in the public domain. However, we did not systematically search for doctorates by portfolio, as these are PhDs, not professional doctorates.

Summary of aims—key themes

The typical structure was part-time over 5 years, with some being only 3 or 4 years. Typically, taught modules were offered (minimum 3, maximum 8) plus a thesis of around 40–50,000 words. There was an interesting variation in module content. For example, one program's module stage was two-thirds research methods, whereas another's appeared to be two-thirds theory. Some are part of more generic programs, so presumably the social work/care content is limited, whereas others are specific to social work/care which presumably means more focus on that domain.

All the programs identified refer to research as their central focus. A recurrent theme within the stated aims is that of developing professional practice through doctoral study. In most cases, this refers to the enhancement of the candidate's capacity for advanced practice and leadership in their field, with frequent references to service improvement and assuming senior or strategic roles. Typically, this is said to be achieved through the development of higher-level skills in critical thinking and reflection, and synthesis and evaluation of data. Building skills in project management, innovation and dissemination are also frequently referenced.

Alongside the personal benefits to candidates as professionals, most programs also promise the generation of new knowledge through research, suggesting the potential of a wider contribution to knowledge like that of a PhD. Emphasis is placed on this knowledge being specific to the professional context, however, and on its potential to have impact in practice, policy or service delivery. Overall, it is envisaged that candidates will carry out research within their workplace and in partnership with organizations—hence the potential for real-world impact as a direct result of the research undertaken.

Implied in the overviews of the professional doctorate programs examined is the expectation that successful graduates of the programs will continue to practice as

Table 1. Social work/care professional doctorate programmes in UK universities, as advertised in 2025

University	Program title	Program structure
Anglia Ruskin	Professional Doctorate in Health and Social Care	Stage 1—four 30 credit Level 7 modules. Stage 2—Engaging in research training and activities (conferences, seminars etc). Producing a final thesis and a ‘viva voce’ examination to defend it.
Birmingham	Doctor of Social Work	Research training, work orientated assignments and a 50,000-word thesis: Four taught modules; 10,000 word dissertation; 50,000 words Thesis
Bolton	Professional Doctorate in Health and Social Care (Online)	Blended Learning, online learning resources and networking opportunities to support participation in communities regionally and globally. Compulsory and Optional Modules to choose from and the completion of a thesis.
Cardiff	Doctor of Social Work	Part one—six weekend modules, each with 4,000-word assignment. Overall mark of 60% in order to progress to thesis. Part two: research thesis 35,000–50,000 words.
Central Lancashire (now Lancashire)	Professional Practice Community & Social Care: Policy & Practice	Year 1 = 3 modules. Year 2 = 3 modules. Years 3–7 = Doctoral Thesis
Chester	Doctor of Professional Studies in Health and Social Care	Stage 1—Five taught modules, with a range of assessments, presentations. Stage 2—the production of a final thesis.
Derby	Doctorate in Health and Social Care Practice	Taught stage: Two 60 credit modules. Research stage: 420 credit Independent Scholarship to complete a research project.
Dundee	Professional Doctorate in Social Work	Assessment (including written work, outputs and products in other media, oral presentations and project work) equating in total to the written work expected for a PhD. degree (70,000–100,000 words).
East Anglia	Professional Doctorate in Health and Social Care	Six taught workshops a year for 2 years, followed by an independent research project during years 3–5.
Essex	Professional Doctorate Social Care Education	Taught modules year 1 and 2. Followed by this, students complete a 40,000 words dissertation
Hertfordshire	Doctorate in Health and Social Care	Combines guided learning with intensive doctoral supervision.
Keele	Professional Doctorate in Social Work	Part One (2 years)—taught; face-to-face seminar(s), workshops. Part 2 research study and thesis.
Liverpool Hope	Social Work Doctorate	Part one—180 credits six 20 credit courses, part 2 Research Phase Year 3 onwards to produce a 50–60,000 word dissertation.
London South Bank	Professional Doctorate In Health And Social Care	Year 1 and 2 Taught modules. Years 3–5 Completion of research thesis
Northampton	Doctor of Professional Practice in Health and Social Care	120 credits of taught modules at level 8 plus Professional Research Module.
Northumbria	Professional Doctorate in Health, Education and Society	Classroom based teaching and learning sessions 3 times a year and Doctoral level research culminating in a Professional Doctorate thesis and viva voce.
Nottingham Trent	The Professional Doctorate in Social Practice	A 6-stage research workshop, involving research methods in social practice among other areas and the production of a thesis
Open University	Doctorate in Health and Social Care	Stage 1 (2 years structured) and Stage 2 (2–6 years supervised research component).
Royal Holloway	Doctor in Professional Studies (Health and Social Care Practice)	Five course units organized into three streams followed by a 360 credits and 50,000 word Thesis
Salford, Manchester	Professional Doctorate (Health and Social Care)	Content depends on Accreditation of Prior Learning. If Master’s qualification meets APEL requirements, this is only a 3-year research project leading to a thesis.
Tavistock and Portman	Professional Doctorate in Social Work and Social Care	Two years of taught modules and minimum two years’ applied research (40,000-word thesis)

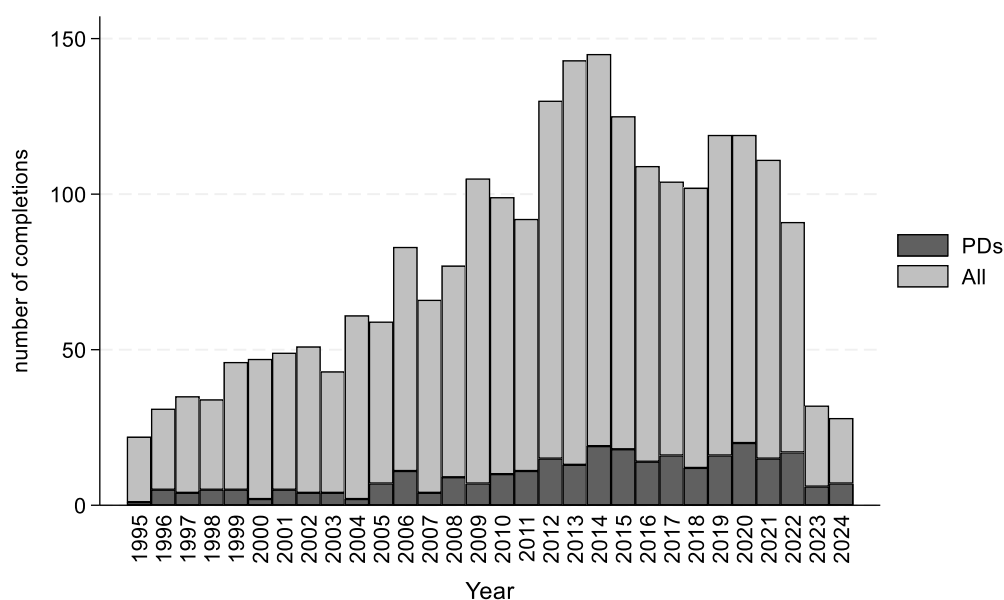


Figure 1. Frequency of all doctorates (and professional doctorates [PDs] only) completed in the UK, with ‘social care’ or ‘social work’ in title, abstract or meta data, 1995–2024 (from ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global).

professionals in their discipline—there is no suggestion, for example, that the professional doctorate is a gateway to an academic career. There is an expectation, however, that a professional doctorate will be most relevant for leadership/managerial roles, rather than leading to improvement in e.g. casework or therapeutic practice.

Bibliometric analysis proof of concept

Figure 1 shows the frequency of doctoral completions over the 30-year period 1995–2024. If we include both PhDs and professional doctorates, after removing duplicates there were 2,074 completions, with the annual number ranging from 21 to 130 (median 70). For professional doctorates alone, there were 284 completions, with the annual number ranging from 1 to 20 (median 8). The numbers of completions are small in the most recent 2 years which presumably is down to delay in universities submitting data.

Initial checking of a small number (<10) theses the authors were aware of, because the work had been supervised by them or colleagues, revealed more than half of the professional doctorates to be wrongly coded as PhDs, meaning they would not have shown up correctly in the Proquest database search. As it was possible this miscoding from one university was an outlier, a random sample of 100 results (5%) were manually checked against full text, where it was available. The results are in Table 2. Thirteen out of 18 professional doctorates (72%) were correctly coded as such and 79 out of 98 theses (81%) where it was possible to determine the topic were judged to be correctly coded as social work or social care.

Table 2. Manual checking of a 5% sample of doctoral theses from Proquest database results.

Category	n
Type of doctorate and coding	
Professional doctorate correctly coded	13
Professional doctorate wrongly coded	5
PhD correctly coded	71
PhD wrongly coded	1
Unknown due to missing data*	10
Total	100
Topic of doctorate	
Correctly classified as social work or social care	79
Wrongly classified as social work or social care	19
Could not be determined**	2
Total	100

*Missing full-text ($n = 7$), not from UK ($n = 1$) or not found in Proquest database on manual checking ($n = 2$).

**Could not be determined from title only—not found in Proquest database ($n = 1$) or missing full-text ($n = 1$).

Structured search for published UK evidence

The systematic review by Hawkes and Yerrabati (2018) identified three papers about social work/care professional doctorates in the UK. Fenge (2009, 2010) provided personal reflections on her own professional doctorate journey, and McVicar et al. (2006) described an integrated health and social care program in their own university. None of these papers would really be classed as empirical research.

The Scopus research uncovered 62 documents. Screening of abstracts by two of the authors revealed no primary empirical research in the UK on social work/care professional doctorates, since the survey of programs by Scourfield (2010), other than the survey of social work and social care PhD and professional doctorate students by Scourfield et al. (2018), which did not present separate results for professional doctorates. A paper of relevance that was published after our Scopus search was completed, but was picked up by the search of specific journals, was authored by Santos-Petiot et al. (2025). While it does not report on new primary research, it draws together themes from relevant literature, highlighting how neoliberal ideologies in higher education result in financial and institutional barriers to doctoral study, especially for marginalized groups. Significantly, the literature cited concerning professional doctorates exclusively relates to the USA context.

Discussion

Twenty-one programs were identified, compared with 14 identified in a 2007 survey by Scourfield (2010). It should be noted, however, that whereas we have systematically searched university postgraduate research websites, Scourfield's (2010) survey of programs recruited respondents from academic social work e-mail lists and there may well have been some non-response from universities offering professional doctorate programs, as well as other professional doctorate programs covering social care whose staff were not on those e-mail lists. So it is difficult to be sure that the higher number in 2025 shows net growth, but it is likely that it does.

The fact that these typically had taught modules and their aims referred to research as the central focus would suggest they almost all still appear to be ‘first generation’ academic social science doctorates in Maxwell’s (2003) terms, as Scourfield suggested in 2010, albeit doctorates probably involving research projects close to the candidate’s social work/care practice. This begs the question, are these doctorates actually fulfilling the promise of an alternative epistemology embedded in distinctive forms of professional, rather than academic knowledge, or are they in fact traditional academic doctorates—in effect structured PhDs.

This question connects to wider debates about the changing relationship between higher education and professional practice precipitated by the hegemony of neoliberalism. The aims stated by program providers frequently emphasized leadership, organizational improvement, innovation and service impact. Such aspirations may be viewed positively as attempts to bridge longstanding gaps between research and practice and to create forms of knowledge production rooted in professional settings (Creaton, 2021; Robinson, 2018). Equally, they can be interpreted as reflecting broader trends associated with managerialism and credentialism, where doctoral study becomes a mechanism of organizational effectiveness, workforce development and measurable outcomes. Professional doctorates may therefore occupy an ambiguous position, simultaneously challenging traditional academic models of doctoral education while also reproducing contemporary expectations that higher education should directly serve professional and organizational objectives. Claims regarding the contribution of professional doctorates to professional practice, organizational change and service improvement remain under-examined, despite their prominence in program rationales (Chapman et al., 2024).

There are clearly limitations in the bibliometric analysis, as the manual checking found around one in five being wrongly identified as social work/care using our search strategy and around one in four professional doctorates being wrongly coded as PhDs. However, accuracy of 70%-plus means that the results on completion over time do have some validity in terms of identifying main trends. The bibliometric analysis suggested that numbers of UK professional doctorate completions may be small. This makes some sense in light of the small number of universities offering programs. We know from manual checking that they are wrongly coded as PhDs in a number of cases, so the numbers in Figure 1 will be an underestimate. Scourfield (2010) found the median number of social work/care doctoral candidates per program (at all stages of progression) to be three, and only identified fourteen programs, so small numbers of professional doctorate theses are in keeping with this. More positively for professional doctorate proponents, it is clear from Figure 1 that over time the annual number of social work/care professional doctorate completions appears to be growing.

An initial search of one database with good social care coverage identified no dedicated empirical research from the UK on social work/care professional doctorates, which prompts our research agenda in the next section.

Limitations

There are of course limitations to our study. Limitations in the searching of Proquest Dissertations and Theses Global have already been noted. In identifying published research, we searched a single database (Scopus), rather than several. This did not

encompass gray literature. It would have been instructive to conduct a systematic scoping review of international evidence, which could have identified research from other countries that could be replicated in the UK. The Scopus search did not pick up papers that had no mention of social work/care in abstract or title, e.g. Fenge's (2012) paper on group supervision for health and social care professional doctorate students, which was in fact an empirical study. However, that study's focus was on the generic pedagogical process of professional doctorate supervision rather than anything specific to the health and social care context, hence it had not appeared in the Scopus search. The Scopus search also did not uncover Robinson's (2018) survey of all professional doctorate programs, which included a category of 'health and social care.'

We regard the use of a systematic Internet search as having greater validity for establishing UK national provision than a survey of universities, as used previously (Robinson, 2018; Scourfield, 2010). All universities offering a professional doctorate program will need to make this clear on their websites, so searching each one for lists of programs is highly likely to identify the programs that are out there. What it cannot tell is which programs are at risk of closure, e.g. due to small numbers in times of university austerity. And it is likely that some information was not up to date, with some programs no longer running still being listed, so our results may be an over-estimate of actual provision. Whilst freedom of information requests might possibly have generated a more accurate picture, this is by no means certain as very likely not all universities will respond to such a request (as noted earlier). So the choice of method involved weighing up false positives (in systematic Internet searching) against missing data (in freedom of information requests). We considered both approaches, but decided against freedom of information requests, to avoid both unnecessary burden on universities and the potential perception of adversarial approach.

A further limitation is that in not including in our search two types of doctorate—fully generic professional doctorates open to any profession, and PhDs by portfolio—we were potentially under-counting professional doctorates or practice doctorates that are open to social work and social care. Another category not included was doctorates aimed at a wider sector that do not specify social care—e.g. working with children.

A future research agenda

Hawkes and Yerrabati (2018), in their systematic review of research on professional doctorates, argue that more is needed than individual case studies of practice on specific programs, and the field needs to move toward developing practice principles for professional doctorates as a whole. The UK evidence base on professional doctorates is extremely slender, as shown by the Hawkes and Yerrabati (2018) review and our search of Scopus. Discussions in the USA context suggest that there are concerns regarding how programs may impact on social work's identity should they replace the PhD as the dominant form of doctoral program, yet there is also recognition of their potential for bridging the gap between research and practice (Santos-Petiot et al., 2025). The flexible, part time nature of professional doctorate programs has appeal for professionals in practice (Acquavita & Tice, 2015) and may be of particular relevance for those who wish to pursue leadership in non-academic settings (Lee et al., 2023). What follows are our suggestions for a research agenda that would transform the UK evidence base on social work professional doctorates and take us beyond rhetoric about their value.

Evidence synthesis

The need for high-quality review of any existing evidence applies to all the following themes. In contrast to us dipping our toes into evidence reviewing, by searching only title and abstract in a single database, a more thorough review involving full text searching and several databases might locate some other evidence. In comparison with the other items in this research agenda, this would seem to be a fairly low priority, as Hawkes and Yerrabati (2018) found the wider professional doctorate evidence base to be slender, and Chapman et al.'s (2024) systematic review is in progress.

Demand and provision

Accurate reporting of professional doctorate program and doctoral candidate numbers is important. Our bibliometric analysis is a starting point, but it is clear that a more thorough study is needed. This could include the manual checking of all theses identified, rather than just a sample, to check correct coding for both doctorate type and topic. Numbers and characteristics of active student registrations could be gathered from program providers. Scourfield (2010) did some of this but that was now 18 years ago. Data returned by universities to the Higher Education Statistics Agency are too limited to be of much help in identifying the specific population of social work and social care professional doctorate candidates. In the light of concerns over the impact of structural barriers to participation in doctoral study by marginalized groups (Santos-Pietot et al., Santos-Petiot et al., 2025), it is particularly important to gain insights into what populations professional doctorate candidates are drawn from.

Doctoral pedagogy

Module handbooks would provide a useful source of data on such issues as the balance of theory and research methods, and the type of theory and method taught on professional doctorate modules. These could potentially be supplemented by teaching materials from a sample of modules, or interviews with module leaders.

Knowledge production

Topics of thesis projects

Scourfield et al.'s (2018) survey of doctoral candidates (PhDs and professional doctorates) found children and families topics to be more prevalent (35%) than adult social care topics (19%), even with the label 'social care' being included in the survey framing, alongside 'social work.' In addition to updated research, focusing on professional doctorates and using doctoral candidates' self-report of topic focus, future research could include, for example, categorization of topic from a random sample of thesis abstracts from the Proquest database. Categorization could be done manually or potentially with the aid of AI tools and could involve comparison of professional doctorates and PhDs.

Methods used in thesis projects

Scourfield et al. (2018) found, across professional doctorates and PhDs in social work and social care, 4% primarily quantitative projects, compared with 70% that

were primarily qualitative, as reported by doctoral candidates themselves. As with the above point about topics, future research could involve both updated self-report data and categorization of theses in Proquest. The latter could involve some sampling of whole thesis texts to delve more deeply into type of research method used.

Relationship to practice

Much of the academic rhetoric from proponents of professional doctorates sets them up as distinctively practice focused. The claim of closeness to practice could be tested, through comparative study with PhDs in social work and social care. Are professional doctorate candidates actually in social care/work practice or management? Or are many of them actually social work lecturers who no longer practice? Is professional doctorate research really more applied to practice than PhD research? Or are the large majority of social work and social care PhDs also highly applied and indistinguishable in this regard? Again, these questions could be answered through qualitative study of theses in the Proquest database.

Doctoral candidates' experiences

How do professional doctorate students experience part-time study alongside paid employment? What is their experience as (typically) mature doctoral candidates? How, for those working in the social care sector, is their research received in their workplace, during the process and after completion? Are they experienced by candidates primarily as opportunities for knowledge generation, as mechanisms for career advancement, or as responses to increasing expectations regarding professional credentials? These are just some of the questions to be asked about professional doctorate candidates' experience that would again benefit from comparative study with social care/work PhDs.

Practice transformation?

The outcomes and impact of professional doctorate study are especially important and understudied (McSherry et al., 2019). Research is needed on outcomes for the candidates themselves—how has their knowledge developed and what difference has this made to their work in social care? Do they go onto leadership within organizations that deliver services? And what impact does their research have on those around them—colleagues and people receiving social care services? Thorough study of this would ideally involve comparison with similar professionals who have not undertaken a professional doctorate, and also with those who have done PhDs.

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