

Professional Doctorate in Midwifery: What is it and why would I do one?

Dr Jane Carpenter

Summary

According to national midwifery-specific and healthcare profession strategy, embedding research into the professions, including creating researcher leaders, is a priority. Evidence shows that this provides benefit for the people we care for, the employing organisation, and the individual employee. However, developing the knowledge to undertake or lead research can seem overwhelming. The Professional Doctorate is one pathway available to support people in the development of research knowledge and skills. This five-year part time course is completed alongside clinical work. Initial taught content develops knowledge and skills, before leading on to completion of independent research, with appropriate supervision throughout.

Introduction

There is currently great emphasis within the midwifery profession on developing research aware and proficient practitioners. For example, the Royal College of Midwives' (RCM) Research and Development Strategy 2021-24¹ has a key aim to build research capacity amongst midwives and 'embed research-mindedness throughout the profession'. More widely, there is a general drive to increase research engaged and active healthcare workers, as demonstrated by a number of recently published reports and strategies. One of the themes developed from the Shape of Caring Review, for example, was to support and enable research, innovation and evidence-based practice². A key aim in the Research and Innovation Strategy from Health Education England³ is to "build the capacity and capability of our current and future workforce to embrace and actively engage with research and innovation". Similar organisations, with similar aims, exist in Scotland and Wales.

Importantly, this interest in developing research aware practitioners has come from a strong evidence-base. Increased client satisfaction (from increased healthcare professional contact and monitoring), improved clinical outcomes and care quality,

increased research income, and empowerment of staff leading to higher role satisfaction and retention, have all been shown to result from a research-active workplace⁴. This creates a win-win; with benefits for the clients, employing organisation *and* increased role satisfaction for individual employees.

So how can a practicing midwife develop their own research knowledge and skills? This article focuses on one pathway - the Professional Doctorate. However, for clarity I also outline some of the other routes encountered. My hope is that unravelling some of the options and pathways available will make them interesting, attractive and more accessible to current and future practising midwives across the country. High quality midwife-led research is essential to ensure the future of our profession, and ongoing quality in the care we provide. For this to happen, we need midwife research leaders and hence accessible pathways into research.

Why not you?

Becoming a midwifery researcher may not be for everyone! However, many midwives graduate knowing they want to go on to further study – although they may not always have a clear idea of what that study is. Or, as I have seen first-hand multiple times, midwives who *never* expected to develop an interest in research find themselves a few years later with the spark of an idea, based on something they have seen in practice – but without a clear idea of how to take it forward.

This may resonate soundly with you, or it may not. Even if not you right now, maybe you *will* have that idea down the line; and this article outlines some ways for you to take your idea further.

Developing research skills – what are the options?

To answer a research question, of course research skills are needed; and these need to be learnt and developed with support. There is an undeniable academic element to developing research skills, and where additional learning occurs evidence of that learning by way of a qualification, or similar, should be given. Therefore, more and more employing organisations are working with universities to develop

opportunities for other healthcare professionals to study a research pathway alongside their clinical / managerial role.

Many people qualify knowing that they will wish to pursue a 'Masters' (usually a Master of Science, MSc) in due course. However, there are many more options than an MSc (Table 1). It is worth carefully considering the reason for wanting to complete an MSc, and whether this is the correct route to take. An MSc is a viable option to give additional education at a higher level than Bachelors. However, an MSc is usually aimed at developing specialist knowledge in a particular area – not specifically at developing research skills. A Master of Research (MRes) is more tailored for developing research skills, but further study in the form of a PhD is still required to then become an independent researcher.

This can start to feel a little overwhelming! Multiple degrees whilst continuing clinical /managerial work, without a clear idea how to go about it can, unsurprisingly, seem rather unappealing. HEE and NIHR developed their Clinical Academic Careers Framework⁵ to address this. This framework aims to provide a dedicated pathway from research novice through to post-doctoral study. For successful applicants, this pathway provides funding and support to develop research knowledge and skills right from the basics of research, through to becoming a research leader. Internships are aimed at those with little or no research experience, but a keen interest to develop; these are followed by Pre-doctoral Clinical Academic Fellowships, Clinical Doctoral Research Fellowships and then Clinical and Senior Clinical Lectureships. It is possible for an individual to travel along the pathway from Intern to Senior Clinical Lectureship, or to join, or leave, part way. The academic study is built into the pathway, with an academic host institution as well as the employing organisation working in partnership to deliver the fellowships. Therefore, as an individual makes their way along the framework, they obtain their Doctorate through study for a PhD. It is this level of study which leads to someone being able to develop and lead research independently.

Undoubtedly, these funded places, allowing the clinician time away from clinical work to develop their research knowledge, are an excellent opportunity. However, this

also makes them highly competitive, and these are currently only available in England.

The Professional Doctorate

There are many different types of Professional Doctorate across education, coaching, sport science, and health care sciences. The Professional Doctorate in Midwifery (DMid), sometimes known as a Clinical Doctorate in Midwifery, is a part-time course taking a minimum of five-years to complete, with the aim of supporting clinical/managerial midwives to develop specialist knowledge and skills whilst remaining in their current role.

So how does the Professional Doctorate work?

The DMid provides an opportunity for you to situate your professional knowledge into a theoretical academic framework. In other words, you are supported to take the spark of a research idea, develop the necessary skills to develop and implement your research, and write up the findings into a thesis. As such, you are supported to generate new knowledge in the midwifery profession, obtain a Professional Doctorate, and become a 'Doctor of Midwifery'.

In the Oxford School of Nursing and Midwifery at Oxford Brookes, we developed the Professional Doctorate in Nursing some years ago, and this course has been running successfully developing new research leaders in nursing. We have now developed the Professional Doctorate in Midwifery to run alongside, and the course commences with its first cohort in September 2021. As Course Lead for the DMid at Oxford Brookes my knowledge on this topic mostly relates to the course we run. However, all Professional Doctorates tend to be similar in layout and scope. Other institutions advertising a Professional Doctorate in Midwifery include London South Bank University, University of West London, and a Clinical Doctorate at the University of Stirling in Scotland. A simple internet search will bring up these courses, as well as ours at Oxford Brookes.

The DMid runs for a minimum of five years, part time. It is expected that you continue in your current midwifery role alongside the course, and that you have a

research idea that you wish to develop and undertake. During the first two years, a number of taught modules are undertaken at MSc level to develop theoretical knowledge and research skills. Whilst undertaking this learning, you are also applying learning to your research idea – so as you travel through the taught element of the course you develop and refine your research idea. Each module is assessed and compulsory – and many of the assessments link either to your own professional development, or the development of your research. After the first two years, there is a final module at the start of Year 3 where you finalise your Research Proposal and ethical approval. You then move on to the research phase of the Doctorate, where you undertake the research and ultimately write this up into a thesis by the end of Year 5. The exact structure of the course at other institutions may vary slightly from this; but the overall aim and outcome will be the same.

What support is available whilst on the course?

Over the five-year period, the course will support development of your knowledge and skills to enable you to undertake your own research in a subject relevant to your role – but when you enter the course it is expected that you do not feel even slightly ready for this! However, you must be ready to push yourself, to explore the theory and practice of midwifery with increasing independence, and to work hard to develop and refine your research idea. Alongside this, support from experienced academics is built into the course from day 1 until you graduate as a Doctor of Midwifery.

During the taught component, you will have support from the Course Lead (or equivalent at other institutions) and module leaders, as well as the Research Degrees team. In addition, though, all research degrees require a focused Supervision process. You will be undertaking new research in your field; therefore, specialist support and supervision is required. The Professional Doctorate is no different. You will be allocated a ‘main’ supervisor (at Brookes known as a Director of Studies) right at the start of the programme. Their input will develop over the first two years before they take over as the main point of contact from Year 3 onwards. You will also have at least one other Supervisor who will be allocated later in the programme. The supervision team provides access to specialist support in terms of topic and methods to be used in your research. They will support you to develop your research from idea to reality.

Another important support element unique to the Professional Doctorate is your study cohort. This cohort, usually of mixed healthcare professionals, journey through the course together. This is very different to the traditional PhD, where you tend to work individually. At Brookes, across the two Professional Doctorate courses in Nursing and Midwifery we have an intake of around twelve students per year. Face-to-face teaching and online sessions during the taught element enables the creation of a strong support network from a cohort of like-minded individuals. Once you are in the 'research phase' catch up days ensure this peer-support is retained.

How do I fund my place?

As with any professional development course, there is a cost to undertake a Professional Doctorate. Fees are kept as low as reasonably possible to ensure the course remains accessible – and this is undoubtedly the case regardless of the institution chosen. It is worth exploring whether your employing body will fund your place on the course, and/or provide you with some study time. With the current drive to increase research leadership such funding is becoming more likely. There are also grants and postgraduate loans available. It may be worth discussing funding with your chosen institution as they may have some local knowledge for funding opportunities.

What do I need to apply?

Entry requirements are likely to be similar across the board, but do expect slight differences depending on where you apply. You are likely to require a good degree in Midwifery, experience in your role prior to application, an interest in research and current registration with NMC. At Oxford Brookes, we also require submission of a research proposal detailing your research idea at the point of application. Before you apply to an institution do make contact first to discuss your application.

Conclusion

The aim of this article was to provide clarity on some of the options available to develop research skills. The benefits of embedding research within clinical practice are evident, and midwife-led research is essential for the future of our profession,

now more than ever. The Professional Doctorate is one way to develop research skills alongside your current role. With support, you can turn your research idea into reality, generating new midwifery knowledge and leading to the title of Doctor of Midwifery.

Again, I ask: Why not you?

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Table 1: Common postgraduate study options after completing an undergraduate midwifery degree

Name	Type of study
Master of Science (MSc)	Consists of taught modules developing advanced or specialist knowledge in a particular area. One-year full time*
Master of Research (MRes)	Taught postgraduate course - greater emphasis on independent study. More credits (and time) allocated to the research component. One-year full time*
Research Masters (MPhil)	A research masters - undertaken mostly through independent study. Aim is to lead onto, usually, a PhD. Some taught content on research methods may be provided. Two years full time*
PhD/DPhil**	Completed by independent research. Requires conceptualisation, design and implementation of a project for the generation of significant new knowledge and/or understanding. Develops the skills required to undertake research and ultimately become a research leader. Three years full time*
Professional Doctorate** (DMid)	Targeted to clinical/managerial midwives who wish to remain in clinical practice but develop their research knowledge. Requires development of a project leading to generation of significant new knowledge. Initial taught component develops research skills. Minimum five years part time

* or equivalent part time; ** Often called a 'Doctorate'. On completion, allows use of the title 'Doctor'