

Comment

Doctoral studies in South Africa

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Thanks to a chance message, I recently received a copy of a report on doctoral studies in South Africa. What follows is a commentary for our readers, many of whom are likely to be post-graduate students themselves or academics in the South African system, and interested in engaging with these findings as well as what is left unsaid by the report. This study was produced under the guidance of the Academy of Science of South Africa and is called 'The Ph.D Study'.¹ Prof. Jonathan Jansen, vice-chancellor of the University of the Free State and an eloquent author of books on race and education, was the senior figure in the production of what is described as 'a consensus report'. Published only in 2010, its figures comprehensively cover the years up to 2007. They are thus not up to date but give a good impression of the post-apartheid landscape in this crossroads area between higher education institutional activity and research.

I think the interest of the document lies first of all in the quality of the figures it gives which are quite revealing of the real state of affairs. It was sufficiently thoughtful and carefully done as to provide more food for thought than the usual served up. Being at least aware that the ordering up of more PhDs may not just happen in the natural course of things, it proposes various kinds of interventions to prop up the process, interventions which may or may not work. I am sufficiently sceptical that I will not bother to itemise these interventions here. However, having said this in its favour, the Report does not really address some of the realities on the ground.

The second reason for its interest is that it gives us a chance to see an exposition of state intentions. My hypothesis is that state planners live in a kind of fantasy world with regard to higher education, if not the whole education sector, that they do everything to avoid discussing the obvious and significant, should it fit awkwardly into politically-acceptable

predispositions. The conventional view, as stated with some qualification above, is that management can decree and order up results, for instance, so and so many research-orientated doctorates, as though these were items on a restaurant menu. It is true that these prescriptions and the related language fit all too well with international managerial objectives superimposed with limited regard for South African realities.

Certainly the saddest thing about the Report is its failure to give substance, apart from a section where individual doctoral students evaluate their own study history, to any reason for producing PhDs, or indeed any kind of sustained and substantial research, that is not narrowly utilitarian. The desirability of nurturing individuals who can promote national cultural activity and fulfil their own talents, to promote human potential is at best a vague and marginal backdrop. The sub-title of the Report indicates that PhDs can be justified in terms of promoting 'high level skills in an emerging economy'. A more realistic description of our economy might be a largely stagnant economy unable to escape from structures established under a very different political regime two to three generations ago while sustaining a small and increasingly sophisticated leisure class, but the definition is, of course, part of the techno-fantasy. The report slips in and out of the assumption that PhDs = high-level skills = science. In fact, only a limited percentage of our production of doctorates fits this kind of goal as we shall see below, a subject which is largely avoided.

The Report's most basic assumption is taking for granted the overriding importance of the doctorate. This is never questioned. However, there is included an introductory table which rates countries by number of PhDs per capita. The surprising champion here is neither the United States nor China but that venerable old colonial power, Portugal. Common sense suggests that, with all due respect to Portuguese intellectuals, they are not striding the global vanguard in terms of innovative research, applied or otherwise. The poorest record in the table is held by Chile. If you think that some kind of national success is at stake, this is an odd candidate for the dunce cap. Chile is generally speaking considered one of the most economically successful countries in Latin America over a long period of time and perhaps for Latin America is a model of achievement in recent decades (without worrying here about its political history, to avoid digressing). The answer, I suspect, lies in the fact that doctorates do not necessarily translate into national economic success or applied benefits for those other than the recipients. Doctorates may in fact vary enormously in their salience to

national knowledge systems, which have to be evaluated realistically and in a more complex way than simply counting up PhDs. South Africa is ranked just above Chile at second to the bottom. This may be an important indicator but only because there is an element of coincidence in the relatively poor standing of South Africa in this competition and other, more telling indicators such as R & D capacity² or skill levels further down the scale.

The Report confirms that most South African doctorates have relatively little to do with the white heat of technology. The number one disciplinary source of doctorates in South Africa is education, not a discipline which has much to pride itself on when we look at our actual state school system. Moreover, to stick my neck out, this is not a subject that stands out for its quality or significance elsewhere internationally. Number three on the list is theology, also unlikely to get our GNP growth rate going much faster. Even in the humanities or social sciences, these fields of study are rarely considered the most prestigious, rigorous or central to the study of contemporary Africa.

Number two, and to be fair it is of growing importance, are business studies, which would require more evaluation but reflects the need to teach the throngs of students who may fancy the prestige of a university degree but basically think that they have found a subject which will lead them quickly into a lucrative job. The proportion of science and technology PhDs is not growing. In 2000, 54% of new doctorates (with the above fields leading) were in the humanities and social sciences and the figure in 2007 was the same albeit with a slight increase in social science at the expense of the humanities.

Who are the PhD students? Between 2000 and 2007, the number of new PhDs in South Africa rose from 823 to 1,274. In both years, however, new registrants were more than twice as numerous as successful new graduates. While some allowance must be made for a completion lag due to the increase, this basically suggests that at least half of new doctoral candidates can be expected never actually to submit a thesis successfully and that many are not really capable of completing work of this complexity and sophistication. If we target one interesting figure from the document, considering different fields, amongst the number of surveyed PhD holders who saw the degree as essential or very important to getting their present job, the proportions were as small as 35% in health sciences (the highest) to only 15% in natural and agricultural sciences, with the other categories in between. In 2009, some 50% of new registrants were already university employees and approximately

that percentage of PhD holders work for universities. Whatever the international case, these figures indicate that, in this country, employed academics do PhD theses in order to advance and be promoted in their profession and that many, probably most, new lecturers do not have a doctorate. The number of successful PhDs who work in the private sector (the largest number are in engineering and related fields and these are most likely to be white males) is small.

More surprisingly, and in contrast to the conventional expectations of the educational planners, only a minority of doctoral candidates are young people who are full-time students. The most typical group of doctoral students are white males in their 30s and the average age of a new PhD is past 40. No more than 12% of new PhDs in 2007 were under 30 compared to 15% in 2000, thus a percentage that seems to be falling. This is in contrast to the situation in most other countries. Why are there so few new doctorates coming up who are not yet established as academics? I would hypothesise that this has not so much to do with poor financial rewards for successful graduates but with the values and orientations of the middle class in South Africa and the reality that our university life is not that stimulating and, with the so-called managerial revolution and the way the universities are financed and defined, becoming much less so. It seems unlikely to me that offering bigger scholarships to recent Honours and Masters students will change this situation much.

This brings me to the government obsession with affirmative action. Here too, while gradually more black Africans are moving into research and tertiary educational positions generally, the emphasis has to be on the word gradually. The largest number of new PhDs remain older white males, on whom serious intellectual endeavour thus still significantly depends! This makes sense only in terms of the point made above, that in real life the doctorate is primarily a qualification to promotion within the academic structures that exist. The tendency of the state to discourage white men from being promoted to top jobs in fields where government linkages are critical or fundamental by definition has to be balanced against the desire of a minority of white males, as the Report notes, to emigrate to richer and whiter countries especially the USA, Britain and Australia, having attained their acceptable South African qualification (p 92).

Between 2000 and 2007, the number of whites amongst new PhDs has fallen in percentage terms from 70% to 54%. This would seem to indicate at first sight a positive change in the entry of blacks into the system. This is

largely deceptive however; what it really reflects is the growing number of African immigrants looking for jobs in South Africa. The proportion of South African nationals amongst new PhDs has fallen from 84% in 2000 to 71% in 2007. ‘While African [racially defined more or less] students have increased by 245 graduates, the number of international graduates has increased by 252’ (p 50). By far the most international graduates come from elsewhere on the continent. In other words, half or more of the increase in doctorates is due to this influx.

Some commentary on this can be attempted. The state is not prepared to embrace and welcome non-Africans in significant numbers—which probably could happen with the right signals attracting individuals away from the business world and purely material rewards—while the much tougher work of pushing capable and well-prepared local African students into the professional life of the mind probably involves interventions at various levels that are not taking place, at least noticeably. The attitude towards foreign black people is ambiguous. To some extent they are welcomed, sometimes because they are politically indifferent and appeal to those who like to hire on race lines, but they are not supposed to benefit from post-graduate financial support of the kind envisioned here according to state policy and of course are not really ‘previously disadvantaged’.

Let us finally move to several points which seem problematic to the Report’s writers but less so to this reviewer. First comes time-length of study. In practice, and with rather minor variations by field, it takes the successful candidates on average not far from five years to complete their doctorate. This ought to tell experienced academics something but the report assumes that the nonsensical government norm of three years is actually relevant and useful. Realistically it is this norm which should be altered, given that most doctoral candidates are not full-time students. Otherwise, the length of completion of studies becomes problematic, as much or more so than the much more serious drop-out rate. If there would be a way of dealing with these problems, it would surely lie in having much higher minimal standards for Honours and Masters degrees at admission, higher coursework and completion levels or insisting that doctoral candidates have well over the minimal entrance qualification but then, of course, the overall size of the product might diminish.

Second is the question of gender. There remain well under 20% of students in the hard sciences that are female, a percentage that is not increasing. The questions of how to interest women more in these fields,

whether or not discrimination remains a factor, international comparisons and the like are not really broached so it is difficult to provide further comment except by noting the issue.

Finally, the Report concerns itself at considerable length with which kinds of institutions and which institutions particularly, produce the PhDs. The University of Cape Town in 2007 produced 24.7% of all PhDs in health sciences, 13% in the natural and agricultural sciences and 18.5% in engineering, materials and technology sciences. The figures for Witwatersrand University respectively are 18.9%, 13.5% and 19.5%. The main competition is from the Universities of Pretoria and Stellenbosch. It is true that the University of Johannesburg rated quite highly in 2000 but this figure fell drastically, for whatever reason, by 2007. There is nothing wrong in institutions engaging in competition over these figures which do go up and down but it is notable that the basic percentages are not really changing very much (with all due respect to other institutions with substantial increases from very low bases such as the University of the Western Cape and Rhodes University). In other words, those institutions with the greatest historic strengths continue to be strongest. The pitiful findings for institutions once aimed exclusively at black Africans are also noteworthy. Their failure to attract top academics and students from across the racial spectrum and to raise standards as opposed to raising numbers of admitted undergraduates presumably helps to explain this.

Unlike the Report's authors, I do not find this either surprising or especially worrying. On the contrary, given the relatively limited amount of substantial research going on in South Africa and the desirability for post-graduates to work in a context where there are substantial numbers of peers, research activity probably ought to be concentrated in a few centres that the state supports appropriately. The middling institutions ought to specialise and the remainder (the majority) ought to concentrate on building skills at more modest levels, skills that are lacking and desperately needed. It is true that a very large number of South African students simply proceed to study at a particular university from start to finish, and inertia for practical reasons and lack of ambition play a role. While the Report does not track this, it points out that 58% of doctoral candidates are registered at the same institution where they obtained their masters degree.

And so the skills shortage continues. The situation over the past decade or so, despite the growth in PhD student numbers recorded in the Report, is one of stagnation or slow growth. It would have been interesting to have

had figures for further back so as to compare the situation with what prevailed in 1970 or 1980. However, the remedy is not simply a promethean struggle to increase the number of PhDs with a strong prejudice towards the ‘previously disadvantaged’ but a comprehensive and more holistic approach to developing knowledge systems in South Africa.

Notes

1. ‘The PhD study: an evidence-based study on how to meet the demands for high-level skills in an emerging economy’, accessible at <http://www.assaf.co.za/wp-content/uploads/2010/11/40696-Bolddesign-PHD-small.pdf>
2. According to a recent newspaper article, Research and Development expenditure has been steadily rising in South Africa but this follows a long phase of decline. We are now back to the fairly modest level of the middle to late 1980s. At that time, R & D expenditure depended heavily on the state; whether this remains true and other qualitative relevant assessments were not included in discussion.