

## **CHAPTER SEVEN: EXPERIENCES AND CHALLENGES**

### **7.0 Introduction**

This chapter presents the experiences of the students in the programme. In relation to the institutional implications and by virtue of the nature of the study, it appears that the themes that are discussed relate to issues of supervision, publication and funding. It assesses the successes and failures of the programme through presenting and analysing the extent to which the programme has been able to attend to the research training needs of doctoral students in Schools of education in South Africa. These are presented as experiences and challenges to the programme of the consortium which are likely to improve it.

### **7.1 Successes and Failures of the Programme**

The successes of the programme rest on its ability to provide funding for high achieving students who, however, do not have the necessary means for pursuing research to the doctoral level. Moreover, the programme of the CSAU has enabling facilities in the individual institutions to further the aims of research training. For instance, they provide students with computers and offices to facilitate research training. Not only do they offer facilities, but they also offer financial independence to the postgraduate student. However, students are divided in as far as this financial assistance can go. The other thing achieved by this programme has to do with networks and partnerships to achieve more than any one of its members can achieve on their own in research training.

On the other hand, failures of this programme come in a form of its inability to discriminate in its financial offers as equality; equity and justice are fundamentally for education transformation in South Africa. The programme has achieved more for those who are enrolled and promises to continue doing so in future. However, it appears to have failed to achieve its objectives of research training through its inability to instil confidence among the doctoral students to publish jointly with their much experienced supervisors.

### 7.1.1 Achievements

The literature reveals that the programme of the Consortium is connected to a number of postgraduate training activities, such as research initiatives, partnerships, international academic programmes, international networks and collaborative agreements with other partner institutions. There is also the curriculum delivery of the programme of the consortium through new collaborative research training methods. The programme of the Consortium of South African Universities (CSAU) mobilizes the resources of the Spencer Foundation in support of research training through institutional cooperation. Spencer Foundation supports partnerships between higher education institutions in South Africa and in cooperating countries to demonstrate how they can apply their expertise collaboratively to global and locally based research development challenges. While the partnerships promise good research training means, it is not clear whether the doctoral students understand the implications of the research funding provided by the programme.

There were five doctoral students that were interviewed, three supervisors and two coordinators, who all come from the School of Education at Wits University. Semi-structured and structured interviews were utilized to allow the subjects to converse uninterrupted about the programme of the Consortium. The responses were interpreted by combining individual perceptions in a way that revealed meaning and coherence, while at the same time looking out for issues that could relate to policy as a contextual frame for this programme. Interactive mechanisms such as assumptions, conventions and practices were noted and then linked to the literature. However, the responses were discussed in relation to the outlined themes and not according to the status of the subjects.

The interviewees were asked to comment on their understanding of the programme of the CSAU and their responses reflected a thorough understanding of the programme of the Consortium and added important qualifiers such as the one advocated by PhD supervisor 2:

*Is something that contributes enormously to the development of research capacity in South Africa. It is making a real significant contribution, in terms of the disadvantaged groups and so I do think it makes a significant contribution to research training in South Africa.*

Janks argues that the programme of the Consortium does make a difference in the teaching of research in HE in that this programme through its collaborative nature reaches for even those groups that have been previously disadvantaged. PhD supervisor 2 is supported by PhD supervisor 1, a supervisor and coordinator of the programme, who also believes that the programme has achieved significantly for students and the institutions involved ever since its inception by arguing that:

*The programme of the Consortium has addressed the question of access to previously under-represented groups to educational opportunities.*

He goes on to argue that;

*the programme has had a considerable regional, national and institutional impact on existing approaches to doctoral training in general. (i) At the regional level, it has been regarded not only as the most effective approach to human resources training most suited to the needs of the region, but also as a model of training more likely to change the North-South knowledge relations and minimize dependence on the North in HE training. (ii) At the national level, the strengths of the Consortium's initiative have been interaction between various institutions, faculty and students with specific focus on educational policy. (iii) The programme has also allowed both students and the academic staff to understand and view research from a broader base, informed by international exchange of ideas and challenges.*

Whether this can be confirmed to be the truth depends on the understanding of other stakeholders in the programme, especially those that were not interviewed. The programme has great promise for research training in South Africa, but the question is, can it be the single most important research training model for South African higher learning institutions?

These achievements outlined by PhD supervisor 1, who is also (the Coordinator) assume that the programme of the Consortium has been initiated at the right time for South African HE and has opportunities to grow through the Consortium and all the interviewees agreed that it is a collaborative effort or perhaps an act of working together of the schools of education in South Africa to develop research training, (See the Eruption of Partnerships in HE pp22 where Borzonsy and Hunter (1996) stress the need to pool together resources in a way that no individual member could afford on its own). Concerning the programme, the doctoral students felt that the programme has contributed enormously to the development of research capacity, as it has helped them (the disadvantaged)

students to complete their doctoral programmes with ease. This argument is further developed by one senior lecturer at the Wits School of Education, PhD Supervisor 3 when she argues that:

*My understanding of the Consortium entails what it seeks to achieve and it seeks to boost doctoral programmes through partnerships and collaboration among different education institutions to benefit a large number of students. .*

PhD Supervisor 3 seems to be cautious in her understanding of the Consortium and resembles someone who does not know what the truth about the CSAU is. Who are the people that have knowledge about the Consortium of South African Universities? Is it those that benefit from its funding or is it common knowledge for all those that are involved in its operations?

Another question that was posed concerning the programme was the description of the features of the programme and its curriculum practices. All the stakeholders answered this question willingly. For instance, PhD Supervisor 2 had this to say;

*The way in which this programme is constructed makes it easy for a cohort of students to meet together regularly across different parts of the country. These are students from different parts of the country, as well as universities (mainly the previously disadvantaged groups that include blacks and black women from rural South Africa). These students share their research tasks with each other and they get feedback from each other as well as from their supervisors from the various institutions and at times even got to be critiqued by highly reputable scholars from universities in the US and Australia. . . .In actual fact, it is combined research framing. These are moments of coming together of young researchers and experienced researchers for a common good research training. These are moments of coming together where we get input from experts in educational policy from different parts of the world. We get some of their inputs and present our work and get feedback from these experts, echoed student Govender.*

When a student comes out of these research workshops, they do not only know about their own research topics, but they have a good understanding of what their counterparts are doing. This coming together makes these students a ‘research community’, as they help

each other with their research tasks and design. This translates to what is called a ‘research culture’ within the Consortium.

Coordinator and PhD supervisor 1, however, was of the view that the purpose of the programme:

*is for the learner to make an original, significant contribution to knowledge in a chosen field through research work that is usually supervised and combines specialized knowledge, skills and research mastery to produce a thesis.*

This has implications for the programme of the consortium as it suggests that the purpose of the programme remains unchanged, despite the issue that the Doctoral Consortium has adopted a more structured approach by integrating a coursework component in the programme to develop and consolidate the learning that the candidates already have in a more focused and systematic way (Cross, 1999)

Having considered all these arguments on the programme, the participants I had interviewed defined the programme as one that can address the drive towards greater equity and quality goals that face HE in South Africa today. Secondly, while the students work together they establish networks with established researchers from overseas universities:

*While the students work together they establish networks with researchers in the area of policy, that is establishing links with the students with researchers overseas. I think their times of coming together have been real important for the whole process and for keeping students on track and for keeping them motivated and inspired It is really important, asserted PhD supervisor 2.*

This shows how much can be achieved through the Consortium, as this programme helps keep students on track and inspires them to complete their research work with ease. This implies, for instance, that the programme has come with innovations towards postgraduate research training in higher learning institutions in South Africa. However, it goes beyond this, as it goes beyond training in the traditional sense, where individuality was emphasized, but with this programme, collaborative efforts are pronounced and promise to

transform research training in key South African Universities. Another thing, through this programme, students are able to complete their research in time, although this could be attributed to the readily available financial assistance.

## **7.2 Students' Experiences**

The second theme that was explored in this project is that of students' experiences in the programme of the Consortium and has revealed two important themes in students' supervision and publication while they are doing their research.

The participants concur on issues of supervision in that supervision is not just considered in a narrow sense, but supervision entails professional development, even in spheres other than the students' research work. Doctoral students are required to do a lot of other mini projects and some of these are not even related to the student's research topic. This, according to the participants, helps the students to gain much research experience. They do many write-ups and attend international conferences where they are made to present the articles they have written. In most cases the students are accompanied by their supervisors to these conferences, and this helps the students to receive assistance at all times. This entails the need for funding and is evidence enough to show that research training cannot be possible without adequate funding because of its demands.

### **7.2.1 Supervision**

PhD student A, B, C and D agree that the type of supervision provided in this programme is of a one-to-one model with their supervisors:

*The main form of supervision is from my own supervisor based at Wits university, PhD Supervisor 1. The way we would have a supervision relationship, I would present work in progress and he would advise me by providing very detailed comments on these chapters and then we would have discussions. I would go back and make corrections and we would have further meetings. That is the main kind of supervision that one would get. "How often did you do that?" Two or three times a year up until now. These would be in-depth meetings of about an hour or an hour and half meetings, echoed PhD student A.*

However, PhD student B had a slightly different view about supervision as he asserted that:

*We don't take supervision, in its narrow sense, but supervision entails professional development even in other spheres other than my research work, but also we do a lot of research projects that are outside my work and when I do, I gain a lot of research experience and I do a lot of write-ups and we go to international*

*conferences and we present on these and we gain skills on how to present and skills of doing a good presentation. Also, over and above that, we also develop my supervisor's courses on education policy together and this is important for my professional development and growth. I also help teaching some components of those courses.*

PhD Student B adds a new dimension to postgraduate research training in the sense that supervision has aspects of professional development, in the sense that he gets to do many other research topics for presentation which are not directly related to his work and by so doing his research skills are developed.

On the other hand, PhD supervisor 3 points out to the fact that quantitative researchers are very few and far-in-between as she had to be supervised internationally because of the lack of competitive supervisors in this field:

*The nature of supervision was mainly through meetings. I also benefited from Stanford University who gave quite an insight to my work. And just because my study was largely quantitative, I found it difficult to get an experienced academic in it.*

This argument has challenges for the programme of the Consortium in that there have to be varied training methods when it comes to the two major research methods as advocated by MacMillan and Schumacher (1997). However, the supervisors have a different view to the nature of supervision. For instance, PhD Supervisor 2 argue that:

*Research into postgraduate pedagogy embraces more than just supervision of a thesis or dissertation. If we believe that research training involves more than just supervising the production of a thesis, dissertation or research report, then we have a responsibility to ensure that those responsible for supervising the development of postgraduate researchers need to be research active themselves. They need to know the journals in the field, they need to be writing and publishing, they need to present at national and international conferences. They need to establish networks that they can give to their students.*

This has implications for the programme of the Consortium as it suggests that there should be new approaches that can support the one-to-one supervision model of individual supervision, in order to make it more efficient and expose students to researchers and research communities beyond simply one supervisor. This is one of the challenges of the programme of the Consortium that should be dealt with through its annual winter and summer schools.

### **7.2.2 Good supervision**

In good supervision, as described by PhD supervisor 3:

*The relationship has to be enabling because when the student completes the PhD he or she [sic] will have to stand on his [sic] own and the supervisor should leave room for independence on the part of the student.*

This implies that any good supervisor should not just do his work, but should be considerate towards the needs of his or her students, through what both PhD supervisor 2 and PhD supervisor 4 call ‘successful completion’ of the research exercise. The point to make here is that while supervision can seem simple, it varies from one supervisor to the other and from school to school or faculty to faculty. This implies that there is a need for a common supervision guidelines among the supervisors of the programme of the Consortium or perhaps learn from the best practice of others within the Consortium.

Most of the participants described a good supervisor as one who assists a student toward a successful completion of their research work. For instance, PhD student C said:

*Supervisors are seen as people who are knowledgeable and have many years of experience in it. They do not just give intellectual guidance, but they provide support in many other ways such as assisting the students acquire financial help from donors like the Spencer Foundation and many others: He always makes it a point that we receive our financial payments on time to assist us complete our tasks in time. Furthermore, my supervisor would also give emotional support in terms of personal problems such as family commitments. This translates to the fact that doctoral research needs supervisors who care*



*about the people they work with and they should be in constant contact to facilitate the speedy completion of their research tasks.*

From the arguments above, I can say, good supervisors are those who instil confidence in those they are supervising, but the pacing of the work is done by the student and not the supervisor (PhD Supervisor 3).

The question to ask here is whether the supervisors have common ground from which they operate.

### **7.2.3 The advantages and disadvantages of co-publication**

On issues of publication and co-publication with students and their supervisors, the participants had a common view in that publication or co-publication has more advantages than disadvantages. The advantages of publication or co-publication helps in the ‘sense that it brings with it skills that are not available through theory, but with working hand-in-hand with these experienced supervisors:

*Students in the programme are trained to publish and their supervisors give support to many of the students who have actually published during the course of their study argued PhD supervisor and coordinator 1.*

Many of the students have not published only one paper, but have published several on their way to doing their doctorate. They had to write full reports about what they have achieved in each six - month period and I think this means that reporting shows the extent to which the students have been doing in their research. When it comes to the disadvantages, it is evident that the inferiority complex of the young researcher gets in the way as at times, they fear their much-experienced supervisors and this result in students failing to grow effectively, asserted PhD supervisor 3 and 4. Overall, the advantages of co-publication provide complete researchers who can stand on their own and without their supervisors’ assistance:

*It can build your confidence and assist you to start to become a researcher. The disadvantage would be the fact that one part sets the rules and the other follows and it becomes very much skewed. The power relations are not good for co-publication.* Commented PhD student D.

From this view, one gets the feeling that power relations in co-publication get in the way of development and can deter young researchers from developing into reputable scholars. This gets to be supported by PhD student A, C and D:

*The advantage of this is the fact that you get the guidance from these experienced supervisors, but on the other hand, you do not get to publish on your own because you are considered not fit enough for publication.*

On the other hand, PhD supervisor 2 and 3 get to support their students' assertion when they both complain of the power relations getting in the way of co-publication and yet it has more advantages in research training than there are disadvantages:

*I think there is an advantage in co-publication as long as the student remains the sole author of the material. I don't have any problem with it. It is healthy for the profile of the student. It does help when they look for jobs. A disadvantage could be when a student concentrates more on publishing rather than finishing her studies in good time that could be a disadvantage. In developed countries where I trained they do not allow students to publish. The argument will be that if you publish while you working on your PhD, that disembowels whoever is going to assess the PhD because the PhD is already in a series of publications,*

Argues PhD Supervisor 3, whereas PhD Supervisor 2 recognizes the advantages, but still points to the fact that power relations have a way of tarnishing these advantages:

*You know, I tend to come from a different tradition of not actual publishing with your student. And certainly where the students are capable of publishing on their own and my student, she must have published four or five papers. I am not sure, but I will have to go and count them. The three international conferences and we had one paper for each of those. She wrote them on her own, she did not need me to write them. Where a student can publish on their own they should be encouraged to publish on their own. The supervisor come and gets the benefit as somebody who did the field-work and it seems to me that is inappropriate if the students can*

*publish this on their own. It is like putting your name on your student field-work. The advantages are that if the researcher is a recognized academic the student can more likely get to publish in highly rated journals. It is more likely to get accepted for conferences. Co-publication with a supervisor who has a name does help the student to get into the publishing game.*

Most PhD students supervised agreed that co-publication and publication issues are important for their careers. However supervisors of the students are ambivalent about having a publication relationship with their not-so-experienced doctoral students and they prefer that students should be given a chance to publish on their own. Can co-publication attain its intended goals? On another hand, the hardship involved -at times in meeting supervisors seems to point to the reduced amount spent on individual supervision of student research.

### **7.3 Institutional implications**

There were three types of participants in this study, namely, doctoral students, supervisors and coordinators and all agree that the institutions that are in the Consortium do provide their full-time doctoral students with fully equipped office space that enables the doctoral students to complete their research task within the given time. Findings indicate that doctoral students in the Programme have offices that are equipped with the latest computers and are connected to the internet This is not a common feature for most SADC universities. Doctoral students use these to work at any time of the day and it is easy for them to be in touch with their supervisors' constantly, argues supervisor Cross.

#### **7.3.1 Facilities**

*The acquisition of computers for all doctoral students has been a major boost to most of the students enabling them to work long hours in their offices. They are able to concentrate on their academic work and make the most of peer support and advice from their supervisors. Doctoral students are now publishing their own newsletter, Graduate News, which provides a forum for an exchange of ideas and presentation of their publications and contribution to research conferences, argues Coordinator and PhD supervisor1.*

The institutions in the Consortium attempt to provide a welcoming and supportive environment for doctoral student through the support of the Spencer Grants and other generous sponsors. The other concern for the institutions in the Consortium is the issue of financial assistance for the doctoral students.

### **7.3.2 The sponsors**

*The Spencer Foundation is the major sponsor for this programme and there are others that also help our students, asserted PhD supervisor 2.*

This implies that the programme is now attractive to most doctoral students as the lack of funds have deterred many prospective students from pursuing such a programme before the introduction of this programme. Moreover, it appears that this collaborative programme is funded through a combination of allocations from different sources, but they supplement the Spencer Foundation.

All the interviewees' agreed that the Spencer Foundation which was awarded to outstanding doctoral students who were registered as full-time students in Educational Policy at the School of Education for three consecutive years funded them. The students felt that the fund is insufficient to cater for all their research needs, especially for commitments outside their research tasks. This is attributed to the fact that most of the doctoral students enrol for this programme when they are over forty years of age and this means that they already have other family commitments etc. echoed PhD Student E. On the other hand, PhD supervisors are of the idea that the fund is enough to complete a doctoral research.

*The money is very important for the development of research in South Africa, especially for the previously disadvantaged groups of our society. This programme gives students money, but the money is about time to concentrate on research. It enables people to take time out from whatever their jobs are. People who are doing research in this country are adults who have other commitments. The money buys them time to do field-based research. Another thing, I am not sure that the students are supervised in their institutions in which they have registered And I think there*

*could be stricter deadlines to ensure that at third year is the year in which the students are writing. They must have completed all their data analysis so that they should be writing. They should be probably writing in the institutions where their supervisors are.*

This is the feeling of PhD supervisor 3 and this to me appears to hold water in the sense that doctoral students get catered for by the Spencer Foundation which helps them to concentrate on their research task undividedly. However, Students do not agree with the opinions of their supervisors as they feel that the fund is not enough to cater for all their research needs:

*It is not enough because when I started this programme, I resigned from my previous place of work and this fellowship could only accord me R70 000 a year which was not enough to cover all my expenses as an adult. I had to find additional funding to meet some of my financial obligations and the additional funding did not cover everything but nevertheless I coped The Spencer Funding was not enough, but I needed another R30 000 to meet my other financial obligations.*

PhD Student 2 agrees with PhD Student 1 in that the fund is not enough:

*It depends on what type of study you are doing, but I may say it is not enough as there are many commitments we have as doctoral students. The fund gets to be used for all these demands and may get finished before the actually study is completed. Nevertheless, it is a very useful fund!*

On the other hand, part-time students appear not to have been catered for adequately by the Foundation as they also need to continue working to continue paying for the other life commitments which makes it impossible for them to register as full-time students. Part-time students should be catered for as failure to do so leave a lot of people out there who would have, otherwise liked to join the programme of the Consortium.” These were the words of PhD student E. But from the coordinators point of view, enrolling for part-time in this programme does not provide enough disciplinary training and the research mentorship that is necessary for supporting students in their work. In a nutshell, the Consortium’s doctoral programme in educational policy studies provides important lessons that have

been increasingly incorporated by the schools of education. Nevertheless, we have to be grateful to the Spencer Foundation for the financial support accorded to these disadvantaged groups of our society and through this Foundation research training is growing.

#### **7.4 Conclusion**

The responses have pointed to three important elements of the programme of the Consortium that need immediate attention. These are individual needs of students, funding and institutional implications as detected by the program of the CSAU. This chapter revealed that partnerships should be promoted as they help with issues of supervision and curriculum development. Furthermore, funding seems to be the single most important aspect of research training in higher learning institutions in South Africa, especially for those who have been previously disadvantaged. These aspects of the programme need to be improved for the programme to achieve its objectives. Furthermore, this chapter has looked at the experiences and challenges of the programme in an attempt to suggest ways in which it can be improved.