

D12 Raglan Wednesday 5 December 15.00-15.30

Challenging the Current Zeitgeist of Doctoral Education: Focussing as much on Fulfilment as on Stress as part of Excellence (0426)

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Whenever change occurs it is human nature, when forced out of our comfort zones, to focus on the problems it might engender. It has been so in doctoral education over the last thirty years as traditional ways have been replaced by new policy and procedures intended to fit the doctorate to the needs of society during the 21st century (Denicolo, Duke, & Reeves, 2016).

Of course, problems have been identified by HE staff involved with doctoral education and training and many of them have been satisfactorily solved. Some examples include the embedding of professional skills training, the establishment of supervisory teams and progression/completion targets and policies to ensure that doctorates are completed in a timely manner. Professional skills training (Roberts, 2002) and team supervision (Watts, 2010) has been identified as key to enable doctoral graduates to be more well-rounded and fully prepared for a wide range of career options (within and outside of academia), requiring a breadth of both research and transferable skills. Better progress monitoring and incentivising timely completion have dramatically reduced doctoral drift, which in decades previously lead to high attrition, non-completion or extremely delayed completion of many doctorates (Jiranek, 2010).

However, despite much progress being made in relation to researcher development and support and since academia is populated by 'professional problem solvers', many other challenging issues have been uncovered and highlighted. For instance, the restriction on completion times alongside the increased requirement for formal training/workshops/courses and impact-related activities raises concerns about 'fitting everything in'; the introduction of regular (annual or bi-annual) monitoring procedures is said to increase stress levels, though intended to reduce anxiety. Indeed, emphasis has been turned to the mental and physical health with well-being centres becoming prominent on campus (Evans, et al 2017).

Moreover, in conference programmes, books and articles on doctoral education negative words and phrases proliferate such as: 'surviving the doctorate', 'managing the challenges' alongside stories of unemployment and underemployment of doctoral graduates. Seldom are the positive aspects and unique opportunities afforded by doctoral study given prominence. As the study by Levecque et al (2017) shows, there is an undercurrent of a negative culture surrounding the doctoral research experience, where the common response is for individual researchers to be encouraged to take better care of themselves and to become more resilient.

It is right to be concerned about problematic issues and to attempt to resolve them but we contend, and evidence through case studies, that greater attention should be paid to the positive value of the doctoral experience, for doctoral researchers and academic staff. Rather than encouraging a culture in which stress, fear and loneliness are expected as a right of passage for a doctoral candidate more emphasis could be applied to celebrating the opportunities for fulfilment and joy available during the doctoral process.

It is important to recognise that some stress or arousal is necessary for us to perform well, as in the Yerkes-Dodson Law (Green & Bavelier, 2008). We contend that to help researchers produce work that goes beyond the average and mundane, some anxiety-producing challenges are required. Importantly, that Law does alert us that too much anxiety-stress-arousal can be detrimental, and that the maximum level of positive arousal differs between individuals. This has implications for recruitment and for the process of doctoral study. For the latter, what has been termed 'productive distractions' by Dr Zoe Harris can be helpful in reducing and managing stress by including and promoting enjoyment (Denicolo, Reeves, & Duke, 2017). For the former, the attributes that were top-rated by academic researchers across disciplines during the research on which the Researcher Development Framework was founded are crucial: passion, perseverance and enthusiasm (Vitae, 2010).

In this presentation we utilise case evidence to support the assertion that to establish and maintain excellence in doctoral education it is critical to ensure that the passion and stamina that researchers initially bring to bear in their research is fuelled, not quelled, and their versatility is recognised and harnessed so that their experience of the doctorate is memorable for being engagingly constructive and productive. The use of more positive language and better structural support would shape the discourse and remind researchers of the attributes with which they first embarked on research and are now expanding.

Whilst we do not deny the challenge and real difficulties researchers face, nor do we trivialise the problems some researchers sadly experience, we believe efforts to change the discourse surrounding doctoral research begins with the language used to describe it and the attitudes cultivated around and in support of it; these then go on to influence the 'stories' transmitted about doctoral research. This is not and never should be conceived as the researchers' responsibility alone; indeed, the most serious source of weakness lies with institutions themselves – where staff perpetuate narratives of misery and there is no guidance or discussion on what needs to happen to make the doctoral journey a more pleasurable one (Skakni, 2018). The prevailing institutional response seems to be reactive rather than pro-active: increased access to counselling/enabling services and raising everyone's awareness of the key issues. Typically, institutions rely on individual agency rather than structured and robust support and action.

HEIs should not depend on researchers and their supervisors to sort things out in isolation; everyone needs to cultivate a more positive attitude towards doctoral research, from the VC down, and to find ways to celebrate our doctoral researchers and their research, and further, the benefits that research brings to institutions and society. In this session we will suggest specific ways in which this can be or has been achieved but invite participants to be creative in suggesting other opportunities and processes for achieving such outcomes.

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