

## Editorial

### What could second-generation research on the doctorate be like?

#### Introduction

This seminal collection of conceptual and empirical articles on the doctorate propels higher education scholarship in South Africa into new territory. We have simply not spent much time thinking about higher degrees and especially not about the doctorate. There is a wealth of scholarship on the governance and organisation of higher education, the founding legislation and policies that govern post-school education after apartheid, the problems of equity, access and success in higher learning given the poverty of the school system, and the persistent legacies of racism and authoritarianism inside universities. The formal arrangements for rearranging universities (mergers and incorporations, for example), inscribing new curriculum codes (the SAQA-inspired regulations), assuring quality (the industry spawned by the Council on Higher Education), and transforming patterns of racial enrolments and appointments have all enjoyed considerable “air time” in journals and some books.

It was the high-quality research of the Centre for Research and the authoritative report of the Academy of Science of South Africa – alongside the foresight of individual researchers on the doctorate such as Chaya Herman – that drew sharp attention to the link between the doctorate, knowledge, economy and development under the tough conditions of an emerging economy. That collection of research provided us with first-generation research on the doctorate, the quantitative platform for understanding simple but crucial things such as how many doctorates are produced where and by whom; where these graduates come from and where they are employed, and – with some strong qualitative snapshots – how they value their doctoral experiences. We now have a solid baseline for longitudinal research on the doctorate and a rich source of data for higher education policy and planning. It would be a very useful starting point for framing related and new questions for Masters and doctoral research on the subject.

#### Six directions for second-generation research

The question now to be asked, of course, is what second-generation research on the doctorate might be like. I want to propose six new directions for the next level of research.

First, it is important now to go beyond counting and delve into *the quality of doctoral degrees in South Africa*. There is cause for concern, for example, that some institutions train massive numbers of doctoral students without the supervisory capacity to provide the intensity of guidance and mentorship that the highest degree requires. The sheer volume of doctorates registered at South Africa’s premier distance education institution surely demands inquiry into capacity to do justice to the students concerned. The data suggests that, while averages for student:supervisor ratios are high for university staff with doctorates, it might in fact be worse when one accounts for the fact that the burden of supervision falls on a few academics. The financial incentives do not help, for the subsidy income from the state rises significantly for every doctoral graduate than is the case for lower degrees. The quest for professorial promotion in most universities requires that doctoral students must have been supervised to completion.

All of these pressures mean that there are real threats to the quality of doctoral degrees in South Africa. So what is the internal worth (as opposed to its market value) of the PhD? The Council on Higher Education might eventually get to quality assuring the South African PhD across institutions, but this call is for serious research that establishes some reliable indices for measuring the quality of the doctorate.

This is a sensitive issue, for there are serious differences among universities in terms of the overall quality of institutions and the net quality of the professorial pool by institution. To delve into the quality of the doctorate would invariably draw attention to the deep differences among the more privileged (former white) and the disadvantaged (black) universities. And since South Africa’s higher education chiefs still

believe that all universities can do everything for all students from the baccalaureate to the doctorate, some nasty data can emerge on quality. We could, of course, ignore the problem, and hope no researcher poses inconvenient questions of this kind. But our responsibility is to the students who might very well be short-changed inside institutions struggling to establish well-resourced libraries or to retain the best qualified academic staff or to nurture through the system the most promising honours and masters students into the PhD pipeline.

Secondly, we need a new generation of research that describes and *accounts for the epistemological and ideological character of the doctorate*. I have made this point often that deep transformation in higher education must move beyond “face equity” as an account of change and take on the hard knowledge questions about what counts in the doctorate. In a study of curriculum trends in teacher education in three Cape Town universities, Joy Papier found very distinctive trends in knowledge claims, assumptions and silences across these institutions. Nothing wrong with that — but what if we found that underlying the character of knowledge in these institutions in fact carried racial, class and gendered assumptions that were offensive, outdated and simply wrong? This matter was brought to attention in my book *Knowledge in the Blood*.

What do we teach in universities? How is that reflected in the theses and dissertations? To what extent have we developed new conceptual and methodological lenses for making sense of the colonial and apartheid past? What are the new terrains of curriculum struggle taken on, or ignored, as reflected in the products of doctoral study? How, if at all, has our language or our theoretical frames for describing past and present realities in advanced research changed?

This proposed direction for second-generation research has nothing to do with academic freedom or autonomy; academics should remain free to choose their own content and directions for student research in Masters and doctoral studies. Whether research undertaken is liberal or conservative or radical is not what I am questioning; all three directions, and more, make for healthy universities.

But if transformation is to mean anything at all, it has to at least allow for inquiry into what counts as knowledge in the post colony. It cannot assume that because the political order changed, the epistemological order also changed. The deep democratisation of university and society depends crucially on what and how we teach; this remains unexplored territory after apartheid, and courageous researchers are needed to at least pose the knowledge problem.

Thirdly, we need *comparative research on the meanings of the South African doctorate in a global world*. How good is the South African PhD measured against its counterparts elsewhere? This is important for several reasons, including the fact that the most mobile knowledge workers will be those with doctorates; that the doctorate is the highest academic attainment by which education standards can be compared across nations, and that the doctorate is the best measure of economic attainment within and across national borders.

Simply comparing the South African doctorate across the 23 universities is already a complex task, given the unevenness of starting quality in national terms; such comparison, however odious to some, must be done anyway as a matter of social justice. But what we also need is a set of indicators, quantitative and qualitative, that enables us to compare the domestic PhD with those in countries with strong universities. This is not about ranking; it is about improvement of what we do in relation to the best performers in higher education anywhere. There is no better measure of such comparison in academic terms than the doctorate.

Fourthly, we need much more textured studies of *the sociological meanings of the doctorate* within universities but also in the broadest communities outside of the academy. It was clear in the ASSAf study that a doctorate was not viewed by most as something attainable and necessary in the quest for high-level human capital and economic development. South Africa lags behind competitive world economies in this sense; where the doctorate is no longer exceptional but an achievement more and more students regard as worth doing for personal reasons and broader social reasons.

Our levels of government funding suggest, at the moment, that financial investment is heavily skewed in favour of lower levels of education. That is understandable, given the long history of underdevelopment of education. But, if South Africa is to take seriously its assigned status as an emerging economy, then

higher levels of education need to be regarded as commonplace within the populace. We need studies and strategies that make such acceptance of the doctorate in the broader society a given.

Fifthly, we need to know what it is within doctoral training that explains its value and significance in the marketplace. There are important curricular and pedagogical implications in this query. If we know what kinds of knowledge, skills, attitudes and attributes the doctorate conveys, we might better design and teach new PhD programmes. In other words, it is not enough to know, in an economic sense, that the doctorate is valued in social and economic life; it is important to know why.

There is a sense from the available research that the qualification itself signals high-level competence. It is reasonable to assume that new knowledge is a critical component. But it is suggested in other research – such as the ASSAf Humanities Study – that the PhD also conveys important soft characteristics such as attitudes to work, confidence, articulatedness, versatility, and teamwork. But we do not know with certainty what those value-added meanings of the PhD are, and how they come to light in and through doctoral training. Such knowledge could provide evidence for designs emerging in other parts of the world where the technical training in the PhD is accompanied by workplace-related modules as part of the students degree preparation.

Sixthly, we need research that on a scientific basis clarifies the relative value of various kinds of PhD preparation programme. In this instance, the major distinction between the American-styled course-based training and the English-styled “thesis only” supervision model needs to be thoroughly evaluated. The South African PhD is styled on the old English model of one student supervised by one expert supervisor over long periods of time. It is argued that this intensive model of training is not cost-effective, given the rising demand for doctoral training, and that no one person can contain within their expertise everything a student needs to know through a PhD.

However, there are also criticisms of the cohort model in which small or even larger groups of students progress through a set curriculum that combines theoretical and methodological training, and that exposes the students to a range of professors in the field. The course-based model co-exists with a full dissertation. The criticisms include the dilution of depth knowledge and supervision in the discipline, and the possible ‘watering down’ of the dissertation because of the distractions of the module-based components of training.

This simmering debate, which often appears more ideological than substantive, needs to be laid to rest through research that brings to light the relative value of doctoral training under these two very different models of PhD preparation.

## Conclusion

First-generation research on the doctorate has provided strong quantitative accounts of the PhD with some initial qualitative portraits of what the highest degree in the academy corresponds to and how it is experienced by academics and students. What we now need is to build on this platform of first knowledge and deepen our understandings of how to increase the numbers of doctorates while building high-quality value within the qualification. These six directions offer a possible starting point for such an ambition.

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(Guest Editor)