



The Idea of the PhD: The Doctorate in the Twenty-First-Century Imagination

Kelly, Frances Jennifer

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Book Review

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Understanding the concept, contours, and concerns of Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) studies is the central focus of this book. It explores the world of PhD as it is imagined, experienced, and analyzed in various academic contexts. It unearths the relationship between the PhD of the past and of the present, and argues that there is a tension at the core of the idea of PhD in its twenty-first century understanding. Is the PhD undergoing a radical transformation? Where is it heading? In exploring and responding to these questions, the author, Frances Kelly of the Faculty of Education at the University of Auckland, initiates a needed conversation within higher education.

The book consists of four chapters, each examining an aspect of the subject matter in focus: the nature of doctoral research, the idea of the doctoral researcher, PhD pedagogy, and the spaces of doctoral research. The introduction outlines the rationale and agenda of the book and briefly reflects on the themes of the PhD and university in general as they relate to culture, images, and stories. The author also claims the book is about critical analysis of contemporary discourse on the PhD.

Chapter 1 reflects on doctoral writing and with the help of illustrations and case studies argues for understanding the process of dissertation writing as work. This is a helpful perspective for graduate students working on or preparing for their dissertation writing. The second chapter explores the person, character, and identity of a “knowledge worker” and highlights five key attributes of the doctoral researcher: (1) specialist knowledge, (2) effective communication, (3) general intellectual skills and capacities, (4) independence, creativity, and learning, and (5) ethical and social understanding (45-46). This chapter contributes an important conversation

on the struggle of the researcher in the context of university and society about his or her contribution as a doctoral researcher. Chapter 3 examines the nature and function of doctoral pedagogy in terms of supervision, socialization, and issues of gender, power roles, and their impacts. It begins with the study of the traditional pedagogical practice of private and dyadic supervision and proceeds with the ideas of doctoral pedagogy in groups and voices for the later. The fourth and final chapter takes up the discourse on the spatial realities of doctoral learning, which includes the university campus, the location and design of that campus, library and archives, the writing desk, and the imagined space (location) of the researcher. The significance of each of these in doctoral research are explored within a context of cultural imagination. In her conclusion, Kelly says that the cultural imagery of the PhD is tied to a Western idea and wonders about the nature of non-Western ideas of the PhD.

The book is rich in illustrations from a variety of researchers and their experiences with the PhD. However, it does not define or explore the concepts of imagination – Western or non-Western – or social and cultural domains, thus taking them for granted. Some contents of the book may disappoint the experts in the field. Yet it will make a helpful tool, especially for the emerging scholars of higher education.

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