

# ***Assuring quality in Doctoral Education: what's measured is not all that meaningful; what's meaningful cannot be measured***

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## **Abstract**

The doctoral standard (CHE 2020) sets threshold levels for doctoral education in South Africa. In a 2021 review of the doctorate, institutions had to account for their processes of doctoral student selection, supervisor appointment, proposal approval, ethical clearance, progress management, examination, and so on. They also had to demonstrate how it is that institutions ensure that doctoral candidates develop the prescribed set of attributes.

In this reflection on the national review, I present concerns about whether meaningful aspects of quality in doctoral education can be measured across disciplines and institutional contexts, given the very specialized nature of doctoral education. I argue that the quality assurance process failed to offer a space for engagement with the normative values of doctoral education. Instead, the focus of the review was on generic processes and attributes, which positions doctoral education in performative rather than critical ways.

MacFarlane (*Thinkpiece*) argues that knowledge creation in the academy can readily be concerned with performativity and suggests that research in general and doctoral education in particular can potentially be an exercise in 'faking it'. The immediate response should not, in MacFarlane's view, be to blame the student for playing a game which has been set out for them by the academic profession. He suggests that we look at how issues of inauthenticity in research emerges, at least in part, as a response to the persona presented to the doctoral student by the supervisor. I would agree, and go so far as to suggest that rather than attending to this problem, much of quality assurance is an assurance of such performativity. I would also suggest that any 'false performativity' that may be evidenced in students' work emerges because of macro forces at play, every bit as much as in response to supervisory rhetoric. Komljenovic (*Thinkpiece*) points out that higher education functions in many ways like an industry serving multiple markets. She argues that many macro analyses of how the so-called 'knowledge economy' shapes higher education miss out on analyses of micro-processes. I use the national review of doctoral education in South Africa as a basis from which to take a close-up look at how such micro activities are shaped by macro forces, and vice versa.

## **Keywords**

Quality Assurance, Doctoral Education, Performativity, Knowledge Economy, Normative