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# Postgraduate research training: A case of the South African doctoral consortium of universities

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## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

### 1.0 Background

Postgraduate research training has all along been operating on traditional inherited curriculum and as such, has not been able to cater for South African needs for research training. This is due to the fact that the main strategies that dominate the training of researchers in developing countries, through the MA and PhD programmes have shown gaps, especially in historically Black universities (AISA, 2004). As Letseka (2004:46) has indicated that historically black universities in South Africa were established as teaching institutions whose responsibility was to prepare graduates to enter the workforce after completion of their degrees hence the majority of these have not developed a culture of research.

Moreover, postgraduate training that was received in overseas and local universities by South African researchers was very narrow, too specialized and too theoretical resulting in postgraduates that had communication, interpersonal and leadership skills that required further development (Cross, 1999). Before the program of the Consortium there was a mismatch between the research priorities of the universities and the interests of the students and as a result, a cultural gap between researchers was produced in this context and they now face challenges in South African higher education. Internships and apprenticeships conducted by research institutions also reflected the problems of an environment that was associated with poor supervision, inadequate levels of departmental assistance and limited access to quality research training infrastructure (ibid).

Within universities, the models of training researchers are rooted on the British and the American models which are either based on coursework and research report or research training and dissertation models. The British model is based on the solitary-scholar ideal. It assumes that students who have reached the doctoral level already have established capacity and that they have financial and infrastructural resources to deal with the demands of conducting rigorous research. On top of that, it relies on individual student-supervisor

consultations and offers insufficient support. Consequently, this model has produced very few educational researchers even long after the demise of apartheid. On the other hand, the American model is based on research training that emphasizes partnerships and support through coursework assistance and structured training. This model assumes that the learner requires support from the educators of research and accorded such help, the learner can become an independent researcher. The Consortium was formed in 1998 by five South African Universities, namely the University of Cape Town (UCT), University of Durban-Westville (UDW), University of Natal (UN), University of the Western Cape (UWC), and the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits).These institutions discerned a need to review their doctoral programmes in education in the context of a widely recognized shortage of high-level capacity in the area of Education Policy research (Cross, 1999).

However, in developing countries, emphasis on research training should be based on developing an alternative model that would be more suitable to specific contexts. For instance, the Wits research-training approach that runs across faculties has a vast range of programmes to be explored. The different schools and various faculties approach research mentoring and supervision differently. For instance, in the faculty of Humanities, Wits has the WISER model, the Graduate School model, the NRF model (as developed by the school of education with Stanford University) and the individual one-student-one-supervisor model. Each of these models has a different approach to the funding of research trainees and therefore it requires research that aims to comprehend advantages and disadvantages of these varying approaches to research training in order for each faculty to extend what is possible for its postgraduate - research students. In this manner, all the faculties may all learn from the best practice of other faculties within the university.

Hence, the assessment of the Consortium was that, while these strategies remained a necessity, in their current form they were highly inappropriate for South Africa's educational needs. However, what required urgent revision and a more innovative approach was the postgraduate training model of the consortium, which represents the single most important source of research training in South Africa at the moment. The Consortium seeks

to do away with the small numbers of postgraduates who are enrolling for research training as this is a direct product of the apartheid legacy where sound educational research and development were inhibited for political reasons. Not only was there racial skewing of research opportunities, but also universities lacked the capacity to work at the postgraduate level in a competitive and sustainable way.

### 1.2 Statement of the problem

The study explores the doctoral programme conducted by the Consortium of South African Universities and its contribution to research training in South African Higher education. It deals with the following key aspects: funding issues, program design and coordination, curriculum delivery, partnership and collaborative arrangements, student experience and institutional implications. Moreover, it is often argued that in a modern economy the quantity and quality of human capital is the most important factor underlying economic growth (El-Khawas, 1996). In this study, I shall show that the Consortium of South African Universities gives opportunities for promoting uniformity in postgraduate training, funding, pooling together of resources and standards.

The existing literature on the consortium points to the fact that there are opportunities that the Consortium of South African Universities can bring to both the students and the country. For instance, the benefit to the career of the graduate and to the country is that the student, will have made, and is capable of making, original contributions to the knowledge through research in the chosen field. The impact of the work on society can expose his work to both national and international public criticism. The study explores these opportunities, together with the pedagogical practices that underpin them, and the experiences of the students in the program.

### 1.3 Argument

This study argues that under conditions of shrinking budgets, increasing financial constraints and shortage of capacity, collective programmes conducted on a partnership

basis such as the doctoral program of the Consortium of South African Universities, provides effective forms of research training with beneficial impact on students and staff of partner institutions. Although such initiatives may be relatively expensive, their advantages outweigh possible disadvantages.

Firstly, it is possible to bring the existing capacity and best expertise from partner institutions into this program. Secondly, the program of the Consortium of South African Universities maximizes the use of existing infrastructure and support systems for the benefit of students from South Africa, the SADC region and throughout the African continent. For instance, it makes readily available library resources, IT resources, joint supervision and institutional and cross-institutional support through its summer and winter schools. Thirdly, it provides an enabling context for the experimentation and appropriation of new teaching strategies, pedagogies etc. by drawing from international expertise and these are vital for revising training strategies. Fourthly, the program of the Consortium facilitated the building of useful networks of students, researchers and academia across institutions. However, to be sustainable, strategies should be built in these initiatives for partner institutions to make use of the lessons emerging from them.

The program of the Consortium is research intensive and gives priority to research training and research productivity. As such, it has adopted a hybrid model of research training through doctoral studies in education policy that combines the strong research emphasis of the British/South African tradition, coursework support and structured training of the American tradition (integrated program of enrichment, academic support and professional skills development) adapted to the South African context. This program retains and consolidates the primacy of research in graduate training and adds a structured curriculum with course-work elements, support through mentoring, practical research experience and exposure to work-place experience through internships (American Experience).

Furthermore, the program of the Consortium has elements of integration and articulation of research with work experience. This program provides students with an opportunity to

participate in training for team and large-scale empirical research. In addition, the model allows part-time students' work experience to be applied to the courses and full-time students to get exposed to the work place. It also has flexible delivery modes that cater for both full-time and part-time students when they attend the generic components of the program in the Summer and Winter Schools and at a later stage during the joint doctoral colloquia (annual colloquia that brings together students and faculty for the purposes of further skills training and discussion of students' work-in-progress) and the doctoral seminars (every candidate is required to participate in a research seminar for the purpose of planning and preparation of a doctoral thesis), that are undertaken in their home institutions. Moreover, this program enables full-time students to complete the program within the minimum period, while part-time students are enabled to proceed at a pace that recognizes their difficulties of location (Cross, 2003:1).

### 1.4 Rationale

This study opens debates on issues concerning postgraduate research training in a changing world context, especially in educational policy studies. It adds the advantages of forming collaboration in higher learning research training to the already existing literature. By focusing upon the program of the Consortium, the study aims to contribute to the development of a more culturally sensitive, cumulative and contextually grounded research base for education policy studies and researchers in South Africa. Moreover, this research attempts to find out what has worked well and it derives lessons which can be drawn for providers of postgraduate research training. It is hoped that the lessons learned from the program of the Consortium may be applied to improve postgraduate research training in South Africa and the region. Furthermore, the study explains the complexities of effective training of postgraduate researchers in relation to funding and the issues of part-time students.

South Africa requires high-level capacity for teaching and research, but it also requires the development of complex policies, which the educational and economic systems require (Janks, 2004:1). While there is capacity for critique and conceptual work in the country, there is an inadequate capacity for gathering empirical information about the effects of policies, policy implementation and what is actually happening with policy within classrooms and education bureaucracies. Such capacity, as there is, is also in need of development. There is, furthermore, a need to bring into the research community constituencies of the South African nation who have been previously excluded and marginalized, namely women and black people. This goal can only be possible through the institutionalization of graduate training in South African universities, which takes into account important contextual factors such as the profile of graduate students, the profile of faculty and the institutional environment in South African universities.

Hence, the assessment of the Consortium was that, while existing strategies remained a necessity, in their current form they were highly inappropriate for South Africa's educational needs. However, what required urgent revision and a more innovative approach was the postgraduate training, which represents the single most important source of research training in South Africa.

Higher degree-courses depend on faculty members, who have been trained up to doctoral degrees. These scholars lack the necessary experience to lead others to desired heights of research training. Besides, their numbers are inadequate and this results in a situation where the universities are unable to take doctoral work seriously (Cross, 1999:1). The reasons for the development of a partnership of universities arose from the absence of capacity in South Africa. The argument that was made was that together the universities would be able to present a credible and generative model which would increase the pool of doctoral graduates in the country and provide the experience for institutions to undertake this level of training effectively.

While attempting to address these issues, this study has cultivated an awareness of the relative advantages and pitfalls of competing approaches to educational development. On top of that, it also explores the relevance of the model of the consortium in providing a sustainable basis for the enlargement of educational research capacity throughout South Africa and the region.

I hope the study does not only add to the already existing knowledge, but also promotes an understanding of how the Consortium works and for whom it works. Moreover, it presents a possibility of shedding some light on the strengths and shortcomings of the training program, and in doing so it will help to improve the program. It also sheds light on salient issues that donors of this initiative are interested in evaluating. It reveals the benefits of training postgraduate and doctoral researchers in higher learning institutions such as members of the Consortium and others who are not yet members. Besides, it helps raise awareness among other incumbent students of the advantages of pursuing doctoral research training with the Consortium. This enables the members to gather its collective wisdom and re-invigorate its vision and its practices in postgraduate education from the point of view of students, donors and institutions involved with the Consortium.

### 1.5 Outline of Chapters

The study begins by giving the general background to the changing needs of higher education through the shrinking of budgets. This has necessitated the formulation of the Consortium of South African Universities, which when understood properly, advocates for partnerships in higher education through its program. Furthermore, it outlines the research problem through tabulating arguments and the rationale that has necessitated this study. Finally, this chapter gives a brief overview of the chapters to follow.

**Chapter Two,** *Globalization, Institutional partnerships and Doctoral Research training trends and Theories* gives a broad literature review, beginning with issues of: globalization and the challenges it poses to Higher Education, the rise of partnerships in Higher

Education, the organizational approaches, theories and eruption of partnerships in Higher Education i.e. forms of international collaboration, and the South African debate. Drawing on the globalization and the educational change theory, a case is made for the necessity of forming partnerships and collaborations when training effective researchers in a developing world context. Finally, the review introduces the need and implications of partnerships in postgraduate research training which helps explain the necessity for partnerships and collaborations in research training.

**Chapter Three,** outlines the methods of data collection and analysis. The chapter describes the research approach adopted and gives reasons for opting for the qualitative type of research for this case study. Furthermore, it goes on to describe the case study in an attempt to investigate the research question and explains that data analysis focuses on a singular phenomenon and has given rise to a certain few themes in activities of the programme, supervision and publication issues and lastly, the institutional implications. The interview has been used as the major tool for data collection. Issues relating to the use of qualitative research, such as the contextualization and researcher intrusion are tackled through triangulation and by the nature of the study to identify the criteria for rigour and the reduction of prejudice.

**Chapter Four,** is devoted to *Contextual issues* such as the emergence of partnerships in Higher Education in South Africa. These issues range from the changes in higher education to the role played by donors under conditions of shrinking budgets. Moreover, this chapter looks at the relationships that are created through working together with the North and South and strengthens the national and regional partnerships in associations such as the UCT research capacity and its influence, EPUs, HSRCs and the Consortium. These help provide the different levels in which the program of the Consortium is understood. Chapter Five addresses the aim, argument and key issues of the Consortium and its institutional and organizational strategies, the curriculum and pedagogy approaches. It concludes by reviewing the experience of the CSAU.

**Chapter Five,** examines the program design, its arrangement and its curriculum delivery. Furthermore, this chapter outlines key assumptions about the programme delivery and benchmarks together with the need for more systematic support. On top of that, it argues that, this programme emphasizes systematic support in theory and method, structural approach to delivery and maximization of peer support among staff and students.

**Chapter Six,** introduces the organizational issues of the programme of the Consortium through the discussion of management issues such as meetings with deans/faculty, coordination, monitoring and funding. The aim is to argue that the programme is managed through a tightly controlled process which is implied in the collaborative responsibility that is intrinsic to the seminar approach of the programme.

**Chapter Seven,** argues that through the programme there are three major themes that explain the way in which the doctoral programme addresses research training in the Consortium. It focuses on the successes and failures of the programme, students' supervision and publication issues and finally the institutional implications that deal with facilities and funding issues.

**The Conclusion** integrates the various themes that arise from the data and explores these issues in a concluding manner. It further shows the importance of partnerships and collaborations in postgraduate research training as dictated through the process of globalization, which is presently affecting the whole world and society. This provides a starting point for educators to consider partnerships as a mode of delivery in HE pedagogy.