

# Complexities and contradictions of doctoral education in South Africa

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Doctoral education in South Africa



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I read this lucidly written and empirically rich book with much interest as someone who both researches higher education and grapples with many of the supervision challenges discussed. The experienced authors of *Doctoral Education in South Africa* have provided a valuable overview of the central issues and topics relevant to doctoral education internationally and then applied more specifically to the African and South African contexts. The central thesis of the book is carefully mapped out in the first chapter. The thesis is that 'Four imperatives intersect in current debates on the production of PhDs in South Africa. These four discourses concern global and national competition (the imperative for growth), efficiency, transformation and equality' (p.20). The analytical framework that is constructed on the basis of these four imperatives 'capture[s] the ecology (the external demand and accountability environment) of doctoral education and training in South Africa today' (p.23). Particularly useful is the manner in which the framework takes account of the external factors as well as the dynamics between students and supervisors within universities. These four imperatives, or discourses, are then used as the basis for organising the empirical chapters of the book.

Firmly grounded in detailed and rigorous empirical analyses – both quantitative and qualitative – and drawing on several studies on doctoral education conducted by the Centre for Higher Education Trust and the Centre for Research on Evaluation, Science and Technology over several years, the authors draw powerful (and likely somewhat controversial) conclusions regarding what it will take to reach the ambitious National Development Plan<sup>1</sup> target of 100 doctoral graduates per million of the population by 2030. Amongst others, the need to tackle the thorny issue of differentiation in the system is discussed, as is the tension between the significant growth of PhD enrolments (6.4% from 1996 to 2012) compared to only 2.9% growth for academic staff in the same period. Chapter 6, which presents an analysis of specific university departments that have been particularly productive with respect to doctoral education, shows the various ways in which the actors in the system have been responding to the contradictions of increasing numbers of PhDs without the requisite increase in resources. The examples and practices shared are of particular value to doctoral supervisors and departments who are seeking to improve their own practices. The major challenge created by the fact that more than 60% of South African PhD students study part-time is also highlighted as one of the main contributors to low completion rates, and the data show the huge impact this situation has on the entire doctoral education system. This finding raises critical issues related to system efficiency and, as is argued in the book, requires that the models of PhD education in the country be revisited.

What might these revised models look like? The authors argue that the system could either opt for incremental change, which would involve continuing with the practices that have shown results in the high performing departments, or could embrace a more radical approach that requires changing the dominant model of doctoral education in South Africa. The latter is presented as the preferred option. This new model (also called a paradigm shift in the book) would involve reversing the full-time to part-time student ratio such that 60% of students would be full-time students. Suggestions for how this might be done are presented, and the realities of the funding requirements (estimated to be about ZAR800 million per year) for such a shift are briefly addressed. The argument would have been strengthened though if more attention was given to possible funding models, particularly given the major resource constraints faced at all the levels in the post-school sector. The final chapter presents three policy options that emerge from the earlier chapters. The first centres on growing doctoral enrolments and graduates (including the setting out of 16 theoretical scenarios). The second policy option is a proposal to make South Africa a PhD hub for Africa, and the third policy is to implement more active differentiation of the sector, allowing for targeted investment in doctoral education, the provision of which is already differentiated across different groupings of universities. None of the options presents a panacea, and each raises a series of tough questions for policymakers and universities. As is emphasised in the concluding section of the book, the research has highlighted a need for better consideration and management of the policy trade-offs of any given policy position. These trade-offs are clearly articulated in the sections mapping out the three main policy options presented.

What is less clear from the arguments presented throughout the book is the normative position that a country like South Africa ought to take up in making these difficult policy trade-off decisions. Although there is some acknowledgement of wider purposes for the doctorate (raised particularly by some of the commentators included in Appendix 2), it seems that the main purpose of the doctorate is framed as contributing to building the knowledge economy and to economic development in South Africa, and Africa. However, what of the complex debates in the higher education landscape about the public good role of the university that have so powerfully been raised by students in the past few months?

Although perhaps beyond the scope of this book, but nonetheless critical when thinking about doctoral education in South Africa, and particularly what this means in terms of larger questions about the purpose of higher education in the country, we ought to also ask pressing questions about knowledge itself: 'What knowledge is produced? How has it been produced? Whose interests does it serve? And how does it serve society?'<sup>2</sup> These questions are particularly important to answer given the current juncture in the country's history, at which young people are increasingly standing up to pose critical questions about the colonial histories and persistent legacies within our universities as a basis for advocating for deeper change within the sector. In my reading of the analysis and arguments presented here, a possible gap is that little consideration has been given to the role that doctoral education has or could play in either subverting or maintaining the colonial heritage of our universities, and its role

in addressing broader social development imperatives of the country. Related points are made in Appendix 2 by Badat, Moja and Langa. Nonetheless, this important and well-researched book certainly takes the debate forward in meaningful ways, and clearly sets out the policy implications of different paths that might be considered as we continue to strive to improve doctoral education in South Africa. The data, conclusions, recommendations, and additional information included in the detailed appendices, are likely to be of much value across the sector, for doctoral students, supervisors, university management and leaders, and policymakers.

## References

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