

## **Turning Doctoral Research Supervision into a Partnership: Towards Promoting Quality Research in African Context**

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### Abstract

**Purpose:** The paper establishes different perspectives of doctoral research supervision in African context and the contribution of adopting doctoral research supervision into student-supervisor partnership to enhance the quality of research.

**Background:** Research reveals that the need for doctorates has increased in the 21st century. Whereas it is revealed that research supervision is key throughout the doctoral journey, there is need to establish new and contextual techniques of enhancing doctoral research supervision for quality research in African context.

**Methodology:** The paper adopted a documentary review qualitative approach to establish different perspectives of doctoral research supervision in the African setting. Through the same approach 46 papers were reviewed and it was evident that Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) research supervision need to be an interactive process between doctoral candidates and their supervisors.

**Contribution:** The paper contributes to the current literature on aspects of doctoral research supervision and puts to light the contribution of establishing partnerships in doctoral research supervision towards quality research.

**Findings:** The paper reveals that doctoral education in Africa has been affected with several supervision setbacks ranging from limited human and physical resources to unfavorable supervision practices. Findings, further revealed that incorporation of partnership approach in the supervision journey enhances quality research and output.

**Recommendations:** The paper suggests that universities should regularly revise and update rules, regulations and policies that govern doctoral training and research supervision. Similarly, new interactive research supervision technique of pursuing research supervision as a partnership among doctoral students and supervisors should be adopted for quality research results.

**Keywords:** Supervision, Doctoral Research, Partnership, African Context, Completion Time and Quality Research

### **Introduction**

Doctoral education has gone through tremendous changes in the 21st century all over the world. Several doctoral programmes are being introduced with high numbers of

students' enrollment. Africa is not spared in registering multiple changes in doctoral training. South Africa in particular has been establishing mechanisms to remain competitive and popular in doctoral training (Teferra, 2015). In 2012 the South African National Planning Commission came up with a strategy of producing 5,000 doctoral degrees per year (Herman, 2017). These were geared on a sense that PhDs are essential in securing the global wheel for economic growth and development. Considering the capacity of handling doctoral training, South Africa is a more established country compared to other parts of Africa. This may be justified by the fact that first ranked institutions of higher learning in Africa are South African ones. However, studies indicate that much as South Africa has a good record in the production of doctoral degrees, the research capacity is still under deficit (Herman, 2017; Jowi et al., 2018; Maringe & Ojo, 2017; Samuel, 2016). Teferra (2015) adds that the quality of doctoral students' research is in most cases problematic which has resulted into low research output. The universities are oriented to focus on production of PhDs yet the issue of quality (both research and academia) is central in doctoral training ( Teferra, 2015 ; Kitazawa & Zhou, 2009).

Three other countries of African continent (Kenya, Egypt and Nigeria) have established themselves competitively in terms of doctoral training and research (Akudolu & Adeyemo, 2018). Kenya has registered commendable progress in doctoral training (Rong'uno, 2016), however, Kenya higher education system suffers from limited qualified staff especially in newly established institutions for doctoral training. Much more is needed in production of doctorates to achieve the Kenya development goals (CUE, 2015 as cited in Akudolu & Adeyemo, 2018). Kenya Vision 2030 recognizes the role of research, knowledge generation and utilization in contributing to national development. This is believed to be geared towards responding to Kenya development challenges. In order to be effective in knowledge generation and utilization, quality doctoral research is paramount (Bastalich, 2017; Akudolu & Adeyemo, 2018; Frick et al., 2017; Mckenna & Mckenna, 2017; Wellington, 2013).

Despite the fact that South Africa is ahead in doctoral training and research, it still faces challenges. The growth and improvement in doctoral training in Kenya and other African countries do not match with the rate at which knowledge generation and utilization is achieved within the country. The few who attain doctorate degrees go to institutions of higher education and not industry.

## **Review of Related Literature and Discussion**

### **Research Supervision**

Research is the main component of doctoral education globally, the doctoral graduate should possess and present a mastery of knowledge and skills within the area of interest (Matas, 2012) and this attribute can be achieved through research. By the fact that

research is key at the doctoral level of education, a supervisor needs to take responsibility of ensuring that the student acquires all required generic skills in the research supervision process (Herman, 2017; Lee, 2008; Matas, 2012). For better results, supervision should be handled with combined efforts by the supervisee and the supervisor within the process (European University Association, 2010). In the fifth Salzburg Principle (European University Association, 2010) it is argued that supervision has to operate on clearly defined responsibilities with reservation to the student for independent growth and development. In addition, it is at a higher advantage of a student if the supervisor is actively involved in research. This denotes that the supervisor should guide the candidate with the informed point of view. In Bastalich (2017) it is noted that supervision should be taken as an aspect of making a student a qualified researcher rather focusing on completing the thesis and the degree which is a common case in African setting. If the focus is put on the quality of the research output during the supervision, quality in research can be manifested (Bastalich, 2017; Jones, 2018; Lee, 2008; Matas, 2012).

### **Research Supervision in African Context: Issues, Approaches and the Quality of Research Output**

In African setting, supervision has been affected by several issues ranging from limited staff to inefficient supervision approaches. According to Manderson et al. (2017), Academics are overwhelmed by heavy workload that involves teaching large numbers of students at lower degree levels as well as postgraduate students. This means the supervisor has limited time for research supervision and research. The same author adds that it is even hard to secure time for individual training in supervision practices and pedagogies. Part-time teaching to secure additional income is also common in African higher Education institutions (Manderson et al., 2017). Despite the noted challenges, fewer opportunities are put in place to discuss them and generate solutions. To utilize the importance of research supervision in doctoral training (Cekiso et al., 2019; Igumbor et al., 2020; Malunda et al., 2021), institutions are required to improve on doctoral research supervision by adopting interactive means of supervision.

Creating and maintaining supervisor-supervisee relationships has also been a concern especially in African institutions. According to studies conducted in African context like (Bastalich, 2017; Cekiso et al., 2019; Herman, 2017; Igumbor et al., 2020; Malunda et al., 2021 & Mckenna, 2017) supervisor-supervisee relationship has remained a concern over years. Majority of students find difficulties in establishing good working relationships with their supervisors. This poses a risk due to the fact that supervisor-mentee relationships contributes to creativity and originality in student's research project (Baptista et al., 2015). When the relationship is conducive, there is good flow of communication. Hence the supervisee is free to approach the supervisor whenever difficulties arise and explore more which definitely contributes to research.

The responsibility of establishing rigor in students work as well as student supervisor relationship is on the side of the supervisor (Daramola, 2021). In addition, the supervisors are obligated to note that students come with limited information on a research compared to a supervisor who ideally is an expert in the area of the study. Hence supportive supervision is preferred. Unfortunately, this has been noted to be a rare norm in African setting. In most cases, a big social gap exists between the student and the supervisor during the supervision process.

In addition to limited personnel in African universities, lack of research infrastructure and resources is another setback to quality doctoral supervision and research (Igumbor et al., 2020). According to Igumbor et al. (2020), many universities in Africa do not avail staff with required technological materials and do not subscribe to relevant computer softwares to facilitate research. Similarly, monetary incentives offered for research supervision are inadequate and therefore less motivating. This does not only affect the research supervision process but also the quality of research output.

In other settings particularly Europe, governments offer adequate resources to both supervisors and students. In Hasgall et al. (2019), it is reported that universities benefit largely on the national funding sources which has greatly assisted in doctoral training and research. On the same note, African universities try to offer funding from government for research. However, the funding is still limited. In the study conducted by Cloete et al. (2015) on doctoral education in South Africa, participants reported that if African universities needs progress in research then resources must be available. Therefore, in this paper, we put it that, to boost African research output and quality, the universities should seek for more funding through partnerships and collaborations.

### **How Doctoral Students Are Supervised in Africa**

The question of how doctoral students should be supervised has not been exhausted for quite a long period of time. The study by Lee (2008) identified approaches to research supervision and ways supervisors went about their work and purposes underpinning them. These included functional, enculturation, critical thinking and emancipation. In all noted aspects, Lee (2008) contends that focus is put on project management, student's involvement in the discipline community, students' critique of own work, students' self-question and development and care given to students respectively. While Bastalich (2017) highlights how students and supervisors working together in a collegial manner is highly advantageous, Lee's aspects of doctoral research supervision largely requires more responsibility from the student. Muller (1988) argues that doctoral research supervision should be an interaction which allows a student and a supervisor to have adequate interaction towards the research project. In agreement, it is reported that doctoral supervision is a collective learning process which requires full supervisors support (Wolff, 2010). With the current trend in terms of research, doctoral research supervision needs to

be re-conceptualized for quality research especially in the African concept.

The working relationship between doctoral students and supervisors are also deemed to be key in facilitating quality research supervision and output. It is observed that working relationship blends individual roles and responsibilities during the research process (Bitzer, 2016; Cloete et al., 2015; Centre for Research on Science and Technology 2009; Qureshi et al., 2016). According to Löfström et al. (2019), research supervision is supported by meaningful engagements and working relationships among individuals and groups of individuals. In African setting, it becomes challenging that supervisors tend to take students towards their areas of specialization. The student is less likely to explore his area of interest if it does not belong to the supervisor's specialization (Löfström et al., 2019).

### **The Concept of Partnership between a Doctoral Student and a Supervisor during the Research Process**

Research supervision has been perceived differently by different stakeholders. Some scholars view it as a means of guiding a candidate to do what is being done correctly. Others take it as an employment responsibility. At a doctoral level, why not turn research supervision as a partnership of the supervisee and supervisor? In this paper, partnership is referred to as supervisors working closely with doctoral students mentoring them on how to produce quality research results and completing their studies as stipulated. In South Africa, a new qualification standard for doctoral degree (CHE, 2019) is based on the concept of graduate attributes. This means that the focus in supervision should be on the 'development of the doctor' the person and not study per se. The study becomes a means of developing the person. Majorly, supervisors in African universities take a guiding role (Ismail et al., 2013; Kaur et al., 2021; Löfström et al., 2019; Nethsinghe & Southcott, 2015; Wright & Cochrane, 2010). If both the student and the supervisor decide to partner and work together on a project as a team the quality of research would be high. To support this argument, in academic settings where doctoral students and supervisors work together as partners for example in Germany, a lot of success has been registered in terms of quality research and research output (European University Association Doctoral Education, 2016)

Doctoral students and supervisors working together collaboratively do not only enhance the quality and productivity of research but also advances the initiative motives of the candidate (Fan et al., 2018). The same authors revealed that students develop much confidence; they feel much trusted and recognized during the research process. Supervisee-supervisor partnership instills in a doctoral student attributes of personal confidence, growing sense of determination and assertiveness and acquisition of specific social/work skills (Colbran, 2014). These attributes are important in enhancing research particularly at doctoral level.

In settings where supervisor-supervisee partnership are put into a consideration, it

emerged that this enhanced local research (Loukanova et al., 2014). According to Loukanova et al. (2014), the success of this research supervision mode requires a helping hand from the university management by establishing initiatives like funding research projects as collaborative projects and offering necessary support to both supervisors' and students for better outcomes. In agreement to research partnership, Franke & Arvidsson (2011) contend that fully participation of the doctoral candidate and the supervisor in a cycle of the project definitely contributes to meaningful results. This supports the aspect of working together at the expense of supervisors' directions to the students on how the project is supposed to be done. Similarly, a study conducted by Orellana et al. (2016) reveals that over the course of the research process, student supervisor-partnership establishes collegial relationship and make the two work together in conducting research. The partnership of doctoral students with supervisors or other senior academics plays a commendable role in obtaining the doctorate as well as achieving the desired research outcomes (Hasgall et al., 2019). In agreement, Baptista et al. (2015) observes that originality in research outcomes may best be achieved by "encouraging creative processes during the candidature, such as a creative learning environment or collaborations" (p.59).

### **Conclusions and Recommendations**

The paper aimed at establishing different perspectives of doctoral research supervision in African context and the contribution of adopting doctoral research supervision as a student-supervisor collaborative partnership to enhance the quality of research. Whereas, many studies have been conducted on research supervision, there is need to transform doctoral research supervision in the African contexts for enhanced results in research. The analysis of literature revealed that doctoral research supervision in Africa is still old fashioned with supervisors playing a guiding role. Hence the study recommends that supervisors should resort to partnering with doctoral students and play the principal investigators role in order to enhance the quality of research. This recommendation is based on the fact that in the settings where doctoral research supervision has been taken as a collaborative partnership (Japan and Germany), good results are witnessed in the quality of supervision, research and completion time.

Institutional capacity building, resources (physical and human) still lays a disadvantage on enhancement of research supervision and quality in the African setting (Manderson et al., 2017). The study revealed that lecturers are overwhelmed with large classes of undergraduate students which limits them to engage in meaningful research. On top of that, the salaries paid to supervisors are not sufficient which makes them get involved in other private and part time activities. The study recommends for a reasonable teaching and institutional responsibilities to graduate faculty and enhanced funding especially on the side of research activities as well as research supervision.

The paper finally posits that the supervisee and supervisor should be partners in

the doctoral journey for quality research output.

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