

Book review

Book review: *Becoming a Scholar: Cross-cultural reflections on identity and agency in an education doctorate*, edited by Maria Savva and Lynn P. Nygaard

Paul Temple 

Faculty of Education, Practice and Policy, UCL Institute of Education, UK; p.temple@ucl.ac.uk

Submission date: 8 September 2021; Acceptance date: 8 September 2021; Publication date: 10 November 2021

How to cite

Temple, P. (2021) 'Book review: *Becoming a Scholar: Cross-cultural reflections on identity and agency in an education doctorate*, edited by Maria Savva and Lynn P. Nygaard'. *London Review of Education*, 19 (1), 31, 1–3. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.14324/LRE.19.1.31>.

Peer review

This article has been through editorial review.

Copyright

2021, Paul Temple. This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution Licence (CC BY) 4.0 <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>, which permits unrestricted use, distribution and reproduction in any medium, provided the original authors and source are credited • DOI: <https://doi.org/10.14324/LRE.19.1.31>.

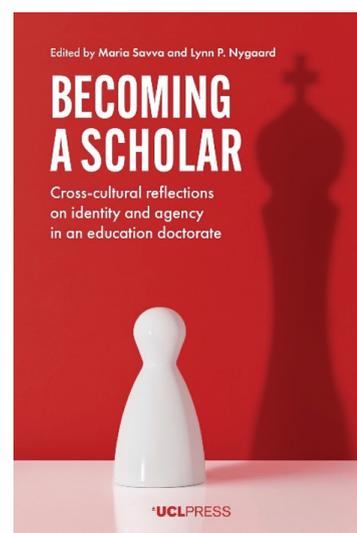
Open access

London Review of Education is a peer-reviewed open-access journal.

***Becoming a Scholar: Cross-cultural reflections on identity and agency in an education doctorate*, edited by Maria Savva and Lynn P. Nygaard**

London: UCL Press, 2021, 178 pp., open access: <https://www.uclpress.co.uk/products/130873>, ISBNs: 978-1787-35766-2 (ebk); 978-1787-35768-6 (hbk); 978-1787-35767-9 (pbk)

This book directs a penetrating, and often far from flattering, light on the structures and methods surrounding doctoral work in education in one of the world's leading university institutions in that field. I would strongly recommend it to anyone contemplating doctoral studies in the social sciences, in any institution: it shows how easily things can go wrong in a field where intellectual standpoints vary widely, but also how they can



be put right. Those teaching on doctoral programmes can also learn from it: how many of the supervisory mistakes detailed here have I made? (Answer: most of them.)

Most studies of international students in British universities focus on undergraduate and taught postgraduate students, who account for the great majority of international students: of the 400,000 non-EU students in the UK in 2019/20, about 320,000 were in these two categories, split roughly equally between undergraduates and taught postgraduates. Therefore, postgraduate research students are a minority of international students, and consequently they have been somewhat overlooked by higher education researchers. It might perhaps be assumed that as they will necessarily be more experienced learners, and will probably be a little older than most students, they will be better able to fend for themselves, academically and socially. This book is therefore to be welcomed as a critical contribution to our understanding of this student group.

The contributors to this book all studied for the UCL Institute of Education's Doctor in Education (EdD) degree, a professional doctorate programme of long standing, which offers a pathway aimed at international students. A distinctive element of this pathway is termly, intensive, week-long sessions in London, allowing participants from around the world to take part without completely disrupting their personal and professional lives – an attraction highlighted by several of the contributors here. A related point is that, as Savva and Nygaard observe (155), many of the contributors could probably have undertaken a broadly similar course of study either in a university in their home country or online: the pull of a globally high-ranking institution and in-person tuition in central London is presented as an important consideration. The physical university, and world cities, still mean a lot.

The supervisory relationship is a key factor in all doctoral study, inevitably laden with sensitivities and potential difficulties, but presenting perhaps unique challenges – for both parties in the relationship – on a programme such as an international EdD. An obvious difficulty is that in-person contact will be more limited than even for part-time UK-based students, and so reaching a way of working acceptable to both parties becomes trickier, even before possibly differing cultural expectations are factored in. Nygaard and Savva draw attention to the need 'for careful negotiation between the student and supervisor, with the ownership of the research always belonging ... to the student' (20). Use of the American term 'advisor', rather than 'supervisor', would, I think, be helpful in clarifying what Nygaard and Savva call 'the issue of ownership' of the research proposal (20). It has seemed to me that what the supervisory role comes down to has similarities with Bagehot's view of a constitutional monarch's rights: to be consulted, to encourage and to warn. But in the end, the prime minister, or the student, has to decide.

A chapter by Mohammad Abdrabboh (Al-Batran), from Saudi Arabia, raises several concerns which I would have found troubling as a course director. Matters get off to a bad start on the first day of the course, when Abdrabboh gains the impression that he and a few other students from non-Western backgrounds are 'left in a pool of unassigned students' (59) when it comes to allocation of supervisors: an effective rejection, as he reads it, at the very start of the course. Matters then seem to go from bad to worse when he believes he suffers from 'stereotypical images of Arab culture' and 'female faculty [who] were aggressive and dismissive of my comments during class discussions' (60). No doubt there is another side to the story here, but the unarguable point, surely, is that a committed student (he did, after all, gain his doctorate) was left to an extent embittered by his treatment by academic staff.

I certainly sympathise with Abdrabboh over the difficulties he had in gaining ethics approvals for his research, because of a requirement that he should obtain a signed consent form from each of the informants in his research project. He explains cogently in his chapter why this would have been inappropriate, given the status of his interviewees, as well as a Middle Eastern culture resistant to signing strange forms, but apparently to little avail. Perhaps Abdrabboh would have been gratified to know that others have also confronted the same context-free, tick-box approach to research ethics. It is to Abdrabboh's credit that, despite these setbacks, he considers his doctoral studies to have 'brought [me to] an important transformation ... with my own intercultural abilities ... expanded' (69). One hopes the same can be said of some of the academic staff he apparently encountered.

The chapter by David Channon, from the UK, but who took the international EdD route because he was working abroad, focuses on his unhappy experience around his viva. In this all-too-vivid chapter, I felt at times as if I was watching a horror movie, wanting to look away to avoid the ghastly denouement. Although Channon ultimately succeeded, he found the experience of the viva so traumatic – an examiner’s ‘haranguing ... still haunts the edges of my dreams’ (81) – that he came close to giving up. Academics from countries where the student’s defence of their thesis, often before an audience, is a pleasant formality before the award of the doctorate and a nice dinner, are usually amazed to learn that in the British viva the supervisor remains silent and the outcome is determined entirely by two examiners, chosen precisely because they have had no prior involvement with the candidate. It is the ultimate high-stakes examination.

Channon’s difficulties seemed to revolve around apparently conflicting advice from his supervisor, his upgraders (members of staff reviewing his thesis proposals), the independent reader at the near-submission stage, and, as he himself accepts, his own developing ideas. Every experienced supervisor will, I think, have struggled with comparable situations: the very nature of the doctoral thesis is that it is not dealing with obviously right or wrong answers, and so there will invariably not be a single, unarguable expert view. However, the supervisor should help to prevent the viva becoming ‘a source of anxiety and humiliation’ (86) – my own certainly did.