

## LEADING ARTICLE

# ARE DOCTORAL STUDIES IN SOUTH AFRICAN HIGHER EDUCATION BEING PUT AT RISK?

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## ABSTRACT

Inasmuch as many attempts are being made in South Africa to increase the doctoral throughput rate, it appears as if the rush to produce doctoral (PhD) qualifications might just be the biggest risk that confronts the pursuit of doctoral studies. The author argues that, in the quest to accelerate the number of doctorates produced in the country, higher education institutions (HEIs), in particular administrators and – to a lesser extent – supervisors, run the risk of trivialising doctoral education: because of an over-emphasis on throughput rates alone, the purpose of the doctorate is assigned to a mere exercise of technical compliance and completion. In this article, the author offers a word of caution as to what the doctorate should not be subjected to if such a high-level achievement is to remain an aspiration of those serious about knowledge construction, reconstruction and deconstruction.

**Keywords:** doctorate, higher education, South Africa, risk

UNISA   
university  
of south africa

South African Journal of Higher Education  
Volume 29 | Number 5 | 2015  
pp. 1–7

ISSN 1011-3487  
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## A CURSORY VIEW OF DOCTORAL EDUCATION IN SOUTH AFRICA

By way of introduction I first offer an account of the higher education landscape in South Africa as a backdrop to an analysis of doctoral education. The South African higher education system was profoundly shaped by racial discrimination and the inequalities of class, race and gender that spawned the systemic exclusion and marginalisation of blacks, coloureds and Indians. Higher education favoured the minority white group and the apartheid ideology resulted in the establishment of higher education institutions (HEIs) that were reserved for different racial groups, both in terms of ethnicity and language. These institutions became known as historically white (advantaged) (HAIs) and historically black (disadvantaged) institutions (HDIs), differentiated according to academic programming, knowledge production, staff qualifications, student access, opportunities and quality, infrastructure, funding and geographical location that disadvantaged the HDIs (HESA 2014, 9). Prior to 1994, the differentiated higher education system comprised 21 public universities, 15 technikons (polytechnics), 120 colleges of education, 24 nursing colleges and 11 agricultural colleges, which all differed in terms of quality of academic provision, adequacy of infrastructure and facilities, and level of state investment and funding (HESA 2014, 9). With the advent of constitutional democracy in 1994, and the subsequent promulgation of the White Paper 3: A Programme for the Transformation of Higher Education by the then Department of Education (DoE) in 1997, the higher education system was subsequently completely overhauled as an integrated, 'single, national co-ordinated system' that would ensure diversity in its organisational form and the institutional landscape, mix of institutional missions and programmes commensurate with national and regional needs in social, cultural and economic development (DoE 1997, 2.3). By 2001, the colleges of education had either been closed or incorporated into the universities and technikons, and the 36 HEIs had either been merged, unbundled or incorporated to give rise to 11 traditional (research) universities that offer largely degree programmes; six comprehensive universities (one distance education institution in the form of the University of South Africa); and six universities of technology, which are intended to be vocationally and career focused. In addition, two HEIs were established in provinces without universities, namely, Northern Cape and Mpumalanga – two of the nine provinces in the country – in 2013. Thus, it was envisaged that the post-1994 institutional restructuring would engender a differentiated, diverse and articulated higher education system that resonated with the knowledge and development needs of South Africa and the imperative of achieving social justice (HESA 2014, 10). As acknowledged by Higher Education South Africa (HESA 2014, 11), a new, differentiated higher education institutional landscape has not adequately and justifiably addressed the

past inequities, more specifically as they relate to the educational, material, financial and geographical elements of the (white) advantaged and the (black) disadvantaged:

The continued under-developed institutional capacities of historically black institutions must be emphasized; providing access to rural poor and working class black students, inadequate state support for the historically black institutions to equalize the quality of undergraduate provision compromises their ability to facilitate equity of opportunity and outcomes.

This view is corroborated by the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) in the Green Paper for Post-school Education and Training of 2012:

A diverse university system steeped in inequality is the product of apartheid education policies, and that reality still confronts us today. While our leading universities are internationally respected, our historically black universities continue to face severe financial, human, infrastructure and other resource constraints. Universities of Technology are in some instances experiencing mission drift, losing focus on their mission of producing technicians, technologists and other mid-level skills at undergraduate level. This problem is also evident in the comprehensive universities (DHET 2012, 11).

With this abovementioned background in mind, I now turn my focus to the status of doctoral education: its size, shape and diversity. In this way, it should become clear why the rush for doctoral throughputs should not become an exercise in futility – a matter of producing PhDs for the sake of merely enhancing throughput rates.

## SIZE, SHAPE AND DIVERSITY OF THE DOCTORAL SYSTEM

The South African system of doctoral education is amongst the most established on the African continent on the basis that, next to Egypt and Nigeria, it enrolls the most students (Altbach and Teferra 2007, 206–207). While accurate statistics on the number of doctoral students currently enrolled in South Africa's 22 universities are unavailable, doctoral throughputs (completion rates) over the past years have shown a steady increase (977 in 2004; 1 100 in 2006; 1 182 in 2008; 1 421 in 2010; and 1 878 in 2012) (Mouton, Boshoff and James 2015). By 2007, South Africa produced about 28 doctorates per million of the total population, which compares unfavourably with other countries such as: Portugal (569 per million); Germany (297 per million); Australia (264 per million); Greece (218 per million); the United States (218 per million); Korea (187 per million); Israel (186 per million); Belgium (172 per million); Mexico (28 per million); and Turkey (48 per million) (ASSAf 2010, 46). Despite the significant increase in the production of doctoral graduates, new targets, for example as set by the 2012 National Development Plan of the South African government, aim to ensure that 70 per cent of all academic staff will have PhD degrees by 2030 compared to the current 40 per cent – a demand that would invariably put more strain

on the existing institutional capacities vis-à-vis supervision in the system (Mouton et al. 2015).

In terms of diversity in doctoral education, the age and ratio of male to female graduates have remained fairly constant over recent years, with men outnumbering women by about three to two, and with a greater proportion of black and non-South African students entering the system (ASSAf 2010, 47). Doctoral students spend on average about five years in their respective programmes – between the ages of 33 (natural and agricultural sciences) and 41 (social sciences and humanities), with most of the PhDs produced in the social sciences and humanities (54%), especially in the fields of education, economic and management sciences, and religion; followed by natural and agricultural sciences (25%); health sciences (14%); and engineering sciences, materials and technologies (7%) (ASSAf 2010, 51, 54). While women are well represented among doctoral graduates in the health sciences (62%) and social sciences (51%), only about a third of the graduates in the natural and agricultural sciences are female (36%), with the number of female engineering, materials and technologies graduates being critically low (15%) in 2007 (ASSAf 2010, 48). Likewise, female representation is significantly better among white doctoral graduates in all fields with the exception of engineering sciences, materials and technologies (11% white compared to 22% black) and health sciences (60% white and 65% black) (ASSAf 2010, 48).

A total of 22 public universities – categorised as research (11), research and teaching (comprehensive, 6), and technology universities (5) – award doctoral degrees (CHE 2009). More than 80 per cent of all doctoral qualifications are produced by ‘traditional’ research universities, with the top ten doctoral graduate-producing universities being responsible for 89 per cent of all doctoral graduates and 86 per cent of all research (HESA 2014). Amongst the top ten doctoral graduate-producing universities, mostly previous HAIs are prominent and produced the bulk of doctoral graduates in 2007, such as: the University of Pretoria (13.3%); Stellenbosch University (12%); the University of Cape Town (11.1%); the University of the Witwatersrand (10.5%); North-West University (9.7%); the University of KwaZulu-Natal (8.3%); the University of South Africa (6.1%); the University of the Free State (6%); and the University of Johannesburg (5.9%) (ASSAf 2010, 56). It seems unlikely that the number of doctoral graduates will increase, considering that doctoral throughput depends on the availability of a research-oriented academic workforce that should be more diverse to include many more blacks and not just be reliant on those in the system, whose productivity may have reached a ‘plateau’ (Mouton 2010). The DHET (2012, 11) acknowledges that ‘the number of overall postgraduate qualifications obtained, particularly PhD graduates, is too low’. Consequently, the National Planning Commission (NPC) of the government proposes that there should be ‘more than 5 000 doctoral graduates per year’ by 2030, mostly in the fields of science, engineering, technology and mathematics (NPC 2012, 319).

HESA (2014, 6) considers the target of producing 5 000 doctoral graduates by 2030 as too ‘ambitious’ and cites a lack of state funding; the unavailability of research infrastructure, facilities and equipment (including at those universities that produce the bulk of doctoral graduates, more specifically 12 universities that produce 95% of doctoral graduates); the lack of supervision capacities; and limited inter-university collaboration as major constraints to expanding doctoral education. This brings me to a discussion of why an overemphasis on throughput rates only potentially puts the doctoral qualification at risk.

## PUTTING DOCTORAL STUDIES AT RISK: A CAUTIONARY REMARK

There are a plethora of scholarly contributions that corroborate the importance of producing doctorates for societal, political and economic development. The Academy of Science of South Africa (ASSAf) and the NPC are but two institutions that confirm the significance of doctoral studies for South Africa’s human development. Yet, the importance of producing knowledge cannot just be about performing a mere technical exercise that results in a manuscript with a problem statement and methodical and methodological positioning that accentuate the ‘scientific’ contribution of the text. This would be tantamount to producing knowledge for the sake of mere technical compliance, but that does not respond to the societal, political, economic, human and non-human complexities and challenges of the day. Such work would be the efforts of ‘technicians of learning’ (Derrida 2004, 97), who merely judge without autonomy on the basis of having limited knowledge. This brings me to my three points of concern.

First, in the humanities, arts and social sciences – as in the natural and health sciences for a while now – there has been a demand for candidates to complete their doctorate by publishing four to five articles in ‘reputable’ academic journals. This sounds noble and perhaps – although I seriously doubt so – more doctorates will ensue. My argument is a sceptical one: If by far the majority of students enrolled for doctoral degrees in the social sciences, such as education, for example, only learn to write *through* completing their PhD, what guarantee is there that they will competently write their articles towards their PhD? If students have not yet acquired the skill to write (which the vast majority of students in education learn through doing their PhD), why do supervisors want to raise their own and their students’ expectations that they can write articles and have them published – without the skill to do so? This would be a major risk, considering that many doctoral supervisors complain that students cannot write ‘scientifically’ and are under-prepared for doctoral studies (Mouton et al. 2015).

Second, if many students – certainly in education – are under-prepared for doctoral studies, there is the hope that they can be supported personally, caringly,

engagingly and contractually (Gatfield 2005). And that, through such support, they are taken through a proposal phase (even allowed to register for an entire year just to produce a proposal at the University of Stellenbosch). In other words, these students are being introduced to pursuing a doctorate without having systematically and rigorously produced a proposal. Can a potential doctoral student be expected to investigate, for instance, the implications of democratic citizenship on pedagogical action in classrooms if such a student has not connected himself or herself to the major debates about democratic theory in relation to pedagogy? Of course not, and hence under-preparedness poses an epistemological threat to doctoral scholarship.

Third, there is the view that more and more novice supervisors are expected to jump on the throughput rate-enhancement 'bandwagon' because the experienced ones are already enjoying their fair share of students – on average at least four to five annually. Of course novice supervisors can engage quite competently with the literature and contribute towards the doctoral thesis collaboratively with the student. However, there is an inherent danger here. A novice being expected to competently supervise a doctoral candidate can equally result in a partial treatment of a study that would not have been the case had an experienced supervisor with a proven pedigree in the field of study being investigated by the student done the supervision. The risk is equally that superficiality might ensue.

By way of opening up the debate I think it is high time that higher educationists become more serious about the scholarly contributions students can make in the name of pursuing a doctorate for its own sake, rather than first being concerned about the throughput rates that need to be achieved. This would put the doctoral qualification less at risk, yet would engender opportunities for more risky erudite contributions.

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