Doctoral Supervision A Challenge in Universities: The Context of the Sub-Saharan African Universities

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Abstract
The quality assurance and increment of Doctoral degrees and their effectiveness and efficiency have been identified on the students, their supervisors as well as how they relate as the problem to be accomplished in need of managerial relation, skills improvement or perhaps emotional management. A number of journal articles on doctoral supervision in higher education to date have been selected with the possible suggestions as well as ways forward within the changing doctoral education environment published in the past 20 years with the Netherlands, Australia, UK, Sweden and South Africa. The study observed four distinctive conceptual frameworks that suggest how research education is assumed of in these contexts each captivating into account of what institutes a good supervisor, with the implicit of relationships created between, doctoral candidates, academics, academic developers and the government. It was later highlighted of the challenges of the conception of supervisors as distant controllers with the sole responsibility of research outcomes. On the other hand, the articles argue that the de-contextualized, psychological dominates educational thought about research. Innovation and Education identify the need for a greater emphasis on context learning and context within the future of research and practice around doctoral supervision as well as doctoral education.

Keywords: Doctoral Supervision; Doctoral Education; Research Training and Quality Assurance.

Introduction

Sub-Saharan Africa is struggling to produce quality better-trained and more graduates. For decades, policymakers and donors have focused on primary and secondary education as the key to development and poverty alleviation in Sub-Saharan Africa. But until recently funding for tertiary education has been reducing. Only since the 1990s has higher education's importance for socio-economic development come to the fore, becoming part of the political agenda in many African countries (Irene Friesenhan 2014). There is now a consensus that Africa needs many more doctorate holders to develop the robust knowledge needed to promote development. The African Union and the British Council, among others, are making the case for higher education's inclusion in the post-2015 development agenda, given its role as a motor of economic development and prosperity. But what does it take to make higher education work for Africa? In particular, what makes producing more PhDs difficult and how should doctoral training change so it better supports the continent's needs?

The core principle within much policy and management discourse around doctoral education in the non-US context is that supervision is the key to both quality and efficiency in higher degree research. With the massification of higher degrees, this has manifested in intense scrutiny of doctoral supervision within cost efficiency drives in which supervisors are often blamed for unsatisfactory completion times and high withdrawal rates. Attempts to address this in Australia and the UK have involved shifting funding from enrolments to numbers of completions, the latter to be encouraged by increased monitoring of student progress, the introduction of university or faculty-wide skills programmes, and supervision training the most common element of which has typically included clarification of university policy, and overviews of the expectations, roles and responsibilities of supervisors (Kiley, 2011).

Worldwide, in Africa and in South Africa, the importance of the doctorate has increased disproportionately in relation to its share of overall graduate output over the last decade. This heightened attention has not been predominantly concerned with the traditional role of the PhD, namely the provision of a future supply of academics. Rather, it has focused on the increasingly important role that higher education–particularly the production of high-level skills –is perceived to play in the knowledge economy.
Within the changing doctoral education environment, the critical review of higher education literature on doctoral supervision aims to summarize 'the problem of supervision' to date and to suggest possible ways forward in light of this.

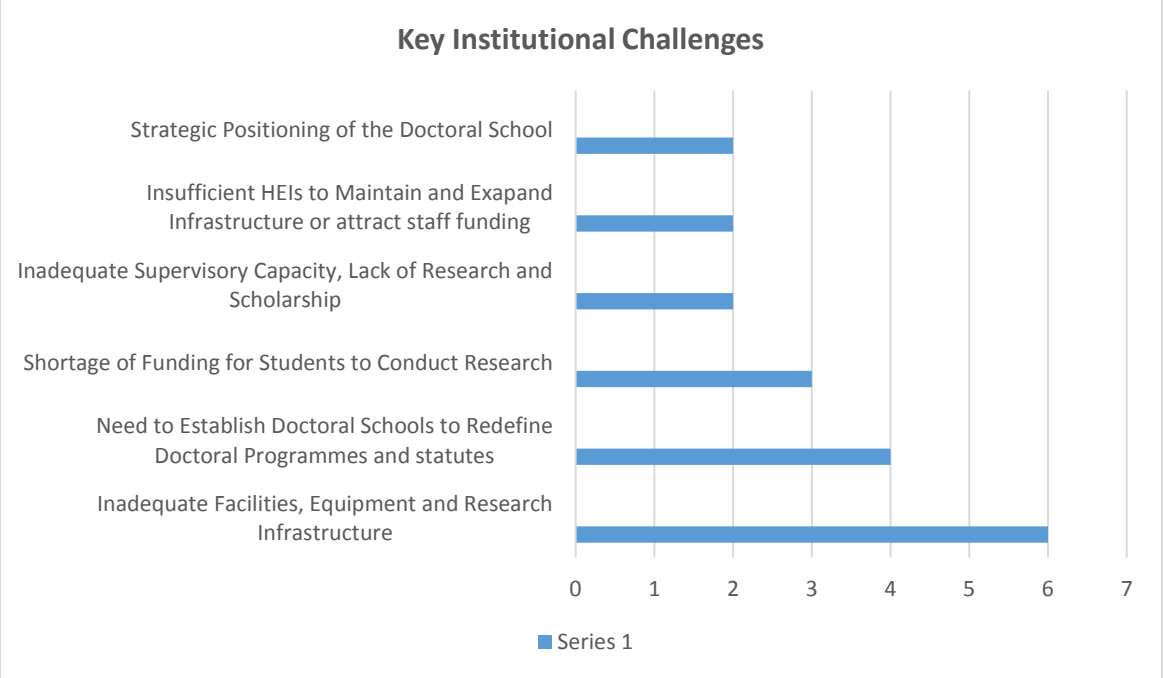
Expanding sector

Since the 1970s, there has been a massive expansion in Sub-Saharan Africa's higher education sector. Student enrolments across all levels grew from roughly 200,000 about 40 years ago to an estimated ten million (10M) today. But only a minority of the estimated 1,500 public and private universities across Africa offer graduate programmes.

Indeed, most students desiring graduate degrees would obtain them abroad for the past few decades. Postgraduate enrolment both in master's and PhD programmes made up 6.9 per cent of the total enrolment in 1997. But it rose to 9.3 per cent by 2014. This is a result of educational reforms that enabled more people to pursue higher education — such as Universal Basic Education (UBE), which aims to reduce drop-outs, Education for All (EFA), which aims to ensure quality education, and the Millennium Development Goals (MDG), which aims to achieve universal primary education.
Increased public investments into higher education signal changing perceptions about higher education systems' role in Africa's development priorities. In 2006, African countries' average public expenditure per university student was US$2,000 per year — more than twice as much as non-African developing countries invest in tertiary education. The continent also receives international support for the higher education of about US$600 million annually.

The PhD and its contribution to the university system
But the PhD is not just a possible contributor to talent in the knowledge economy – it is also regarded as crucial for improving quality in the university system. In an article entitled 'The rise and rise of PhDs as standard', Morgan quotes Wendy Piatt, Director-General of the Russell Group (UK) of larger research-intensive universities:

Challenges in Doctoral Education in Africa
"The changing Nature of Doctoral studies in Sub-Saharan Africa"



The Purpose of the Critical Review

1. The need for Doctoral Supervision

2. Higher education, especially advanced degrees, can help drive development

3. But expanding undergraduate courses are squeezing graduate programmes

4. Africa needs more PhDs and more 'industry-ready' graduates

Methodology

The paper reviews a selection of higher education journal articles on doctoral supervision published in the past 20 years within the UK, Australia, Sweden and the Netherlands (doctoral contexts in which research students do not undertake significant, formalized or taught coursework for credit).

The review identifies a set of conceptual frameworks that prescribe how research education is thought in these contexts, taking in understandings of what constitutes 'good supervision', and the relations are drawn between doctoral candidates, academics, academic developers and government.

The paper observes four problematizations within the literature, each of which, argue, and describes a distinctive perspective, chosen to demonstrate a deepening sophistication in thinking around doctoral education. The perspectives discussed include problematizations of supervision in terms of project management and relationship improvement; government control and regulation; pedagogic support for the research process and the socialization of doctoral researchers into the academic culture and, finally, the contradictions within academic subjectivity.

Results

It has been argued and realized that throughout there have been significant forward strides in thinking and practice around supervision and research education in the past 20 years. Particularly salient is the challenge mounted to the conception of supervisors as distant masters with sole responsibility for 'quality' outcomes.

At the same time, a de-contextualized, psychological dominates educational thought about research education and innovation. The production of new knowledge within the doctorate is seen to arise from an individual developmental capacity, best fostered within interpersonal relationships, among which supervision is primary.

Much educational thought on doctoral education sees research supervision and learning in process terms – doctoral students learn by reflecting on a research process, and supervisors and others facilitate the research process, as well as reflection on the research process, to ensures the 'capacity' for future innovation.

Doctoral research and scholarship are conceptualized in doing, being, becoming and relational terms; innovation seeming to arise from isolated individual minds. This contrasts with sociological understandings of innovation and invention as context- driven and defined, pointing to the need for a greater emphasis on content learning, or something that is learnt, within future research and practice around doctoral education.

Improving the supervision relationship

Much of the supervision literature aims to understand supervisors' perceptions of their practice or role in order to support new supervisors to provide quality supervision. Interviews with supervisors often provide the data set for research and are ready to provide a picture of the different management and interpersonal 'styles' supervisors adopt in facilitating students' 'journey' from 'apprentice' or 'novice' to 'master'.

Information about what supervisors do and how they perceive what they do is understood to be important because it can enhance the supervision experience and relationship. This might be achieved by acquainting supervisors with the strengths and weaknesses of different supervisory styles (Lee, 2008), and attempting to match these with students' preferred styles (Gatfield, 2005 and Mainhard *et al*., 2009), or, by ensuring that criticism or advice is delivered without damaging the relationship (Li and Seale, 2007).

Government regulation

Another perspective that can be determined within the supervision literature takes as its focus on the impact of the regulatory measures of the past several decades accompanying policy and funding shifts in higher education. As for those concerned with improving supervision, responsibility for achieving quality research outcomes in this view is presumed to rest solely with individual supervisors.

The focus shifts, however, from supervisor performance to the impact of the institutional context upon supervisors' ability to produce academic quality. In this view, the introduction of the four-year time restriction for the PhD, and compulsory training courses in the first year of research degrees in research-only doctoral traditions are a central focus of critique (Hockey 1995, 1996).

These measures are seen to reduce not only the depth and breadth of the PhD but research creativity itself (Hockey 1995).

The attempts of academic developers and others to improve supervision are belittled, reduced to 'pedagogical ideology', 'technicist diagnosis and remediation' or the 'deployment of a generic "tool kit" for supervision' (Holligan 2005, 269), associated with 'market-driven discourse', 'highly politicized bureaucracies' and 'public sector performance management' (Holligan 2005, 268, 277).

There is the same negative perception of a hands-on approach to supervision. Neo-liberal policy interventions are seen to 'threaten innovation' and compel supervisors to 'over-direct' students to ensure efficient completion rates (Deuchar 2008, 490), thereby, potentially, jeopardizing students' movement towards independence of thought.

This kind of problematization offers the critical observation that the government emphasis upon getting students through quickly puts pressure on quality and on supervision.

Research pedagogy and academic socialization

The assumption within both improvement and over-regulation problematizations that good supervisors achieve research outcomes by striking a skilful balance between the provision of guidance and enabling student autonomy is explicitly politicized within a pedagogic approach to doctoral education.

Papers by (Johnson, Lee, and Green 2000 and Lee and Green 2009) are salient markers of a new approach within the doctoral education literature, in which the status of the traditional supervision relationship as a 'private space', and its under-theorization as a specifically 'pedagogic' practice, are questioned (Johnson, Lee, and Green 2000, 136).

Unlike improvement approaches to supervision, and notwithstanding the analyses offered by over-regulation texts, these thinkers suggest that there is a problem with research training that is internal to the universities and to academic culture, and the responsibility of institutions to change.

(Johnson, Lee, and Green 2000) argue that supervision imaginaries or discursive traditions promote attitudes of neglect and indifference, and result in widespread isolation and abjection among the doctoral cohort.

For pedagogues, supervisors should be open to negotiation, personal interaction and critical feedback, sensitive to power differentials, and aware of the diversity of research approaches beyond their own. However, it is not knowledge acquisition or direct instruction that is critical within learning in these analyses so much as reflection upon the experience of the research process and the development of the student as a person: 'Development of student understanding means that attention to learning rather than teaching is essential' (Maxwell and Smyth 2010, 409). 'Learning' here comes from or arises in reflection upon research experience.

In pedagogy approaches, the isolated doctoral education space is to be filled with relationality. There is an emphasis upon 'learning activities', 'networks of learning relationships' and 'the experienced environment', in which students are 'at the centre of a constellation of others' and asked 'who they learned with and from and how' (Boud and Lee 2005, 502, 503, 505).

Supervision and subjectification

Pedagogy and socialization perspectives highlight the importance of an identification with, or socialization into the academic discipline culture, bringing attention to problems of exclusion. In a subjectification perspective, supervision and academic culture are problematized not because of pedagogical under-development, or because they exclude some from participation in academic culture, but because academic culture rests upon unstable processes of subjectification creating tensions for academics and inequalities in academic relationships.

Petersen (2007), argues that supervision does not simply produce completions and the research thesis, but is a principal site for the production of academic subjectivity. Green (2005) argues that the 'subject-supposed- to-know' is an idealization or fantasy around which supervision relationships are negotiated.

Grant (2003, 180), argues that the supervisor is 'not only to teach the student skills but, to teach the student how to be someone – a researcher, a scholar, and an academic'. The problem with research training in these analyses is that in taking up the mantel of knowing master, academics implicitly reject the knowledge and esteem of academic 'outsiders'. The academic subject can only take up the position of 'the- one-who-knows' by situating student 'others' as unknowing, irrational, unprepared, or otherwise incomplete, academics.

Conclusions

In conclusion, Africa needs to produce future leaders who will promote better governance and management in all sectors, and facilitate innovative solutions to society's problems. Universities are best placed to provide the trained labour force needed as the drive for knowledge-based economies takes hold on the continent.

But efforts to boost advanced degrees have been oppressed with difficulties. Although investments into higher education have increased, they are not enough to support the growing numbers of students. For most universities, scarce funding limits their capacity to implement graduate programmes. A shortage of personnel such as faculty members with advanced degrees is another major factor and is compounded by demographics: often, less than 40 per cent of all university staff are under 40 years old.

The figure is similar to other regions but is lower than expected for a continent with the youngest population in the world. Budget cuts, hiring freezes, low salaries and low staff-to-student ratios (up to 1:46 in South Africa) discourage young graduates from taking up university careers.

This comes not only from decades of poor political commitment to higher education but also the associated brain drains of academics. Qualified staff have often left faculty positions in African institutions to pursue more attractive and better-paid jobs either in other sectors or abroad. About ten per cent of every cohort of Sub-Saharan Africans with graduate degrees emigrate, leaving a comparatively low number of researchers in most African countries

These challenges mean that research output from African universities ranks amongst the worlds lowest. Only one African country, South Africa, makes it to the global top 50 in terms of research output (35th), and less than ten African countries are in the top 100, according to the global SciMago Country Ranking, which is based on data from Scopus, a large database of scientific journal articles.

Way Forward

The way forward will include a number of issues;

- **Who are you?** Building a researcher identity is the basis for good supervision within your subject area and within the research methodologies used in your field.
- **You and your student:** "A scholarly environment is a key to doctoral success" What do you think makes a scholarly environment? And how might you enhance the scholarly environment for the students you supervise?
- **You, Your Students and their Knowledge Project:** Many supervisors advise their students on **what to read** but they don't help their students to understand **how texts may 'sit' in a particular position** and how they might be in opposition to other position on the field.

- **Writing as a Tool for Learning:** Supervisors need to insist that students write throughout the doctoral journey. As well as providing feedback to drafts of writing intended to guide learning and the development of thought.
- **The Supervisor's Role in the Writing Process:** Research on writing shows that there are many more productive ways of providing feedback and, indeed, of supporting the development of students' writing.
- **Negotiating the Supervisory Relationship:** Making expectations explicit and negotiating the roles openly as key means of building the supervision relationship.
    - **Power relations and hierarchies:** Supervisor generally have both **institutional authority** and **disciplinary expertise.** This is necessary for them to be able to provide strong supervision. But it can also lead to very **uneven power relations**. All relationships have power embedded in them but when this is highly uneven it can work against open and collaborative interactions.

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