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Research Paper

Curbing Doctoral Students' Dilemma in the Supervision Process: A Literature Review

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ABSTRACT

Doctoral students worldwide experience various dilemmas in the course of their studies. This paper sought to establish ways in which these dilemmas can be reduced. The objectives of this paper were to: Identify factors that contribute to doctoral students' dilemmas, and roles of students, identify specific areas of challenges in writing the theses and establish ways that could improve the supervision process. The study conducted a literature review analysis which showed that doctoral students are a diverse group of learners who come to the university with no idea of what is expected of them and the need to establish these dilemmas.

Key words: Curbing, Supervision, Doctoral, Diverse, Dilemma, Supervisor.

1.0 Introduction

The demand and importance for doctorate education have increased excessively concerning its share of overall graduate output over the last decade worldwide, in Africa, in South Africa, and Kenya inclusive. This has led universities to increase doctoral admissions to respond to the global context of the knowledge economy (EUA, 2007). The increasing generation and access to knowledge have led to what is now commonly referred to as the knowledge society (Castells 1991) or the knowledge economy). Doctoral education is understood to be a driver of economic development and doctoral-level research is seen to be an important means of generating solutions to society's complex problems (CHET, 2014). It is also viewed as a driver of research and development and innovation, a generator of knowledge and skills in key strategic areas of national innovation systems, a contributor to industrial and social resources, and a vehicle for addressing the gap between postgraduate study and the needs of the labor market (Azure, 2016 & Hemer, 2012). This massification of doctoral students is due to policies from the workplace, universities, promotion drives, and work security. In some higher education providers, supervisors may count their supervisory achievements in making a case for promotion.

In support of this; A national tracer study of doctoral graduates in South Africa conducted by Mouton et al, 2022 found out two-thirds (70,5%, n=3,875) of respondents indicated that a doctoral degree was a requirement for employment in their current position. Not surprisingly, the majority of graduates currently employed in the higher education sector (83%) indicated that a Ph.D. was a requirement for their work, compared to only 53% in the government sector. As a core function of universities, doctoral research provides invaluable education and training aimed at producing highly skilled knowledge workers capable of transferring their intellectual and technical expertise to wide-ranging global contexts.

For students to achieve the doctorate there must be a smooth doctoral supervision journey between the doctoral student and the supervisor. Doctoral supervision is a “pedagogy in which our raced, classed and gendered bodies are present”, and when such supervision happens across ethnic cultures it “becomes a pedagogical site of rich possibility as well as, at times, a place of puzzling and confronting complexity” (Grant & Manathunga 2011). This developmental relationship is often described by using the interchangeable terms mentoring and advising. Various scholars describe mentoring as ‘personal, intimate, pastoral relations’ through shared interest and cooperation, and advising is limited to ‘questions concerning research tasks’ in structured and formal ways (Lindén et al., 2013). It is a process that involves a supervisor and the student who need to know their roles in the doctoral supervision process. However, despite this demand and importance for a Ph.D., doctoral students face a dilemma in the supervision journey.

2.0 The Problem of the Statement

Despite, all efforts played by universities to meet the high demand for doctoral degrees doctoral students experience different dilemmas in doctoral supervision. This is because doctoral education is more complex and often viewed as a training ground for a diverse range of careers. For this to happen supervision is the most important aspect of the success and completion of a doctoral student. It is a formal arrangement between the supervisor and supervisee in which the supervisor guides and supports the supervisee in undertaking research and accomplishing the thesis. The burden of increasingly large numbers of doctoral students to supervise manifests itself in different ways during the supervisory process.

For such a transition to occur, developing a sense of self, through social interaction, is fundamental (Strawson, 1997). However, students come to universities with very diverse needs, and little knowledge of what doctoral education entails, what is expected of them, and the role that they should play in their studies. This causes dilemmas for the doctoral student in the supervision process and therefore, the need to find out ways of curbing this dilemma.

3.0 Research Objectives

This paper sought to:

1. Establish the factors that contribute to doctoral students' dilemmas in the supervision process.
2. Analyze the roles of doctoral students and supervisors in the supervision process.
3. Establish the specific areas in which doctoral students experience challenges in writing the Ph.D. theses.
4. Establish ways that could be done to curb this dilemma.

3.1 Research Questions

This paper seeks to answer the following questions:

1. What are the factors that contribute to doctoral students' dilemmas in the supervision process
2. What are the roles of doctoral students and supervisors in the supervision process?
3. What are the specific areas in which doctoral students experience challenges in writing Ph.D. theses?
4. What could be done to curb the doctoral student's dilemma?

4.0 Methodology

The study conducted a literature review analysis of the training modules and other related studies.

5.0 Contribution

The study contributes to the ongoing debate on doctoral students' supervision process in Africa.

6.0 Review of Literature

6.1 Factors that Contribute to Doctoral Students' Dilemma in the Supervision Process

Doctoral students join the university intending to join the scholarly community and with high expectations on how to complete their doctoral education. Doctoral education in its broadest sense is heavy as it refers to the international, national, institutional, and individual efforts to produce doctoral qualifications. 'Doctoral education' includes research education, of which the aim is to assist doctoral candidates in various ways and at various stages to graduate successfully (Cloete, Mouton, and Sheppard 2015). Doctoral education must be developed by autonomous and accountable institutions taking responsibility to cultivate the research mindset. This aspect of a doctorate is rarely understood by most stakeholders and Ph.D. candidates. However, due to their diverse needs of balancing family, workplace, and studies, most of them lack adequate time to concentrate on the heavy demand of doctoral education.

Time is of the essence in any activity that one would want to pursue in life. In doctoral education, the time to graduation points to the effective and efficient use of resources and the quality of doctorates. Issues like time may lead to power imbalances and individual feelings of responsibility for the work done as reflected in Emilsson, U. & Johnsson, E (2007) by the participants in doctoral supervision. While what seems clear in South Africa is that doctoral studies take time and the context within which it occurs affects the process of production, studies by Pearson (2012), Ahern and Manathunga (2004) & Ellsworth (1989) also reveals that the challenge involved in Ph.D. completion is that it takes a long time to be completed. This can result in the 'lonely journey' (Harrison, 2012) that has been mooted as one explanation for the international phenomenon of poor throughput and high dropout at this level (ASSAf, 2010; Elgar, 2002; EUA, 2013). This challenge is partly attributed to an inadequate understanding of the dynamics that inform the process and the context of supervision. In this regard, it seems reasonable and convincing to look at the Ph.D. experience as a ritual, which in most cases becomes

psychologically painful, and disproportionately demanding under current conditions, gaining a doctorate entails endurance of severe personal distress for a great many candidates and the output of successful Ph.D. is achieved at the expense of a high toll in purely human terms. Conclusions and recommendations from the Bologna seminar on “Doctoral programs for the European knowledge society” (Salzburg, 2005) had foreseen this when they endorsed these by embedding them in institutional strategies and policies.

Other factors that contribute to doctoral students’ dilemma include lack of funding to supplement their budget and research is an important obstacle, heavy workload of supervisors leading to a shortage of meeting times, and acute shortage of PhD-qualified academic staff to undertake and supervise research was another major inhibiting factor. In support of this Yongdi Zhou, a cognitive neuroscientist at the East China Normal University in Shanghai identified four contributing factors. The length of Ph.D. training, at three years, is too short, many Ph.D. This is supported by the “Salzburg Recommendations” adopted in 2010 by the EUA Council, which included a series of guideposts for success in doctoral education and addressed some potential obstacles to be overcome. Five years later, in 2015, a new set of recommendations, “Taking Salzburg Forward – Implementation and New Challenges” was published. These recommendations were based on an extensive consultation process with over 200 universities from 39 countries in the previous two years.

A study done in South Africa on challenges faced by the doctoral supervisor in South Africa shows that the massification of higher education has resulted in large numbers of postgraduate students with varying levels of capabilities being admitted to the universities. These issues led to students’ dilemmas in their work.

6.2 Roles of Doctoral Students and Supervisors in the Supervision Process

Different institutions have clear written roles for both doctoral students and supervisors. Heath, 2002 observes that the role of research supervisors is to guide research students throughout their study by providing them with time, expertise, and support that will foster their research skills and attitudes and ensure the production of high-quality research. Supervision is important for the progress and success of Ph.D. candidates. All these students have to be supervised and there is pressure on the supervisory capacity. However, the role of the Ph.D. supervisor is becoming more complex and challenging in the academic environment (Acker et al., 1994;).

A study of the fit between the supervisor and the doctoral candidate (Pyhältö, K., Vekkaila, J. & Keskinen, J., 2015) where 1184 doctoral students and 431 supervisors from eleven different faculties at the University of Helsinki participated in the survey pointed out that perceived fit or misfit between doctoral candidates and their working environment influences the doctoral experience and completion. Possible misfit leads to student attrition: wrong department, problems with a supervisor, uncertain career prospects. Doctoral candidates and supervisors not necessarily having similar perceptions of the factors that contribute to a successful doctoral process; Doctoral students emphasize social support and interaction. Supervisors emphasize resources (funding), motivation, and self-direction. Doctoral students see supervision as controlling and task-focused. Supervisors see supervision as person-focused guidance.

The study further looked at Doctoral students' and supervisors' perceptions of the most important tasks of a supervisor and found out that the primary task of the supervisor can be seen in four categories; supervision of the research process, including giving advice and instructions on how to conduct research and to become a researcher. Central prerequisites for supervision, include the supervisor's presence and commitment, and mutual conversation. Coaching, including emotional support, constructive feedback, and joint brain-storming.

However, the supervisor is fundamental to the support and development of the doctoral candidate, and therefore, the candidate's relationship with their supervisory team is key to the successful completion of a research degree program.

Central prerequisites for supervision, including the supervisor's presence and commitment, and mutual conversation important steps in the policy reforms of European doctoral education: the 'Salzburg' Process in its final report, the authors described the diversity of doctoral education on both national and institutional levels and identified key topics related to doctoral education such as its organization and funding, career development of doctoral candidates and transversal skills training. The results of this project were presented in 2005 at the EUA seminar "Doctoral Program for the European Knowledge Society" in Salzburg, Austria. As its outcome, ten foundational principles for doctoral education in Europe, usually described as the "Salzburg Principles", were formulated

6.3 Areas in Which Doctoral Students Experience Challenges

Trafford and Leshem (2009) proposed the concept of 'doctorates' to describe both the doing and achievement of a doctorate. The doctoral journey is about learning. It is not just about research and writing a thesis. It is during this stage that most doctoral students experience dilemmas and get 'stuck' in their work and this leads to a lonely scholarly syndrome a very dangerous stage. The student continues being 'stuck' and confused a stage we call the liminality which is the confusing period before the crossing of the threshold and involves encountering something new, a recognition of the shortcomings of existing ways of thinking, letting go, and a re-authoring (Land, Rattray, & Vivian, 2014). 'Liminality involves wavering between two worlds, after the separation of the previous identity but before the point of incorporation into a new one (Keefer, 2015, p. 19). Kiley (2009) writes of students moving from their 'stable, known state and entering into an ambiguous, liminal state, a state which can last for several years before the rite of passage, or several mini-rites of passage see the student becoming ready for graduation. The

student often has a sense of being on the edge of the conceptual threshold but the process can elicit deep anxiety and confusion, which is only lessened when the crossing has occurred.

A study conducted in 2002 at the University of Stellenbosch (SU) on issues in doctoral supervision focusing on both Master`s and Doctoral students that had completed (years 1991-1999) as well as current students (the year 2000) showed that students had issues in a variety of areas: fieldwork/ data collection, literature study, gathering of information on a thesis topic, analysis, and interpretation of data, development of a research proposal, organization and writing of the thesis feedback, modules/coursework/seminars. Another empirical research done in 2000 on two postal surveys on attitudes and perceptions of postgraduate students reported on areas in which students require a lot of guidance including the development of a research proposal, organization, and structure of thesis, how to write scientifically, choice of thesis topic, analysis, and interpretation of data, modules/ coursework/ seminars, gathering of information about the subject of the thesis, fieldwork/ data-collection, and literature study. Meyer and Land (2006) indicated that threshold concepts have five characteristics: they are transformative, integrative, irreversible, bounded, and troublesome. Students who feel unsure about expectations and who are not encouraged to participate in an intellectual conversation with their supervisor and many others in their studies may well decide to drop out without completing.

6.4 What Can Be Done to Reduce this Dilemma in the Supervision Process

Literature shows that for the doctoral student and the supervisor to have a smooth journey in supervision there is a need for a memorandum of understanding and a good student-supervisor relationship. Further, (Yousefi, Bazrafkan, and Yamani, 2015) state that graduate supervision involves creating a professional relationship, selecting a research topic, preliminary design research, assisting students with their personal and general problems, and ensuring that good quality guidance is provided. Every institution has different norms and processes, therefore there is a

need for doctoral students and supervisors to have a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) which should direct the student to any relevant policies in the university such as Higher Degrees Guide, supervision policy, postgraduate rules, examination rules, academic integrity & plagiarism policy, and ethics rules. Many issues are much easier to discuss early on before any problems crop up. An MoU between student/s and supervisors is very useful to make things clear from the start, but it is also important to revisit regularly.

The MoU is often considered a contract, a legally binding means of enforcing regulations. The supervisor's relationship with the student needs to model how we want the student to engage with other experts in the field. We want our students to be developing a deep understanding of the field and confidence in their ability to contribute to it. We need to treat our postgraduate scholars not as knowledge tellers who are outside of the discipline or field, but rather as colleagues who are novice members of that discipline or field. We need to open spaces for the articulation of expectations and negotiation of relationships. For this, we would recommend a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) –a written document that outlines the roles and expectations you have of each other and how you plan to work together.

7.0 Recommendations

Literature has suggested that partnerships can manifest in a variety of ways with different objectives. Students could become co-researchers (Dunne & Zandstra, 2011), pedagogical consultants course designers, and co-creators of assessments (Kaur et al., 2017) and collaborate for administrative purposes such as research, governance, quality assurance, and community engagement. Most importantly, stated that such collaborations could create transformative experiences for both students and staff because they yield a stronger sense of identity, connectedness, and increased understanding of each other's experience, as well as enhanced trust, respect, and reciprocity among participants.

8.0 Conclusion

The doctoral supervision process can be smooth between the student and the supervisor through mutual communication, regular meetings, weekly docs, an introduction to the scholarly community, guest speakers, scholar presentations, workshops, panel discussions, and so on. The community is also fostered through online synchronous seminars and asynchronous resources and various groupings of scholars working in project teams (McKenna, 2014). Universities can consider reviewing the duration of doctoral programs according to students' diversity, capability, and the different responsibilities they have as had been suggested earlier by the (Salzburg, 3-5 February 2005 should operate within an appropriate time duration (three to four years full-time as a rule).

Personal Experience

I am not an exception to what other students have gone through. I experienced the same, especially crossing the conceptual threshold. I felt lonely and hated myself until when I gathered confidence and said to myself that others have made it. I started having a positive attitude and this helped me to accomplish the goal of attaining a Ph.D.

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Ethical approval

This article does not contain any studies with human participants or animals performed by any of the authors.

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