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## **The award of the PhD degree in Kenyan universities: a quality assurance perspective**

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This article attempts to bring to the fore the need for enhanced quality assurance processes in the award of PhDs by Kenyan universities. The findings reveal that quality challenges exist in the institutional processes established for the award of this advanced degree across the universities in the country. It is hoped that the findings will stir debate and urge the universities to re-evaluate and revamp their quality-control systems for the award of not only the PhDs but all their other degrees and diplomas, the ultimate outcome of this effort being a quality human resource for Kenya's socio-economic development.

**Keywords:** higher education; Doctor of Philosophy; PhD; quality; defence; examination; award

### **Introduction**

#### ***Rationale***

Doctoral education, the highest level of academic qualification, is the foundation for the research and development pursuits of a country. The term 'doctorate' comes from the Latin *docere*, meaning to teach, which in turn comes from the Medieval Latin *licentia docendi*, or 'the licence to teach'. Its importance is widely acknowledged. However, globally, quality assurance across disciplines has proceeded at a slower pace for the doctoral level in comparison to the other levels of education. Unlike other awarded degrees and qualifications that have syllabuses, criteria that have to be adhered to and grading systems and benchmarks that have to be achieved in order to be awarded a certain grade, a PhD has no such formal standards. This makes a doctorate a very personal learning experience and this is a key part of becoming an independent researcher. On completion, a successful PhD student should be 'in full command of the subject, right up to the boundaries of current knowledge and able to extend them. As the highest degree

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that can be awarded, it proclaims that the recipient is worthy of being listened to *as an equal* by the appropriate university faculty' (Phillips & Pugh, 2005, pp. 20–1, italics added for emphasis). Indeed:

successful postgraduates emerge with a new identity as competent professionals, able to argue their viewpoint with anyone regardless of status, confident in their own knowledge but also aware of its boundaries . . . To arrive at this point is what being a postgraduate research student is really all about. (Phillips & Pugh, 2005, p. 4)

There is some demand, however, for a more rigid set of guidelines as to what a PhD should entail. The number of graduates with a PhD qualification in Kenya and other countries has 'grown exponentially in recent years' and 'there is still the absence of a yardstick against which appropriate success can be measured' (Burnard, 2001, p. 159). Burnard calls for a 'tentative but stipulative set of criteria for what constitutes a "pass" at PhD level', to do away with the 'arbitrary' and 'subjective' approach to PhD marking. However, the huge differences in subject matter, discipline, individual style of students and the nature of their work would make this very difficult. Moreover, despite stating that there are no 'formal standards' that PhD students have to meet, acknowledged expectations of doctoral research do exist, which are generally considered to be sufficient for assessment and examination. These are fairly broad and include the following: independence; a contribution to knowledge; originality; and suitability for publication. The thesis writing and the eventual oral defence are compulsory components of doctoral assessment processes in most countries (Powell & Green, 2007) and are closely related to the quality assurance of the doctorate awarded (Morley *et al.*, 2003). Research in the UK has revealed great diversity in PhD examinations, both in institutional policy and practice (Tinkler & Jackson, 2000, 2002, 2004). In North America, relevant research is very scarce and minimal research, if any, has been conducted in Kenya.

This study looks at the PhD dissertation award from a quality assurance perspective, aiming at shedding some light on the challenges existing within the universities' quality assurance mechanisms. In particular, it addresses the following questions: which quality control mechanisms exist in Kenya universities for the award of PhDs and what is their level of application? What challenges are encountered during the supervision, examination and final oral defence of the PhD? What are viable international best practices that could be adopted by Kenyan universities for improving the quality of the PhDs awarded?

### ***Quality perspectives***

The rapid expansion of higher education in Kenya and globally, the entrance of market forces in higher education delivery and the globalisation of

education necessitate the formation of structures and mechanisms, standards and guidelines, to assure quality. At independence and up to 1984, Kenya had only one university with an enrolment of 7624 students. Currently there are 30 universities with an approximate enrolment of 145,000 students, of which 85% are enrolled in the seven public universities. In response to the above challenges and national needs, the Commission for Higher Education was created as a corporate body in 1985 to make better provisions for the advancement of university education in Kenya and for connected purposes such as quality. The Commission for Higher Education operates on the principle of best practices and while emphasising that quality assurance is a continuous process requiring flexibility and adjustments, a lot of emphasis is placed on structured pre-determined standards. It is for this reason that great prominence is laid on the process of internal quality assurance. The establishment of internal quality assurance processes within an institution ensures that it is fulfilling its own purposes and the standards, professions and disciplines of higher education (Materu, 2007). It is assumed that once the internal quality assurance processes are in place, the external quality assurance processes can be engaged through consultation with external bodies such as the Commission for Higher Education. Based on this premise established by the Commission, quality is viewed both as content, process and outcome and should contribute to the quality of the human resource for the country.

Existing literature globally depicts quality in various forms as illustrated by the following authors: Mukhopadhyay (2001), who defines quality in education as excellence in education; Juran and Gryna (1988) as fitness of educational outcome and experience for use; Gilmore (1974) and Crosby (1980) as conformance of education output to planned goals, specifications and requirements; and Parasuraman *et al.* (1993) as meeting or exceeding customers' expectations of education.

The Bologna process established by the European Commission on education and training to assure quality across educational institutions in the European Union (EU) is indeed a best practice that countries in the East African community can emulate. The EU has put pressure on member states to harmonise their higher education systems so as to increase transparency, accountability and comparability of institutions in the EU and indeed well beyond in the European Higher Education Area. This is purposed to contribute to the creation of a competitive market where quality becomes the distinguishing factor between institutions (Kunstelj & Vintar, 2004). The Bologna Treaty (Neave, 1999) aims to ensure that the higher educational institutions fulfil their full range of purposes such as: preparing students for life as active citizens in a democratic society; enabling their personal development; creating and maintaining a broad, advanced knowledge base; and stimulating research and innovation.

The EU aims to become a world reference for the quality and the relevance of its education and training and should be the most attractive world

region to students, scholars and researchers (Commission of the European Communities, 2003).

In addition, as a result of initiatives such as the QAA *Code of Practice* in the UK among universities, some consistency can now be expected across the sector about: the need for supervisory teams (rather than single supervisors); the training of supervisors; rigorous procedures for selecting, appointing and briefing examiners (internal and external); the expectation that students will be offered development opportunities, including research methods training; the need for transparent rules and procedures for appeals; and clarity in the transfer from MPhil to PhD registrations.

### ***Quality assurance and purpose of the award***

In considering the assurance of the quality of the award of a doctorate, it is necessary to revisit its purpose. There are three dimensions here. First, if the PhD is inseparably related to training in how to do research then assessment of the creative output should include a judgement about whether the candidate is able to conduct independent research. While a creative output may indicate that the creator has engaged in such training (for example, has investigated, designed and made use of research techniques), such an indication will remain implicit and hence not amenable to assessment unless the candidate sets down an account of how the research goals were achieved (Liu & Cheng, 2005). In essence this is what is required within a PhD submission where the candidate sets down the outcomes of the research programme and also a discursive account of how those outcomes were achieved. Second, if dissemination of findings is a necessary requisite of successfully undertaking research and, in turn, of being awarded a higher degree for doing it, then successful research at doctoral level must result in a contribution to knowledge that is realised when it is communicated effectively to others in the field. Arguably, the acid test in this dimension might be that others working in the field need to be able to learn from the creative output if it is to be acceptable as a contribution to knowledge (Jibril, 2006). Third, a doctoral examination typically takes the form of the candidate defending arguments set out in the thesis.

It is recognised in the literature (Powell & Green, 2007; Powell & McCauley, 2002, 2003; Tinkler & Jackson, 2004) that institutions vary in respect of their use of the *viva* as an essential or non-essential component of the doctoral examination process; though for the majority of Kenyan universities the *viva voce* is seen as an integral part of the process. Reliability and fairness are the key issues surrounding the quality control of the oral examination. In as much as doctoral candidates should set out their 'thesis', their intellectual position, that they then defend in their written submission, the *viva* then becomes a matter of enabling the examiners to pass judgement on the viability of the intellectual position and on candidates' understanding of

it and their ability to continue the defence that they have set out in writing, in the face of an individual, oral, cross-examination (Powell & Green, 2003). For the quality of the doctoral award to be ensured there is a need for this final stage, if part of the notion of a 'doctor' is that holders of such a title can initiate research that contributes to knowledge and, importantly, be aware enough of the context and the implications of their work to explain and defend it and continue to initiate work of a similar standard (Tinkler & Jackson, 2004).

In short, the need for a *viva* as part of doctoral examination cuts to the heart of what the award is about. The decision as to the level of necessity for a *viva* therefore matters and determines: (a) how a university perceives the doctoral award; and (b) the controls it places on the quality of successful doctoral candidates.

### ***Comparative analysis***

As part of the contextual background, it is important to consider the different PhD admission and examination systems in the world, as system differences influence the focus of the research in Kenyan universities. Universities in the UK admit applicants to PhD programmes on case-by-case bases, depending on the university. In the case of the University of Oxford, for example, 'the one essential condition of being accepted ... is evidence of previous academic excellence and of future potential'. Commonly, students are first accepted on to an MPhil programme and may transfer to PhD regulations upon satisfactory progress and are referred to as advanced postgraduate status. In the UK, the PhD examination consists of submission of a written dissertation and a private oral defence called a *viva*. In most British universities, only the examiners and the candidate attend the *viva*, although a few universities allow the supervisor to attend and another few allow other people under certain conditions (Powell & Green, 2007).

In the US, the PhD degree is the highest academic degree awarded by universities in most fields of study. American students typically undergo a series of phases in the course of their work toward the PhD degree. The first phase consists of coursework in the student's field of study and requires one-to-three years to complete. This is often followed by a preliminary, a comprehensive examination or a series of cumulative examinations that emphasises breadth rather than depth of knowledge. The student is often later required to pass oral and written examinations in the field of specialisation within the discipline and here depth is emphasised. Typically, upon completion, the candidate undergoes an oral examination, sometimes public, by his or her supervisory committee with expertise in the given discipline. As the PhD degree is often a preliminary step toward a career as a professor, throughout the whole period of study and dissertation research the student, depending on the university and degree, may be required or offered

the opportunity to teach undergraduate and occasionally graduate courses in relevant subjects. Overall, 57% of students who begin a PhD programme in the US will complete their degree within 10 years, approximately 30% will drop out or be dismissed and the remaining 13% of students will continue on past 10 years.

Denmark and Norway offer the degree based upon the European system and include public defences of the thesis. Students pursuing the PhD degree in France must first complete a Master's degree programme, then the PhD admission is granted by a graduate school. The validation of the PhD degree generally requires three to four years. In Germany, an advanced degree is usually needed and above-average grades are often required to gain admission to a doctoral programme. Doctoral programmes in Germany generally take up to four years depending on the subject. There are usually no formal classes or lectures to attend and the doctoral candidate mainly conducts independent research under the tutelage of a single professor or advisory committee. This contrasts sharply with the situation in countries in Africa and India as well as in the USA where doctoral candidates have some formal curriculum.

Admission to a PhD programme within Australia and New Zealand requires the prospective student to have completed a bachelor's degree with an honours component or master's degree. Completion requirements include the completion of an original research thesis that makes a significant new contribution to the field. Most Australian PhD programmes do not have a required coursework component or a formal oral defence as part of the doctoral examination. The PhD thesis is sent to three external examiners, experts in the field of research, who have not been involved in the work. Many New Zealand universities have retained the oral examination requirement but often the external examiner's report is presented by one of the internal examiners possibly due to travel costs and time considerations.

Admission to a PhD programme at a Canadian university usually requires completion of a Master's degree in a related field, with sufficiently high grades and proven research ability. In some cases, a student may progress directly from an honours bachelor's degree to a PhD programme. An application package typically includes a research proposal, letters of reference, transcripts and, in some cases, a writing sample or graduate record examination (GRE) scores. A common criterion for prospective PhD students is the comprehensive or qualifying examination, a process that often commences in the second year of a graduate programme. Furthermore, it is usually required that by the end of 18 to 36 months after the first registration, the student will have successfully completed the comprehensive examinations. From this stage on, the bulk of the student's time will be devoted to his or her own research, culminating in the completion of a PhD thesis or dissertation. The final requirement is an oral defence of the thesis, which is open to the public in some but not all universities. At most Canadian universities, the time needed to complete a PhD degree typically ranges from four to six years.

The same situation exists in most Asian and African countries (Powell & Green, 2007). For example, the University of Cape Town in South Africa requires an oral defence before the award of the PhD. Makerere University in Uganda lays emphasis on the written dissertation as well as the *viva voce*, which is an open defence and the grading of both the oral defence and the written thesis is based on a rigid marking scheme. For the University of Ghana the candidates are required to pass a qualifying examination and an oral examination of the thesis in addition to the thesis. The University of Pretoria in South Africa has an elaborate evaluation mechanism that involves publications, written thesis and a private oral defence before the award of the PhD degree. The University of Kwazulu Natal, also in South Africa, makes the oral defence optional and that award is based purely on the written thesis.

Addis Ababa University in Ethiopia is one of the oldest universities in Africa and has a rigorous oral defence that is sequential for the award of its PhDs. Dar-es-Salaam University in Tanzania insists that an oral *viva voce* is carried out to ensure that the PhD thesis shows evidence that the candidate has made an original and significant contribution to knowledge. The defence, however, is not open to the public but is before an institutionally constituted panel.

In all the above cases, the award of a Doctor of Philosophy degree is not awarded with distinction since a successful dissertation is presumed to be a distinguished piece of work (Middlehurst & Campbell, 2003). Little or no research, if any, has been reported on the PhD thesis examination in Kenya and this study attempts to assess the quality assurance mechanisms that exist in Kenyan universities and the challenges inherent in the system, if any.

## **Methodology**

The research was carried over a period of six months and was designed as a qualitative study using documentary sources and self-administered questionnaires: 60 academics and 52 current PhD students and those who graduated from their respective universities were interviewed from 10 universities in Kenya. These methods were ideal, for they allowed for triangulation of the data and threading of key responses and thus provided valuable insights into the quality dimension in relation to the PhDs awarded by Kenyan universities. A purposive sampling method was used to identify subjects for interview across four academic blocks of the universities under study. Data analysis and interpretation were done using the interactive model of qualitative data analysis (Miles & Huberman, 1994), which first involved sorting or shifting through the data and identifying similar phrases, relationships between themes, distinct differences between target blocks and common sequences. It then entailed isolating patterns and processes, commonalities and differences, and taking them out to the field in the next wave of data

collection. The next task involved gradually elaborating a small set of generalisations that covered the consistencies discerned in the database and then finally confronting those generalisations with a formalised body of knowledge in the form of constructs or theories surrounding the quality considerations in the award of the PhD degree.

The data analysis was based on the study themes: context, supervision, examination and oral defence of the PhD award in Kenya. These themes were analysed with the aim of establishing the quality assurance strategies within each and how each compares to best practices globally and, therefore, assures quality for the entire PhD award process.

The PhD concentration in Kenya resides in the seven public universities which, in 2008, graduated over 95% of the total PhD degrees in Kenya. The sample for the study, however, also involved the private universities that offer PhD programmes. A total of seven public universities and three private universities were sampled for the study; all of whom are offering PhDs, although some had yet to realise graduates at this level. The public universities were University of Nairobi, Moi University, Egerton University, Jomo Kenyatta University of Agriculture and Technology, Masinde Muliro University of Science and Technology, Kenyatta University and Maseno University. Kenya Methodist University, Kabarak University and the Catholic University of Eastern Africa represented the private universities. The universities' online policies regarding the PhD dissertation admission, supervision and defence were either downloaded or physically collected in hard copy and analysed textually. The questionnaires were administered on the selected respondents from the various universities to affirm the statements from the documents and give unsolicited responses on the PhD award process. The questionnaires were used to collect data relating to the PhD award process from four perspectives: supervisors ( $n=50$ , 21 women and 29 men); candidates ( $n=52$ , 32 current PhD students and 20 PhD graduates of the respective universities); external examiners ( $n=6$ , 2 women and 4 men); examination board members ( $n=4$ , 1 man and 3 women).

The four questionnaires were tailored to the respondent groups, although the format of the questionnaires was broadly the same. Information was ascertained relating to: background (gender, age, experience); selection of supervisors; supervision; selection of examiners; oral defence panel selection; *viva* procedures; outcomes; perceptions of the purpose(s) of the *viva*; and, for candidates, their expectations and experiences of the PhD process. The questionnaires to the lecturers focused primarily on the PhD that they had supervised and examined most recently in Kenya.

## **Findings and discussion**

Relevant segments from the documents were either coded or quoted to allow for comparison and contrast across the institutions as illustrated in Table 1.

Table 1. Institutions chosen for the study.

Institution	Selection of supervisor	Type of oral defence	Level of supervision (frequency and documentation)	PhDs 2009
Nairobi University	Criterion-based Open	Private	Mainstream	41
Moi University		Public	Explicit	30
Masinde Muliro University of Science & Technology	Open	Public	Not stated	0
Jomo Kenyatta University of Agriculture & Technology		Public	Not explicit	16
Maseno University	Criterion-based	Public	Mainstream	11
Egerton University		Private	Not explicit	16
Kenyatta University	Defined options Open	Private	Explicit	55
Kenya Methodist University		Private	Not explicit	0
Catholic University of Eastern Africa	Open Not established	Public	Implied	11
Kabarak University		Private	Not stated	0

Despite the institutionalisation of PhD awards in Kenyan universities and the apparent serious attention for the quality of supervision, PhD studies still face many problems in most of the universities in sub-Saharan Africa (Materu, 2007). For example, the percentage of non-completion is regarded as too high and there is a very long process before completion, often more than six years, instead of the expected four years. Forty-eight percent of the PhD candidates interviewed regard the PhD period of their life as a lonely and stressful episode. Both the students and lecturers admit that there is a host of supervision problems. Two-thirds (66%) recorded that meetings were inadequate and lacked depth, while 57% noted that often there were no regular performance and progress reports. In the nine universities currently awarding PhDs in Kenya, 72% of the current students affirmed that there is a lack of adequate research funding and that financial arrangements are unclear or non-existent. Half (49%) of the supervisors interviewed agreed that PhD supervision was a stressful and frustrating experience coupled with the fact that completed PhDs often have a low utilisation return at the individual (student/supervisor) and even at university level; and so may be regarded as a rather wasteful way of spending research time and money.

Three-quarters (77%) of the PhD candidates and 57% of the supervisors interviewed across the public universities in Kenya identified the following as major sources of problems during the PhD experience: poor research design; lack of focus; and inadequate conceptualisation of the research question by both parties. Inadequate research background and lack of training in methodological and writing skills (inadequate bachelors and masters training) were seen by 88% of both the ongoing and graduated students as a major area of difficulty. Half (52%) of those interviewed cited problematic research facilities (time, office, computer, assistance, flexibility in rules, under-funding of essential tasks), many competing tasks (teaching, consultancies, family life) and bad planning along with poor time management as hindrances.

Almost two-thirds (63%) of the supervisors conceded that there were major problems with writing academic English on the part of the students. A similar proportion, 64%, of ongoing students cited inadequate supervision, strained relationships and lack of awareness of others working in the same field of study as one of the constraints. Furthermore, 50% of the candidates and the supervisors identified the fact that there was no contact with peers and the existence of parochial local research cultures as a running impediment. Lack of motivation, psychological stress due to isolation, feelings of uselessness and lack of opportunities to participate in a vibrant research culture was captured for both students and lecturers at 40% and 72%, respectively.

In addition, 64% of both ongoing and graduated PhD candidates complained about infrequent meetings with supervisors; 52% of both categories of PhD candidates indicated a lack of enough specific knowledge among

supervisors with regard to the candidate's research topic. Thirty-eight per cent of the students further felt that supervisors did not give due attention to planning and keeping within time limits while 78% recorded that supervisors exhibited lack of support for publishing beyond the PhD thesis.

All these concerns and shortcomings no doubt bring to the surface the need to amplify the quality imperatives in the award of the PhD qualification. This study is an attempt to bring some of these aspects to the surface and therefore stir public debate that hopefully can have some bearing on policy formulation with regard to quality at the universities not only in Kenya but in Africa and even globally.

Systemic issues also affect the quality of the awards of the PhD in universities in Kenya. A majority (60%) of the academic staff raised the issue of uncontrolled growth of doctoral student numbers and the corresponding lack of supervision capacity. Most of the academics interviewed conceded that the pressure on institutional finances, and the incentive of subsidy income through increased student enrolment, has led to all kinds of questionable practices, for example the enrolling of large numbers of doctoral students for whom there are often few skilled and available supervisors. Five of the six examiners interviewed raised concerns with regard to the quality of PhD supervisors and this problem seems to face even the well-resourced, established universities. It was revealed that few supervisors across the universities in Kenya are selected based on, let alone trained in, advanced methods of supervision. It was further revealed, by the examination board members, that appointed supervisors seldom have a conceptual map of what constitutes acceptable supervision. Indeed, it is reasonable to postulate that supervisors themselves are often the products of poor supervision and do not, therefore, have experience of what constitutes competent supervision.

The quality of doctoral student intake is also a major problem. The study revealed that over 60% of the current students enrolled for the PhD programme in the Kenyan universities have a bachelor's degree of below an upper-second class honours qualification (that is, only a moderate level bachelor degree). The fact that most Kenyan students are poorly selected and supervised at the master's level means that these same students become minimum-entry students at the doctoral level. Consequently, universities without strong and competitive selection procedures for PhD students often find themselves matching a weak doctoral student with a weak supervisor. The end result is disastrous for the student, the institution and for the unsuspecting public considering the vast sums of money households are spending on education in the country in the hope of commensurate economic returns not only to the individual but to the family as a whole. This perhaps explains why the current completion rate per given cohort at PhD level stands at just 5%.

The lack of institutional selectivity with respect to supervisors is another area requiring adequate attention. In all the Kenyan universities it is

assumed that an academic with a PhD will automatically be capable of competently supervising a doctoral student. None of the supervisors who were interviewed had undergone any training or mentoring. Without training and without any assessment of their supervision capacities or competence, every year many academics take on their first doctoral student, often without institutional support, guidance, or oversight. The lack of an induction experience for new supervisors compounds the issue of quality. Even if the supervisor does have the potential for competent supervision, none of the universities have a strategy for monitored progression, starting, for example, with a demonstration of competent master's supervision as a prerequisite for doctoral supervision; or assuming the role of second supervisor for the purpose of learning from a main supervisor. Under pressure to accommodate ever-more doctoral students, there was no evidence for preparation for advanced supervision by any of the universities in this study. There is also the lack of internal evaluation systems for measuring supervision competence in all the universities. While there are all kinds of evaluation instruments, some mechanical and routine, for measuring teaching performance and research outputs, there are hardly any institutional procedures for holding supervisors to account.

Accordingly, three of the established public universities, in their schools of business and education, had cases of supervisors with as many as 25 PhD students allocated to them but without any evidence that they are 'delivering' long-enrolled students for graduation purposes. A compromised system of external accountability for the final thesis also raises quality concerns. In getting feedback from examiners, it was revealed that there is often a tacit agreement that a friend or former student at one university would externally examine a doctoral dissertation of a friend or former supervisor at another institution and vice versa. The outcome of such examination, among allied institutions and academic colleagues, will normally mean a 'pass' for the thesis, irrespective of the quality of the final product. In this closed pattern of external examination, there is therefore no way of receiving meaningful feedback on the quality or competence of supervision. Eight universities have detailed criteria for the selection of the external examiner in their documents and these are essentially competency and impartiality. Six universities (Kenyatta, Nairobi, Egerton, Kenya Methodist University, Moi and Maseno) share the definition of competency as being acknowledged experts in the discipline to be examined and having experience of doctoral supervision or examination. Seven universities (the previous six plus Masinde Muliro University of Science and Technology) have statements regarding impartiality but the application of this criteria is a point of debate as evidenced by the findings of this study.

This study reveals that Kenyan universities vary in degree of openness of the PhD oral defence. While four have public defences, five have private or relatively private ones. Publicity is related to transparency of the

examination process (Tinkler & Jackson, 2000). In this sense, not all Kenyan dissertation defences are transparent. As a result, students at universities conducting private dissertation defences may be less informed about this examination than those at universities having a more open system. Second, reflecting the literature (Tinkler & Jackson, 2000), the universities differ in details of the criteria for the choice of the external examiner, especially regarding impartiality. Five of the Kenyan universities appear to have clearer specifications, which lead to a more transparent selection of an external examiner. As external examiners are meant to gate-keep a discipline by maintaining standards across institutions (Tinkler & Jackson, 2000), questions arise about the possibility of selecting an 'un-impartial' external examiner due to less-transparent specifications, who may not successfully fulfil the gate-keeping role. Third, while none of the universities release examiners' reports to candidates until after the defence, the example of the University of Toronto of releasing external examiner's reports to candidates prior to the defence could be considered as a possible best practice. Although there is no evidence showing that the latter mechanism, seemingly more transparent, may enhance students' performance in the defence (Powell & McCauley, 2003), the variation itself brings to the surface the value of rethinking the transparency of the Kenyan PhD examination process. The power of the external examiner in the evaluation process is diverse as well. At four universities (Kenyatta, Nairobi, Jomo Kenyatta University of Agriculture and Technology and Maseno), the external examiner's opinion on the dissertation significantly influences the committee's final decision. For example, at Moi and Kenyatta Universities: 'When the Examining Committee's decision is not unanimous, the majority view shall prevail' provided the external examiner shares the majority view. In contrast, the external examiner seems to have less power at the Catholic University of Eastern Africa and Egerton. At some of the universities, the external examiner's opinion is not permitted to unduly influence the committee's decision.

The lack of an enabling departmental or institutional culture in most of the Kenyan universities to support effective supervision was another point of focus. Most of the universities relied on the enterprising attitude of one or two energetic supervisors and this is unlikely to be sustainable in an academic culture that does not create a positive departmental or faculty environment. Things such as research seminars, faculty development workshops, incentives for exemplary students and supervisors, conference-funding opportunities, occasions for airing students' work-in-progress, provision of mentorship resources and release from heavy undergraduate teaching loads were non-existent or absent in the universities surveyed. Bad practice in doctoral supervision is therefore sustained by a lack of effective interventions from within, or outside, institutions to correct these problems.

There is no system-wide mechanism for improving the quality, depth and sophistication of doctoral supervision. This study is a small contribution to

at least raising awareness of the seriousness of the problem and offering suggestions for strategic improvements in the quality of the PhDs produced in Kenya.

### **International benchmarking and the way forward**

Based on experiences from South Africa and the Netherlands through the South Africa–Netherlands Research Programme on Alternatives in Development, the following are exemplary supervision practices that could be emulated by Kenyan universities to improve the practice of supervision and defence of the PhD award.

An area that needs immediate attention is the procedure that revolves around the selection of new doctoral students. From the findings it is evident that admission criteria in most of the Kenyan universities is not stringent, resulting in the admission of candidates for the PhD who are both not grounded in the underpinnings of research but also lack the ability to withstand the rigours of doctoral studies (Adu & Orivel, 2006). Indeed problems of supervision are compounded when the PhD student is clearly not well-suited for advanced study at the level of the doctorate. The case of admission criteria for Canadian universities could be adopted as a best practice by Kenyan universities by using a combination of personal interviews, academic records and samples of formal writing in making selection decisions, so as to bring into the supervision pool students who are ‘supervisable’ (Jibril, 2006).

The results of this study highlight the selection of supervisors as a major shortcoming of the Kenyan PhD award process. There is, therefore, a need to step up the criteria for the selection of supervisors, for poor supervisors have been seen to be a major factor in student completion rates, the quality of the thesis and the overall supervision experience by student and supervisor alike (Ozga, 2000). The South African–Netherlands initiative of providing formal training for new and promising supervisors on the technical, ethical, personal, legal, administrative and professional aspects of supervision should be taken on board by the Kenyan universities. All universities in Kenya should design an induction programme for new supervisors, so that they gradually learn to supervise, ideally under a mentor and, initially, in a co-supervision role.

It is important for Kenyan universities to structure opportunities for students to provide feedback on the quality and effectiveness of supervisors and on their experiences of the overall supervision process, as is the case with the best universities in the US. It should be evident to students that such feedback is acted on within university practice (Ncayiyana, 2006). It is crucial for the universities to recognise the reproductive character of research supervision. Weak supervision reproduces weak graduates who will in turn, if they opt for an academic career, reproduce the same weak model of supervision in an endless cycle of mediocrity (Hanushek & Wossmann,

2007). A weakly supervised graduate is unlikely to yield high-quality research in competitive academic journals, which in turn weakens the entire research enterprise within an institution. Collectively, such practices set limits on national innovation, scholarship and competitiveness within the higher education system as a whole.

In conclusion, higher education operates in a context of competition, interdependence, interconnectedness and exploitation at unprecedented levels (Long, 2001). Kenyan universities should, therefore, strive towards becoming competitive in the global arena as well measuring up to the unavoidable stringent peer-established mechanisms globally (Doherty, 2008). A Doctor of Philosophy degree must therefore be seen to meet these expectations considering its impact on the socio-economic well-being of the country.

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