The Nature of a Successful Online Professional Doctorate

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This chapter provides a case study of a wholly online professional doctorate in Teacher Education that has been running successfully since 2003 within the School of Education at the University of Nottingham, UK. It begins with both the background and context in which the development took place—this covers the team involved and identifies the drivers that led to this innovative course. The main body of the chapter focuses on the course itself, which was constructed collaboratively through written reflections of the team. This illuminates the reasons for its success as measured by healthy recruitment, high student evaluation scores, and high retention and completion rates. The pedagogic rationale for the design of one module involving collaborative knowledge creation is presented with some student reactions to this. Six student voices are then presented, which provide an insight into the value of the course. This leads to a consideration of the current context and the new challenges facing the course.

BACKGROUND

This chapter provides a case study of a wholly online professional doctorate in Teacher Education, that has been running successfully since 2003 within the School of Education at the University of Nottingham, UK. It begins with both the background and context in which the development took place—this covers the team involved and identifies the drivers that led to this innovative course. The main body of the chapter focuses on the course itself which was constructed collaboratively through written reflections of the team. This illuminates the reasons for its success as measured by healthy recruitment, high student evaluation scores and high retention and completion rates. The pedagogic rationale for the design of one module involving collaborative knowledge creation is presented together with some student reactions to this. Six student voices are then presented which provide an insight into the value of the course. This leads to a consideration of the current context and the new challenges facing the course.

The University of Nottingham is a traditional campus-based, research-intensive higher education institution, attracting a mix of international, EU and home students. It should be therefore unsurprising that the course was originally intended to be delivered wholly face-to-face and on campus. The drivers for the course in itself relate to the particular context within the School of Education in the 1990s. Initial Teacher Education (ITE) had previously become primarily university based in the UK, but a variety of school based and partnership models were also being piloted. This signalled a period of rapid change in ITE accelerated by Government imposition of competence and then standards frameworks and an emphasis on diversity of provision with a focus on an increased participation in ITE by schools themselves. This called for some radical rethinking in relation to the nature of the ITE curriculum within Schools of Education, as well as the support for student teachers in school and the role of the university tutor and school based mentor. Teacher Education became an important research area in itself. There was a need to explore issues relating to these changes in policy and practice in different contexts and to explore methodologies for this research. ITE providers at the time were recruiting experienced teachers to lead this provision many of whom had little research experience. The expectation within the University of Nottingham and elsewhere was that all academic staff were to be research active and there was an increasing requirement for ITE staff to hold doctoral degrees. The reality was that many teacher educators in the UK and globally did not hold this qualification and many were not research active and this did not fit well within a University culture. This, combined with a pressure to increase international student numbers, led the Head of the School of Education at the time to include an Professional Doctorate in Teacher Education course within a campus-based, part-time professional doctoral programme. This

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