Doctoral Education in Context

Perspectives from Africa

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CHAPTER 22

Overcoming perpetual liminality among doctoral candidates in a Kenyan university

Tom Kwanya

The **Republic of Kenya** is on the eastern coast of Africa. With a population of about 50 million, it is the 27th most populous country in the world and 7th in Africa. There are 61 universities in Kenya, 36 public and 25 private.

The **Technical University of Kenya** (TU-K) is the first technical university in the history of independent Kenya. As the former Kenya Polytechnic University College, this university (established in 2007) is mandated to offer technology-based and vocational education and training programmes ranging from certificate to post-doctoral levels. The university has three faculties with 18 schools. In 2022 TU-K had 153 doctoral candidates and 48 doctoral degrees were awarded.

1. Introduction

The demand for doctoral degrees has grown globally due to the shifting dependence of economic productivity on knowledge (Cloete et al., 2015). Urbancova (2013) argued that talent, or knowledge, has lately become the primary source of competitive advantage for companies and nation states. This pivotal role played by knowledge in economic development has shone a spotlight on universities as sources of talent and the doctoral degree as the pinnacle of learning and talent development. According to Louw and Muller (2014), the interest in the doctorate degree, which surged from the 1990s, has increased in recent years. Consequently, there is an increase in the production of doctorates the

world over. Cyranoski et al. (2011) argue that the world is producing far more doctorates than ever before. They reported that the number of science doctoral graduates rose by 40% annually between 1998 and 2008 in the member states of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). They predicted that this trend was unlikely to slow down because many countries, including non-members of the OECD, have recently put in place systems to enhance their capacity to produce even more doctoral graduates as a means of improving their socio-economic development. Nonetheless, Cloete et al. (2015) argue that the importance attached to the doctorate globally has increased disproportionately in relation to its share of the overall graduate output over the last decade. Friesenhahn (2014) argues that although the number of doctoral graduates in a country is likely to promote development, there are many other factors at play in promoting economic development in any given country at any given time.

Despite the increases in doctorate production, there is concern about high attrition rates among doctoral candidates globally. According to Cyranoski et al. (2011), more than a third of doctoral candidates in the United States do not graduate at all. They further report that more than half of doctoral students in engineering in Poland do not complete their studies. In South Africa, Mouton (2011) reported that 46% of the students enrolled in doctoral programmes across all disciplines in 2001 did not complete their studies at all, while about 13% of the doctoral candidates in South Africa took more than six years to complete their studies. In Uganda, Wamala et al. (2011) reported a graduation rate of 39.7% of doctoral candidates. Matheka et al. (2020) and Rong'uno (2016) report a graduation rate of below 50% among doctoral students enrolled in Kenyan universities. Rong'uno (2016) also reported that the average doctorate completion period in Kenya between 2001 and 2008 was nine years, instead of the ideal three. Mouton (2011) points out that the highest rate of attrition occurs within two years after enrolment. He reported that about 29% of the candidates who dropped out did so in the first two years of their enrolment.

In Kenya, like other countries in sub-Saharan Africa, enrolment in doctoral programmes has grown in the recent past. According to Matheka et al. (2020), the number of doctoral candidates in Kenyan universities grew by 34% in 2015 and 2016. With an increase in the number of universities from 32 in 2011 to 74 in 2017 (CUE, 2017), there was an acute need for doctoral graduates to take up administrative, teaching, research and outreach roles in the universities. Given the low completion rate, there is a deficit in the number of doctorates required by academic institutions, as well as the public and private sectors of the economy in Kenya. There is need to address how to improve not only the

enrolment in doctoral programmes, but also the completion rate of doctoral candidates in Kenya.

Doctoral candidates encounter several hurdles on their way to graduation. Most of these hurdles are experienced in the liminal stage. This chapter examines the causes and experiences of perpetual liminality among doctoral students in Kenya. Primary data were collected from 14 doctoral candidates through online focus group discussions using the Zoom conferencing platform. All participating candidates acknowledged that they had experienced extended liminality, particularly while preparing and defending their research proposals. According to the students, the extended liminality experienced emanates from individual and institutional challenges. There was consensus, however, that the major causes of extended liminality are institutional or programmatic challenges revolving around inadequate supervision, insufficient institutional support, and lack of clarity on expectations. Improving the structure and depth of supervision, institutional support, as well as closer monitoring can reduce the prevalence and effects of extended liminality on high dropout and low completion rates among doctoral students in Kenya. Ethical clearance to use the data in this publication was granted by the Research Ethics Committee of Stellenbosch University (Project number 2273).

2. Doctoral liminality: Being neither here nor there

Doctoral candidates encounter several hurdles on their way to the doctorate. Keefer (2015) likens the doctoral journey to a rite of passage in which candidates acquire new skills and personalities qualifying them as new people, doctorates. According to Wisker et al. (2010), during this journey doctoral candidates acquire multidimensional skills encompassing ontological, epistemological, emotional and professional realms of development. Candidates who successfully make it through this journey experience a transformation akin to what initiates experience after a rite of passage. Through the transformation, initiates leave behind their previous (inferior, novice) selves to embrace new (superior, expert) selves exemplified in transformed ways of understanding, interpreting, viewing or comprehending of concepts in the relevant subject matter, landscape or worldview (Meyer & Land 2003). Kiley (2009) avers that this transformation is experienced at both personal and disciplinary learning levels. The transformation is so deep that Trafford (2008) opines that it remarkably changes the candidates' identity and perspectives. Keefer (2015) asserts that when these changes occur, doctoral candidates' identities change to the extent that they are no longer the same people who entered the programme.

Attaining a doctorate is, therefore, akin to crossing an identity-changing threshold which significantly transforms the candidates. Turner (2011) asserts that the identity-changing experience follows a transition period of uncertainty, confusion or doubt known as liminality. According to Keefer (2015), doctoral liminality is the period when candidates are not who they were when they enrolled in the programme but have not attained a full transformation into a doctorate. Therefore, liminality is a wavering between two worlds experienced after separation from the previous life but before getting incorporated into the new one. Jazvac-Martek (2009) posits that doctoral candidates in liminal periods oscillate between learner and academic identities enroute to scholarly expertise.

Trafford and Leshem (2009) explain that attaining a doctorate is intellectually challenging and presents doctoral candidates with myriad scholarly challenges in conducting research as well as writing and defending theses. These challenges, which are found at various stages of the doctoral journey, are likened to portals through which the candidates must pass to experience meaningful transformation. The period between the time the candidates enroll into the doctoral programmes and their graduation is characterized by scholarly struggles leading to confusion and uncertainty. According to Kiley and Wisker (2010), doctoral candidates in liminal periods experience an intellectual feeling of being stuck or going round in endless circles. Kiley (2009) argues that during doctoral liminality, candidates mimic the behaviour and language perceived as expected of one to fit into the learned community. This mimicry subsides as the candidates become confirmed as expert academics within a scholarly discipline or institution (Jazvac-Martek, 2009). During the liminal period, the candidates possess no rank, insignia or kinship position which distinguishes them from other researchers (Adorno et al., 2015). They are neither here nor there. They experience an identity crisis which makes them uneasy and unsettled.

Adorno et al. (2015) explain that just like in ethnographic rites of passage, candidates are guided out of liminality by experienced 'elders' in the form of supervisors in academic contexts. Moore (2016) opines that liminal periods are characterized by scholarly ambiguity and complexities which candidates attempt to navigate and discern. Turner (1969) argued that persons in liminal periods support each other out of the stage through mystical solidarity. Kralik et al. (2006) explain that the only route out of liminality is transition, which represents change enabling the doctoral candidates to cut links with their former selves and develop attributes that connect them to the scholarly community of doctorates. Clouder (2005) argues that the process and results of this transition are gradual but irreversible. Meyer and Land (2005) explain that this transition

is preceded by a season of troubled knowledge when the candidates go through intellectual thresholds to get integrated into the academic environment and community. According to Szakolczai (2009), doctoral transition begins with rites of separation and ends with rites of re-aggregation. In between these two rites is a boundary which separates the two phases. Wisker (2018) opines that intellectual transitioning through doctoral liminality involves ontological and epistemological change leading to breakthroughs in terms of thinking, understanding, researching and writing. Leshem (2020) also emphasises the role of supervisors ('elders') in helping doctoral candidates transition effectively through these stages into genuine scholars in their respective areas of specialty.

According to Wisker (2018), doctoral candidates adopt diverse mechanisms or strategies to facilitate breakthroughs during liminality. Some of these include taking time off from the thesis to 'let it settle' or re-shape. Experienced supervisors use these opportunities to support the candidates in concretising their thoughts by suggesting further readings or providing opportunities for them to share and validate their ideas. By providing these opportunities, the supervisors do not impose their own thinking onto their students. Conversely, they create opportunities for their students to share their own experiences in ways which enable them to question, develop their own insights, query others, and discern how breakthroughs took place or develop analogies from other contexts.

3. Context, rationale and methodology of study

This study is focused on candidates enrolled in a Doctor of Philosophy in information and knowledge management programme. It is a three-year doctoral programme executed through course work, thesis and examination. The course work is structured to be completed in the first year of study and consists of six taught units of which four are examined. Thereafter, the candidates are expected to venture into their research which is structured into semester-based milestones of research proposal development; data collection or fieldwork; thesis compilation; as well as thesis defence and submission.

Currently, there are 31 candidates enrolled in the programme. Of these, nine were enrolled in 2018; seven in 2019; nine in 2020; and six in 2021. The majority (25) of the doctoral candidates have completed their course work. Even though the 2018 cohort completed their course work in 2019 (according to the structure of the programme, they were supposed to have completed and defended their research proposals in the month of August in 2019), none of them had submitted a complete research proposal by July 2020 when data for this study were collected. The 2019 cohort was also expected to have developed

their research concept papers, but these were still outstanding at the time of data collection. For the purposes of this chapter, the two groups were perceived to be stuck in an extended period of liminality. They all seemed to be stuck in a cycle of continuous drafts and corrections. Efforts by the school and department to support them in completing their proposals or concept notes, for instance through seminars and individual mentoring, had been unsuccessful. Unless appropriate interventions to reduce the period of doctoral liminality are designed and implemented by the school and department, many of these candidates are likely to take long to graduate or drop out of the programme. This study investigated the reasons for the evident long period of doctoral liminality as experienced by the sixteen candidates.

Data were collected from 14 candidates from the 2018 and 2019 cohorts through focus group discussions held during July 2020 using the Zoom conferencing platform. The author, who is also the academic coordinator of this doctoral programme, was the facilitator of the focus group discussion which lasted about two hours. As the academic coordinator of the programme, the author needed to understand why the candidates experienced a longer period of liminality to help them overcome it. Given the growing number of students getting enrolled in the programme, prompt completion is desired. The session began with a presentation by the author on the concept of doctoral liminality as a means of creating a common understanding among the candidates. This was followed by a guided discussion on the causes and symptoms of extended doctoral liminality among the students, as well as how to facilitate breakthroughs for the candidates.

4. Findings and discussion

All fourteen doctoral students who participated in the focus group discussions acknowledged that they were somehow stuck in a period of extended doctoral liminality and were not making the expected breakthroughs to get out of it.

4.1 Causes of extended doctoral liminality

From the findings of the study, there are three main categories of causes of extended periods of liminality among information and knowledge management doctoral students in Kenya. The first category relates to inadequacies in supervision and mentoring. The students explained that some supervisors did not take their roles seriously. This lack of commitment was manifested by an inability or unwillingness to set aside adequate time to attend to the students

and their work promptly. Inadequate supervision resulted in insufficient guidance in terms of the content and methodological issues relating to doctoral work. One candidate explained this challenge as follows:

> *I know many students whose supervisors do not provide review comments promptly. The longer they take to review the drafts, the more they forget what the research is about thereby making it difficult for the students to make progress*. (FGDR4)

There were also cases where the supervisors did not possess the expected level of competency in their students' areas of research. In such cases, the students were left in the dark to find their own way through trial and error. The verbatim response below demonstrates the frustrations students experience when dealing with inadequate supervisors:

> *Some supervisors are learning while also supervising at the same time. To provide credible guidance, supervisors are expected to know more than the students. Supervisors who lack the requisite competency in the area of research end up only correcting grammar or not providing comprehensive comments to the students*. (FGDR7)

The students were also of the view that some supervisors treated them as lesser academic beings and not as budding scholarly colleagues seeking mentorship to attain the skills and attitudes of doctorateness. The verbatim response below captures the gist of this attitude:

> *Some of the supervisors treat us as schoolchildren who are expected to be generally passive in the learning process. This is inappropriate for this level. Are we not supposed to be treated as junior colleagues in academics?* (FGDR3)

These findings underscore the role of supervision in facilitating successful transitions in the doctoral journey and generally concur with the views of several scholars (e.g. Backhouse, 2009; Langa, 2010; Cloete et al, 2011). According to Grant (2005), relationship difficulties between doctoral students and their supervisors emanate from power dynamics which can interfere with the quality of communication between them, leading to feelings of inferiority and marginsalisation among the students. Mcclure (2005) clarifies that in these circumstances students exercise situational adjustment to avoid confrontation

with supervisors. Deuchar (2008) asserts that the relationship between doctoral candidates and their supervisors is pivotal to the successful completion of the doctorate. Deuchar adds that most students value supervisors who foster a sense of collegiality and who facilitate the interchange of ideas with other research students. The Academy of Science of South Africa (ASSAf) (2010, p. 93) state that effective supervisors apply multiple styles to support the students under their mentorship: they see themselves as "providing students with much more than research skills and an amount of subject knowledge; there is a strong emphasis on developing students as independent academics and peers". Pyhältö et al. (2012) assert that supervisors should apply student-centred approaches to facilitate and promote effective learning.

The second category of reasons for doctoral liminality relates to the students and their willingness and ability to work on the doctoral study. The respondents pointed out that all the doctoral candidates were working while also pursuing their studies. Being part-time students reduces the amount of time candidates can commit to their doctoral work as explained in the verbatim response below:

> *Many of us are working while also pursuing the PhD work. It is sometimes difficult to balance expectations of both roles. This leads to procrastination or general delay in completing revisions or drafts.* (FGDR6)

While acknowledging the difficulty of balancing work and student roles, the respondents also stated that some students are lazy and are unable to commit the requisite amount of time or effort to make progress. Other challenges in this regard include failure to take doctoral studies seriously; poor time management and procrastination; inability to apply oneself maximally in terms of attending to comments or suggestions; lone-ranger syndrome, which sees students working in isolation; a culture of secrecy and negative competition; personalising comments and suggestions from supervisors and colleagues; as well as difficulty in understanding important elements of the thesis such as conceptual and theoretical frameworks. The respondents also pointed out that students became less motivated when they realised that they were not progressing as expected. The verbatim response below captures this opinion:

> *PhD work can be draining on students especially when one is made to believe that they are not making good progress.* (FGDR8)

These findings generally concur with those of Liechty et al. (2009) that individual issues such as psychological factors and skill preparation influence dissertation

completion period. D'Andrea (2002) argues that student characteristics such as procrastination, dependency, unrealistic thinking, and relationship stress hinder progress in doctoral studies. Kluever and Green (1998) argue that independence and responsibility are highly demanded for doctoral work and that there is greater risk of attrition among students who lack these attributes. Vekkaila et al. (2013) acknowledge that doctoral students experience periods of disengagement and negative emotions which affect their progress. The authors add that disengaged students generally withdraw and become passive to learning opportunities. In these periods, they can only make progress if they are able to draw encouragement from a support network of supervisors and peers. Ali and Kohun (2006), as well as Spaulding and Rockinson- Szapkiw (2012) suggests that support from a strong community of scholars can motivate, and challenge disengaged students to re-engage. This parallels the support offered among members of an age-group, fostering mutual growth and success in life. Therefore, students need to collaborate with supervisors and their peers to progress out of perpetual liminality. Green (1997) suggests the use of regular meetings to keep students on track.

The other cause of delay for doctoral students in the liminal period revolves around availability and adequacy of institutional support and resources as well as clarity about expectations. The doctoral journey is taken in an environment. Candidates perform better if the environment is conducive for learning. This environment is generally created through institutional support in terms of clear rules and regulations; provision of adequate reading and other learning materials; availability of conducive physical and social workspaces; and financial support for needy students. The provision of this support contributes to the creation of an environment in which students are confident, safe and comfortable to work. Vekkaila et al. (2013) argue that there is a need for a close student–environment fit if the students are to make good progress and avoid being stuck in doctoral liminality. Golde (2005) asserts that the ability of the candidates to be resilient in the face of challenges depends on how closely they fit in the learning environment. Therefore, a misfit would discourage and delay progress out of liminality. Golde further states that whereas some elements of institutional support may be offered from a corporate level, departments should strive to offer structural support to their doctoral candidates for optimal results.

4.2 Symptoms of being stuck in doctoral liminality

The participants explained that in their liminal period, they felt stuck, timid, diffident and confused. Their efforts to break free and make progress seemingly led nowhere. Consequently, they felt frustrated, humiliated, failed and defeated as indicated in the verbatim responses below.

> *For me, I just hang in there confused but hoping something happens to enable me to make progress. It is the most frustrating part of the PhD journey.* (FGDR7)

Because of the slow pace of progress, the affected students avoid contact with their colleagues, supervisors and administrative staff at the university. There are also instances when they avoid some family members or friends.

> *Sometimes people, including family members, can be real tormentors. This is so unfortunate because they ought to support you more but sometimes they join the rest of the world to crucify you. One feels so helpless and alone.* (FGDR10)

The participants also explained that in this state, they become irritable, defensive and even suicidal. They also reported that they experience physical, social and mental fatigue. Some, like the respondent below, feel utterly helpless.

> *Sometimes, I cry to let out the anger and frustration. I know other people who do the same. It is no joke.* (FGDR9)

Some candidates consider dropping out of the programme because they feel they do not have the adequate energy and skills to complete their studies. This feeling is reflected in the verbatim response below:

> *I feel the PhD is for the selected few; it is not for me; I am not good enough; I am just wasting time and money trying to do something I am not cut [out] for.* (FGDR11)

Additionally, the literature reveals that doctoral candidates stuck in long periods of liminality demonstrate low energy (burnout), reduced involvement and inefficacy. Other symptoms include fear and anxiety (Strachan et al., 2004); cognitions such as self-criticism and self-doubt (Gordon, 2003); being troubled

and constricted (Greco & Stenner, 2017); uncertainty and precarity (Gill & Orgad, 2015); fluidity, feeling unsettled and unstable (Salvatore & Venuleo, 2017); as well as depression and self-pity (Tigranyan et al., 2020).

From the foregoing, it is evident that if not addressed, then the consequences of liminality can be felt in the physical, social and psychological realms of students' lives as well. Supervisors and host departments are encouraged to watch out for any of the symptoms above to be able to provide prompt and proactive support to students who are stuck in liminality. Whereas the symptoms may be varied and may at times be caused by issues outside their doctoral journey, basic support such as merely providing a listening ear can make a whole difference to candidates who are experiencing liminality.

4.3 Overcoming doctoral liminality

The question on how to break through doctoral liminality persists. According to Liechty et al. (2009), there is a need for interventions at individual, relational, and institutional/departmental levels if doctoral candidates are to be helped of extended liminal periods. The participants in this study suggested the following strategies:

- The institution should design and implement an appropriate incentive and reward system for doctoral supervisors which would encourage them to prioritize supervision.
- Use supervision committees as a means of addressing personality conflicts between students and individual supervisors. The committees may also help to harmonize the comments and suggestions given by the supervisors to the students.
- Establish and promote doctoral work groups to provide a mechanism for peer support and monitoring. Students, supervisors and the department should participate freely in the formation of these groups.
- All doctoral supervisors should be trained to enhance their skillsets and to execute their roles in the best interests of the student and the university. Such training should be regular and mandatory.
- Allocation of supervisors should be transparent (and consultative) and done with the goal of matching the research needs of the students with the research interests and competence of the supervisor. There should be mechanisms for changes where and when the need arises.
- The selection of doctoral students should be structured and elaborate to ensure admission only of students who demonstrate the interest and

capacity to pursue the programme successfully. Those who do not make good progress should be allowed to drop out.

- Supervisors should use a structured system to track and monitor students' progress periodically according to the milestones in the doctoral programme. The system should have provisions for and encourage interventions to sustain progress.
- Regular seminars and workshops on topical issues of interest both for students and the supervisors should be held. These can be used as platforms for the exchange of ideas, experiences, best practices and lessons learnt.
- Explore opportunities for offering financial support to students in the form of tuition fee waivers and stipends. This can be achieved through appropriate scholarships and student work programmes.
- Work closely with institutional student support services to escalate needs which supervisors or departments cannot directly provide. Of interest here are professional counselling and guidance services.

5. Conclusions

This study demonstrates that most doctoral students experience liminality which is caused by a mix of factors. Three categories of factors were identified in this study. The first related to inadequacies in supervision and mentoring. While some supervisors committed insufficient time for their students, some were either less interested or incompetent in the students' topics of research. Inadequate supervision left the students without the requisite guidance in terms of conceptual and methodological issues relating to their doctoral work. Therefore, they worked alone through trial and error thereby making little progress. The second category of factors relate to the personal willingness and ability of students to work on the doctoral study. It emerged that all the students were working while pursuing their studies part-time. Therefore, they struggled to balance their job and student roles. This affected their progress. Nonetheless, there were also students who did not take their studies seriously. Such students did not respond appropriately to their supervisors' comments and suggestions. The third category of factors causing perpetual liminality among doctoral students in Kenya emanated from inadequate institutional support and resources.

Doctoral students experiencing liminality were fatigued, timid, confused and diffident; frustrated, humiliated and defeated; as well as irritable, defensive and suicidal. Therefore, if not addressed, liminality can affect the physical, social and psychological realms of students' lives. The need to address doctoral

liminality is exigent. This can be done through diverse strategies. Having an appropriate incentive and reward system for doctoral supervisors; addressing personality conflicts between students and individual supervisors through supervision committees; training all doctoral supervisors to execute their roles in the best interest of the student and the university; allocating supervisors through a transparent and consultative process which matches the research needs of students with those of supervisors; and closely monitoring the progress of doctoral students so as to identify and mitigate indicators of liminality promptly.

This chapter used data generated by doctoral students in one programme in one university in Kenya and can therefore not be generalized beyond this context. This is only one part of the liminality story. There is need for further research on doctoral liminality at the national level; experiences of students who have completed their doctoral journeys; and the perspectives of supervisors on the causes of and solutions to doctoral liminality. Despite these limitations, the chapter is anchored in the author's experience as a supervisor of completed doctoral studies elsewhere as well as scholarly literature.

This chapter concludes that perpetual doctoral liminality is prevalent and is caused by students' personal contexts as well as the adequacy of the supervisor and institutional support they receive. Extended doctoral liminality can be avoided by adequately nurturing students through effective supervision and facilitative institutional support.

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