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Student voice in doctoral education research

Book review: Mulligan, D. L., Ryan, N. and Danaher, P. A. (eds.), *Deconstructing Doctoral Discourses: Stories and Strategies for Success* (2022). London: Palgrave Macmillan.

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The toughest days of my PhD involved high-school students touring the research centre where I studied. They would flutter through the laboratories in awe and eagerly share their dreams about wanting to cure cancer or end obesity. It was so difficult to reconcile their view of academic research with the reality that I, and my peers, lived. They thought I was a genius – I felt that I knew nothing. They thought they'd get rich from this field – I'd been in precarious academic employment for years. They thought everyone in the building was collegial with one another – I was constantly navigating a minefield of workplace politics as a disempowered actor. Do I tell these students that their very same aspirations will likely mutate into my current experience? Would they believe me if I did? Many of my friends, mentors, and mentees describe similar journeys: a total shock at what a PhD is, and a doctorate spent desperately trying to learn the 'rules of the game' from their superiors.

Doctoral students rarely discuss the realities of being an apprentice in the neoliberal university. Instead, the complex journeys of these junior scholars are often reduced by decision makers to metrics of attrition, times to completion, and published outputs (Manathunga and Bottrell, 2019). The resulting silence breeds an academic culture of conformity, with new scholars simply adhering to the prevailing narratives of what and how they should research. Doctoral students are the future of the academic workforce. The future of knowledge. They are the only antidote available to remedy the failings of higher education. The dominant perspectives that have overseen the death of the Humanities, the climate crisis, and growing geopolitical instability (Barnett, 2021) cannot be challenged if

PhD students remain passive in a doctoral education system that supports existing ways of becoming a scholar. *Deconstructing doctoral discourses* aims to probe, expose, and reimagine the normalised shortcomings of doctoral education. The editors, in combination with approximately 30 contributors offer counternarratives to prise open new vistas for conducting, supervising, and designing doctoral study.

This edited collection consists of 20 chapters, edited by Australian academics and written by a multinational, multidisciplinary group of PhD students, supervisors, and academics reflecting on their own doctoral journeys. The book is loosely ordered to mirror the trajectory of a PhD – first addressing ethics applications and finally addressing the oral defence. A few chapters operate as guides for specific aspects of the doctorate. For example, Chapters 9 (Cash, 2022) and 10 (Shrestha, 2022) guide students and their supervisors through choosing to undertake, or avoid, a thesis by publication. Other chapters make space for voices often suppressed in doctoral education research including women in doctoral study, mature-aged doctoral students, doctoral students in the Humanities navigating STEM-centric administrative barriers, and international and transnational doctoral students. Power imbalances are set aside, and their stories are heard. Through both qualitative interviews and autoethnographic methods, this collection makes visible the plurality of persons that wish to extend knowledge.

For example, in Chapter 16, Hannaford (2022) analyses interviews with mature-aged doctoral students. Their responses challenge the enduring belief that doctoral study is reserved for young, mid-20s students fresh out of their undergraduate or master's degrees. This chapter also exposes the emptiness behind existing academic discourse regarding mature-aged doctoral students as technologically inept. Through her analysis, Hannaford demonstrates that in actuality the mature-aged students examined struggle to fit into a performative and rushed doctoral programme designed to prepare young individuals for workforce entry. The richness of mature-aged students' research depth and engagement is demonstrated, and recommendations are made to better support these individuals.

In Chapter 3, Meibusch (2022) recounts her battle towards ethical approval during her PhD and the number of disciplinary assumptions made by her institution. Her autoethnography highlights the need for our doctoral programmes and central research infrastructure to better serve all disciplines, not just Science and Medicine. Many chapters work in a similar

fashion: assumptions in existing doctoral research are identified, suppressed voices (either the authors' or the interviewees) counter these assumptions, and steps for improvement are proposed. The out-dated prevailing views of doctoral education are unpicked through the acknowledgement of the lived experiences of these students.

While such studies make this collection a worthwhile read for doctoral education researchers, in my opinion they also serve a radical function for existing doctoral students. This edited collection is one of the largest collections I have seen of doctoral students engaged in doctoral education research. Any disciplinary research requires both a generic academic skillset, and expertise in the research area. Doctoral students are already developing their academic skills, and they hold current, intimate experiences of navigating doctoral studies. If PhD students supplement these capacities with reading existing doctoral education research, they are in a unique position to contribute to this literature. This book serves as a testament to this idea and as inspiration for doctoral students to document their journeys, situate themselves among current debates, and improve the degree for the next generation. PhD students are often considered powerless to change their circumstances, but there is power in robust research. For doctoral students considering making contributions to doctoral studies, this book is a rare collation of exemplars.

The collection developed here is by no means comprehensive. Many of the empirical studies rely on a small sample size of doctoral students, sometimes from only one institution. The book does however configure a call to action for doctoral students and educators to publish their stories. Through such an approach, we will better understand the uniqueness of doctoral study for people not discussed in the collection, including LGBTIQ+ students, First Nations students, students attempting the doctorate for a second time, and students who change supervisory teams. A small sample of doctoral student interviews, or a single autoethnographic piece are not universal, but they do 'dissolve some calcified beliefs' (Kovalyova, 2022, p.189) underlying dominant doctoral discourses. The collective consequences of these disruptions will transform the nature of the academy for the better.

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