Tensions in Graduate Education

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“In attempting an ‘archaeology’ of knowledge, Foucault (1966) in his seminal text *The Order of Things: An Archeology of the Human Sciences* brings to light the possibility that scientists, as subjects responsible for scientific discourse, might be *unconsciously* determined in their situation, their function, and their perceptive capacity by conditions that dominate and even overwhelm them.

In a similar vein, we contend that graduate education is analogous to a complex edifice, internally composed of elements (the student, the educator and the institution) that are in ceaseless interaction and also hold the structure together. In this essay, we wish to bring to light the critical interactions that underlie graduate education, and which, to stretch the structural analogy further, we conveniently term ‘tensions’. In doing so, we hope to provoke critical reflection as educators, on our aims, methods and inadequacies in upholding the edifice of graduate education.

**Tension 1: Lack of agreed outcomes for graduate education and the absence of clear motives on the part of students**

While there are some broadly agreed outcomes for undergraduate education, there appears to be little or no agreement when it comes to the expected outcomes for graduate education. The outcomes are largely determined by the thesis supervisor and there are often wide variations in the value systems among them. This is compounded by the fact that many students choose to come to graduate school without an appreciation of what a graduate education entails and may see graduate school solely as a stepping stone to a better future. The result of such an unwholesome mix is often a source of tension among colleagues as well as between the student and the supervisor.

Often, personal intellectual growth for the thesis supervisor, who is at a different stage in his/her career, may be misaligned with the goal of student intellectual growth, especially when students enter graduate school without having clear objectives and intellectual (or other) aspirations. This misalignment can create tension; the student-supervisor interaction is often not reciprocal in the long term, especially when it comes to exchanging ideas. We believe that one of the metrics for a ‘successful’ graduate education is this very “reciprocity of idea-exchange” between student and supervisor. The relaxation of this tension is a goal that can be used to formulate a consistent, overarching graduate educational philosophy, which we frame here in the form a set of (perhaps provocative) statements and questions posed by a supervisor to a potential student:

> “I am investigating these important problems which will benefit society. These ideas have the ability to move the research area forward. Right now I will move faster than you, because I have had more time to do this. You will have to catch up, and I will help you by holding your hand for a part of the way ahead. It will be worth it. If this isn’t your cup of tea, you have the choice of leaving at the outset, or even after trying for a while. But do not expect me, at any stage, to spoon-feed you a degree.”

(Foucault, 1966)
Would it make sense then to develop a flexible (to handle domain-to-domain variations, experimental/theoretical/fieldwork peculiarities etc.) but rigorous quality assurance system to ensure that a minimum set of objective indicators related to the intellectual growth of the graduate student has been achieved? If so, these indicators must be very broad in scope and not confined to simply counting the number of publications one has chalked up in a certain class of journals. The indicators must help us to unambiguously verify that the graduate student has created an identity for himself/herself as a scholar. The “reciprocity of idea-exchange” mentioned above could be one of the objective measures to decide if the “scholar” has indeed arrived! As a learning community, we should be able to come up with several such generic indicators that can be applied across disciplines and the type of research one is involved in.

**Tension 2: Performance expectations that ignore some important self-evident truths**

In addition, the practice of benchmarking our academic performance against top-tiered western educational institutions and the increasing “grant-publication-impact-visibility” based faculty appraisal are sources of tension that are directly linked with the research perception and expectations of the students in our graduate programmes. We are being compared and asked to compete with other universities without satisfying an essential pre-condition that the ‘raw materials’ are comparable. In such an environment, new ideas become a burden since many students are often ill-prepared and lack the outlook and experience to gradually take over ownership of the idea being investigated. The “joy of learning” one expects from the graduate students is not a common experience, as noted above with our comments on idea-exchange reciprocity. As a result, faculty members are either fearful of venturing into ideas with significant unknowns or get burnt out from the overload of having to do the thinking for their students. Students’ expectations of their supervisors often become frustringly close to what they would expect of a private tutor. Such a position is neither healthy nor sustainable.

Therefore, in addition to formulating a guiding philosophy as noted above, we propose subjecting research students to a set of intensive graduate modules in their first semester as a means of conditioning them to the intellectual challenges and expectations they should expect in a graduate school of our standing. This would require a shift in the way we look at graduate course work and a willingness to depart from conventional pedagogy. However, first of all, we must change the present practice of combining the research students with course-based graduate students in our graduate classes. The graduate education is already being spread

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**A Note About the Authors**

This article is a result of the authors’ “adda” (chat) in the shades of University Hall after their early morning cricket outings on weekends.
very thin by trying to educate every segment of the higher education market in the same class on the pretext of resource optimisation. The course-based students bring extreme heterogeneity to the mix in terms of their levels of preparation, motivation, and needs for the future. For such a mix, designing expected outcomes and teaching methods that make the class meaningful for everyone, and choosing the level of sophistication the teacher should aim at, will impose undesirable compromises to the proposed idea.

We have perhaps done a disservice to ourselves and some of the students by completely mixing up various graduate student streams. It is perhaps time that we started teaching and assessing the different graduate streams separately (e.g. aiming for different learning outcomes) or differently (e.g. using technology as a complementary to classroom interactions). These changes are not suggested to create a class differential but only as possible ways to “grow” well-educated scholars out of all our graduate programmes.

Concluding reflections

Facing the situations highlighted above often puts a faculty member in a reflective mode that precipitates the following question: what does being an academic really mean? Such internal intellectual tension is not necessarily a bad thing; it can grow into a positive force for change at both personal and institutional levels. However, these tensions must be recognised as valid and managed, and not aggravated by imposing expectations that are inconsistent with ground realities.

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