

Chapter 11

The Temporal Disciplining of Doctoral Research in the Neoliberal Academy: Winners and Losers in the Timely Completion

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ABSTRACT

The neoliberal agenda in higher education has led to expectations and targets of market-likeness in student enrolment and completion demographics through the widening participation agenda. However, the reality is that disadvantaged groups such as students with a disability and Indigenous students are still underrepresented, particularly in advanced research degrees. This disadvantage is compounded by the temporal disciplining imposed by bureaucratically-defined completion deadlines. Taking Australia as a paradigmatic case, this chapter explores the temporal disciplining of doctoral research in the broader context of neoTaylorism and the projectification of research. It argues that a care-inspired slowness is needed to counterbalance the harms created by the managerialist push for ‘timely’ completion.

INTRODUCTION

A doctorate is the highest degree awarded in academia. It is the minimum standard for entry into an academic career and continues to attract a degree of status and prestige for holders. As a result, there have been calls to address historical underrepresentation (McGee, et al. 2016) and to increase diversity in doctoral candidates beyond the typical profile of “a high-achieving young male from a privileged

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background” (Skakni, 2018a, p.197). Paradoxically, this shift has occurred within a climate of managerialism in higher education and a backdrop of change in the purpose of the PhD from one of intellectual development and growth and the development of new knowledge toward viewing the PhD as a tool for enhancing employability (Barnacle, Schmidt & Cuthbert, 2019; Cuthbert & Molla, 2015a; Mowbray & Halse, 2010; Molla & Cuthbert, 2019). This is achieved through the projectification of research as limited in time, scope, and content (Ylijoki, 2016; Torca, 2018), an “overweening preoccupation with efficiency” (Gronn, 1982, p.18), and “context of pressurised performativity” (Green & Bowden, 2012, p.66).

It has been argued that capitalism depends on how people use and conceptualize time (Walker, 2009). In the neoliberal university “[t]ime is disciplined by various workload models, procedures, processes, policies, practices and tools. The underpinning assumption is that time is quantifiable, standardised and linear—imply that measuring time is not only possible and desirable but is an essential part of what makes the neoliberal university ‘tick’” (Gannon & Taylor, 2020, p.2). It is therefore not surprising that doctoral research has attracted measurement. There is a basic project management tenet that quality, cost, and time are three sides of an equilateral triangle, and that emphasis on one or more of these will necessarily impact the others (Azar, Militaru & Mattar, 2016; Bowen et al., 2012; Kuuttila et al., 2020), however, what is typically missing from this understanding is a recognition of the negative consequences on the wellbeing of those involved in the project, when any of these parameters shift. Indeed, Jones and Cheuk (2021) argue that outside of the specific realms of equity policies, research policy may contribute to the erasure of difference by simply ignoring its existence.

In this chapter, Australia is taken as a paradigmatic case (Pavlich, 2010) of this phenomenon because it exposes the structural violence inherent in the intersection of two key policy platforms: the Widening Participation agenda, which seeks to increase the participation of targeted equity group members in higher education, and the policy push for timely completions. The chapter commences by considering the application and impact of the widening participation agenda in doctoral education in Australia and the extent to which this has been met for doctoral completions. It then describes the current policy environment for doctoral completion and the impact of funding arrangements and ideological framing of the ‘problem’ of timely completion. It then exposes the potential conflict between the desire to deliver a graduate profile that reflects the diversity of the population and the push for timely completion which does not provide for accommodation of this diversity. In addition to exploring the impacts on doctoral students, we also consider the potential impacts on academic supervisors who are caught in the middle of trying to support their students and trying to meet and manage institutional performance expectations. However, rather than focusing on the need to provide counselling, mental health, and other support services (which we do not dispute are also required), this chapter instead focuses on how the systems created by universities are complicit in creating this harm. In doing so we are not calling for additional interventions post-harm but instead, challenge the systems that cause harm and argues that a care-inspired slowness is needed to counterbalance the harms created by the managerialist push for ‘timely’ completion.

THE DOCTORAL POLICY LANDSCAPE

Since the 1980s, neoliberal managerialism has become entrenched in higher education policy and practice in countries as diverse as India (Kumar, 2019), South Africa (Adams, 2006), United Arab Emirates (Ajayan & Balasubramanian, 2020), the United Kingdom (Deem & Brehony, 2005), and the Netherlands and Sweden (Teelken, 2012). Across all post-school education, including in doctoral programs,

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