A RESPONSE TO YUSEF WAGHID’S LEADING ARTICLE

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ABSTRACT

In responding to a potential tension between the need to increase doctoral throughput while simultaneously not compromising quality (Waghid, in this issue), we identify very briefly some of the complex conditions at the institutional and system’s level that cultivate doctoral capabilities. Through isolating certain elements in the doctoral process at the institutional level, we observe some tensions between traditional/collegial and – what is becoming – an increasing commodification of doctoral practices ‘on the ground’. In foregrounding this tension, we wish to open up further avenues for thinking about doctoral processes, mindful of the cultivation of high-level technical and intellectual skills. This tension might be structured into the national system level, in light of the
differentiation policy. We seek to open up a conversation that could pose an opportunity for thinking through the requisite high-level skills, and appropriate levels of research support, in order to harness innovation as we strive towards redressing historical legacies.

Keywords: doctoral education and training, increasing doctoral graduates, knowledge economy, supervision, differentiation of higher education

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Internationally, there is pressure on higher education institutions (HEIs) to increase the number of doctoral graduates (Kehm 2007). Similarly, as outlined by Waghid (in this issue), in South Africa, the policy goal for an increase in the number of doctorates is stated in the National Planning Commission (NPC 2012, 319). This policy mandate is refracted from the national system through to the institutional level, as regulated via the government subsidy. Consequently, and within the context of fiscal austerity measures, there is pressure for institutions to deliver doctoral throughputs at a much faster pace, possibly putting the quality of a doctorate at risk (Waghid in this issue). In light of this, how do we think about the complexities and dilemmas confronting HEIs and the system as it seeks to meet the targets set in the national mandate? We begin with some background information.

The international context of massification, the shape of which includes a more diversified student population of higher education, is a phenomenon which is reaching into postgraduate education. These debates also coalesce around that of the knowledge economy (Ballim, Mabizela and Mubangizi 2014) and competing on the global stage. It is unsurprising, therefore, that a key concern for policy makers is about the macro context, that is, what a country requires in terms of doctoral graduates. The reasons for the policy mandate are manifold and do not form the scope for this article as our vantage point is to get ‘inside institutions’. Instead, we wish to seek to engage with some of the practices as these pertain to doctoral supervision and administration. In this regard, we describe some of the tensions that arise in the actual day to day processes entailed in the latter. We draw on our combined experiences of postgraduate supervision, acting as external examiners and postgraduate administration. We begin with a clearing of the ground in terms of the general meaning assigned to a doctorate, which we are using interchangeably with that of a Doctor of Philosophy (PhD).

In seeking to understand the purpose of a doctoral degree we consider one way to think about it at the level of both process and product. The process is about the actual ‘training’ at the level of immersion in the field of study through a research process that in certain instances might also include structured course work. It is important to note that the shape of the process might differ institutionally in the
sense that the independent research component might not be the full weighting for the qualification. In other words, the academic research component is at times stitched to a structured coursework programme; although, we observe that this is not the case in South Africa. Nonetheless, following what could be termed, a ‘high level of scholarly learning’ (Lovat, Monfries and Morrison 2004), at the end or, (as recent trends suggest), at the start (Kehm 2006) of a career, the degree is conferred by the institution. The final product, that is, the awarding of the degree through a qualification, becomes the licence for the student to perform at a fairly high skills level in a specific profession (Kehm 2006).

Effectively, doctoral training is traditionally at the top end of human resource skills and capacity, positioning countries’ high-level skills in the knowledge economy both globally and nationally. Within the context of the commodification of knowledge (Etzkowitz, Webster and Healy 1998), these high-level skills are intended to advance the knowledge base of a country’s scientific system in terms of industrial and social innovation (Kehm 2007). In addition to the latter, we believe that the advances should, more importantly, be in terms of human development which then raises the nation’s quality of life through the conversion of the research qualification into employment prospects.

Given the above points we raise around the purpose, process and product of doctoral studies, we can infer that, traditionally, it is the peak of learning in a knowledge field taking place through systemic immersion over a specified period of time. However, in the current climate marked by the need to increase throughput, there are signals to suggest that the accelerated pace might potentially compromise both the standard and the quality of this ‘zenith of learning’ (Lovat et al. 2004). To follow through on this general discussion we set up the institutional context in terms of capacity at the level supervisors and the profile of students who are entering the system.

INSTITUTIONAL CONTEXT: THE SUPERVISORS AND STUDENTS

The supervisors

In the current work environment, academics are confronted with several challenges around their workload, having to fulfil all three occupational functions of teaching, research and community engagement and the additional task of administration. In this respect, professional and personal tensions arise in terms of the distribution of time and effort in an intellectually effective way to fulfil these various functions. This results in intense competition among academics as they navigate their way through the promotion processes as part of their career trajectory. This competitive behaviour
coalesces around resources, such as time, as well as the subsidy that accrues from research outputs either at the level of publications and/or postgraduate students.

Through the above process, market-type behaviour kicks in, insofar as there is competition for securing, potentially, the ‘best’ doctoral students. In certain disciplines, the latter might comprise students with advanced reading, writing and conceptual abilities. This competition for securing doctoral students culminates in the academic with more supervisory and institutional experience being assigned the ‘better student’. In this way, albeit inadvertently, the academic with less supervisory experience is assigned the student who requires the most intensive academic literacy support. Notwithstanding these tensions, academics as supervisors have to provide a sharp and acute balancing act, as they seek to juggle their distribution of time and effort among the various professional functions.

Given that intellectual production through a research process (either in terms of producing a publication and/or supervising a doctoral student) requires time for the gestation of ideas, the question arises as to the quality of time invested in the doctoral student’s research work. This becomes more complex and challenging, when the supervisor does not have extensive experience in supervision. Our hunch is that supervisor capacity is acutely uneven within institutions, but this is subject to further research. This research should take account of whether there is a direct correlation between an academic publication’s skills and that of the actual practices of supervision. Is it that the academic coming in with high levels of publications is an experienced supervisor? Can the process of supervision be separated from the wisdom of the knowledge base?

In ideal terms, supervisory capacity has to be coupled with the expert-knowledge power base in the students’ field of research. Generally, the indicators for expert power are publication outputs and knowledge status. In terms of the collegial model, these public indicators (i.e., public argumentation through the articles) provide a level of intellectual trust and legitimacy which is then received by the student. This is one form of assuring quality. Given the high level of skills required in the doctoral journey, where else in the research cycle, is ‘quality work’ evident?

As outlined earlier, the aim of the doctorate is to equip students with high-level skills in the relevant professional (employment) field. In this respect, the supervisor’s role is to guide the students in the relevant intellectual scholarly debates pertinent to the subject matter. This in turn prepares the students from a specialised angle within the subject required by the labour market in direct and non-direct ways. If there is a compromise on two levels, both in terms of time and expert-power, this potentially shapes the quality of the final manuscript. For example, current practices in certain professional fields suggest that published scholarly debates are being trumped by grey literatures in the form of commissioned research reports and policy documents. While the latter is important, it is mainly background literature rather than insights into the ideas that form the basis for the actual knowledge of the subject area in
which the doctoral student is being trained. The tension here when doing the overall assessment/examining is whether ‘grey literature’ is evidence of quality in terms of ‘keeping abreast of debates and ideas in the field of study’. We observe that the student is confronted with a complex situation of, on the one hand, rafts of policy documents and on the other hand, the need to read scholarly texts. This brings us to the question of students’ ‘readiness’ to read for a doctorate.

**The doctoral students**

Following Wagid’s (in this issue) comment on the position of under-preparedness, a few comments are noteworthy.

The under-preparedness phenomenon has to be contextualised within the massification debate, which includes the awkward discussion on the knowledge economy. The term awkward is raised as the debate around the knowledge economy is also about the setting up of elite systems which in turn has the effect of marginalising those without the requisite resources. When transposed onto a university system, invariably, the institutions are confronted with a reckoning of the legacy. It is here that the issue of ‘under-preparedness’ emerges. Insofar as there are an increasingly larger number of doctoral students entering the system with limited academic literacies, we observe that this is further compounded by limits in terms of the shape of students’ research sensibilities. This begs two questions for further research. The first is about an introduction to systematic research training at undergraduate level, and the deepening of this at honours and master’s level. In ideal terms, this combination provides the foundational base for more advanced training at doctoral level.

The second question might have to focus on how universities could draw sustenance from educational practices at other dimensions of the higher education and training system. This, in turn, could facilitate a transitioning process required to advance a research culture. For example, the kinds of internship and skills-based programmes in the college system could provide a research site for inducting students into an applied research culture. In other words, there could be a collaborative research arrangement between universities and colleges. We are aware that this is based on a highly developed college system; however, such a research programme could provide an impetus for strengthening research and in this way, may also address the legacy factors positively rather than deficiently.

**THE PRACTICE OF DOCTORAL RESEARCH**

There are several steps in the actual doctoral practice and in each of these there might be what could be termed a ‘quality pinch’, which we now isolate. The first is the preparation of the proposal. The practice here, following the expression of interest, is that the doctoral student is assigned to a supervisor who shepherds the student
through a process of developing a proposal. A tension around quality arises here, insofar as the student perceives the proposal as a brief set of ideas that expresses interest for the study, whereas the supervisor (or the committee) that considers the proposal assesses it as the culmination of sustained reading. A second step is a peer-review process, in which the proposal is sent out to experts in the field. This signals the start of the public engagement process between the doctoral student and the broader peer community, with the supervisor in a mediating role. Given the current practice that is marked by students taking unduly longer periods of time to complete a full proposal and the concomitant pressure placed on supervisors to ‘get the student into the system’, there is a tendency to distribute proposals to generic rather than subject-specific peer-reviewers. In certain instances, friendly uncritical colleagues and associates take priority selection over and above those more unfriendly and critical expert-power ones, in order to accelerate the process.

Once the student’s proposal is accepted, the student departs, and embarks on an independent research journey in consultation with the supervisor. Experience has shown that this is an intensely privatised process which could last for a period of approximately five years. During this time, the student is then largely at the behest of the supervisor entrusted by the university committee. Within the traditional collegial model of supervision, systematic public accountability (through attending seminars, writing up a publication) is at the discretion of the supervisor, who takes the student to final manuscript stage. In the process of the student preparing to submit the final manuscript, the supervisor makes recommendations as to the selection and appointment of examiners. The issue at hand here is whether supervisors are selected on the basis of expertise, or are recruited from an internal and personal based peer-collegial system.

In theory, expert-power is the over-determining factor in order to arrive at an assessment that the content of the manuscript coheres into an argument and reflects knowledge developments in the field of specialisation. Following the examiners’ assessment reports, scholarly-constituted committees at both faculty and senate levels deliberate on the content of the reports in order to arrive at a result. With the content of external examiners’ reports being very uneven, there are tensions and dilemmas regarding the quality thereof. Given the point made earlier around the principle of collegiality on which quality is premised, it is difficult for members of the committee to pose questions around what in effect is an individual and privatised process. Coupled with aspects of rank, the quality matter is complex.

FINAL SHAPE OF THE MANUSCRIPT

Our first point is around the shape, size and standard of the manuscript, whether this is universal for all institutions in South Africa. In terms of the assessment frameworks (i.e., written guidelines for examiners), the criterion for judgment
is whether there is an identification of a knowledge gap which in turn posits an ‘original contribution’ to the topic under study. To arrive at this, the manuscript has to ‘demonstrate knowledge of the literature relevant to the subject, the field to which it belongs and the ability to exercise critical and analytical judgment of it’ (Carter 2011, 730). There are indications that all institutions hold this as a key criterion for assessment of doctoral manuscripts.

Our second point takes up the ‘technician of learning approach’ that is perceived to be influencing key practices in doctoral education (Waghid in this issue). We concur, that there is a standard and conventional approach to structuring the final manuscript, starting with hypothesis/problem statement, proceeding to methodological positioning which becomes the framework for positing the content of the manuscript as a ‘scientific contribution’. This model – steeped in the natural sciences, with its empirical and positivistic approach – is the key organising frame for most of the manuscripts in the field of education. In light of this, research is perceived to be synonymous with ‘going out into the field to collect (primarily) qualitative data’. Thus, the manuscript is held captive to the ‘techniques’ with limits being placed on the conceptual thinking in terms of the actual field. These boundaries thus fix the students’ thinking into a narrow box and pose tensions and dilemmas when assessing the manuscript against the criterion of ‘original and conceptual body of research’. In other words, there are signals to suggest limits in terms of innovative thinking.

In the aforementioned section, we sought, in a general way, to isolate and describe supervisor and student practices inside institutions to trigger further thinking along the lines of refinement and sharpening of the doctoral process and ultimate product. In the following section, we move from an institutional to a general system level discussion, given the national mandate.

GENERAL SYSTEM LEVEL CONTEXT

National landscape, meeting the national policy goal: Tensions and dilemmas

In keeping with the national policy mandate to increase the number of doctoral graduates, how can we think about this at a system level? Our first point is that with the changing policy landscape in terms of differentiation, the question is whether the different institutional types are moving towards a changed mission and/or in the same direction but at different paces? Consideration needs to be given to the missions of the three institutional types (universities of technology, comprehensives and traditional universities). Are they all moving in the direction of becoming research intensive, in an isomorphic way? And how do the legacy factors act as a constraint in the differing missions?
On the one hand, the higher education system continues to display inequities, disparities and constraints in terms of resource allocation, histories and academic cultures. At the same time, the system is supposed to adapt and increase in order to meet the specified targets. The question therefore is how this takes place in an environment marked by the inequities. Does this mean that those universities historically at the forefront, the 10–12 doctoral producing ones, continue to serve the system? And is it that these ones are met more favourably by the market? In other words, are doctoral qualifications from the more favourable ones at an advantage in terms of employability? Further research might be needed at a system level as to the destination points of graduates across disciplines, fields of study and professions. The entry question has to be how the various professions and workplaces are being served by the discipline-subject based graduates from across natural science, social science and humanities. Our hunch is that there are pockets of excellence in all doctoral producing universities that, at varying levels, are productive at the levels of both the economy and society more broadly.

The above argument rests on the assumption that the top 10–12 doctoral producing institutions will continue to have the full human resource capacity in order to reach the target. As noted in Waghid (in this issue), this does not take account of the supervision plateau trend especially in terms of age-related/retirement patterns. This in turn begs the question of the succession plans in these institutions and the points at which institutional arrangements (around, e.g., co-supervision) are established for the succession to take place. By contrast, it might be that at institutions where no succession plan has been established, external resources are marshalled, in the form of a consultant or retired supervisor/professor, as a basis for an interim arrangement. This adds a different dimension to the intellectual-knowledge production process unique to traditional forms of doctoral study. In other words, it becomes a privatised funding arrangement which potentially and inadvertently has the effect of challenging traditional and collegial forms of scholarly activity.

CONCLUDING COMMENTS

From our brief exploration around doctoral practices both at a system and an institutional level, there are several markers to facilitate thinking in a holistic way to meet the policy targets for increasing the number of doctoral graduates.

By way of conclusion, we observe that there is much more diversity in the level of preparedness of the new doctoral student, which then necessitates more structured and intensive support for students. This might include programmes that focus on induction into research cultures. Where institutions are delivering such programmes, it would be important to pool best practices. In addition, we wonder whether there should be a review of what it means to be a supervisor, working creatively with the tensions of collegial and more efficient ways of ‘doing supervision’. Perhaps,
different models could be drawn upon, with team supervision coming to mind. Finally, might there be a public process as to what constitutes a final manuscript? We are aware that in certain professions the ultimate shape and size is also aligned to professional association structures. Either way, whether the institution is the primary stakeholder, or whether the employer wishes to have some control, the ultimate product has to stand the (international) benchmark test.

REFERENCES


