

37 Creating more representative policy for doctoral education and progression: using participatory methods to generate knowledge about diverse student journeys and needs

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Research Domains

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Abstract

Many universities, especially those in the global North, are concerned with addressing equity, diversity and inclusion (EDI) in their policies, processes and practices. This is largely a response to the increasing diversity of their student bodies—international students, students from racialized backgrounds, students who identify as LGBTQI and trans, working-class students. However, while greater EDI is the goal, there are questions about the pace at, and extent to which, dominant processes and practices are changing to enable and sustain transformation, as well as whose knowledge and experiences are reflected in guiding policy. In this paper I draw on the voices of doctoral students in South Africa and the UK to unpick aspects of doctoral policy that may be undermining EDI goals. In foregrounding students' knowledge and experiences, generated through participatory research, I aim to contribute to a conversation focused on revising and rewriting policy to be meaningfully representative and inclusive.

Full paper

In recent years the demand for better-qualified researchers, high-level publications, and successful grant applications has intensified across the global North and South (see Nerad, 2019; CREST, 2018). Better qualified largely means independent, self-regulated, and successful in conducting productive post-doctoral work. This requires greater capacity within doctoral education and supervision. However, increased demands on supervisors as researchers, as well as decreased time for supervision and mentoring in relation to other work academics do means that there is a gap between these demands and candidates' success, retention, and 'satisfaction'. These increased time pressures may lead to 'assimilationist' pedagogies (Manathunga 2019) as well as doctoral policies that may harm especially women, refugee, migrant, Indigenous and international students who do not 'fit' the largely patriarchal, heteronormative, middle-class sensibilities dominant in the modern university.

Early career, which in most contexts includes doctoral candidature, is a particularly difficult period in an academic career, marked increasingly by casualisation, huge pressure to publish, teach, and participate in departmental life, and decreased job security (Megoran and Mason, 2020). This period may be even more difficult for scholars who identify as Black, non-binary, LGBTQI, as women, Indigenous, international, non-English speaking. Despite rhetoric to suggest a deep concern with equality, diversity and inclusion in universities across the world, we know that academics that do not look, sound, speak or behave like those who represent the cultural 'norm' experience discrimination, both subtle and open in nature (Gagnon, 2021). This discrimination tends to be subtly, and often invisibly, encoded in policy that tends to assume a certain kind of candidate or academic – able-bodied, independent, well-resourced, confident in the medium of instruction (usually English). The reality, though, is more diverse and requires policy that reflects this diversity, and that is inclusive of doctoral students' knowledge and experiences, rather than only the demands of the academy. In creating doctoral policies and processes we need to more fully account for the sociocultural structures and practices that are produced by and inform higher education (Hlengwa, 2020). In most higher education contexts, increasing numbers of doctoral students are struggling to confront and work through the intellectual, personal and emotional issues that doing a doctorate can give rise to. Their experiences can help us to carefully interrogate the culture within academia that shape 'right' and 'wrong' ways to be an academic teacher, scholar and researcher; listening to these can enable us to craft representative policy that gives their knowledge and experiences a voice, and that subsequently may enable and sustain deeper transformation.

In this paper I will draw on data generated through narrative interviews with doctoral candidates at one South African university and one English university. I will also use some data generated from publicly available doctoral policies

from universities in both countries. The interviews were co-created with participants using visual participatory methods (the use of artefacts chosen by participants to represent their experience, journaling, and photographs). The interviews were conducted over 8 months, in person and online. Using a modified critical discourse analysis informed by feminist sociological theory, I aim to give voice to the kinds of knowledges we can generate through these participatory conversations, and how students' experiences can shed light on the ways in which dominant cultures may 'include' without creating spaces for true representation and belonging. Key questions I am asking in this phase of the research include: How are we 'policed' in subtle and overt ways in terms of acting and engaging in the 'right ways'? How is this communicated through policy? What effect might this have on how doctoral candidates who are not 'the norm' feel about being in academia and staying there? If we are serious about equity, diversity and inclusion as tools to transform the university from the inside out, we need to be paying attention to students' stories and experiences, and we need to begin to revisit policy that (inadvertently) undermines transformation and change at deeper levels.

I hope to contribute to the wider conversation on how we create and sustain more socially just, open and transformed universities by adding to the explanatory frameworks we have for exposing tools, such as policies, processes and practices, that inadvertently entrench forms of exclusion that can be hard to see, and harder to challenge.

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