

Contemporary Doctoral Education, Doctoral Researcher Wellbeing and The Public Good: a Sociological Approach

Rosemary Deem, Dean of the Doctoral School, Royal Holloway,
University of London, UK

& former chair 2015-2018 UK Council for Graduate Education

Two important questions about 21st century doctoral education



- What social and cultural explanations are there for the current high rate of mental health and wellbeing problems amongst doctoral students in universities in Europe and elsewhere?
- What steps could be taken to emphasise doctoral researchers wellbeing using a sociological approach whilst at the same time enhancing doctoral education for the long term?’
- Draws on Burawoy’s (2005) idea of public sociology as it focuses on applying social science knowledge for public benefit in civil society

Doctoral candidates' mental health and well being



- Increasing evidence that doctoral students have higher incidence of mental health problems than other highly educated people (Flaherty 2018, Levecquea et al 2017)
- Poor mental health affects scientific knowledge creation process, makes work of research teams more difficult, affects labour supply skilled research workers (Levecquea et al 2017)
- Lack of well being leads to slow or uncompleted theses but also to feelings of worthlessness, despair, lack of social purpose, acute anxiety about meaning of life
- PhD experience also shaped by academic disciplines (Schmidt & Hansson 2018) and some subjects may over emphasise academic competitiveness

Doctoral candidates' wellbeing



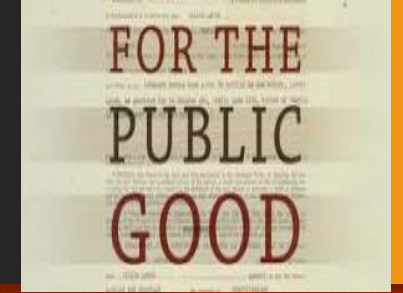
- A lot of literature (*not* Levecquea 2017 though) blames doctoral candidates themselves - introverted, conflicted over work/family, lack mental toughness in face of challenges (Schmidt & Hansson 2018)
- Clearly those with clinical depression/anxiety need counselling and maybe medical intervention
- But all doctoral students may be offered resilience training, yoga, singing, sport, meditation etc
- Supervisors also blamed by some researchers - may not be alert to mental health, can be issues of sexual harassment, bullying, poor supervision, use of student data without permission etc
- But few commentators blame the current conditions of HE for well being concerns, such as tendency to overproduction in academic work (Pereira 2017), low paid temporary jobs, anti-university critiques (see Charkaborrty 2018), 'long hours' cultures, inhabiting 'never good enough' feelings

The purposes of universities



- Humboldtian and Newmanian conceptions of universities fast disappearing
- Mode 1 & 2 knowledge now institutionalized (Gibbons et al 1994)
- The contemporary Rector/President is faced with competing demands that are in conflict with each other
- Swartz et al 2018 work in South Africa with senior HE leaders/policy makers: Finance/fundraising, reputation + league tables, social justice all vie for attention as 'core business' and such conflicting ideas affect those in other countries too
- Funding concerns lead to more precarious academic jobs; reputation/rankings produce extreme metrics driven performance management
- Notions of social justice or public good can vanish under a financial/reputational avalanche

The public good and doctoral students



- Debates about HE & public good tend to focus on value of undergraduate degrees
- Little written about public good and doctoral candidates (but see Cloete 2015, Cloete et al 2015)
- Locatelli (2017) distinguishes between HE *as* a public good and HE *for* the public good The latter is particularly relevant to a doctorate
- Can we begin to educate doctoral candidates about what HE for public good might mean? For example helping others using your doctoral skills?

Interpreting public good: How could doctoral candidates/graduates participate?



- By contributing to public understanding of science, social science, arts/humanities at public events, science fairs, open days
- Learning how to become an organic or public intellectual (Gramsci 1971, Giroux 2004)
- Using academic expertise to raise the aspirations and achievements of school students (e.g the UK Brilliant Club initiative)
- Learning to undertake pedagogic research to improve undergraduate teaching (NSF scheme at Michigan & other US universities, see <https://www.cirtl.net>)
- Engaging in genuine community-based student-led lifelong learning (Mayo 2019)
- Mentoring of other doctoral, Masters, undergraduate students
- Make more theses interdisciplinary, tackling real life problems, tested for rigour and non-academic impact (Susan Porter, University of British Columbia)
- Such skills don't just feed into jobs but also into service to the wider community, a genuine public good sustainable many years after the doctorate is completed

Generic questions for this session suggested by event organisers

- What kind of innovative ways can be developed to disseminate academic knowledge to the public in order to discuss current societal challenges?
- How can doctoral candidates impact society during their research?
- Beyond public outreach, how can we drive meaningful societal impact from academic research?