Doctoral Education in Context

Perspectives from Africa

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AFRICAN
MINDS

Published in 2024 by African Minds
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ISBNs:
978-1-0672535-3-0 Print
978-1-0672535-4-7 e-book
978-1-0672535-5-4 e-pub

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CHAPTER 24

Doctoral education in context: Perspectives from scholars in Africa

Kirsi Pyhältö

Doctoral supervision is one of the most studied areas of research on doctoral education. Yet *Doctoral Eduation in context. Perspectives from African contexts* manages to make an interesting contribution to the body of literature on doctoral supervision. This is mainly for two reasons: first, the book is written by doctoral education practitioners, which includes a mix of novice and experienced doctoral supervisors from various fields who took part in an online course for supervisors. Hence the book provides an interesting example of promoting research-based doctoral education, more specifically with regards to doctoral supervision. Second, the book offers empirically grounded contextualized insights on doctoral education and doctoral supervision across the African continent, a topic that has lacked adequate evidence and scholarship.

The development of doctoral education across the globe is largely driven by policies that aim to enhance social and economic competitiveness and societal health (Anders et al., 2015). Respectively, doctoral supervision and supervisory development still heavily rely on supervisors' own experiences as supervisees, and learning from the experience, occasionally observing and discussing topics with their colleagues, being examiners, and on 'how to' literature (Wisker & Kiley, 2014). Accordingly, the role of formal training for supervisors in many contexts is still of minor importance in cultivating supervisor competence, as compared to informal learning (Pyhältö et al., 2022; Lee, 2018).

Considering the importance of doctoral supervision for doctoral education outcomes and development (Hanesova & Saari, 2019; Denis et al. 2019), only somewhat recently have more extensive and systematic measures to improve

the quality of doctoral supervision been called for and implemented at many universities (e.g. Olson & Clark, 2009; Löfström et al. in press). Such measures have involved the development of supervisors through courses, workshops, mentoring and awards, though providing these activities is a relatively new area of staff development in universities (Taylor & McCulloch, 2017). A recent survey study involving 311 universities from 32 European countries showed that compulsory specialized supervisory training for PhD supervisors was required in only 17% of responding institutions, either in the majority or in all their doctoral programmes (Hasgall et al., 2019). Courses for PhD supervisors were offered by 43% of universities, either in the majority or in all their doctoral programmes (Hasgall et al., 2019). The findings imply that universities are seeking more systematic and effective ways to engage and support doctoral supervisors as part of supervisors' professional development. While we do not have comparable data from across African regions, we do know that a similar need exists (see e.g. Jowi, 2021; Sooryamoorthy & Scherer, 2022). This book presents such an endeavour at a continental scale.

Building a solid grounding for systematically developing doctoral education, supervision included, provides commitment to research-based doctoral education and models to implement it (Pyhältö, in press). This means that in addition to research policies, socio-economic demands, or the experiences of those involved in doctoral education, the practices of doctoral education and its development should be informed by research evidence on doctoral education and researchers' careers. The book provides an interesting example of a model for engaging supervisors in research-based development of doctoral education.

The chapters that comprise this volume originate from capstone assignments in the online DIES/CREST Training Course for Supervisors of Doctoral Candidates at Universities in Africa (organised in collaboration with the Centre for Higher Education Research, Teaching and Learning (CHERTL) at Rhodes University, and the Centre for Higher and Adult Education (CHAE) at Stellenbosch University) (Botha et al., 2019). The course was launched to cultivate supervisory development on the African continent and has been offered to doctoral supervisors across African higher education contexts since 2018.

Between 2018 and 2023, more than 500 doctoral supervisors affiliated to universities across 34 African countries completed the course. Through writing this book, the authors themselves engaged in research-based supervisory development, while simultaneously addressing topical issues with regards to doctoral education in their country, institutional or disciplinary contexts and so contributing to the existing body of knowledge within these areas.

The contributions to the book were selected by the editors, considering the quality of the assignments, as well as a diversity of countries and regions, languages, gender, fields of study, topic, and approaches on doctoral supervision. The invited authors refined and developed their capstone assignments into book chapters based on the editors' feedback. Altogether, supervisors from 16 African countries, including Angola, Benin, Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Egypt, Guinea, Kenya, Mauritius, Namibia, Nigeria, Rwanda, South Africa, Sudan, Tunisia, Uganda and Zambia contributed to this book. As a result, the book gathers doctoral supervisor perspectives from a region in the Global South that are often overlooked in the literature on doctoral education.

All authors are doctoral supervisors themselves and experienced scholars in their own disciplinary fields, though not specialists in research on doctoral education. Accordingly, the book focuses on practitioner perspectives on doctoral education, with some having a particular focus on doctoral supervision. The chapter topics are grounded in the authors' experiences both as supervisors and supervisees (during their own doctoral studies), their identification of a relevant topic (in most cases related to the author's own context in Africa), and the development of useful and interesting ideas, findings and/or recommendations for the theory and practice of doctoral supervision in their own contexts. As such the topics of the chapters largely arise from the authors' experiences within their specific doctoral education context that are further framed, scaled up, and addressed via research literature on the topic. As such, the book provides an interesting example of applying a bottom-up approach, ingraining supervisory experience in scholarly literature on doctoral supervision and in promoting epistemic agency with regards to doctoral education among scholars across disciplines.

The book has three loosely coupled themes: doctoral research and the doctoral qualification in Africa, doctoral pedagogy, and the supervisor–candidate relationship. Accordingly, the primary focus of the book is on doctoral supervision since two out of three sections address this theme. The choice is well justified since most research-based doctoral education boils down to supervisory practices. The reason for this is that the quality and quantity of supervision is a primary predictor of a positive doctoral experience and degree completion (Corner et al., 2017; Anttila et al., 2023), hence supervisors and supervision play a key role in the development of doctoral education. At their best, chapters build insightful bridges between supervisory practice and theory. Hence, the approach adopted in the book has ensured that the questions/issues addressed in the chapters are relevant and well-grounded in the everyday

practices/problems of doctoral supervision in these contexts. This adds to the usability of the book within varied African contexts.

Also, more generally speaking, the well-grounded problem identification can be considered as a precondition for any doctoral education development initiative to take a root, to be effective and sustainable over time. In other words, supervisory development support should be well ingrained in and aligned with the needs and everyday practices of a supervisor's work. Unfortunately, this is not always the case in institutional actions taken to promote supervisory development. Another precondition for doctoral education development work to be sustainable is that its implementation is systemic (see the seminal work in this regard by Bronfenbrenner, 1977; Navarro & Tudge, 2022). This means that the development efforts and activities at the different levels of doctoral education, ranging from national, to institutional and all the way to micro levels of supervisory relationship, are aligned (Pyhältö, 2022). In addition to the theme-based organisation of the book, orchestrating chapters based on whether they address doctoral education issues primarily related to macro, meso and/or micro levels may have further contributed to a systemic understanding of doctoral education development needs in Global South context(s).

The approach adopted in the book also gives rise to some limitations. First, there is considerable variation regarding chapter quality. This may partly stem from the fact that the chapters are authored by doctoral education practitioners. These are doctoral supervisors from various disciplines, rather than researchers specialized in research on doctoral education. On the other hand, the book also offers some interesting cross-disciplinary titbits such as in Chapter 1 by Oosthuizen, 'Presenting Bibliometric Analysis of Doctoral Supervision Literature using Topic Modelling'. Second, the bottom-up approach used in comprising the book has resulted to some degree in a lack of alignment between the chapters. Accordingly, the book offers selection of topics, methods, and perspectives, some of which are highly contemporary and/or original, instead of a systematic examination of the themes.

To sum up, the book provides significant added value by introducing a model for promoting research-based supervisory development that is inherent to the bottom-up approach applied by engaging practising doctoral supervisors in conducting research on doctoral education as part of their own supervisory development. So far there has been a very limited number of empirical studies on doctoral supervision from a range of African countries and across disciplines. The book contributes to bridging this gap. It provides glances at the diversity in systems, policies and enactment of doctoral education and supervision within a variety of contexts on the African continent.

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