

Doctoral Formation in South Africa: Rethinking Academic Preparation

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South Africa produces nearly half of sub-Saharan Africa's PhDs, yet its doctoral model remains narrowly research-centered. Despite rapid expansion in enrollment and output, doctoral and postdoctoral training offer limited preparation for teaching, supervision, and institutional leadership. This article argues that scale has not been matched by transformation in academic formation and calls for reimagining doctoral education as comprehensive academic socialization that integrates pedagogy, mentorship, and institutional engagement.

South Africa illustrates the progress and paradox of doctoral education in Africa. Despite producing nearly half of the continent's PhDs, its programs remain narrowly centered on research, offering limited preparation for teaching, supervision, and leadership. Rooted in inherited European models, South Africa's doctoral system has expanded in scale without transforming its formative purpose. This article argues for reimagining doctoral education as comprehensive academic socialization that integrates pedagogy, mentorship, and institutional engagement, aligning doctoral formation with the multifaceted realities of academic work in contemporary South African universities.

The Paradox of Preparation

Across Africa, doctoral education has expanded substantially over the past two decades, yet the architecture of training remains uneven and fragile. The continent produces fewer than 15,000 doctoral graduates per year, less than 2 percent of global output. These graduates are concentrated in just three countries—South Africa, Egypt, and Nigeria—which together account for over 70 percent of the continent's PhDs. Despite substantial growth, doctoral enrollment rates across sub-Saharan Africa remain among the lowest in the world at just 0.13 percent of tertiary enrollments, compared to 0.8 percent in Europe and 1.3 percent in North America.

Within this continental context, South Africa stands out as both a leader and a mirror of the broader challenges facing doctoral education in Africa. It possesses the continent's most structured doctoral system, supported by national quality assurance, government funding, and a strong research infrastructure, and produces nearly half of sub-Saharan Africa's PhD graduates each year. This institutional maturity makes South Africa an important case through which to examine how inherited doctoral models have evolved under the pressures of expansion, policy reform, and transformation. However, its achievements also reveal the limits of scale: despite its capacity, the system remains shaped by a narrow research orientation that often fails

to prepare graduates for the diverse teaching, supervisory, and leadership demands of contemporary academic life.

South Africa's Experience: The Data Behind the Dilemma

South Africa's experience illustrates this structural tension vividly. Over the past two decades, government investment has expanded doctoral enrollments as part of a national strategy for research productivity, transformation, and development. The [Council of Higher Education](#) reported that, between 2000 and 2022, doctoral enrollments grew from approximately 11,000 to more than 28,000, while annual doctoral output increased from 1,200 to nearly 3,700 graduates. However, this quantitative expansion has not been accompanied by a corresponding redesign of doctoral training. The dominant model continues to privilege research independence and publication as the ultimate indicators of academic readiness.

Evidence from the [National Tracer Study of Doctoral Graduates in South Africa](#) confirms this misalignment. The study, which surveyed more than 5,000 doctoral graduates, found that 98 percent of respondents were employed within a year of completing their degree, clear proof of the doctorate's market value. Just over half (53.6 percent) were employed in the higher education sector itself, but primarily in teaching-intensive or supervisory roles, rather than in research-only positions. While 70 percent reported working in fields directly related to their doctoral expertise, nearly one in five (18 percent) indicated that their current employment was unrelated to their PhD. These patterns reveal that the majority of South African doctoral graduates build their careers inside universities, but in roles for which their training provides little structured preparation.

When these graduates struggle to teach effectively or manage the intellectual and emotional demands of supervision, the problem lies not with individual capability but with a system that prizes research output while neglecting the pedagogical and relational labor that sustains academic life. South Africa's data thus expose the central paradox of doctoral education on the

continent: expansion without transformation in the pathways of academic preparation.

The implications of this extend beyond the doctoral stage. The gap between research competence and academic preparedness does not end at graduation; it follows emerging scholars into the next phase of their careers. For many, the postdoctoral stage represents not a period of holistic professional growth but a continuation of the same research-centered identity formed during the PhD. Understanding how postdoctoral training reproduces, rather than resolves, these limitations is therefore essential to grasping the full scope of the doctoral formation dilemma in South Africa.

Postdoctoral Training and the Persistence of Narrow Identities

This pattern is particularly visible in South Africa. The number of postdoctoral research fellows increased from 357 in 2004 to nearly 2,900 in 2020, with many supported by externally funded research projects instead of university core budgets. Despite this growth, postdoctoral appointments remain overwhelmingly research-focused, offering minimal teaching or supervisory experience. A national profile study described postdocs as “invisible academics,” highlighting their temporary, peripheral status within institutions. The postdoctoral system thus reproduces the same narrow professional identity cultivated during the doctorate, valuing publications over pedagogy, integration, or institutional contribution.

The implications are significant. By privileging research productivity above all else, postdoctoral systems reinforce hierarchies of academic value in which teaching and institutional service are rendered invisible. The result is a generation of emerging scholars who are technically proficient but pedagogically unprepared and who struggle to translate research excellence into holistic academic contribution. If doctoral education marks the beginning of academic formation, the postdoctoral stage should complete it. Expansion has created more opportunities for research, yet the academic pipeline continues to privilege a single dimension of scholarly life.

Addressing this issue requires returning to the fundamental purpose of doctoral education itself.

Rethinking the Purpose of Doctoral Education

The challenge confronting South African universities is not simply to expand doctoral enrollments but to ask, more fundamentally, what purpose the existing model of doctoral education serves. The PhD remains the primary pathway into academia, although its structure continues to reflect a conception of scholarship grounded almost exclusively in research production. This emphasis may have strengthened publication output, but it has done little to prepare graduates for the full range of teaching, supervisory, and institutional responsibilities that define academic life.

The question at hand, then, is not only how doctoral education should change but why the current model persists. What values and assumptions sustain a system that equates scholarly excellence with research alone? And what kinds of academic identities does this system reproduce? In South Africa, these questions are particularly urgent given the scale of investment in doctoral expansion and the centrality of PhD graduates to the future of higher education.

The evidence suggests that doctoral and postdoctoral systems continue to cultivate narrow academic identities rewarding productivity while rendering invisible the relational and pedagogical labor that sustains the university. This is not simply a structural issue but a philosophical one: a reflection of how we have come to define what counts as legitimate academic work. If doctoral education is to contribute meaningfully to the renewal of the academic profession, it must first confront the assumptions on which it rests.

Reframing doctoral formation in this light does not demand wholesale transformation but rather a collective re-examination of purpose. The task is to ask whether the doctorate, as currently designed, still serves the university it was meant to build and whether it prepares emerging scholars to sustain the intellectual and civic life of that institution in a changing world.

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