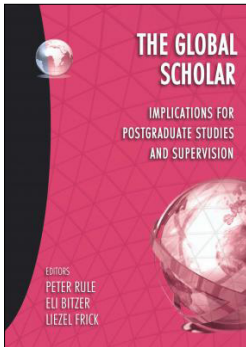




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The global scholar: Implications for postgraduate studies and supervision



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Postgraduate education in a globalised world

Interest in postgraduate education and the supervision of postgraduate research has developed in recent years, largely as a result of the impact of the so-called 'knowledge economy'. South Africa's National Plan 2030¹ draws on globalised discourses in holding that increases in the number of graduates, particularly at doctoral level, will contribute to economic prosperity because of the potential of postgraduate education to contribute to the processes of reinvention that drive the economic system itself. Even a brief glance at the mission and vision statements of a small sample of universities shows how this idea has been taken up within the higher education sector. In the context of high levels of unemployment, the idea that a postgraduate degree can lead to better work prospects also means that students who might never have considered doing a postgraduate degree previously, have now come forward to study at this level. All this then means that academics are being called upon to take on heavier supervision loads with a diverse array of students.

This collection of essays edited by Peter Rule, Eli Bitzer and Lizeel Frick, stems from the 2019 Biennial International Postgraduate Supervision conference hosted by Stellenbosch University. Given the title of the book, and the interest in postgraduate education across the world because of the ideas noted above, it is fitting that the authors included in the collection should represent a cross-section of scholars from places as diverse as the USA, Australia, Israel and various countries in Europe. This does not mean that South African work is neglected, as contributions from a number of scholars who are known in this country for their interest in postgraduate education show.

A comment by the editors (p.2) that globalisation can be understood 'in both utopian and dystopian terms: celebrated by some for its opportunities and affordances, and repudiated by others for its destructive cultural and ecological impacts' captures the breadth of the collection. McKenna's critique of human capital theory²⁻⁴ and her posing of the question 'Who is served by postgraduate education?' is firmly located at the more critical end of the continuum of responses to globalisation. For McKenna, asking this question spotlights, not only issues related to differentiated access and success in the South African system, but also the need for postgraduate research which aims to contribute to the good of society and the planet, and which is not simply aimed at driving economic development and benefitting individuals. The troubling of discourses currently dominating higher education offered by McKenna will resonate with many readers of this Journal and offer challenging insights to others who may unwittingly subscribe to them.

A number of chapters look at more positive aspects of globalisation with one, by Morozov and Guerin, exploring the mobility it has promoted amongst both academics and students. In the context of the pandemic, which struck the year after the conference at which the paper on which the chapter is based was presented, the focus on digitised communication in supervision is particularly interesting. Morozov and Guerin's response to questions about whether remote supervision ultimately presents an attractive proposition or whether it results in a reduced learning experience is largely positive, although the chapter is written from a perspective in a country where access to devices, data and the Internet itself is much less problematic than in South Africa. Although postgraduate students tend to be better resourced in this regard, it is by no means the case that all have adequate access to devices and data or live in places with good connectivity. Also absent is the way disciplines impact on the possibility of studying from a distance and on what this might mean for practice. In the humanities, where one-on-one supervision is common, interaction with a group of fellow doctoral candidates in a campus setting can be critical to developing a broad knowledge base and seeing how cognate disciplines tackle similar problems and objects of interest. In the natural sciences, a lot of research is project based and models of supervision offer the opportunity of working in a team and learning alongside others at laboratory benches on a daily basis.

To my mind, however, one of the most significant papers in the collection is Clarence's attempt to develop a theoretical framework for exploring emotions in doctoral research. The phenomenon of 'imposter syndrome' (where candidates are captured by the idea that they are not 'good enough' to be doing doctoral research) will be familiar to many supervisors along with the way emotional and psychological problems can impede and, even, halt progress.

Significant in Clarence's chapter is the claim that conceptions of the ideal student as 'rational, objective, capable of reason and master of their emotions and thinking' (p.221) stem from ideas that first emerged in the Enlightenment of 17th- and 18th-century Europe. If this is the case, does it not mean that we need to consider that perceptions of behaviour we may consider 'inappropriate' are conditioned by the privileging of particular ways of being with their roots in another age on another continent? Is there not cause to understand some of what our students do and say as stemming from their 'being', from identities developed in very different contexts? Is there not space for pedagogies, however they may be conceptualised, that recognise and acknowledge difference and the way dominant beliefs about appropriate ways to 'be' and behave serve to exclude? Many of those calling for the decolonisation of our universities would answer that question with a resounding 'Yes'.

Regardless of where readers may stand on the ideas she prompts, Clarence's work is typical of the way essays in this collection provoke thought about postgraduate education and supervision. At a time when supervisors are being asked to do more, to take on an increased number of the diverse range of students who now present themselves for postgraduate study in a world confronted by the challenges of globalisation, time spent engaging with this collection produced by some of the best researchers on postgraduate study and supervision in the world will not disappoint.

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