R12 Raglan Friday 7 December 9.00-9.30

Feasible utopias in doctoral education: A research based model for expanded doctoral pedagogy (0322)

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Part 1 Abstract

Ongoing educational and psycho-social challenges in doctoral education (e.g. psychological distress, attrition and delay in completion) warrant a more comprehensive understanding of the expanded doctoral education context and how the different facets of doctoral support mechanisms interact to help alleviate these challenges. Drawing upon evidence captured at the action-based SRHE research seminar, this paper presents insights intended to elucidate the concepts surrounding 'feasible utopias' as well as providing examples of 'actualised utopias' within the doctoral context. Our study findings have twofold implications at both the theoretical and pragmatic levels as we offer an evidence-informed conceptual map characterising how 'feasible utopias' can realistically be translated into 'actualised' utopias within the doctoral ecology framework.

Part 2 Paper

While recognising the crucial relationship between postgraduate researchers (PGRs) and their supervisors, as well as the formal support extended through institutional structures, other existing support mechanisms are arguably complementary and equally important (Bryan & Guccione, 2018; Daley et al., 2017; Elliot et al., 2016a; Jazvac-Martek, Chen & McAlpine, 2011). PGRs' motivation, creativity, resilience and momentum during their long and intense doctoral journey are often strongly sustained by unseen informal structures, social support systems and extra-curricular activities tacitly providing emotional, social, pastoral and academic support throughout what could be a long, lonely and intense doctoral journey (Bengtsen, 2016b; Bengtsen & Barnett, 2017; Elliot et al., 2016b, 2016c; Wisker et al., 2017). Together, these formal and informal educational infrastructures form the entire ecology characterising doctoral study (Barnett, 2018; Barnett & Bengtsen, 2017).

The bulk of research studies in doctoral education as shown by a recent EBSCOhost search, tend to focus on the formal institutional support mechanisms, but latterly, further attention has increasingly been given to informal arenas. For example, recent publications concerning notions of 'penumbra' of extra-curricular support systems (e.g. guardian supervisors, translators, editors, peers, professional networks, friends and family), 'darkness in higher education', 'third spaces' and 'the hidden curriculum' have raised the importance of conversations on this subject (Bengtsen, 2016b; Bengtsen & Barnett, 2017; Bryan & Guccione, 2018; Elliot et al., 2016b, 2016c; Wisker et al., 2017). Yet, there remains a somewhat limited understanding not only of these multifaceted components but how they interact with already existing formal and informal support mechanisms offered by the institutions. Given this conceptual gap, it could be argued that further discourses are needed to address and foster a greater appreciation of what appears to be an imbalanced landscape within doctoral education.

Doing so is particularly timely due to the recognised challenges at the forefront of doctoral education. For instance, a large-scale Belgian study (n = 3659) identified the impact of various academic-related conditions on the mental health status of doctoral learners leading to the conclusion that 32% of this cohort is 'at risk of having or developing a common psychiatric disorder, especially depression' (Levecque et al., 2017, p. 868). The prevalence of psychological distress among doctoral students is likewise highlighted in a similar Australian study (Barry et al., 2017). If we were to accept the premise that PGRs' wellbeing and their academic progress (and subsequent completion) are intertwined, then it can be posited that a closer look at the entire doctoral ecology is indeed indispensable. In so doing, it is likely that we consequently address crucial issues of attrition and delayed completion observed at the global level (Most 2008; Virtanen, Taina, and Pyhältö 2017).

Taken together, our paper will present the insights generated from the SRHE seminar called "Reimagining the Doctorate: 'feasible utopias' for expanded doctoral education" - jointly delivered by the same authors where Ronald Barnett's (2018, p. 173) conceptualisation of utopia was adopted.

> '[a feasible utopia]' is something that 'could emerge in the best of *possible* worlds, and there are good grounds for believing that it just may yet emerge. The idea is an optimistic idea. This is not to say that it is likely to appear, given the circumstances of the world. But, realistically, it could appear.'

This participant-driven research-oriented seminar aimed at enthusing participants to conceptualise, identify and discuss in-depth the potentials and challenges entailed in developing a 'feasible utopian research environment' while taking into account distinct capacities as well as constraints posed by participants' respective institutional environments. With a mixed audience of doctoral learners, supervisors, researchers, academic developers, and intellectual leaders, participants were asked: a) to engage actively during the workshop by envisioning doctoral support within the framework of 'feasible utopias'; b) to outline an action plan by integrating lessons learned and their own contexts; and c) to share observed progress and impact gained (after two and after six months respectively). Such integrated participant engagement is designed to address the following research questions:

a) What are the different elements within an expanded doctoral ecology? How do they interact and function with other formal and informal institutional support mechanisms?
b) How can 'feasible utopias' be actualised within an expanded doctoral education context? Who are the key agents? What are the possibilities and challenges?
c) Are there any discrepancies between the actual and envisioned realities with respect to newly identified support within an expanded doctoral education? What lessons can we learn from these discrepancies?

Data collected for the study emanated from the use of innovative and reflective research methods, i.e. sketches and discussions of feasible utopias using Padlet and reflective narratives of progress and impact concerning actualised aspects of participants' integration of 'feasible utopias' within their own institutions. Following inductive analysis and synthesis of collected data, the findings were interpreted using the expanded doctoral pedagogy framework (Barnett, 2018). Reciprocally, these findings contribute to elucidating and expanding the concept of what 'feasible utopias' within the doctoral ecology framework entail by producing an evidence-informed conceptual map.

Overall, research outcomes aim to bring clarity and a sound understanding of the 'feasible utopian doctoral education' both in the theoretical arena as well as in practice through consideration of novel platforms, approaches and initiatives. Improving both theoretical and practical facets of the doctoral education can play a strategic role in the ongoing development of thinking around doctoral education but equally, in capitalising and building on this new understanding towards an enhanced and more meaningful doctoral learning journeys for all PGRs and staff involved.

Note:
*Permissions from the SRHE delegates to use any evidence acquired from the event as well as other ethics considerations will be taken into account prior to using the data for research purposes.

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