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Closer to home…? Experiences of candidates on a doctoral education programme in two Sub-Saharan countries: South Africa and Ethiopia

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Abstract

This paper qualitatively explores PhD candidates’ experiences in two Sub-Saharan African countries: Ethiopia and South Africa. While the countries are self-evidently very different, their respective drives to graduate PhDs create a strong point of commonality, prompting the programmed initiative focused on, herein. Drawing from observational data, candidates’ engagements within their proposal stage of their PhD, on a doctoral education programme,

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are presented. The programmes, at a stage, supported 855 candidates of whom 276 were in Ethiopia. Called respectively Research Capacity Initiative and PhD Proposal Development Programme, the intervention was provided by an international development co-operation programme, SANPAD, and its commissioned arm, SANTRUST. Encompassing the dimensions of gender, technology, as well as early doctoral scholarship, the paper contributes to studies that seek to understand doctoral candidates’ perspectives through the theoretical lenses of ‘stages of doctoral education’ and ‘internationalisation at home’.

Key Words: South Africa, Ethiopia, Development cooperation, Internationalisation at Home, Pre-doctoral education; Knowledge Creation as a doctoral education stage.

Introduction

This study attends to the research question of what were dual and parallel experiences of Ethiopian and South African doctoral candidates in the early stages of their PhDs, while on a pre-doctoral education programme that supports their entry to PhD studies. While studies point to the necessity of South Africa and Ethiopia having programmes that encourage access to, and completion of, PhD studies (Saint 2004; Habib and Morrow 2007; Academy of Science 2010; Teferra and Heinz 2010; Mouton 2011: Harle 2013; Smit, Williamson, and Padayachee 2013, Cloete 2014), it is useful to focus on how systems and candidates responded to the concrete attempts to address these needs. As this study will demonstrate, there are points of intersection between these two countries that might previously not have been considered.

Both South Africa and Ethiopia have set explicit targets for Doctoral throughputs while also addressing the outcomes expected of this target. The Ethiopian Education
Sector Development Program V (ESDP V), 2015/2016-2019/2020 (Federal Ministry of Education, 2015) has set a target of Doctorate degree enrolment to increase from the base of 3,169 to 6,500. The 3, 169 doctoral baseline is in context of 36 public universities in a country with an estimated population of 110,000 as per the particular count, at the time of this article, offered by the http://www.worldometers.info/world-population/ethiopia-population. ESDP V is also intended “to develop competent citizens who contribute to social, economic, political and cultural development through creation and transfer of knowledge and technology” (Federal Ministry of Education, 2015: 12) for Ethiopia to reach Middle Income status. Already in 2004, Saint (2004) had highlighted Ethiopia’s downward trend in terms of graduating PhDs and to address this pressing issue.

The National Development Plan of South Africa targets the creation of more than 100 doctoral graduates per million of the population, per year, by 2030. This is an increase from 1420 doctoral graduates in 2010 to over 5000 for the years up to 2030. (Republic of South Africa, 2011). At an outcome level, South Africa states that higher education should fulfil human potential as well lead to improved incomes, enhanced productivity and a more knowledge-intensive, innovative country. Yet, for South Africa, the imperative to graduate more PhDs is also intricately linked to achieving transformation and social justice. (Academy of Science South Africa 2010 Jansen 2004; Badat 2010; Hill, 2012; Nickson 2012; Higher Education South Africa 2014). This is amidst South Africa’s high inequality despite its Middle Income status.

Both Governments emphasise the importance of increasing gender equality in postgraduate Higher Education. In Ethiopia, the plan is for female enrolment in
Doctorates to increase from 12% to 20% from, for instance, a 2009/10 base line of 10%. (Federal Ministry of Education 2015) In South Africa, in 2010, 59.3% of postgraduates were women (Higher Education South Africa 2014) with the NDP 2030 stating simply that the number of women PhDs must increase (Republic of South Africa 2011). In both countries, the imperative to increase the number of PhD and women PhD graduates is clearly pronounced as the means to fulfil elements of human aspiration and to better the knowledge base of the country, given these countries development trajectories within the world (Bakari, 2017).

Harle (2013), in a review of interventions to support pre-doctoral and doctoral education in Africa, mainly through defined programmes, notes that the support is uneven, fragmented and might contain still more barriers for the Candidate to enter or complete doctoral scholarship. For instance, he points to the paucity of opportunities for African candidates to attend international conferences. Yet, at the same time, he also notes that there are not many programmes that support the candidate from Africa, remaining in Africa, when taking up a scholarship for doctoral studies. He further notes the lack of funding that covers the costs of doctoral studies, thus inevitably making working on a doctorate, a part-time endeavour, similar to the ‘casualisation’ of labour and all the inherent challenges thereto.(Mouton 2011).

Against a background of such doctoral concerns experienced in Sub-Saharan Africa, the juxtaposing of lived realities of candidates drawn from two different geographic programmes represents a contribution towards understanding contrasting intricacies of doctoral education. This is a concern, which many scholars have referenced and invited further study thereto, specifically in relation to gaps around doctoral education
within the higher education periphery. (Altbach 2015; Agarwal 2015; Knight 2008; Teferra 2015; Cloete 2014; Harle, 2013; Smit, Williamson, and Padayachee 2013; Tettey 2010; Kehm and Teichler 2007; Kehm 2006; Gardner 2008; Teferra and Altbach 2004). Authors have also advocated for more qualitative studies in this regard. (De Wit 2008). This author has also noted that information is not comparative and data are outdated. This article does not attempt to address the outdated data as this would entail broader scale survey work. However, the paper sets out to give some additional insights into the experiences of doctoral candidates from both these countries.

This article therefore set out to address scholarship gaps through comparative observations of two Sub-Saharan countries, in the early phase of attaining a doctoral qualification. What patterns emerged from Doctoral candidates’ participation in such programmes that will provide better insight into current and future modalities of this nature?

**Background**

**South Africa and SANPAD/SANTRUST**

The brutal and oppressive policy of apartheid South Africa saw Black people, with Black women, in particular, being systematically discriminated against in terms of access to Higher Education. The Bantu Education Act of 1953 set up a severely segregated system of education (Mabokela 2001). With the onset of democracy in South Africa, the transformation of South Africa had policies, dimensions of society and lived circumstances searchingly examined so as to ensure that Black South
Africans achieved their rights in all areas of South African society (http://www.sahistory.org.za/sites/default/files/the_reconstruction_and_development_programm_1994.pdf). In this examination, the need to advance equality in terms of Black (Jansen 2004) and women doctoral scholarship was highlighted as an urgent and vital priority. (National Commission on Higher Education 1996) As late as 2007, Habib and Morrow (2007, 120) argued that “there are strong, even increasing, pressures towards racial redress in higher education” and to ensure higher research productivity within conditions of both equity and excellence. Tettey (2010) highlighted that increasing the number of women in postgraduate programmes in South Africa was critical and called for compelling, creative and funded models to enhance postgraduate achievements. Development cooperation is one means to provide such models. (Smit, Williamson, and Padayachee 2013).

While South Africa set out to find means to achieve this, in 1996, the Netherlands Minister for Development co-operation, Jan Pronk, motivated for a programme that would address the development and capacity building of the future, mainly Black, research scholars of South Africa (Hoebink, van der Lans, and Padayachee 2003). The South African Netherlands Partnership on Alternatives in Development (SANPAD) came into being. After 12 years of SANPAD’s development cooperation, a self-standing commissioned programme, SANTRUST, developed and ran parallel to SANPAD until SANPAD’s closure in 2014. (Smit, Williamson, and Padayachee 2013; Williamson, 2016). SANTRUST’S mandate, in line with development co-operation modalities, was to sustain and multiplier the contributions of SANPAD, when the latter closed its funding envelope. SANTRUST (as service provider), therefore, was commissioned directly by universities (as clients) to offer doctoral education (building on the existing infrastructure of SANPAD) for whichever
university was able to pay for the programme out of its own budget. SANTRUST’s programmes are the main focus of this study.

To this end, a sub-programme of SANPAD’s work (named as the Research Capacity Initiative) was taken up by SANTRUST and became the ‘PhD Pre-Doctoral Proposal Development Programme’ [hereafter the Pre-Doctoral Programme] (Smit, Williamson, and Padayachee 2013; Comiskey et al, 2015; Sheehan et al, 2015). The programme enabled doctoral candidates to attend a modular programme (combined of on-site and open distance learning modalities) on methodology as one of the core areas of doctoral scholarship. (Smit, et al., 2013; Comiskey et al, 2014; Sheehan et al, 2015). For all cohorts, other than the Nursing Sciences, candidates were enrolled for their PhDs in a wide diversity of disciplinary areas, ranging from the science, engineering, technology, humanities and social/applied sciences.

Pifer and Baker (2016,16) in a systematic review of international literature model three critical stages within for doctoral education. Stage 1 is “knowledge consumption” as a disciplinary/university-led taught preparation for doctoral readiness, at entry level of doctoral education. Stage 2 is “knowledge creation” which is transiting towards the more autonomous proposal and conceptualisation stage of the research processes for doctoral attainment. Stage 3 which is “knowledge enactment” which is a more summative stage of writing up and theorising within the dissertation proper and more fully claiming an academic identity. SANPAD /SANTRUST were positioned at Stage 2.

Following Stage 2, therefore, candidates arrived with a raw doctoral proposal (posited for their disciplinary area) and followed a sequentially, yet iteratively
configured, programme which facilitated developed doctoral proposals. The more positivist topics followed one track, while the interpretivist-constructivist followed a separate track. These work-in-progress proposals were then defended in front of the peers and experienced academics contracted by SANTRUST, also consistent with Stage 2 (Pifer and Baker 2016, 20). The structures of Universities also were involved with the developing proposals until their final adoption by the relevant structures of the different universities. Thereafter, the process towards a PhD/Doctoral attainment began. From 1997-2013, many candidates nationally, in selected Sub-Saharan African states, attended the development cooperation programme, SANPAD. From 2010 to 2015, cohorts from eight South African universities followed the commissioned SANTRUST programme.

**Ethiopia, a South African University and SANTRUST**

In 1998, within the ambit of international relations between the two countries, the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia and the Republic of South Africa signed a Declaration of Intent, followed by a General Co-operation Agreement in March 2004. (http://ethiopianembassy.org.za/ethiosarelation.htm).

Based on this government- to- government cooperation, a university in South Africa and the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia signed a Memorandum of Agreement (MOA), in August 2006, which made provision for a regional Centre that would support postgraduate education for the peoples of Ethiopia (http://www.unisa.ac.za/default.asp?Cmd=ViewNewsItem&NewsID=922&P_ForPrint =1). This MOA was a response to the need for more postgraduate education, as
discussed earlier. In seeking to increase doctoral graduation, the university commissioned SANTRUST to present the Pre-Doctoral Programme for candidates of Ethiopia registered at the University. From 2010 to 2012, three cohorts of doctoral candidates attended this programme, following the same curriculum as South African candidates.

Both the South African and Ethiopian groups were afforded opportunities, in principle, by their respective universities and to attend the programme.

Literature Review

Pre-Doctoral and Doctoral Education Programmes

Sub-Saharan countries (and as has been stated above, including South Africa and Ethiopia) are driving higher education transformation (Agarwal 2015.) This includes the use of programmed models and diverse support (Kiley and Liljegren 1999, Harle 2013, Tettey 2010) to scale up the transformation that is required (Bassett 2015, Naidoo 2015; Harle 2013; Altbach 2013; Teferra and Altbach 2004). Because a doctoral Candidates experience in Africa is completely different in terms of the knowledge infrastructure (Naidoo 2015; Saint, 2004; Muriisa, 2015), social justice (Naidoo 2015; Herman 2011a and 2011b; Badat 2010), the age, as well as sex of the Candidate and the part-time, ‘non-traditional’ nature of such studies (Naidoo 2015:340, Harle 2013, Teferra and Altbach 2004; Kiley and Liljegren1999), an
argument for revitalising Africa’s knowledge drivers (graduation of PhDs, research, publishing) has been established.

Revitalising African’s knowledge generation is specifically drawn into focus when Africa as being on the periphery of higher education is noted, as it has in this study and by Altbach (2003). The periphery lens demonstrates that African higher education, while striving to enter the 4th industrial revolution, appears still to be dependent on the globalised centre for leveraging technological benefits. Altbach (2003) notes that for many African scholars, access to the technology is not predictable, is expensive and not necessarily in place, even with regard to access to computers. Thus, this is from a hardware, software and connectivity point of view—but, also more importantly, is about the resources that technology offers to academics. When one considers this argument, internationalisation at home, while locating talent where it may best be used, becomes weaker, owing to the lack of technological innovative means of working. Substantive access to resources (including simply downloading the latest journals) therefore, becomes a critical factor for achieving equality of outcomes for scholars around the world.

Substantive access is perhaps no more acutely felt when regard for gender equality is tabled within the context of doctoral education. Selzer, Howton and Wallace (2017) conclude that both structural and personal barriers continue to exist for advancement of women in academia. Referencing a specific report on PhD candidates and gender (See: Newsome, 2008), Selzer et al (2017) reflect on how women perceive that ongoing success in academia is achieved through great sacrifice and persistent struggle. Williamson (2016), when considering the SANPAD and SANTRUST programme concluded too that it is the micro personal agency of women and men in
support of women’s academic advancement that matters, alongside the broader systemic and structural issues of gender at a macro level.

Having considered these dimensions of doctoral education, the conceptual framing for this article considers the interplay of what may be said as appropriated periphery concerns of: access to, and benefits of: gender equality, technology, internationalisation.

**Higher Education Contexts: Internationalisation at home**

A response to challenges of this nature is what Kehm and Teichler (2007,) and Rumbley (2015) highlight as “internationalisation at home”. Kehm and Teichler (2007) sees this as a future internationalisation pattern. While noting that internationalisation and the mobility to experience scholarship abroad is very valuable, Kehm and Teichler (2007) state that it has its limits including compounding polarisation of those who ‘have’ and those who ‘do not have’. Internationalisation at home speaks to the systemic strengths that higher education can inculcate through leap-frogging immersed, experiential learning and mainstreaming the concepts of internationalisation in the daily work of academics. Kehm (2006) has indicated that domestication of doctoral work has a number of benefits including protecting strategic resources, ensuring integrity of inventions and innovations, minimising competition that leads to brain circulation or the ‘brain drain’. There is nowhere the suggestion that academics should not be mobile and not enter global academic arenas. The pattern is, instead to encourage “temporary mobility and exchange” (Kehm 2006,71). While internationalisation at home does appear to be one solution in the age of electronic-driven learning, nevertheless, in the South African and Ethiopian instances, it might be seen as yet another parochial and repressive means
to isolate candidates from global exposure to learning. Both Ethiopia and South Africa share a history of academic oppression and isolation through oppressive governments (Saint 2004; Herman 2011a and 2011b), which creates a heightened need to experience other forms of scholarship located outside the narrow confines of the respective countries’ histories and inter-generational experiences (Saint 2004; Naidoo 2014).

**SANTRUST and PhD Proposal Development Programme**

Given that supported programmes might, amongst other benefits, improve the throughput of doctoral outputs (Kiley and Liljegren, 1999; Samuel and Vithal 2011), a programme, such as the Pre-Doctoral Programme may be seen to encourage entry into, and a better chance of attainment of, the PhD/Doctorate. (Harle 2013; Smit, et al., 2013; Sheehan et al. 2015; Comiskey et al. 2015, Muriisa, 2015). As the so-called Pre Doctoral Programme, it is presented in four different papers, cited herein has been seen to be a successful applied model which provides distinct enablers to overcome the perceived and actual difficulties of PhD study and also which may well fast-track the completion of a PhD, particularly in so called ‘developing contexts’. (Bakari, 2017; Harle 2013; Muriisa, 2015). The programme was also found to be both “a supportive place” and “fit for purpose” in doctoral educational settings that have had inter-generational and systemic contours of oppression, inequality, and deeply disadvantaged developmental trajectories. This was particularly noted for both sex and race. (Comiskey et al. 2015, 4, 6).

The programme, with its curriculum, has been accepted by Candidates as well as the higher education sectors to fulfil some of the doctoral capacity needs on the
African continent. Its strength has also been described in its self-organisation of networks, within the age of internationalisation (Kehm and Teichler 2007, de Wit, 2008, Knight 2008, Altbach, 2015), which reinforce adult peer learning. These networks are built amongst the cohorts themselves (Samuel and Vithal 2011), amongst supervisors/study advisers, who bring embedded capability to the programme, as well as international facilitators from universities of Africa and Europe. (Smit et al 2015). SANTRUST could also be described as one of the means of “internationalisation at home” (Kehm and Teichler 2007; Rumbley, 2015) with emerging Southern academics interacting within an established international academy. (Smit et al, 2013).

While some of the benefits of these programmes have been explored in an overview of the literature, various authors do present that there is only informal or anecdotal evidence of these programmatic approaches leading to the completion of a PhD. (Comiskey et al, 2013; Kiley and Liljegren, 1999; Samuel and Vithal 2011). The literatures, while also discussing elements of the programme in terms of their holistic institutional, national or international contributions do not widely take the unit of analysis to candidate level, a gap which this paper addresses.

**Methodology**

The research, using six years of participant observation and participant debriefing (inclusive of unstructured programme-based discussions with candidates which were a means to establish an early direction for the research) followed a qualitative approach. The observations were laminated with a documentary review of formal module, candidates and facilitators reports.
Ethical considerations included written permission from the SANPAD /SANTRUST governance head to undertake the study and to draw on the documentary evidence under the auspices of the programme. On the programme, candidates were always made aware of the programme as a site of research data but which would respect anonymity. Data concerning individual responses/reports were anonymised. The draft article was also shared with SANTRUST and the Head of the College of the university concerned. Both leaders were invited to review the article for trustworthiness and credibility.

The population of the study, who recorded their evaluations of the programme in 77 module reports, was 855 Candidates of which 276 were in the Ethiopia. There were records of module observations. The document review used the 77 module reports, module observation notes as well as facilitator reports which were the post- module formative verbal and written assessments of the facilitators.

A purposive sample was drawn from the population, in the data gathering stage, with the data analysed using thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006) that was systemised through “progressive focusing” of the data (Sinkovics and Alfodi, 2012).

Initial coding which distilled the “experiences, meanings and realities of participants”, the “prevalence” (Braun and Clarke, 2006, 82) and early clustered ideas were recorded as a starting point of the analysis, based, initially, on a deductive or theoretical logic that was informed by the theoretical points of entry as reviewed in the literature. These were: ‘sex of candidate’; ‘access’ and ‘attendance on the programme’. The data lent themselves also to inductive logic and, as such, ‘choice of methodologies’ and ‘response to academic debates’ became part of the “keyness” of the themes (Braun and Clarke, 2006, 82). Iterative coding created
possible themes. Such potential ideas were “progressively focused” (Stake, 1981; Sinkovics and Alfodi, 2012) to the level of asserted themes (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

**Presentation of Findings**

**Sex-disaggregated profiles**

With gender parity being raised as an area of theoretical interest (Saint 2004, Tettey, 2012; Naidoo, 2013; Williamson, 2016), the gender balance on the respective country programmes is a core finding. While this is not a quantitative study, the duality of the tale that the sex disaggregated data relates is telling in its enumerative significance (Grbich, 2012). In the Ethiopian context, of the 276 candidates, nine were women, in contrast to 267 men, who completed the doctoral education programme. In South Africa in terms of a comparable sample of 276, there were 202 women to 74 men. This is noting that the South African sample did include Nursing Sciences which accounted for 77 women in relation to three men. (Williamson, 2016).

Module observations noted “…why so few women?” …;“…only one woman in this cohort” (Ethiopia, Module Observations 1: 201, 2011; 2012). In South Africa, the notes record: “…many in this cohort are women; speaking out strongly on experiences of Black women…” “…many more women in Nursing Science cohort.” (South Africa various Module Observations, 2008-2013). Programme report comments are:

“It was disappointing that there were no females students in our group. A more balanced gender representation would have added greater balance to the research deliberations.” (Ethiopia, Close Out Report, 2010)
“The number of women decreased over the life span of the programme: in Year 1, there were 4; in Year 2, there were 4; in Year 3, there was 1.” (Ethiopian Close Out Report: 2012).

“The majority of candidates are from Historically Disadvantaged Groups and 17 Females and 1 Male were selected to be on the programme.” (Irish Aid-Santrust Final Report for 16 Jan 2013 to 6 Sept 2013: South African Nursing Science Programme)

**Access to literature**

Another distinctive pattern that differentiates South African and Ethiopian candidates is access to up-to-date literature. In the Ethiopian draft proposals, literature was notably out-dated (references were made to publications and not seminal one’s-in the 50 and 60’s) (Review of random sample of doctoral proposals 2010-2012), while South African draft proposals included recent literature (Review of random sample of doctoral proposals 2008-2013). The Ethiopian candidates reported that they struggled to download recent literature and that they struggled to access hard copy recent literatures.

A comment provided in a report on Ethiopia:

“Computers are very slow; Internet connections are extremely slow and certainly not efficient for article downloads – this must be addressed…” (Facilitator Report, FB: 2010)

“The value of the library orientation has been noted. However, candidates continue to be hesitant/technologically reluctant or constrained by other factors (not known) in terms of their library use. Many still use outdated references or references not drawn
from Academic Journals. There is a real need to get to the root of their failure to use one of the finest online libraries in Africa.” (Ethiopian Close Out Report: 2012)

“Mobile library and presence of librarians to brief the students are a welcome addition to the need for deepened reading and the sense of being a scholar” (Participant Observation, Module 1, 2011)

South Africans and their reports seldom commented on either of these dimensions, but did indicate that they often felt overwhelmed by the amount of literature that needed to be consulted for a doctoral study with statements such as:

“After every workshop, I get so emotional about how much learning and growth I go through. Unfortunately, with knowledge comes responsibility--- I find myself being more stuck with the progress in my proposal, because now that I know what needs to be done, I feel I am cheating my learning if I do less.” (Module Report: South Africa: 2010).

“I feel the programme clarifies what needs to be done differently at PhD level as opposed to Masters’ level. It guides one to think more at a knowledge generating level (a bit scary). However, there’s also a bit of confidence built by the sense of knowing (or thinking you know…).” (Module Report: South Africa: 2010)

**Access to lap tops and ease of on-line access**

Access to lap tops is another area where the contrasts between South African candidates and Ethiopians were marked. Although wi-fi is not as fast or free as it is in a selection of other countries, for the most part, South Africans can access reasonable wi fi for study purposes. Recorded notes reflect that South Africans always brought lap tops to the sessions while, in Ethiopia, until SANTRUST supplied
lap tops for the first two cohorts, there were a very small number of candidates who
brought lap tops. Even when SANTRUST supplied lap tops, some candidates did not
bring them to class, indicating that they were too valuable and they did not want to
travel with them. Therefore, in Ethiopia, most of the notes taken in class were in
small, lined note books that soon became crammed with their recorded information.
Not only were access to a lap top an issue, but the on-line access was slow,
frustrating and uneven, adding to the students’ sense of isolation from global
knowledge.

Lap tops were grounded in terms of prevalence and keyness in the Ethiopian
evaluations of candidates’ experiences. Evocative comments by candidates sums up
the sentiments:

“The issue of the lap top is critical –please provide the lap tops to solve most
(emphasis added) of our problems” (Ethiopia, Module 5: 2012)

“Everyone is really sad for not getting lap tops; we were really hoping for these; most
of us have small salaries to buy one on our own…” (Ethiopia, Module 5: 2012)

“It takes us too long to download one article; our internet is so slow…” (Ethiopia,
Module 1, 2012)

Selection of methodology by candidates

In Ethiopia, most candidates approach their PhDs/Doctorates in a quantitative or
mixed methods manner. There were five qualitative studies of 292 Ethiopian
candidates. Related to this, in the doctoral education modular on-site sessions,
candidates of Ethiopia were more attentive to facilitators who were dealing with
quantitative methodology. Qualitative methodologies often entailed poorer
attendance at sessions and/or less acuity of listening to the facilitator.
Participant Observation notes on a detailed session on qualitative methods: “The group is getting restless…they don’t seem to be taken in with qualitative approaches” (Ethiopia, Module 4, 2012; 2012).

“As Co-ordinator, I had to step in and intervene with the facilitation to provide several policy-based examples of how qualitative work is used in other countries to inform the hard facts of policy…I am not sure they are convinced…”

A facilitator’s comment gives a pointed reference to the privileging of positivist approaches after she was involved with facilitating more than one module:

“Getting them to shift to a position where they could realise that there were many different ways of knowing the world was difficult and not achieved throughout my group”. This situation still applied in Module 4 and I continued to be questioned in Module 4 about the ‘bias’ in qualitative methods (most of the students have been trained in the positivist approach and it is very difficult to get them to think outside of this paradigm).” (Facilitator SD: Ethiopia Module 4: July 2011)

For many Candidates, this would have been their first prolonged exposure to multi-disciplinary approaches-this built project-based scholarship, internationalisation and a wider acceptance of various epistemologies and ontologies. (Ethiopian Close Out Report: 2012)

In South Africa, most groups follow a more balanced mix between quantitative, mixed methods and qualitative studies. In South Africa, there was more balance in terms of being open to facilitators of both qualitative and quantitative approaches

Comment by facilitators who covered many of the analysis modules in South Africa record:
“Again (emphasis added)… the group was diverse enough especially from the perspective of academic approach, background and discipline.” (PB: University Y: 2013)

“It was a very mixed group (approach wise) and it took a lot of interaction to make sure that one was meeting their varied needs” (CI: University X: 2013)

Responses to facilitators’ academic debates within the programme

Given the fact that the on-site sessions include team teaching across different nationalities of facilitators, there are often debates and even scholarly disagreements between facilitators as they convey the range of scholarly material on offer and their epistemological and ontological viewpoints. Most South African candidates were accepting of these debates: either contributing from the floor or showing irritation that the discussions should move on. A sample of participant records reflects this:

“A lively and vibrant group who interacted strongly with the facilitators and enjoyed the disagreements” ; “The level of discussion was detailed and candidates challenged the facilitators on a number of points that they too were also actually disagreeing on” ; “Interesting challenges on the South African vs Dutch ways of doing a doctorate” ; “Good level of all round scholarly debate” (Various South African Reports: 2010-2013)

The participant observation notes record that Ethiopian candidates were less comfortable and often would turn to the co-ordinator as well as each other, showing non-verbal cues, such as widening their eyes and looking for cues on how to react. These might be said to express possible feelings of disquiet and discomfort in terms of the academic debate. A programme reports states the following:
“The Santrust programme, at times, was an important interlocutor with international trends and wider scholarship. Santrust teams often had to mediate strong debates around ‘the normative’ of the local context and the ‘adjacent possible’ of international scholarship: these were often not easy discourses.” (Ethiopian Close Out Report: 2012)

The level of peer debate among and between candidates was strong in both cohorts.

In terms of the candidates’ responses to the academic project of their Doctorates/PhDs that lay ahead, the South African candidates vocalised more distinctly about their realisations of the enormity of the academic challenge and workload that lay ahead of them. The Ethiopian candidates were more focused on getting their proposal and doctoral methodology ‘right’ and were highly focused on the technical processes in relation to research coherence. Therefore when confronted with the realisation that Doctorates/PhDs should lead to new knowledge and making a theoretical contribution, the South African candidates tended to spend more time in terms of debates around epistemology and ontology and the positioning of their research in the body of knowledge. Many of the Ethiopian candidates tended to see the instrumental nature of theory in terms of what it could do for them in an applied manner in their doctorates so that they could show that they had used theory in order to contribute to the body of knowledge. Therefore, there was less philosophising about theory and more focus on ensuring that they ‘found’ a relevant theory that would enable their Doctorate studies to be theoretically driven.

One facilitator evocatively recorded the following about his first time experience in Ethiopia:
“The general mode of class participation seemed to be one of simply listening. I often stopped talking and requested people to have a conversation with an adjacent person about the current material. It would be useful to know. There was little note-taking on paper visible except for a few people, and no obvious note-taking into the electronic copies of the material provided. Discussion was not easy to get going, but after some days it improved. My Ethiopian colleague was much more direct in his approach to students in the classroom, and in selecting people to probe for good answers to a string of questions. My strategy may have been too conservative.” (DT, Ethiopia Report, 2011)

Discussion

Pifer and Baker (2016) provide an integrative meta-analytic review of doctoral candidates’ experiences, internationally, covering fifteen years of doctoral education, from 2000. As noted earlier in the article, their wide-ranging synthesis supports the “stage approach” for doctoral education stakeholders, with SANTRUST and its proposal development milestone being considered Stage 2, namely “knowledge creation” (Pifer and Baker, 2016, 20). Knowledge creation therefore entails the attainment of an approved proposal through its write-up and oral defence, both critical areas that SANTRUST supported. Attendant to the transitional stage 2, Pifer and Baker (2016, 20) discuss the stressful, emotional dimensions accompanying this threshold. Considered a difficult and “isolated” time, the authors suggest that their review of international scholarship found that this stage has little “precedent”. Yet it was a deep focus that SANTRUST specifically sought to cultivate: in providing a cohort model, facilitated by different experts with peers as critical reviewers as well, and a safe space for draft proposal development, culminating in a preliminary defence.
For Stage 2, therefore it would seem, from the international literature that the stage is potentially “too rapid and ill-defined” (Pifer and Baker, 2016, 20) and, therefore, macro supportive understandings of the stage could potentially make a difference for all stakeholders involved. Despite the setting of targets at policy level, it appears that the experiences on early doctoral education programmes are influenced by the structural and systemic areas located in the physical site of the programmes.

The South African and Ethiopian candidates followed the same curriculum and were respectively enabled to attend the programme, yet, as has been shown, had very different responses to the programme. The structural and systemic areas may well be bound up in the political economy of knowledge which Lykins (2011:216) through citing Easton refers to as:

“This economic activity is political insofar as it involves “the authoritative allocation of values” (Easton 1965, 50). It affects the ways people think of the aims and values of education, as well as the means for achieving them.”

The candidates in South Africa scholarly participation could well be coupled to their emerging doctoral status in a widely recognised democracy in a globally described middle income (yet highly income unequal) nation. The involvement of more women, the level of debate, tolerance, and use of different methodologies and access to wider knowledge and technological means suggest a more democratically enabling environment within a multiplicity of “authoritative… values” (see Easton, 1965, 50 in Lykins, 2011). The candidates from Ethiopia operate in a more restrictive society where lack of political, personal and press freedoms are often widely reported.

Moreover, Ethiopia is still aspiring to middle income status and still has high levels of
poverty. The developmental journey for both nations for a density of doctoral graduates, as has been reviewed, is challenging for different reasons. The comparative experiences suggest, however, that it is not about the number of doctoral graduates, but what sex, as well as what they emerge ‘knowing’ that will differentiate the candidates ‘doctoral education’ in a fuller meaning of the words. This notion of ‘knowing’ aligns with the identified stage of “knowledge creation” seen as an important milestone in the Pifer and Baker (2016, 16; 21) review. Their study calls on the key stakeholders to provide “signature” (multi-faceted, yet tailored) support for this stage, attested to in the SANTRUST programme.

Linked to stage 2, as cited, this study asserts, then, that there are academic, practical, economic and social benefits for a programme that allows access for ‘internationalisation at home’, considering the emotional dimensions. Yet, candidates’ viewpoints raised more balanced needs for expanding the scholarly journey to include both internationalisation and internationalisation at home. This therefore evokes the importance of “balance” for doctoral education to ensure a secure, yet widened knowledge footprint (Pifer and Baker, 2016, 20). In a country such as Ethiopia, where technological and knowledge access is poorly resourced (especially for women) as this parallel tale in the study showed, these stage 2 considerations are more marked. Lack of access of women, in particular, to doctoral education programmes, in Ethiopia, as well as lack of access to more diverse methodologies, knowledge sources and technology are severe constraints to scholarship. Doctoral programmes brought and supported at ‘home’ do indeed increase the critical mass of candidates being exposed to such programmes (including the nine women), yet, also create insight into the broader realms of scholarship which can be accessed beyond the borders of a country. In
Lukes’ (2004, 11) dimensions of power, it allows those ‘outside’ to break into the “third dimension of power”. This power lies in the subtle, systemic shaping of people’s thinking, choices and viewpoints in the pursuance of keeping existing power relations. Given that the attainment of a doctoral degree can be seen to be one of the means for people to achieve mastery over intellectual domains such as conceptualising, reasoning and knowledgeable choices, those that attend doctoral education and, concomitantly, shape their education might well begin to see “the supreme power” that Lukes’ thesis manifests (2004, 28).

In a more open academic environment, therefore, the stage 2 of doctoral education and internationalisation at home provide interesting parallel layers to an already diverse academic experience. In a more closed environment, it might be one of the only sources of the all-important phase of ‘getting to know’ what scholarship stands for as well as to show up the dimensions of powers that might have been previously unchallenged.

**Limitations of the research and recommendations**

The research was exploratory in nature, covering a very specific programme within doctoral education which, as is evident, was a conceptualised ‘import’: first as development co-operation to South Africa and then, as commissioned international programme, to Ethiopia. While attending to these limitations, the article does consider two areas of international scholarship, namely the ‘stage approach’ and ‘internationalisation at home’, both which evoked the analytical discussion, above. A more robustly developed programme, conceived and grown at home, with international perspectives, is worthy of consideration and study. Admittedly, the Pre-Doctoral Programme did use South Africa and Dutch facilitators and did bring in
Ethiopian facilitators, alongside international scholars, but this has not been sufficiently researched for the potential collaborative lessons that could be conveyed. The study also selected particular variables, informed by deductive and inductive logic. There are vast numbers of variables, as well as theoretical lenses and methodologies that would provide different illuminations in terms of this narrated experience. The paper endorses the pragmatic and stages recommendations of Pifer and Baker’s (2016) for each of their distinctive stakeholders within doctoral education.

The research would be bolstered through a longer-term study which enabled propositions to be made in respect of how many and what quality of PhDs were attained, after a starting point of early doctoral education.

Teferra and Altbach (2004) point, too, to the challenge of applying ‘a one-size fits all’ for a continent as vast and complex as Africa and even for nation states within Africa. This limitation is also duly recorded for this study, not only in terms of the two countries on the African continent, but also in terms of not ethnographically studying the individual reasoning, viewpoints and responses of the many men and women who were participants of this study.

Conclusion

Academic entry into doctoral hallowed halls was once considered to be a distinctively liminal and privileged space. With the impetus for doctoral graduate development growing apace, this privilege is opening up to more aspiring scholars, who, through diverse doctoral education programmes, are inducted into doctorateness in many different ways. This is but one entry point into scholarship, and like the doctorate itself, does not guarantee the nature and calibre of the final scholarship, nor human
potential, nor innovative, inspired citizens. Yet, these programmes do open up wider academic realms and bring not only internationalisation, but contending debates, ideas and people, closer to the candidates’ home.

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Ethical Declaration:

Charmaine Williamson and any chosen co-authors have ethical clearance in order to use the data from the SANPAD/SANTRUST RCI/PhD Proposal Development Programme in order to compile academic articles. SANTRUST is an independently registered trust, and has the autonomy to grant ethical permission for its data to be used for research purposes.

About the Author:

Charmaine Williamson has been involved with doctoral education since 2008 when she co-ordinated a PhD Proposal Development Programme in South Africa and Ethiopia. The programme was initially funded by the Netherlands, and then evolved into a university commissioned service. Charmaine used the experiences of the programme to publish with
other scholars and as a single author so that scholarship could be advanced both through different theorisation on doctoral education and based on practical models. Charmaine’s research interests are located in researcher development and understanding how academic advancement and identity may be strengthened through peer and expert support strategies. Charmaine is a member of the Academy of Management with a special interest in Strategy as Practice which focuses on more complex, human-centred ways of formulating and implementing strategy. Charmaine works across a number of universities translating this strategic world view into practice.

Public Interest Statement:

For a segment of people globally, enrolling for a doctoral degree is an important culmination of scholarly and personal development endeavours. While reading for a doctoral degree is inspirational, it is also a daunting undertaking. Studying at this level is the essential test of independent research. Higher Education, however, has recognised that supporting doctoral candidates through relevant doctoral education programmes is a worthwhile investment. Therefore, exploring how doctoral candidates both receive and experience doctoral education provides useful messages for role-players. Doctoral candidates and their educational experiences are individualistic, yet their location at the time of their study is important in terms of gender, technology, access to resources and the very focus of their studies themselves. Experiences within Sub-Saharan Africa, as for this study, provide some commentary on what it means to be on the periphery of Higher Education within a world that increasingly values internationalisation of experiences.