Africa: Resource Challenges to Doctoral Education

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Abstract

This article examines the provision of doctoral education in Ethiopia and its implications for African higher education. Despite the role given to doctoral education toward achieving economic development and improving the quality of higher education, the resources for running PhD programs are lacking in many African countries. More efforts should be directed to building institutional capacity and availing the resources needed to run successful doctoral programs.

The contribution of doctoral research to the advancement of knowledge is widely acknowledged. On the African continent, doctoral education has been especially promoted owing to its critical role and potential contribution to economic and scientific development. As a result, the link between doctoral studies and research for the development of Africa has been emphasized in public discourse, policy directions, and program expansion schemes. It is assumed that the main needs of building research capacity and enhancing economic development on the continent can be met by supporting higher education institutions that offer postgraduate programs, especially doctoral education.

While this basic assumption appears to be shared across the continent, the crucial importance of PhD programs in improving the quality of education at African universities has also been recognized. The latter has been dictated by the need to upgrade the academic qualification of faculty where there is significant deficiency at many universities across the continent. However, despite increasing interest in the expansion of PhD programs, doctoral studies in Africa and lower-income countries in general are fraught with a multitude of challenges.

In a recent study that we conducted to examine doctoral students' views about the support schemes and resources deployed to run PhD programs, the issue of funding and resources came out as the most critical area hindering the progress and success of PhD studies at Addis Ababa University—Ethiopia's flagship university and main PhD provider.

Resource Availability

The study revealed that doctoral students are dissatisfied with the poor standard and availability of resources such as IT and computer facilities, personal work or study space, library and electronic research resources and services, quality of library holdings, and availability of laboratory, clinical, or related physical facilities.

The overall rating given by doctoral students to adequacy of facilities was very low and quite worrisome. In terms of specific categories identified, availability of laboratory, clinical, studio, or other physical facilities received a mean rating of 1.65 (standard deviation [SD]=0.99) out of a possible high mean score of 5; and availability of personal work or study space was rated 1.91 (SD=1.13). There is clearly a high level of agreement among doctoral students about the lack of resources, which must be negatively affecting the success of their PhD journey.

We found our results to be consistent with earlier local studies where poor facilities and resources, shortage of laboratory and learning materials, lack of office or working space for PhD students, and related deficiencies were reported as major challenges of postgraduate programs across most Ethiopian universities. The same is true about many African countries where the expansion of doctoral education has not been accompanied by a corresponding improvement in availing facilities critically needed for running successful PhD programs.

Availability of Financial Support

The issue of funding for doctoral studies in many African countries has been repeatedly identified as a critical incentive—or barrier. In the context of the present study, doctoral students rated the financial support and related support schemes provided the university as poor. Out of a possible score of 5, doctoral students' ratings ranged from a mean score of 1.18 (SD=0.68) to 2.53 (SD=1.13). Concerning the availability of financial support to take part in conferences or workshops, which is the least rated category, over 92 percent of the respondents said the assistance that they received was poor. This should be a cause

for concern, since this does not only constrain the success of the PhD journey but it can also limit doctoral students' opportunity to develop their research capacity and skills.

The financial challenges faced by doctoral students appear to have been a common and outstanding feature of the system.

The financial challenges faced by doctoral students appear to have been a common and outstanding feature of the system. Most programs are often opened without necessary preparations and deployment of adequate resources. In terms of budget allocated to PhD research, the amount of money allocated at Addis Ababa University has until recently been ETB 25,000 (US$781.23) per student. Aware of the exorbitant costs involved in conducting PhD research, the university was forced to supplement student allocations using funds from its internal income and external funding received from international development partners.

The study further indicated that a recent increase of the research budget to ETB 45,000 (US$1406.25) for students in social studies and humanities and to ETB 60,000 (US$1,875.00) for students of science and technology, is still regarded as unsatisfactory in the eyes of doctoral students. One doctoral student decried the inadequacy of the funding scheme as follows:

"If PhD candidates should conduct studies that are useful for the country, they must have adequate financial backing. However, the present financial support is very low. If I tell you from my experience, the amount doesn't cover my transport expenses. In places where there are security problems you are expected to take airplanes. The budget doesn't even cover that. And the people concerned clearly know that it is inadequate. I think the government is aware of that. The problem is failure to give importance to the issue and improve the situation."

What is more worrying about the financial strain faced by doctoral students is the fact that the existing financial stringency is forcing them to misdirect their research focus and compromise the quality of their output. A doctoral candidate observes,

"Because they know the money they get from the university is limited, doctoral students try to fit their dissertation topic to the missions and activities of certain NGOs, with an aim of securing some grant. That means PhD students are not doing research on problems that come out of their interest nor those aimed at solving national problems. They do research to get some spillover from the research grant they secure by linking their topic to the interest of potential sponsoring organizations."

This is an indication that the financial challenges of the university are threatening the goals of increasing research productivity and enhancing economic development through doctoral education, which are regarded as the main rationales for introducing the programs. Research findings at the regional level are indicative of similar patterns. Most African countries spend little on research, innovation, and development, which has a direct impact on expanding doctoral programs and promoting quality outputs.

Conclusion

Given the circumstances, it can be anticipated that neither the process of doctoral education nor the quality of the research output in Ethiopia will help achieve the aims of PhD programs, unless significant improvements are made in terms of overhauling both national directives and resources and support mechanisms. The same holds true for the many higher education systems on the continent where, despite encouraging efforts to expand doctoral education, little attention is given to fulfilling the requirements needed to run successful PhD programs. Future efforts should focus on addressing existing constraints, rather than on opening new PhD programs without proper financial planning.◢

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