

*Ornate PhDs in Sub-Saharan Africa: Purpose and
Quality Concerns*

Aloysius Rukundo, Mbarara University of Science and Technology

Keywords: Ornate PhD; quality, doctorates, Sub-Saharan Africa, careers

In academia, every maneuver follows, or should seem to have a purpose. In view of that, an earned doctoral degree is primarily purposed in training and educating new scholars in preparation for the development of knowledge (Wellington, 2013). For that reason, doctoral training has of recent gained essential global currency (Peak & Blumbach, 2018). Particularly, that has been due to the capacity of doctorates in driving scientific productivity and innovations. Consequently, the number of doctoral programmes and accompanying enrollments in Sub-Saharan Africa has risen in the previous decades (Herman & Schoole, 2018; Peak & Blumbach, 2018). After all, the award of a doctorate confers on the contender a ‘public title that acknowledges their elite status within the academy – a status grounded in the “contribution” of the written thesis and the expectation of a lifetime commitment to research and/or university teaching’ (Holbrook, Bourke, Lovat, & Dally, 2004). To that end, the impact of the doctorate on the future working or non-working life of the doctoral graduate remains a matter of concern (Wellington, 2013).

Possibly, the supervision aspects notwithstanding, the envisioned purpose and impact of the doctorate is one of the driving factors of its quality (see Figure 1). In the context of this paper, the supervision process is not a matter of concern, as the knowledge at the doctorate level is presumably original and brought about by the student (Bourke & Holbrook, 2013). Moreover, the original contribution remains that of the doctoral student as the prime beneficiary of the process (Trafford & Leshem 2009). Remarkably, the supervisor only facilitates with advisory, managerial and guidance oriented role, to an extent (Deuchar, 2008; Turner, 2015; Vilkinas, 2002). In that matter, the supervision process remains a constant and external

to the overall doctoral outcome. Indeed, doctoral students often own the study process to the extent of initiating the research process and choosing the study problem. Yet, limited debate has considered the influence of a doctorate on the development of the student (Wellington, 2013).

Ordinarily, the cardinal purpose in pursuance of a doctoral qualification is in line with the provision of better and gainful employment opportunity (Herman & Schoole, 2018), and capacity building at institutions of higher learning (Alabi & Mohammed, 2018; Barasa & Omulando, 2018). Unfortunately, there seems to be a developing trend in pursuance of doctoral qualifications in the developing world. It happens that during this and the previous decades, persons in the age of retirement, non-academic and intellectual careers, and who already are in retirement have hit the doctoral stage to avail themselves for scrutiny as doctoral candidates.

Perhaps, that corresponds with the assertion that the majority of doctoral candidates were in the mature category, as opposed to fewer younger students enrolling direct from the master's degree (Peak & Blumbach, 2018). In addition, erstwhile studies have identified a relatively mature age trend of doctoral cohorts in the Sub-Saharan Africa Region (Peak & Blumbach, 2018). Possibly, the primary goal of such students rests in obtaining the PhD as a 'show off' or for opulent purpose. So, would the doctoral theses educate and train those students in becoming life-long scholars, who can develop knowledge? Certainly, the answer to such a question rests in a number of concerns. In principle and in the scope of this paper, the answer could not be in the affirmative. Why then, would someone outside of the doctoral labor market insist on making it to the doctoral graduation list? Alternatively, would such doctoral graduate's credentials contribute favorably to practice and development of knowledge? Perhaps, different scholars would afford a diverse of concerns. The over-aching concern rests in the "living room ornate" purpose of doctorates. Indeed, we could borrow the "living room ornate doctorates" metaphor in reference to doctoral qualifications or degrees for leisure without academic purpose.

In touch with the ornate debate, this paper underlines Wellington's (2013) outline of the five purposes of doctorates, as in (i) preparing doctoral candidates for future careers; (ii) helping in career or continuing professional development; (iii) springboard for a doctoral graduate to develop generic and transferable skills or increasing propensity for employability; (iv) self-satisfaction in terms of personal curiosity and intellectual interest in area of specialty; (v) knowledge production –in terms of creating a novel position in an academic arena, and that could be transferable to industry. Indeed, in the most orthodox terms, doctoral education has its role rooted in the knowledge economy, through development of generic skills that creatively contribute to economic and technological development (Hutchings, 2015). In that perspective, a doctorate could be aimed at producing 'researching professionals' rather than

‘professional researchers’. However, a puzzle remains regarding how the former could be tenable in the midst of quality concerns regarding ornate doctorates in the developing economies. In most circumstances, the quality of a doctorate is measured in terms of doctoral examiners’ recommendations and viva voce panels’ decisions regarding a doctoral thesis (Holbrook et al., 2004). So, for the benefit of doubt, “quality” in this context considers the general academic and intellectual disposition of a doctoral graduate as well.

Purpose and Quality Issues and Concerns

In Figure 1, notwithstanding aspects like supervision and research environment, the student is the overall determinant of the purpose (ornate in this case) and quality of a doctorate. Of course, ornate PhDs could deliver challenges concerning quality as well. All the same, the primary beneficiary and determinant of the doctoral process remains the student. Possibly, different students attach different purposes to the PhD process (Wellington, 2013). Perhaps, some scholars would view their doctorates in professional and non-professional contexts. In the professional context, the obvious purpose could be development and enhancement of knowledge and skills (Odendaal & Frick, 2017; Wellington, 2013). In fact, the student is prepared for a career, usually academic in nature - such as supervision of graduate research, during training in the PhD programme. Also, the doctorate would be a foundation upon which advanced research within and outside academia is undertaken. In the non-professional arena, the doctorate could be viewed in terms of personal or home interests, or what Wellington considers to be qualification for curiosity and self-gratification. That, of course, defines the extent to which the doctorate can be ornate. The latter remains a big area of debate, as probably it defines the quality of the candidate and the material of doctoral output.

As regards doctoral quality, the concern lies in the standard of work and traits in possession of the doctoral student. Thus, the quality of a doctorate and the ‘publish-ability’ of the doctoral results take a cardinal concern among scholars (Badley, 2009). Recently, a colleague of mine, a doctoral examiner as well, decried the increasingly substandard doctoral theses examined. To that person, ‘students did not intellectually insert themselves in the doctoral processes’, as manifested in the below par quality of the theses. In that regard, the appalling quality often could be associated with “lack of clear academic vision and direction” by the candidates at their viva voce defenses. Also, connection between candidates pursuing doctorates in their late career life and in non-academic professional environments permitted the disquiet regarding the awful quality of doctoral theses. Similar complaints were visibly active in the talks during health breaks at conferences, and in boardrooms among doctoral supervisors, faculty deans and members of graduate committees. In consonance, Kiley, (2015)

refers to the comments overheard in departmental tearooms, among supervisors, complaining about how their students ‘did not “get it right”’. In that case, “getting it right” implied many aspects of intellectual discourse, particularly in understanding the aspect of the theory and its application in the doctoral studies.

Also, the outcry regarding ornate doctorates could be visibly traced in the major obstacles resulting in the longer time some doctoral students take to attain the doctoral qualifications, outside of the formal, prescribed period (Dimé, 2018; Peak & Blumbach, 2018). Further, the idea of ornate doctorates could partly explain the origin of very low citation indices of research from Sub-Saharan Africa (Peak & Blumbach, 2018). It is not surprising, therefore, that such doctorates catalyze the devaluation of the doctoral systems and hardly contribute to the general benefit of the social and economic demands of their respective countries, and of the region in general (Akudolu & Adeyemo, 2018; Nega & Kassaye, 2018). All the same, there seems to still be a lot of ground to cover as concerns purpose and quality of doctorates in Sub-Saharan Africa.

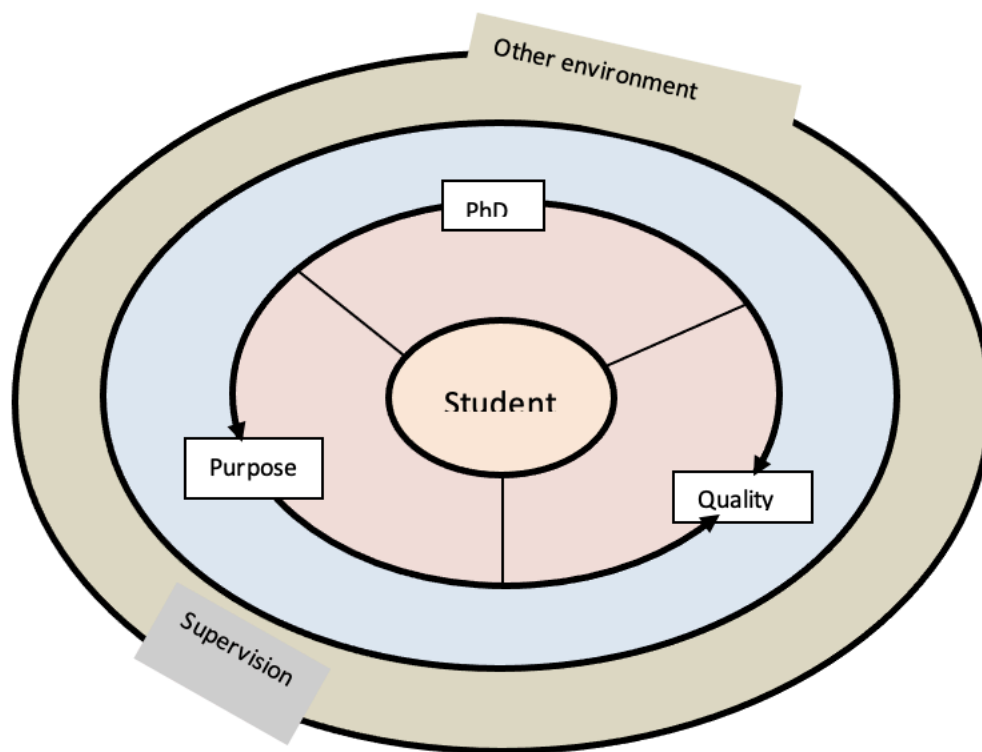


Figure 1: Showing the purpose and quality issues influencing ornate doctorates

Notes on Figure 1: The figure demonstrates that keeping other factors constant, the student is at the centre of the doctoral process, determining the purpose and quality of the outcome. Also, the figure shows that doctoral purpose is determinant of its quality. In the case of this paper the purpose of the doctorate is ornate, which could result into dismal quality.

Conclusion

The scarce anecdotal evidence regarding quality of some of the doctorates in Sub-Saharan Africa has already put them on spot as wanting. So, the sprouting trend of ornamental doctorates could potentially have a diluting influence on the already limping doctoral systems in Sub-Saharan Africa.

Implication for Doctoral Policy Reform

Doctoral programmes in Sub-Saharan Africa seem to consider academic credentials and resource availability as quality safeguards. However, doctoral schools and colleges inevitably invest heavily in training and mentoring of the doctorates. The developing trends regarding doctorates could necessitate prior evaluation of the potential to contribute to academia or development as well, before consideration for admission to doctoral programmes.

Implication for Empirical Studies

The present paper casts intellectual and theoretical debate regarding issues of quality and purpose of doctorates in a Sub-Saharan context. Without a doubt, this letter opens a 'Pandora's box' but remains limited in empirical argument. That calls for large scale widespread studies interrogating the subject with data-based evidence. The issues for further understanding could be, but not limited to purpose and quality of doctorates among different disciplines and the role of the supervision process in shaping the purpose and quality of doctorates.

References

- Akudolu, L.-R., & Adeyemo, K. S. (2018). *Research and PhD capacities in Sub-Saharan Africa: Nigeria report*. British Council. https://www.britishcouncil.org/sites/default/files/h233_06_research_and_phd_capacities_in_sub-saharan_africa_nigeria_report_final_web.pdf
- Alabi, G., & Mohammed, I. (2018). *Research and PhD capacity in Sub-Saharan Africa: Ghana report*. British Council.
- Badley, G. (2009). Publish and be doctor-rated: the PhD by published work. *Quality Assurance in Education*, 17(4), 331 - 341. Doi:10.1108/09684880910992313
- Barasa, P. L., & Omulando, C. (2018). *Research and PhD capacities in Sub-Saharan Africa: Kenya report*. British Council.
- Bourke, S., & Holbrook, A. P. (2013). Examining PhD and research masters theses. *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education*, 38(4), 407-416. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/02602938.2011.638738>
- Deuchar, R. (2008). Facilitator, director or critical friend?: contradiction and congruence in doctoral supervision styles. *Teaching in Higher Education*, 13(4), 489 - 500. Doi: 10.1080/13562510802193905
- Dimé, M. (2018). *Research and PhD capacities in Sub-Saharan Africa: Senegal report*. British Council.
- Herman, C., & Sehoole, C. (2018). *Research and PhD capacities in Sub-Saharan Africa: South Africa Report*. British Council. https://www.britishcouncil.org/sites/default/files/h233_02_south_africa_final_web.pdf
- Holbrook, A., Bourke, S., Lovat, T., & Dally, K. (2004). Investigating PhD thesis examination reports. *International Journal of Educational Research*, 41(2004), 98 - 120. Doi: 10.1016/j.ijer.2005.04.008
- Hutchings, M. (2015). Improving doctoral support through group supervision: analysing face-to-face and technology-mediated strategies for nurturing and sustaining scholarship. *Studies in Higher Education*, 2015, 1-18. Doi: 10.1080/03075079.2015.1058352
- Kiley, M. (2015). 'I didn't have a clue what they were talking about': PhD candidates and theory. *Innovations in Education and Teaching International*, 52(1), 52 - 63. Doi:

10.1080/14703297.2014.981835

- Nega, M., & Kassaye, M. (2018). *Research and PhD capacities in Sub-Saharan Africa: Ethiopia report*. British Council.
- Odendaal, A., & Frick, L. (2017). Research dissemination and PhD thesis format at a South African university: The impact of policy on practice. *Innovations in Education and Teaching International*, 55, 594-601. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14703297.2017.1284604>
- Peak, M., & Blumbach, H. (2018). *Building PhD capacity in Sub-Saharan Africa*. British Council. https://www.britishcouncil.org/sites/default/files/h233_07_synthesis_report_final_web.pdf
- Trafford, V., & Leshem, S. (2009). Doctorateness as a threshold concept. *Innovations in Education and Teaching International*, 46(3), 305-316. Doi: 10.1080/14703290903069027
- Turner, G. (2015). Learning to supervise: four journeys. *Innovations in Education and Teaching International*, 52(1), 86-98. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14703297.2014.981840>
- Vilkinas, T. (2002). The PhD process: the supervisor as manager. *Education + Training*, 44(3), 129 - 137. Doi: 10.1108/00400910210424337
- Wellington, J. (2013). Searching for 'doctorateness'. *Studies in Higher Education*, 38(10), 1490 - 1503. Doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2011.634901>