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On the intellectual purposes of a postgraduate education

Keynote Address
The Third Colloquium
Ensuring Quality Postgraduate
Education (EQPE)

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Photo by Stefan Els

I suspect it would be easy for this audience to agree on the usual academic homilies issued in response to the question, what is postgraduate education for? One's like:

- to prepare leaders for the professions
- to meet the demands of academia and industry for high level skills
- to induct students into theories and methods of advanced research

1. Those of you of more honest bent might add to the question of purposes: 'to improve the subsidy income for my academic department.' You might even confide that the dean is on your back to increase revenue streams since we all know that the funding of higher education has steadily declined in real terms. In the process, you learnt a whole new language that was not part of your PhD training like 'time to degree' or 'graduate outputs' or 'academic efficiencies.'

2. The more critical ones among you might have responded to this factory-like production industry with a whole new industry flashing every published article with titles that include terms like 'neoliberalism' or 'new public management' and for those with even less imagination, 'decolonization.'
3. It is nonetheless true that the entire process of postgraduate education has been corrupted in a feverish, never-ending quest to maximize income at the expense of the broader, more noble purposes of postgraduate education.
4. In reference to the corruption of the new post-graduate business model, I refer of course to
 - supervisors publishing with their postgraduate students out of their theses or dissertations
 - academics salami-slicing a small body of research into as many mediocre publications as usual

- academic leeches pursuing predatory journals with questionable (if any) peer-review mechanisms simply to bolster their CVs for promotion, and
 - supervisors short-changing postgraduate students without the depth, quality and intensity of supervision that distinguishes a post-graduate master's or doctoral qualification from earlier endeavours.
5. I hope to persuade you about one aspect of postgraduate education that we seldom talk about--and that is, the intellectual purposes that should distinguish post-graduate education from post-graduate training.
6. What do I mean when I speak of the intellectual purposes of a post-graduate education?

7. Among such intellectual purposes I count the following couplets as illustrative of those ends:

- The professor who is devoted to the cultivation of the intellectual mind such that the student becomes capable of thinking deeply within and widely beyond the confines of their specific field of inquiry (in other words, one who knows what the Ph in PhD stands for)
- The student who is constantly curious and intrigued by complex and novel questions, rather than one limited to finding solutions to concrete problems along the straightest line possible; that is, to the exclusion of the intellectual imaginary

7. Couplet two:

- The professor who is a reader and writer of groundbreaking books or articles that appear in leading international outlets and that form the basis for seminar readings and contemplation among students
- The student who, through exposure to a scholar-supervisor, is comfortable reading landmark works such as A brief history of time (Hawkins) and Superior: the return of race science (Saini) on one day and Necropolitics (Mbembi) and The comrade's wife (Boswell) on the next day (in other words, an educated student)

7. Couplet three:

- The professor who models scholarly dispositions such as elegance of argument, critical thought, and the delights of being wrong
- The student who learns to embrace uncertainty and discovers that arriving at dead-ends is part and parcel of the scholarly or scientific enterprise

7. Couplet four:

- The professor who teaches students how to judge rival arguments yet always respecting the fact that then as now, we stand on the shoulders of giants
- The student who finds that humility is the most treasured asset of a scholar-in-the-making, recognizing always that the more we learn, the less we know

7. Couplet five:

- The professor who shows students how to weigh the value of their emergent scholarship rather than only to count ‘research outputs’ without reference to enduring worth
- The student who finds great value in delaying productive outputs, such as singular publications, for the sake of a larger, more ambitious purpose, the scholarly book (that old marshmallow test with kids)

7. Couplet six:

- The professor who teaches students the risky habits of bold and courageous new thinking rather than only those simple, straightforward steps from question to hypothesis to lit review to theory to methods to analysis to findings (the kind of thing a basic methods textbook could have taught)
- The student, having been taught how to find innovative problems in the field, is determined to pose their own, original questions

7. Couplet seven:

- The professor who does everything within their power to promote and advance the rise of their proteges, celebrating that moment when they realize that their student is better than them
- The student, having benefited from years of supervision and mentorship, is determined to break new ground beyond what s/he was taught by a wise and competent supervisor

7. Couplet eight:

- The professor whose unbounded enthusiasm for their research inspires generations of students to also revel in the joy of inquiry
- The student who is able to swot away the draining effects of ‘administration’ pressures (deadlines, proposal formats etc.) and stay focused on why they came into the discovery of new knowledge in the first place

8. I am fully aware of the fact that the inherited colonial model of postgraduate education is deeply entrenched in South African universities i.e., the single supervisor responsible for a single student without the benefit of structured coursework in most master's and all doctoral degrees.
9. Apart from its obvious inefficiency, given the sharp growth in postgraduate numbers, it is anti-intellectual in at least three respects:
 - No one supervisor has the depth and range of knowledge and expertise to fully educate a postgraduate student
 - Isolated within this arrangement, the student loses out on the benefit of cohort learning and exchange

- The broader intellectual formation of the student is stunted by limited perspectives on their research projects
10. In short, there are structural impediments within our control that maintain this anti-intellectual model of postgraduate learning
11. What can be done? Please allow for two personal examples to illustrate how these commitments can be pursued

12. Example one. I introduced the cohort model for master's students as dean in Durban and for doctoral students in Pretoria---without, of course, the financial benefits that would accrue through the subsidy; in other words, students would do 'a full dissertation' and at the same time gain from structured seminars with inputs from leading scholars in education policy and change from around the world. That model continues to this day.
13. Though few in number, we fortunately have powerful cohort models that have significantly impacted on South African science and scholarship from the centre of Brenda and Mike Wingfield in Pretoria known for their stunning work on plant pathology and fungal genomics to Michael Samuel's famous doctoral innovation in KwaZulu Natal on teacher education to Ian Phimister's award-winning work in the Free State on mining and imperial history in Southern Africa.

14. Example two. In a few days I will be taking my top postgraduate students (one is a post-doc) to the two leading research conferences in my field, the CIES in San Francisco and a week later the AERA in LA with the between-week on the Stanford campus. The intellectual goals for these students on this visit are structured with the following purposes in mind:

- To introduce them, each personally, to the leading scholars in their specific fields of inquiry
- To arrange for them to visit those luminaries, per specific focus, over the next year or two
- To present them and their papers in panels for which they have prepared for at least a year, even before their papers were accepted (that took another few months of preparation)
- To then take each of their conference papers and workshop them into top journals for another round of peer review
- To assure that their papers are engaged by top scholars in structured panels at the two conferences and the Stanford visit

15. What these examples imply is that the transformation of the postgraduate education towards intellectual purposes requires the transformation of the professoriate---that class of supervisors and mentors who should be carrying the bulk of the responsibility for postgraduate supervision. I venture that many of those lecturers who currently supervise postgraduates are not qualified to do so
16. It might be a task of EQPE to ascertain whether we have the intellectual labour force that can competently supervise especially doctoral students at the levels of intellectual engagement required. The many, many workshops on ‘research methods’ does the exact opposite of what I have been setting out in this presentation.

17. The dangerous consequences of a narrowing down of the intellectual purposes of a postgraduate education were made very real during the pandemic. A generation of biomedical scientists from immunologists to infectious diseases experts were found wanting when their very recommendations—such as social distancing---put poor people in informal dwellings at high risk because the advice of the experts were completely at odds with the sociological realities of peri-urban homesteads. How do you socially distance in a crowded shack? That was a theme I took up with colleagues in a special issue of SAJS.
18. To broaden the intellectual purposes of postgraduate education therefore means a very different curriculum for this purpose.

19. One that enables a postgraduate student to speak with equal confidence about validity in statistical research and credibility or trustworthiness in qualitative research; in other words, to think beyond the immediate, instrumental, mechanical applications of a 'method' in a limited field of interest.
20. A curriculum, moreover, in which a postgraduate student can discern the differences and connections between the social and the scientific so that these pursuits are not limited to journals like Social Science & Medicine but becomes commonplace in all disciplinary pursuits.

21. After all, the problems of the world do not come to us packaged as disciplines.
22. To conclude, qualification standards for advanced degrees or graduate attributes are quite meaningless on their own unless we specify the theory of action that gets us there---and that must begin with attention to the intellectual qualities of the postgraduate student we have in mind

Thank you

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