

Submissions Abstract Book - All Papers (All Submissions)

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Rethinking Doctoral Education: Changing Academic Cultures, University Purposes, Mental Health And The Public Good

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Abstract: The paper examines what steps could be taken to emphasise doctoral researchers' wellbeing, using Burawoy's (2005) public sociology approach, whilst also enhancing doctoral education for the public good. Mental health incidence among doctoral researchers is now far higher than the general population (Flaherty 2018), leading to unfinished theses, talent loss and emotional, physical and financial costs (Levecquea et al. 2017). Using a sociological approach to wellbeing, the paper considers the effects of HE organizational climates and changing academic cultures (Musselin 2009, 2013) on doctoral candidates and how we might ameliorate some of these effects by thinking differently. The paper also examines debates about the purposes of higher education (Collini 2012) and dilemmas faced by university leaders in relation to core purposes (Swartz et al. 2019) and how these impact on doctoral graduates. Finally, some examples of ensuring that doctoral graduates can contribute to wellbeing, civil society and public good are proposed.

Paper: Background and literature

The paper addresses the question 'What steps could be taken to emphasise doctoral researchers wellbeing, using Burawoy's (2005) public sociology approach, whilst also enhancing doctoral education for the public good in the long term?'. It offers a creative, approach to improving doctoral education and enhancing doctoral researchers' wellbeing and capacity to contribute to civil society.

Mental health incidence among doctoral researchers worldwide is now higher than amongst other highly-educated members of the general population (Flaherty 2018). This can mean unfinished theses, loss of talent and considerable emotional, physical and financial costs to those experiencing mental health problems (Levecquea et al. 2017) and their supervisors. By taking a sociological rather

than psychological approach to doctoral researchers' mental health, the paper considers the effects of current higher education organizational climates and changing academic cultures (Musselin 2009; Musselin 2013) on doctoral candidates and how we might ameliorate some of these effects by thinking differently. The paper will examine debates about the purposes of higher education (Collini 2012; Docherty 2011) and dilemmas faced by university leaders in relation to core purposes (Swartz et al. 2019), to see how these debates are relevant to doctoral education. The prevalence of new managerialist approaches in universities (Deem et al. 2007), including performance-management of academics and the growth of 'boardism', the focus on external stakeholder participation within university governance (Veiga et al. 2015), have increasingly made public HE institutions more business-like and less caring about staff and students. Nevertheless, concern about doctoral candidates' mental health has led to attempts to support doctoral researchers' wellbeing. However, initiatives are often aimed at individual students (e.g resilience training or doing yoga) and whilst these are important, we also need an approach which enhances wellbeing in civil society. To this extent it could be seen as part of a 'public sociology' (Burawoy 2005) informing doctoral education wellbeing by focusing on doctoral education as a force *for* public good, rather than doctoral education *as* a public good (Locatelli 2017). Sadly, doctoral degrees have become just another commodity (Nerad and Heggelund 2008), with doctoral candidates shaped to fit that commodity. It is questioned whether this is necessary. Debates about public good and higher education have tended to concentrate on undergraduates (Marginson 2018) but can be extended to how doctoral researchers can be prepared to look outside as well as inside HE for their future careers and also make a genuine contribution to the public good in the community.

Methodology and approach

The paper is not based on a piece of empirical research but draws on literature about significant and enduring changes to academic work such as precarity and loss of the 'special' status of academic work through new managerialism (Deem et al 2007) and 'boardism' (Veiga et al. 2015), which all affect the cultures of universities as organisations and filter into the environment of doctoral researchers. HE change is not just about moves from academic self-governance to rule by managers, HR directors and governing bodies but is also affected by a major political shift to the right, for example in Europe, South and North America (Lazaridis et al. 2016; Norris and Inglehart 2019) in which social sciences and humanities subjects such as gender studies are attacked as ideological (Pereira 2017) and politicians try to take control of academic agendas for research and teaching. Such developments make life difficult for higher education institutions, students and academics. Secondly, the paper also considers the longstanding debate in higher education literature about what universities are for (Collini 2012). As universities have increased their student intakes and redoubled their efforts to raise money, undertake research, collaborate with industry and get high rankings in league tables as well as tackle societal inequalities (Swartz et al. 2018), questions are being asked about who should pay for higher education and also whether it should be more than just an employment training camp for students (Collini 2012). Yet doctoral education still typically focuses on academic discovery and employment prospects (McAlpine and Emmioğlu 2015) and not on wellbeing or the broader societal contribution of doctoral graduates.

Conclusions and findings.

The paper suggests a social and cultural route out of the doctoral researchers' mental health impasse

(Levecquea et al. 2017). The impasse is exacerbated by policy shifts regarding universities as business-like organisations driving knowledge economies, whilst requiring ever more stringent surveillance of academics' research and teaching performances. An alternative is to consider in what ways we might move away from seeing doctoral graduates and theses as 'products' (Locatelli 2017's education *as* a public good) towards regarding doctoral education as a force '*for* public good' (Locatelli 2017). This could be achieved in a number of different ways. Examples include encouraging doctoral researchers to engage with public understanding of varied academic disciplines, reshaping lifelong learning as a participative, community-led activity (Mayo 2019), undertaking 'real life' theses which apply research results as part of the thesis process (Porter 2019), working with disadvantaged young people in schools and colleges, such as the UK's Brilliant Club where doctoral researchers go into schools to help disadvantaged students aspire to university or supporting teaching staff by carrying out pedagogic research (as in the USA National Science Foundation's scheme for improving undergraduate science teaching, see www.cirtl.net). Burawoy's idea of 'public sociology' is an example of a strategy that would follow this pattern (Burawoy 2005). 'Public sociology' is seen by Burawoy as different from professional, critical and policy sociologies in that it focuses on applying social science knowledge in the public arena for public benefit in civil society. Here it is argued that academic knowledge can and should be used in the public arena where possible. The wider engagement of doctoral researchers in making public, otherwise inaccessible academic knowledge, in order to facilitate debates about societal concerns, values and goals or offer co-created lifelong learning opportunities, could be done in any discipline. It would constitute a new phase of doctoral education and hopefully give doctoral researchers a sense of social and cultural worth and esteem.