

Book review: The future of doctoral research

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The Future of Doctoral Research: challenges and opportunities

ANNE LEE & ROB BONGAARDT, eds.

2021

Abingdon and New York, Routledge

356 pp.

£36.99 Paperback

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A key context for this book is the massification of doctoral education and the consequence that many countries' higher education systems now produce more PhD graduates than there are academic jobs available. Much of the book deals with the issue of how universities can best reform their doctoral training to equip graduates to thrive in and beyond academia. This edited collection contains twenty-seven chapters informed by reviews of existing literature and/or the authors' own empirical research, using a variety of methodologies: questionnaires, interviews, focus groups, classroom observations and analysis of written responses to training activities. Many authors are engaged in the development and delivery of formal programmes for students as well as supervisors. Other contributors range from current PhD students to senior managers in higher education. These stakeholders, along with research funders and government policy-makers, will be the audiences for this volume. Authors are situated predominantly in Antipodean, British, and Northern European universities. Experiences from Africa, North America, and Eastern Europe are also represented. However, the absence of western and southern Europe as well as regions with rapidly expanding doctoral education – Asia (acknowledged in chapter one), the Middle East, Central and South America – is something a future publication should redress.

The chapters are clustered into five parts. Part 1 sketches the changing landscape of academia, including the wide-spread development of doctoral schools; training for doctoral students to teach; professional doctorates; structured progression; the importance of third space support to doctoral students; and tensions between the pragmatic idealism attributed to millennial researchers and traditional ideals for objective, dispassionate research. An outstanding chapter, six, passionately offers models from the global south of thoroughly decolonising approaches to doctoral studies, going well beyond decolonising the content of research to decolonising the language of, and pedagogies for, doctoral studies, as well as striving for “cognitive justice” (p. 69). Some similar approaches are traced in chapter twenty-seven.

Part 2, on collaborations and funding, uses case studies to explore the centrality of trust to capacity building work between a Scandinavian and an African university; identify key factors in successful bids for, and provision of, doctoral training centres in the UK; trace a possible model for national cross-institutional collaboration on doctoral training and cross-sector co-operation between universities and funders on effective career development for doctoral students. Parts 3 and 4 on doctoral researchers' and supervisors' perspectives, respectively, consolidate ideas encountered earlier in the volume about abandoning notions of supervision as a one-to-one practice, intuited by researchers from their own experience of supervision; embracing, in Maresi Nerad's words, that in the twenty-first century, “it takes a global village to raise a PhD candidate” (p. 333); breaking up doctoral study into a series of milestones; and being transparent about the professional and personal skills, not just research-specific attributes, examiners evaluate; and developing graduate schools together with supervisors and students, to avoid their being dismissed as red tape.

Additionally, Parts 3 and 4 advocate for, and offer models to fulfil, needs of candidates related to mental health and wellbeing; learning not just the academic language in their country of study, but its rhetorical traditions; their roles as informal care-givers; and the effects on supervisory relationships of digital connectivity. Chapter seventeen offers a nuanced consideration of its pros and cons, made universally important by online or blended delivery modes in education during the pandemic. Other chapters in this section share the design of workshops, research supervisor training and recognition schemes, action learning groups for PhD supervision, and change management processes for bringing about institution-wide reforms of supervision.

Part 5 opens with a focus on the ethics involved *within* supervisory relationships. The remaining chapters contend that research ethics can no longer reliably or sufficiently be acquired through gradual socialisation within one discipline of research. Rather, dedicated ethics courses are required – not just to guarantee the success of candidates but to protect the public and the authoritativeness of scientific (in the broadest sense) research. Chapter twenty-six alludes to the “special significance” of ethics in “the current age of ‘fake news’ and scientific misconduct scandals”, even before the flurry of Covid vaccine-related stories (p. xxx). The conclusion relates the collection’s content to a world in the midst of the Covid-19 pandemic, as I have done intermittently in this review: we both find that the “principles in the book are still valid when they are held to the fire” (p. 3xx).

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