

## Working in the borderlands: Critical perspectives on doctoral education

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The early history of the doctoral degree is largely lost in time, but the modern manifestation that recognises a significant and original contribution to knowledge creation is barely 200 years old (Simpson 2009). Despite the Latin inflections of the *philosophiae doctor* or ‘PhD’ (as it has been traditionally known in most contexts), it remains a young pedagogic form. For most of its infancy and across most countries, it has been predicated on the production of a lengthy personal monograph under the gaze of a senior academic, in a relationship redolent of a craft apprenticeship (Park 2005). The principal purpose of the doctorate has been to allow entry to an academic career and, while statistical data are scarce until relatively recently, doctoral students were undoubtedly overwhelmingly younger white men from affluent backgrounds, with incremental – and, arguably, glacial – change only arriving since the 1950s. The doctorate in much of the Global South is younger still, but no less marked by colonial and post-colonial inequalities (Yudkevich, Altback, and de Wit, 2020).

Standing in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, we gain a slightly different perspective. The last 30 years or so have seen a rapid diversification in doctoral education. Student numbers have increased and demographics have started to shift, particularly with respect to gender and age, while many doctorates are now pursued part-time. Doctoral supervision has been professionalised in many contexts, with expectations of trained academic staff supporting students who have themselves had specialist research training (Fourie-Malherbe et al. 2016). There has been a blossoming of doctoral forms beyond the traditional monograph-led PhD, encompassing professional doctorates, practice-based doctorates and doctorates awarded for scholarly publication (e.g. Guerin 2016; Park, 2005; Schwarzenbach and Hackett 2016). The connection with academic careers has weakened, with many students anticipating – or being forced to accept – work outside of higher education, in part due to fierce competition for limited jobs (e.g. Hancock in press). Indeed, the doctorate has increasing currency in *other* labour markets, conferring status and positional advantage in business, technology, public administration and elsewhere. The complex and multidimensional ‘wicked problems’ of late

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<sup>1</sup> The three editors made equal contributions to this special issue and its editorial.

modernity – climate change, public health crises, mass migration and so on – require knowledge and expertise to leak out of the academy. We felt, therefore, that it was an opportune moment to solicit critical perspectives on a contemporary doctoral world that is more diverse and fractured than ever before.

As we called for submissions to this special issue, we suggested that there might be a geography of ‘doctoral borderlands’. The title tag gives energy for consideration of doctoral education from the assumption that ‘a borderland ... is in a constant state of transition’ (Andzaldúa 1987, 3); ‘frontiers are dynamic and often unstable zones’ (Parker 2006, 77). Borderlands can be conspicuously political, ‘imbued with the sense of inclusion and exclusion as individuals and groups move through, in, and out of communities’ (Gulson and Symes 2007, 2). Doctoral education, like other borderlands, is marked by uncertainty, hope, risk, and identity transition (Carter 2020; Leonard, Becker, and Coate 2005). Candidates conduct research into what is unknown: they must do the research, locating and scoping that new knowledge to procure their ‘original contribution’, and then producing a map-equivalent in their research writing. They become researchers as they learn methods; they become recognised as researchers by their discipline community as they develop an appropriate voice in their academic writing (Chaudhry 2009; Guerin and Picard 2012; Jackson 2009; Maclure 2009). There is tension between institutional frameworks, usually constructed slowly and ponderously, and individual experience of such frameworks as often inadequate, when time, money and power are scarce (e.g., Boud and Lee 2009). Such tension is endemic to borderlands where there is often a disconnect between state rules and their enactment by enforcers and where identity is apprehensively reconfigured in a space that is always contested (Kearney 1998, 124). Historically, academia detaches itself from the challenges of daily life; commonly, candidates manage a fractured multiply-layered reality that includes panic and despair that are masked when they step into their professional persona.

Like other borderland crossers, doctoral candidates are motivated – by potential upward mobility or at least a rewarding career – to undertake risk, uncertainty and struggle. At the same time, they are challenged to slowly construct a new identity. Our assumption is that 21<sup>st</sup> century higher education has shifting values; rapid and therefore alarming change; outdated and thus empty rhetoric; and increasing numbers of borderland crossers seeking the promised land of doctoral graduation. We believe that the metaphor of the borderlands is generative in encouraging critical exploration of the various borderland journeys that different forms of

doctoral education open up – novice growing into expert, professional combining practice with critical study, individual joining a team, supervisor reinventing themselves, student working within a new culture, discovery of the world of scholarly publication and so on.

We raised questions in our invitation to researchers that intended to provoke critical and theoretical consideration. Some of these questions related to doctoral education's central purpose: how might the multiple understandings of doctorateness be contested (Carter and Gunn 2019; Jones 2009); are doctoral examination systems fit-for-purpose (Kumar and Sanderson 2020); what about institutional responsibility for employability within a globalised higher education market (Young, Kelder, and Crawford 2020)? Doctoral education sits at the heart of the purpose of academic research. Behind managerial responsibility, ideals of public good compete with the pragmatics of a business model approach. Clearly, politically and perhaps poetically, public good is foregrounded in Indigenous knowledges of teaching and learning, with their insistence that it is people and community that matter (Smith 1999). Other questions challenged the idea of a shared central purpose to the doctorate by seeking out variation: have the sciences and humanities ideas of research diverged to a point of separation (Delamont, Atkinson, and Parry 1997; Snow 2001), how do funded research projects' deadlines influence the doctoral researcher's development, and to what extent are creative, practice-based (Schwarzenbach and Hackett 2016) or publication-led doctorates (Guerin 2016) changing traditional ideas of the doctorate as producing a monograph? The increasing flex of doctoral practice, we felt, invited critical eyes to make sense of, and to challenge, the assumptions about doctoral education that are shifting, or could shift.

The thirteen full articles and two 'Points of Departure' – the journal's alternative format for new ideas and provocations – in this special issue take the evocative borderlands metaphor in different directions. We are delighted that we have been able to include contributions from six continents and perspectives from a mixture of established writers in the field and newer authors. For the purposes of this editorial, we have somewhat artificially marshalled the contributions into three binding themes around *identities*, *pedagogy* and *dual roles*; almost needless to say, some inhabit the borderlands between these themes.

### **Doctoral students' multiple identities**

There is a rich vein of research around identity and doctoral students, recognising how identities shift and develop during the doctorate (e.g. see McAlpine and Lucas 2011). In this special issue, contributors focus on the multiple identities that doctoral students hold, where factors such as race, gender, ethnicity, and epistemological difference intersect. These identities, which are geographically, historically, and temporally situated, inhabit the borderlands of doctoral education and contributors draw out some of the tensions, ambiguities and cultural collisions identified in borderlands theory, as well the potentials that such spaces offer.

Karen Gravett (2021) draws a ley line through the complexity of doctoral borderlands, by employing Deleuze and Guattari's (1987) concepts of rhizome and becoming to challenge the notion that the doctoral journey is a linear pathway to completion, showing that there are multiple moments of becoming when journeying. Her approach is a promising one, emphasising the possibilities for joy, innovation and creativity once institutional regulatory routes are unsettled.

Marlize Rabe, Caroline Agboola, Sahmicit Kumswa, Helen Linonge-Fontebo and Lipalese Mathe (2021) recognise that gender, habitus, employment status, geographical location and distance create 'inequalities in the global academic world' (p.??) that they encountered on their own journeys on the 'road less travelled' of a South African doctoral degree at a distance, experienced from within South Africa, Nigeria, Cameroon and Lesotho (also see Alebaikan, Bain, and Cornelius in press for a Middle Eastern example). They underline the importance of supportive networks for social and academic sustenance and the building of bridges when geographically distanced, both during the doctorate, and beyond as their academic journeys continue through 'troubled landscapes' (p.??).

Their autoethnographic focus on geographical difference and their socio-political implications resonate with Serhat Tutkal, Valeria Busnelli, Isaura Castelao-Huerta, Fernanda Barbosa dos Santos, Luisa Fernanda Loaiza and Duván Rivera-Arcila (2021), who draw on borderlands theory to explore their multiple identities as doctoral candidates within a Columbian context. Writing from their outsider positions within the 'armed conflict and violence' (p. ??) of Columbia, working with otherized research subjects, experiencing financial precarity and on the fringes of a discipline as transdisciplinary researchers, they indicate the challenges that these multiple identities can bring. Yet, they contend, transdisciplinary research can facilitate the building of bridges between these identities that

are in constant recreation, between marginalised research subjects and between researchers themselves, thus opening up possibilities for new epistemic approaches.

In his shorter reflective provocation, Rafi Rashid (2021) picks up the theme of transdisciplinary research and articulates a pressing challenge with which doctoral education in the 21<sup>st</sup> century must come to grips: academia is organised into strongly bordered disciplines, but that categorisation does not fit some of the pressing challenges the world currently faces. This is a theme that the journal has engaged with in a previous special issue (see Harrison and Luckett, 2019) as a means of better aligning the expertise (re)produced by higher education with the diverse expertise needed by society. Rashid argues that we need to train researchers to work across disciplines, venturing out of the known zones to cross and transcend disciplinary and epistemic borders (Abdul-Jabbar, 2019). For doctoral students, the interdisciplinary borderlands hold many practical problems – but also the potential for greater reach for their work. Echoing Hauke's (2019) work with undergraduates, Rashid offers a framework for how STEM doctoral candidates might be trained; a model that might be adapted more widely to address the world's needs.

Epistemological border-crossings are also the focus of the contribution from Jing Qi, Catherine Manathunga, Michael Singh and Tracey Bunda (2021). They politicise the identity of doctoral candidates by showing how the residues from past histories impact on First Nation and transcultural students' and their supervisors' epistemological border-crossing. By foregrounding the importance of the past on the present, they are able to suggest that epistemologies can be challenged productively within historically aware pedagogy.

Finally, Stephanie Masta (2021) focuses specifically on Brown and Black student identity in doctoral education. Through research within a graduate-level research-methods course, she describes classroom counterspaces as places which recognise the complexity of Black and Brown identity, where Black and Brown students' social and academic identities are bridged, and where their experiences are 'reflected in the material and considered valid and critical knowledge' (p.??). The creation of classroom counterspaces entails pushing back on white hegemony, so that Black and Brown candidates can bring their 'vulnerable and honest perspectives into the academy' (p.??). Masta makes a call to teachers to rethink their doctoral pedagogy, a theme that is picked up in the next section.

## **Contestations of doctoral pedagogy**

It is not surprising that in a special issue of a teaching and learning focused journal, the dynamics of doctoral education and pedagogy are brought to the surface. Commonly, academic discourse equates doctoral teaching with supervision (Deuchar 2008; Grant 2010; Peelo 2011) – something that we expect interests and troubles most of our readers – with a small amount of consideration to the work of other doctoral learning advisors. There is less research on centralised learning advising than you would expect given the flourish of support burgeoning from funding following Sir Gareth Roberts' Review (2002) in the UK. The use of social media for doctoral teaching and learning is a practice slowly acquiring its own discourse (Guerin, Aitchison, and Carter 2019), perhaps because practice is becoming more pertinent given the experience of COVID-19 pandemic lockdowns. Doctoral education is multiply layered, and amongst this tangled undergrowth each candidate, supervisor and learning advisor picks their way, improving their practices as they do so. How might academia forge a path forward that better enables the doctoral learning journey in the current changing environment?

Experience is always best regarded as something to learn from, and many of the articles in this special issue provide data from experience that is insightful. Like Gravett's (2021) use of individual narrative, Rebekah Smith McGloin (2021) analyses narrative data from the reflective diaries of candidates. She then addresses the doctoral progress trajectory by drawing on a new mobilities paradigm (also see Henderson, 2019), and looking analytically at some of the fixed institutional structures that enable doctoral progress to suggest how universities might provide better doctoral education. Honing in on the role institutions play in their support structures, Puleng Motshoane and Sioux McKenna (2021) draw on 186 participants' accounts of how supervisory skills are developed, making the case for the provision of supervisory workshops that target the expertise needed in different aspects of supervision (see Grant and Barrow, 2013 for thoughts on how this might work). Personal experiences in Motshoane and McKenna's data inform suggestions for possible future direction.

If supervisors could be better supported, so could doctoral candidates who engage in academic teaching. Jo Collins (2021) looks in particular at international Graduate Teaching Assistants (GTAs), often characterised as lacking training, skills, English language proficiency and knowledge of the host education system. Her participants are 18 GTAs from

postcolonial countries, who she sees as working in a contact zone within the borderlands of doctoral education where they bring their diverse cultural resources and remake them within the Western academy. Her article is a reminder of the importance to teaching and learning of culture and past histories. Pedagogy is strongest when it is aware of individual difference.

Looking through the other end of the telescope, Cally Guerin's (2021) shorter piece explores the positioning and status of individuals employed by universities to deliver research training courses to doctoral students and otherwise support their development (e.g. through coaching). In considering the curious marginal space of such work in the borderlands between academic disciplines and university administration, she argues the need for a new pedagogy that recognises the liminality and vulnerability of staff who are generally neither embedded within disciplines nor research-active themselves, enabling them to better translate 'hidden' research cultures for students (see too Carter, Kensington-Miller, and Courtney 2017; Grant 2007; Guerin, Carter, and Aitchison 2015; Manathunga 2007).

While supervision, learning advice, and social media each offer support for doctoral learning, one paper brings these together, making sense of the potential of each approach. Tai Peseta, Giedre Kilgyte, Amani Bell, Brittany Hardiman, Delyse Leadbeatter, Jenny Pizzica, Gina Saliba, Fiona Salisbury, Kate Thomson, and Robyn Yucel (2021) think together with the concepts of borders, paths, and orientations to interrogate the field of higher education as a valid site of doctoral study in its own right. They do this under the formation #thesisthinkers, an approach that enables group supervision energy for thinking together amongst the hierarchies of academia. In doing so, they theorise the field, and additionally demonstrate a curriculum of communal care work that enables practitioners to flourish as stewards of a burgeoning doctoral discipline – higher education.

These contributions help us to map and understand the increasingly diverse pedagogic forms that are now brought to bear on doctoral education, in sharp contrast to the historically dominant model of an isolated dyad between student and supervisor. Not only are universities now concerned with training their supervisors, but they are also accepting that students need support to develop as researchers and teachers. Such support comes not only from supervisors, but also either from specialists or – more creatively – from their peers (for recent examples, see Ciampa and Wolfe in press; Douglas in press). We now turn from pedagogic borderlands to consider those created by a fracturing of traditional roles for doctoral students.

## **Dual roles: student/teacher, teacher/student and student/author**

Several of the articles in the special issue draw on the borderlands theme to conceptualise the experiences and challenges of doctoral students who simultaneously inhabit dual roles – as academics in their own right, as part-time teachers or as (co-)authors of scholarly work.

Jennie Billot, Virginia King, Jan Smith, and Lyn Clouder (2021) note the pressures that can be applied to the growing number of staff who have entered academic roles from professional backgrounds (e.g. in healthcare, business, education or law) to acquire a doctorate – as an institutional stipulation, to facilitate promotion or ensure esteem in the eyes of students and other staff. They argue that ‘the dual-status academic lives in messy borderlands where they are simultaneously staff and student and a potentially even messier metaphysical status where they are not quite either’ (p.??) – a position that is fraught with novel difficulties.

Supervisors are often also colleagues, with a complex web of pre-existing relationships, frictions and tensions that need to be renegotiated and navigated. Time constraints, arising from the ebb and flow of academic work, impinge on research time and create tensions with supervisors (see Bosanquet, Mantai, and Fredericks, 2020 in a recent special issue in the journal for more about the centrality of time to the doctoral experience). Billot et al. (2021) conclude by noting the high level of attrition in their sample, where some candidates ‘felt the need to “fight” to complete their studies’ (p.??) while others opted for flight. They therefore recommend tailored institutional and supervisory support for academic candidates within this Andzaldúan ‘no-man’s land’ (p.??). The variation of individual experience described here shows how far reality can peel away from traditional institutional expectations of doctoral education.

Namrata Rao, Anesa Hosein, and Rille Raaper (2021) explore the other side of the coin, noting that the common practice of giving doctoral students part-time teaching roles often occurs without support or training for these novice academics ‘in the making’ (also see Collins, 2021). They conceptualise them as having a temporary and uncertain status in the borderlands; ‘a liminal state which is stressful as it requires them to navigate new discourse communities with diverse norms and expectations’ (Rao, Hosein and Raaper 2021, p.??). The authors note that these roles are often accessed through opaque procedures or informally through supervisors and other staff, leading to atomisation and a lack of structure. They show

inequality in teacher-identity development and recommend that candidates should have recognition and support from communities of practice to become competent and successful teachers in an environment that they emphasise is increasingly precarious and competitive.

A possible contribution to this challenge is presented in an empirical exploration of an innovative approach based in Germany. Angelika Thielsch (2021) argues that teaching undergraduates alongside their supervisors enables doctoral students to ‘connect to possible interpretations of their future academic roles’ (p.??), constituting a very practical way to develop doctoral identity. She grounds her case study in theories of identity and liminality, that show liminality to be inherent in identity reconstruction. It is through spending focused non-research time with practising academics, she argues, that ‘experiences as [a] team teaching member can provide guidance for those who are in transition towards their new academic identity’ and help them ‘to identify what’s important to them and to position themselves in their new roles as academic teacher as well as expert in their field’ (p.??). This resonates strongly with Rao, Hosein, and Raaper’s (2021) call for stronger communities of practice for doctoral students with dual roles as teachers.

While teaching is a skill likely to be of use to candidates in future academic careers, perhaps even more so is the ability to publish research – either solo or alongside supervisors (Xu in press). The need for doctoral writing that satisfies examiners is of course a primary concern (Carter, Guerin, and Aitchison, 2020), but publication success is what gives research impact. Harry G. Rolf (2021) demonstrates how quantitative data and ‘big data’ tools can be effectively used to offer critical perspectives. He examines the ‘diagrams of power’ by critically analysing bibliometric and co-authorship networks for 1216 publications by research masters and doctoral students. Insights from this study map out the social patterns of publication, with a data feminist approach showing both power and inequity, as well as making visible the labour of female research students. Rolf recommends openness and inclusivity.

These articles shine a light on the increasingly diverse modes of doctoral study, with the historical stereotype of the (usually) young researcher able to dedicate themselves wholehearted to their studies increasing not holding water – if it ever did. This has important implications for, *inter alia*, the conceptualisation of supervision (also see Kreber and Wealer in press) the configuration of support services and the construction of professional norms

within the academy. We must be vigilant and ensure that these more recent modes are not marginalised and that they continue to be subject to critical scrutiny.

### **Concluding thoughts**

The articles in this special issue bring to the fore the critical knowledge and multiple identities that doctoral students hold, the dynamics of doctoral pedagogy and education, and the experiences and challenges of inhabiting dual roles within the academy. We have also been provoked, through the Points of Departure, to also consider the positioning of those who support the development of doctoral researchers, and to recognise the need to provide interdisciplinary doctoral education.

The focus is often on individual borderland journeys, and the risks, uncertainties and challenges those journeys pose. Within the contributions, there is less specific consideration of the borderlands that newer forms of the doctorate inhabit. One exception is Gravett (2021, p.??) who makes mention of her own PhD by publication, where ‘the interweaving of publication through the writing of a doctorate offers new opportunities for intertextuality and connection – for thinking and writing differently’. Other newer forms of doctorate foreground professional, creative, industrial and practice connections, and there is clearly space for further critical and theoretical engagement with the kinds of border-crossings that these doctorates require and to explore the resultant opportunities for educating differently, creatively, and productively. Arguably, the problems of the 21<sup>st</sup> century demand that academia changes its preconceptions about doctoral education quite substantially in order to address the complex challenges facing humanity (Barnacle and Cuthbert 2021; Rashid, 2021). We need to actively question whether, in the ‘information age’, the monolithic doctoral monograph remains the best vehicle to establish expertise and make emerging knowledge accessible to the wider population

The other borderland that we had hoped this special issue might address is that represented by the doctoral examination: the ephemeral frontier between expectant student and recognised expert. Practices in this space vary widely between (and often within) countries, with few structures to ensure comparability between institutions or disciplines. Institutional guidelines are often kept deliberately general so that one size of examination criteria fits all. However, that attempt to make a doctorate of equal substance across disciplines means that the process

is often opaque to the student, who may be more or less powerful as their supervisors seek to ‘risk manage’ the examination through the choice of examiner by flexing their professional networks. Examiners – who are often poorly paid (if at all) for their labour – may feel pressured into accepting students into the doctoral ‘club’ against their better judgement as a failure to do so holds reputational risks for them. We believe that this space is ripe for critical exploration, questioning the tacit and hidden processes that may (dis)advantage the student, compromise the academic participants and bring into question the status of expertise within the discipline.

The metaphor of borderlands has always conveyed a shifty unstable reality: to speak of doctoral education as a borderland opens up the opportunity for transparency about double dealing; for recognition of different cultures and respect for them, even when that troubles academic assumptions; and for taking advantage of what is promising about the politics and creativity of an imagined Third Space (Bhabha 1990). Anzaldúa (1987, 79) proposed that those who inhabit borderlands and build a borderland identity must develop ‘a tolerance for contradictions, a tolerance for ambiguity’. The borderland dweller

‘learns to juggle cultures. She has a plural personality, she operates in a pluralistic mode... Not only does she sustain contradictions, she turns the ambivalence into something else’ (79).

When we called for abstracts back before the COVID-19 pandemic, the response was a wave of promising passages. We had to choose a manageable number, allowing a journal-sized conversation to be rolled together. It is something of a formulaic cliché to declare how difficult the editorial choices were, but with this special issue that reality is true. Rejecting promising articles was painful, with the only mitigation being that other articles that failed to make it into this issue might find a place in later general issues. This is a substantial special issue exploring the doctoral education borderlands, but, glaringly, there is more territory open for research to stake out.

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**NB – the articles in the special issue will need adding to this reference list**

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