An Assessment of the Status, Practice and Challenges of Doctoral Supervision at Lupane State University in Zimbabwe

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Abstract: The main aim of this paper was to explore the status quo of doctoral practice at the Lupane State University in Zimbabwe, in order to get context into the challenges which are encountered that lead to low completion rates by doctoral students, from both the student and supervisor perspectives. Previous literature highlighted a need for further skills development of novice supervisors. This paper adopted a qualitative methodological approach, combining semi-structured interviews with documentary analysis techniques. The key findings were that as a rural based university, the institution is unable to retain its skilled human capital, and the few supervisors there are unmotivated. For students, the main highlight was their desire to interact and network with other PhD candidates, hence implored the organizing of regular doctoral colloquia to showcase their work in progress. This paper recommends that the university revises its current policies on doctoral supervision to accommodate the various modes of attaining a PhD, as well as expand the supervision models used to ensure that, in the event of a supervisor leaving the university, students are not disadvantaged and can still complete their PhD studies.

Keywords: SDGs, Higher Education, Doctoral Supervision, Doctoral Practice, Supervision Challenges, Zimbabwe

1. Introduction

The United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) have become entrenched in the strategic visions of many universities around the world. According to the UNESCO Institute for Statistics (2018), SDG4 specifically aims to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education, as well as promote lifelong learning opportunities for all global citizens by 2030. This, by default, also encompasses aspects of gender equality, that fall under SDG5, and reduced inequalities (access irrespective of socio-economic standing) as per SDG10. Although SDG4's focus begins at the grass-root level of education, the 'lifelong learning' aspect implies that there is a spill-over beyond formal tertiary education. The education lifecycle as envisioned by SDG4 begins at school readiness, transitioning to academic competencies, literacy and numerical skills, to graduate and post-graduate's skills required for the workplace. Hence, even after one

has attained the highest possible academic degree in the form of a doctorate, learning does not stop. In order to remain relevant and up to date with developments, a PhD-holder must regularly attend continuous personal development (CPD) courses, as required by professional bodies and employers alike.

Besides the global humanitarian perspective, there are other arguments that have been put forward in support of the need for more PhDs in the world. One such voice is the International Association of Universities (IAU, 2021) which has a cluster within its structures which advocates for the recognition of the important role played, and contributions made, by higher education institutions (HEIs) towards achieving the SDGs and Agenda 2030. This cluster has opened avenues for collaboration between universities across the world in the facilitation of teaching and learning, research and development, community engagement, leadership and university management and best practices. The IAU (2021) underpins that for universities to function optimally, and achieve their own institutional goals, national goals, and global development goals – they need to be managed by an able team comprised of individuals that hold the highest possible academic qualification (i.e. a PhD), in order for them to discern the quality needs of their academic programmes, particularly the doctoral degree in respective fields. As such, as long as an HEI has a distinguished scholar at its helm, he/she will strive to be supported by a suitably qualified and experienced team that shares a similar vision in terms of the short, medium and long term goals of the university.

While the global and national visions and goals are closely aligned to the UN's SDGs, many African universities are struggling to incorporate these national visions into their strategic institutional plans. If universities do not produce adequate teachers, SDG4 will remain a pipe dream. Equally so, if the few professors in their respective disciplines do not graduate new, younger academics, mentor and upskill them – there may be a void in universities, as there will be paucity in doctoral supervision, particularly in the emerging research areas.

There are thirteen government universities in Zimbabwe. Lupane State University (LSU) is the only rural-based institution of higher learning. It was established in 2004, with its first student intake in 2005. This was at a time when the government was reducing public funding for universities, despite HEIs' importance in the economy as an avenue for research and development (R&D), skills development and other economic partnerships.

University mandates differ. Lupane State University's mandate is semi-arid agriculture. Its focus is the development and offering of graduate programmes suitable for, and aligned to the economic activities of the local community. LSU is based in Matabeleland North's provincial capital, an area surrounded by rural farm land, as well as Hwange National Park, which is rich in wildlife. As such, the university offers unique degrees in crop, soil and animal sciences, horticulture and landscaping, irrigation engineering, and rangeland management (Agricultural -Sciences Faculty), tourism and hospitality, and human capital development (Commerce Faculty), development studies, and educational foundations (Humanities Faculty), as well as engineering and information technology (Engineering Faculty). The distinctiveness of LSU's degree offerings has put a strain on the academic human capital of the university. There are a few individuals who hold higher level degrees to be able to teach and supervise Masters and Doctoral candidates wishing to pursue their studies at that level. With an increased demand for PhDs at Lupane State University, the available supervisors find themselves carrying abnormal workloads split between

teaching modules, and supervising postgraduate students. A preliminary assessment of PhD enrolments, indicated that LSU has a significant number of its own staff pursuing PhD studies, with a few within LSU and the majority at other HEIs beyond the borders of Zimbabwe. From a financial perspective, the preference for LSU would be for their staff to enrol for PhD at the employing university, as the sponsorship cost for tuition fees can be contained. This obviously then results in colleagues supervising colleagues, and can raise the issue of professionalism, objectivity, quality, amongst others.

This paper seeks to present the doctoral supervision perspectives of Lupane State University (LSU), by critically analysing the existing scholarly literature on doctoral supervision practices. It will further assess the status, current practices and challenges encountered by doctoral supervisors at LSU, using predominantly documentary evidence, supplemented by interviews. Conclusions and recommendations on best practices suitable for the rural-based, resources' constrained university will wind down this paper.

2. Literature Review

According to Herman (2012), although a PhD student enrols for their studies assuming that they will merely receive the highest academic qualification, PhD supervisors aim to equip PhD candidates with additional hard and soft skills. These skills include communication, self-confidence, conference paper presentation, publishing of articles, and even the ability to supervise future PhD students. Unlike other qualifications, a PhD thus goes beyond merely equipping a student with intellectual knowledge. This hence makes the pedagogy of a PhD very important. Madondo (2019) is also of the view that successful doctoral supervision is dependent on striking a delicate balance between the student-supervisor relationship, experience, skill and practice from inception to completion of the project.

Doctoral supervision practices are grounded in Grundmann's (2021) socialisation theory, and closely correlated with the key roles played by supervisors. Lessing (2011), Schneijderberg (2021) and Makoni (2022) affirmed the main roles of doctoral supervisors as being those of an advisor, a counsellor, mentor, friend, teacher, critic, and examiner, amongst others. Furthermore, supervision practices are guided by the format of the doctoral thesis, as well as the supervision mode or approach. According to Ngulube (2021), doctoral education is at the core of knowledge creation, through the acquisition, acclimatisation and sharing of ideas, often flowing between students and their supervisors, but eventually contributing to societies and communities alike. As novice researchers, doctoral students often depend on their supervisors for guidance and mentorship, on the personal, academic and professional fronts.

Swales (2004) averred that doctoral qualifications can be attained in one of two formats: PhD by publication which is a collection of articles, or a PhD by thesis, which is a monograph. The PhD by publication requires a student to already be able to independently produce articles that are of a sufficiently high quality to be accepted for publication in high impact journals. The PhD by publication brings together a number of independent articles, with a common theme running from the introduction to the conclusion of the overall thesis. The more common and traditional type of PhD is the monograph. A student is guided from writing the introduction, to critiquing existing theoretical and empirical literature review, to undertaking data collection and analysis, ending with a round-up of the findings upon which study conclusions are drawn (Swales, 2004).

As part of supervision practice, the supervision model also matters. There are two basic types of supervision models which universities permit to guide the relationship between student and supervisor during the doctoral journey: sole or individual supervision, as well as team supervision. In individual supervision, also known as the apprenticeship model, the student is solely dependent on their supervisor to provide the necessary guidance throughout the PhD journey (Frick, 2019). This can present problems of continuity in the event of death or resignation of the supervisor. It is for this reason that universities now prefer the team supervision model. As implied, this supervision model exposes the doctoral student to a number of supervisors, often bringing different expertise, knowledge and skills to the project (Manathunga, 2012).

Smith, Billot, Clouder and King (2020) examined the dual status of academic staff, who are both PhD candidates as well as lecturers at the universities they work and study at. Similar to the earlier seminal work on colleague supervision by Denicolo (2004), Smith et al. (2020) identified four aspects of the dual status of academics, which were assumed to be problematic, or a source of conflict. These were: colleague supervision, power relations, collegial support and self-development. Smith et al. (2020) found that, although supervisors acknowledged the need for peer support of their PhD candidates that were also their colleagues, there was often the element of rank from the supervisor, and a general lack of support from the institution, and this resulted in a high drop-out rate of dual-status doctoral students, and their subsequent resignation from the university, due to frustration.

Clouder, Billot, King and Smith (2020) concurred with Engeström (2015) that the institutional rules that govern doctorate qualifications, and those of employment, often lead to conflicts. On the one hand, the university employed student can only study on a part-time basis, due to carrying a full teaching load for which the employer remunerates him. On the other hand, as a registered student – he is expected to complete the doctorate within the prescribed time limits, as per university statutes. The reality is that, one of the two goals will suffer. More often than not – because the employment activity comes with financial implications, a staff member registered for a doctorate at his place of employment would rather safeguard job security through ensuring that they maintain their academic teaching standards, at the expense of pursuing their doctorate studies. This is the reason why academics pursuing doctoral degrees at their place of employment either never complete, or take very long to finish their studies. The workload allocations done by universities overlook the competing goals of personal development to attain a PhD (Smith et al., 2020).

Based on the academic literary perspectives presented herein, this paper will assess whether the experiences of academics, as per the reviewed literature, is applicable to doctoral candidates and supervisors at Lupane State University.

3. Methodology

This paper adopted a qualitative approach, combining the case study and documentary analysis methods. A case study paves the way for the researcher to undertake in-depth data collection and analysis within a specific, real-life setting, while documentary analysis gives the researcher an opportunity to assess policy and other documents related to the subject under study (Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill, 2019).

As previously stated, LSU being a rural-based higher education institution offers unique degrees, has not experienced a high uptake of its postgraduate studies offering. As such, LSU has only two students registered for PhD, both being co-supervised. For the purposes of this paper, informal interviews were conducted with both PhD candidates, and their PhD supervisors at Lupane State University. Interviews were deemed to be appropriate as they enabled prompt data collection, considering the few respondents. Due to the small number of PhD students and supervisors alike at Lupane State University, a total of two PhD candidates, and two PhD supervisors were interviewed. The objective of interviewing both students and supervisors was to facilitate the gathering of evidence from both a demand (student perspective) and supply (supervisor perspective) side to PhD supervision. Although the end-goal for both parties may be the same, namely, to deliver a successful PhD thesis and graduate; the roles, expectations and modes of attaining such may vary; hence the need to analyse both ends of the spectrum. The interview guide contained open-ended questions that included the following:

1. What challenges have you encountered in your PhD journey as a student/ supervisor?
2. How have you overcome the challenges encountered?
3. What advice would you give to the internal structure/ policy makers of LSU with a view to improving PhD supervision at the University?

In order to enhance the quality of analysis for this paper, the qualitative interviews were augmented with documentary analysis. The documents analysed for the purposes of this paper were mainly policy documents that relate to the recruitment and supervision of doctoral students at Lupane State University, including the application process, identification and allocation of supervisors, and Senate regulations on the awarding of PhD degrees.

4. Findings

4.1 Current Status of Doctoral Supervision at LSU

The practice at the university is that applicants should submit their applications for admission to a prospective department. After the Departmental Board has scrutinised the application, they assess the available supervisors and supervision capacity, then submit their recommendations to the Faculty Higher Degrees Committee. The key requirement is that there should be a main Supervisor and a co-Supervisor, and where possible, an alternate Supervisor. This is done to safeguard the students, hedging them against the effects of staff mobility. Being a rural university renders LSU unattractive to most staff, who are often looking for opportunities at other urban-based institutions of higher education. That said, staff in the departments of Agricultural Sciences, Development Studies and Education see a lot of research possibilities with respect to the university's location, context and mandate. These disciplines are viewed as an integral part of rural development, and this makes the rural environment a strategic location for doctoral research and experiments.

Currently, the situation obtaining at LSU is possibly peculiar to it. The only students registered for doctoral studies are also members of academia in the same university. It is a staff benefit not to pay academic tuition fees while employed by the university. This makes them what Billiot, King, Smith and Clouder

(2021) refer to as "borderlanders". They play the dual role of being lecturers to undergraduate students, while being doctoral students at the same institution, in line also with the study of Smith et al. (2020).

Collaborative research is highly recommended in local universities. So far, it seems to attract funding from varied sources. Applied across to the context of doctoral supervision models learnt under a promoted doctoral supervision programme for African academics, Frick (2019) avers that collaborative research creates opportunities for co-supervision and team supervision. Collaborative supervision backed by funds from collaborative research is advantageous to students who often face financing challenges, while to a novice supervisor, co-supervision presents an opportunity to learn quality doctoral supervision from experienced colleagues. Furthermore, co-supervision makes it possible to consider doctoral studies by publication, wherein the student and supervisors collaboratively produce journal articles for publication during the formal course of PhD study. This approach expedites promotion for both the PhD candidate (currently internal staff members) and the respective supervisors (also staff members), as the research outputs count towards the cumulative count required for promotion to the next academic grade. Given the peculiarities of Zimbabwean universities, where there is a dearth of doctoral supervisors and a scarcity of funding, universities need to think in other terms to develop doctoral candidates. This could further necessitate a consideration of alternate routes of achieving the PhD, such as PhD by publication, as opposed to the traditional thesis or monograph model.

Practically on the ground, doctoral students at LSU expressed sentiments that they depended solely on the expertise of local staff to advance their studies. The explanation was that their isolated environment limited their choices. Whilst there is internet infrastructure, data connectivity in rural Lupane was extremely poor for them to want to rely on online supervision, offered by higher education institutions outside of the country. As a result, the PhD candidates and their supervisors hold regular seminars, group presentations and workshops on specific areas of need, such as statistical data analysis. As such, most of the seminars are led by statisticians in academia who are also pursuing their doctoral studies. Students practice mutual support of each other under the guidance of their supervisors, while also benefitting from the participation of other academic colleagues, who usually ask reflective questions during the seminars.

4.2 Challenges of Doctoral Supervision at LSU

While we recognise the significance of doctoral studies as a nation, Zimbabwe Council for Higher Education (ZimCHE) regulations / guidelines and standards at the moment seem to work against the realisation of supervising and graduating PhD graduates in bigger numbers in universities (Garwe,2015). Lupane State University itself does not have a complete framework to promote doctoral studies. Holders of doctorates in the university are busy churning out journal article publications to accumulate research outputs towards their own promotion. The spirit to help candidates wishing to do doctoral studies is certainly not a priority. The few candidates from outside the university who had registered for doctoral studies have had to shelve their studies due to failure to pay the very high tuition fees charged. Academics feel that this discontinuation of studies by students dents their image, as other stakeholders might not understand the real problems behind low doctoral supervision numbers per capita, and institutionally. As a result, there is a general slack on promoting doctoral studies. According to Carter, Kensington-Miller and Courtney (2017), academics world-over are faced with many competing demands, of which doctoral supervision does not rank highly because of the time that it takes to supervise a doctorate from start to

finish. Other academic activities such as the publication of articles can be successfully undertaken in under six months, but a PhD takes at least two years of a supervisor's time.

Without institutional efforts to upskill staff, it is up to suitably qualified lecturers at LSU to identify mentors in doctoral supervision, outside of their home university. As a result of this keen interest to partake in doctoral supervision, the authors of this paper twinned up, affording the less experienced PhD-holder an opportunity to serve as an alternate supervisor. As a third-tier supervisor, this presents an opportunity to learn from both the main and co-supervisor without getting embroiled in some differences in their academic perceptions. Fortunately, there seems to be some understanding on whose opinion takes precedence in certain aspects of the research and the PhD candidate's thesis. For this particular doctoral candidate, one supervisor leads in the introduction and literature review, while the other has strength in methodology and leads in data analysis and discussion, by mutual consent. This experience has facilitated the mentorship and skills transfer on how successful co- supervision can be managed.

Concurrently, there is a campaign at Lupane State University to consider the inclusion of the Department of Educational Foundations under the regulations of postgraduate studies. This omission might have been overlooked at the time when this department insisted on not admitting any doctoral students for supervision. Granted, there are many applications to the department but there are some regulation gaps to be addressed first. This has resulted in some colleagues opting to be co-supervisors of doctoral candidates in neighbouring private universities where they are incentivised for every completing student, a practice that is common in South African universities as well.

5. Recommendations

Ongoing and continued doctoral supervision training is an integral part of academic professional growth and development. As such, we implore university leaders to buy into the value addition that can be derived from programmes such as those offered by the Stellenbosch University's CREST team in developing novice African doctoral supervisors. Investments in human capital of universities can assist young academics, and the universities themselves in multiplying relevant doctoral holders as needed by our developing nations.

From a BRICS economies' perspective, developing countries should emulate the policies and practices of China. China's doctoral education programmes are backed by national policy (Cyranoski et al., 2011), wherein the government provides funding to support universities. Similarly, South Africa, through its numerous scientific research bodies such as the National Research Foundation (NRF) provides various grants, support programmes and incentives for postgraduate students, academic staff and higher education institutions (HEI), in pursuit of the objectives of the National Development Plan (NDP), which is closely aligned with the SDGs (Cloete, Mouton, & Sheppard, 2015). Universities need a clearly enunciated national policy on doctoral education that will ensure a multiplier effect in producing doctoral holders for academia, industry and economic development.

Other recommendations that Lupane State University could consider adopting in support of both doctoral students and doctoral supervisors include:

1. Affording academic staff who are pursuing doctoral studies the opportunity to take sabbatical leave such as 'research and development' to pursue and complete their studies, with the provisio that the staff member should, complete the degree during the paid time off, and upon returning, should work back the period at the sponsoring university.

2. To ensure that the doctoral journey is not a lonely one for students, LSU should organise an annual doctoral colloquium or conference which brings together students from other universities within the country, to share experiences and present their work-in-progress. It is always important and value-adding to subject one's work to peer review by others who can openly and honestly critique it without fear of being reprimanded. Any suggested feedback can then be discussed with the supervisor before being incorporated into the doctoral study.

3. To source and provide funding to send the doctoral students and their respective supervisors to present a paper at a conference within Africa, where similar degree specialisations are offered. This will ensure networking and open doors for future collaborations with staff from other universities.

4. Doctoral supervisors should generally be "freed" from having to lecture any teaching modules and focus solely on doctoral supervision and the publication of journal articles. While currently not the practice, it may be worthwhile for the university to incentivise staff to publish in international journals, by paying the article processing fees (APC), particularly for open-access journals. This would make the LSU brand visible among the scholarly academic community, government research institutes from other countries, and universities globally. This would be further advantageous in that, the unique degrees offered by LSU, would attract greater interest and possible funding from private institutions with an interest in flora and fauna, for instance.

5. To revise the current institutional policies on doctoral supervision to accommodate the various modes of attaining a PhD, as well as expand the supervision models. The PhD by publication for instance, would enable both the student and supervisor to open themselves to immediate peer review of their work in credible international journals. Also, the publication of these articles may encourage the hastened completion of the doctorate, as opposed to one which is a monograph format.

6. To capacitate doctoral supervisors by investing in programmes such as the CREST doctoral supervision course offered by Stellenbosch University in South Africa, particularly for novice supervisors. Supervision is not taught per se, but rather learnt through practice. However, the theoretical exposure that is given to supervisors in courses such as the CREST one, would provide a solid foundation to ensure quality doctoral supervision.

The possibilities for universities to support their academic staff, whether as students or supervisors, are endless. It is often the financial resources which are a constraint, and thus doctoral degrees and supervision thereof, are not considered a priority, despite their national importance.

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