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Toward a Global PhD: Forces & Forms in Doctoral Education Worldwide

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MERESI NERAD & MIMI HEGGELUND, EDS. (2008)
**TOWARD A GLOBAL PHD: FORCES & FORMS
IN DOCTORAL EDUCATION WORLDWIDE.**
CENTER FOR INNOVATION AND RESEARCH IN GRADUATE EDUCATION
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Toward a Global PhD is an anthology with a point of view. The general theme of the book relates to doctoral education around the world and ideas and recommendations for changing and improving it. I think it is fair to say that few readers would find much disagreement with the suggestions that doctoral education is important to the continuing development of human cultural, political, and economic systems. Few would disagree that historic and current problems related to sexism, racism, and class should be addressed in ways that open advanced study to all capable and motivated individuals. Ditto suggestions that advising and mentoring of doctoral students could be improved by moving beyond the oft abused master-apprentice system or patron-client relationship between professor and student. Ditto again on the benefits of cross-disciplinary and international collaboration and cooperation. And no one could argue against the claim that high quality should be assured in every program.

But as many wits over the centuries have observed, "God is in the details." Several of the essays in this volume reflect a sometimes almost breathless idealization of doctoral education and globalization as forces for the improvement of the human condition. In the introductory chapter the editors/authors (p. 5) assert that holders of doctorates are a "primary source of innovation, research, & development capacity" and that there is "broad agreement that doctoral students are poised to become global leaders." Regarding "transnational settings" the authors insist that "Globalization can be an opportunity to bring the best minds together to solve the world's most critical challenges." Yet I am not entirely convinced that solving these intractable problems will be achieved through processes of standardization and moving in lockstep with national economic priorities as the basis for

staffing, funding, and generally supporting doctoral education. Further, is there really some kind of consensus that quality standards for every such program should be based on a world wide set of criteria established by a cadre of the most wealthy and powerful institutions? The issues raised are not simple, and there is not a single set of answers, yet the perspectives presented tend to lean in the direction of a transnational, technocratic, and monolithic approach to doctoral education.

The skeptical may suggest a pause from the recommendation that we rush headlong toward a world wide network of doctoral-granting institutions that have embraced a common research agenda, common practices, common standards, and a common language as they serve the economic and social priorities of their respective countries and regions. Evans, Evans, and Marsh, in their chapter in this volume on Australian doctoral education, observe that “ideologies that dominate much of contemporary Western policy seem to induce features in government and business that eschew the creation of new ideas, theories and knowledge, unless they have a commercial potential or are at least congruent with these prevailing ideologies.” As they quite correctly note, the challenge is “to ensure that universities are allowed to flourish within contemporary societies in ways that do not stultify the creation of new, and sometimes challenging or provocative, ideas both from the academic staff and the doctoral students” (p. 199). Indeed, the implication of many of the essays is that institutional priorities for research and advanced education will be set primarily by national governments through the use of funding and policy levers.

Across the span of the book there are various references to the need for greater efficiency and effectiveness in doctoral education, i.e., doctoral education needs to “pay off” better for national and transnational economies and workforces. It needs to move more people through the process at a faster rate. Instead of a larger vision for advanced study and research, several chapter authors comment in various ways on what the editors/authors note in the final chapter, that “many universities are operating increasingly in a managerial mode similar to business and are applying quality standards through outcomes assessment systems that include matrices of measurable objectives. Benchmarking is also becoming more common” (p. 308). If there is enthusiasm for Taylorism as a model for the university, I have rarely observed it within the academy.

The urge to standardize higher education invites us to reflect carefully on the dictum offered by former U.S. Supreme Court Justice Felix Frankfurter, who offered an opinion in the 1957 United States Supreme Court

case *Sweezy v. New Hampshire*. Frankfurter drew upon a statement of a conference of senior scholars from the University of Cape Town and the University of the Witwatersrand in South Africa (ironically enough, at the time fully in the thrall of the racist policies and practices of apartheid): “It is the business of a university to provide that atmosphere which is most conducive to speculation, experiment and creation. It is an atmosphere in which there prevail ‘the four essential freedoms’ of a university - to determine for itself on academic grounds who may teach, what may be taught, how it shall be taught, and who may be admitted to study.” An international consensus achieved by national governments, international agencies, and the most powerful universities seems almost by definition to do violence to the spirit of such freedoms.

We would be wise to remember that where universities have achieved greatness it has not been through the authority of ministries of education, or through the establishment of technocratic measures of efficiency and assembly line quality. They have grown through the sometimes messy processes of evolution in response to social needs and aspirations. We will convert them to factories at our peril. At risk of seeming overly provocative, it seems fair to ask basic questions about the most famous current effort at international standardization in higher education. Is Europe’s much-discussed Bologna process about quality as much as it is about economic competitiveness? The EU is suspect in the minds of many average Europeans as a technocratic bully compelling nations to conform to strict and detailed prescriptions for international uniformity in the name of a more powerful and influential Europe. Is it unreasonable to ask if these kinds of reforms and cooperation are motivated by a vision of a greater future for humanity or the convenience and control afforded by uniformity?

In fairness, in the final chapter the editors/authors observe, “Although there are advances to a converging model of doctoral education, we don’t know what we are losing: different modes of learning? Better adapting to local needs?” (p. 308). Having spent the past 22 years laboring in the vineyards of research, assessment, and evaluation in higher education, I continue to be puzzled by the endless fixation on a “one size fits all” model of educational policy. In truth, if we’ve learned anything through decades of educational research, it’s that one size does not fit all. The qualities and characteristics of students, professors, cultures, environments, traditions, and more all vary to such an extent that laying a template over the entire globe may amount to little more than a Procrustean bed for the diverse systems, needs, and innovations that exist or could exist around the world.

Certainly there are questions of monumental importance and complexity to consider. Who will bear the costs of advanced education? Is advanced study a private or a public good? Is studying medieval Italian poetry a private good that does not merit public subsidy? Is studying neurotoxins that may have powerful military applications a public good that does merit public subsidy? As the editors/authors note in their introduction (p. 10), (referring to German doctoral education) – “will knowledge and therefore doctoral education become just another commodity that is part of a global agenda for technological progress, or will there still be room for systems of education that cultivate scholars who are driven by deep curiosity about problems that may have no obvious practical application?” The answer offered by the book, when taken as a whole, appears to be the former, with scant appreciation for the latter.

The reader has no doubt detected a significant vein of skepticism in my commentary on this work. Though I have been critical, I hope others will give this volume a thoughtful reading, because the discussion here begun is important. There is need for reform in doctoral education around the world. The characteristics of the “new doctorate” outlined in the concluding chapter include better career preparation for students, better funding for students, better advising, more instruction in such areas as epistemology, environmental literacy, ethics, and “world citizenship,” interdisciplinary study, collaboration, international experience, and professional development. Generally speaking, there is not a great deal with which the reader might argue here, other than to wonder whether this is a prescription for undergraduate or doctoral education. As a hypothetical case, if I am charged with sustaining a first rate doctoral program in mathematics, why should I be adding Mandarin, environmental ethics, and emotional intelligence to the curriculum? Does this serve the larger cause of advanced learning and research, or the needs of transnational employers? Does the answer to that question influence my opportunities for funding or protect my academic freedom to teach mathematics?

Finally, the so-called Seattle Declaration is appended as the concluding statement of the volume. It is a statement of goals and priorities arising out of the international meeting that was the impetus for the volume under review. Again, the emphasis is on international collaboration, global networks to examine change in doctoral education, creation of an agenda for international research on innovation in doctoral education, a commitment to sharing research findings and best practices, attention to the role of doctoral education in globalization, strategies to “preserve native cul-

tures and reducing brain drain,” seeking international consensus on what doctoral education is and what competencies it should confer, developing international comparative data on doctoral education, evaluating doctoral education across national boundaries, and identifying policies that promote excellence and foster diversity. That’s quite an agenda, and honest investigation and discussion of what it all means in practice could occupy many very good minds for a very long time.