

A Research Agenda for Graduate Education

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Book Review/Recension d'ouvrage

A Research Agenda for Graduate Education

By Brian S. Mitchell

University of Toronto Press, 2021, 192 pages

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In *A Research Agenda for Graduate Education*, Brian S. Mitchell defines the state of the art of research on graduate education and identifies some of the key changes, needs, and issues facing graduate education and research in the 21st century. Mitchell explains that the impetus for this book stemmed from the need to rethink graduate education through “more timely data, longitudinal studies across a wider array of institution types, and theoretically sound and robust models on more specific research questions that consider multiple factors and their interactions” (p. xvii). Indeed, Mitchell’s central message in the book is that efforts to improve, innovate, and maintain excellence in graduate education are not only urgently needed, but also dependant on sound evidence.

In addition to introductory and concluding chapters, this book consists of three chapters that focus on distinct facets of graduate education research: The theoretical nature of teaching and learning at the graduate level, the implementation of pedagogical practices, and the development and assessment of graduate education. While this book may be of interest to a wide audience of researchers, educators, and administrators

working in graduate education, the core chapters tackle each of the three facets rather discretely, thereby delineating more fixed boundaries between these groups of readers, and Mitchell presents a convincing argument for organising the book in such a way.

In the Introduction, Mitchell builds a concise, yet thorough context for his research agenda. The topics within the three core chapters are structured sequentially—that is, in addition to being all thematically interconnected, they build upon one another in a consecutive, logical manner. By designing the chapters in such a style, Mitchell offers the reader a panoramic view of each chapter’s overarching area of investigation based on selected topics.

Chapter 1 focuses on how and what graduate students (should) learn. This chapter begins by discussing the skills graduate students are expected to attain and how these may be attained. Yet, Mitchell is not concerned with examining program-specific skills, but rather “how those requisite career and educational skills are identified, categorized, and, most importantly, assessed” on a general basis (p. 21). With this aim, Mitchell reviews how certain models approach the development of these skills and how the pathways for skills development proposed by those models are assessed for effectiveness, if at all—an important gap Mitchell highlights for the reader. Other sections in this chapter explore the relationship between research and teaching skills, mentorship, the impact of online and distance education on graduate student learning, and the evolving nature of theses and dissertations. Toward the end of this section, Mitchell poses almost a dozen of unanswered questions that may overwhelm the reader, but also illustrate the complexity involved in decision-making in graduate education.

Chapter 2 addresses topics related to graduate student career preparation. Mitchell organizes these topics chronologically to clarify that “what graduate students do throughout their careers is as much influenced by their experiences prior to graduate school as it is during and after” (p. 49). This topic is likely the most difficult one to disentangle and bring into being given the kind of data required—but often only minimally available or altogether lacking—to answer the questions which Mitchell puts forth to contextualize graduate student career preparation. For instance, the role played by post-doctoral training to career development and success is poorly documented in the global literature. It is this very empirical challenge, though one not unique to post-doctoral training, which fuels Mitchell’s argument for better and more longitudinal data on investigations into career preparation.

Chapter 3 shifts the focus to graduate program improvement by examining this topic from a program, rather than student, perspective. The first section of this chapter approaches three interrelated areas: student enrollment, retention, and degree completion. Mitchell reserves an entire section to an important concern that has gained prominence in the last decade: student diversity and equity in graduate education. At this point, as Mitchell examines data on underrepresented groups, it may be unsurprising to state, again, that a consequential gap in the research literature persists in relation to not only the experiences of minoritized groups, but also how structural changes to graduate education might and should be made in response to such (missing) data. A central theme which could have received more attention is that concerning international students' experiences, given the impact of the pandemic on (graduate) international student enrollment, retention, and mobility on a global level.

While structural changes to graduate education at the scale with which this book is concerned are multilayered and difficult to achieve, Mitchell concludes the book on an optimistic note. Mitchell calls on the graduate education community to move away from quick, facile interventions and to work instead collaboratively, systematically, and robustly to develop better approaches and frameworks to assess graduate education. Improving research models on graduate education, including the recording and dissemination of research, is of primary importance for the development of a foundation which the field can move forward upon.

This book reflects and speaks primarily to the Anglophone context, often positioning graduate education (research) models and trends in the United States as the point of departure for analysis. For example, one will not find mention of India's latest national report on higher education, which also presents relevant statistical information for international graduate education research. Other reports reflecting the Latin American and African higher education contexts prepared by international organisations are also absent. As a result, for Mitchell's proposed research agenda to benefit graduate education on a more global scale, it will first need to better include contexts outside the Anglophone Global North.