

# Doctoral Students' Academic Engagements in Addis Ababa University, Ethiopia: Nature, Sources, and Challenges

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## **Abstract:**

Doctoral education cultivates thinkers and researchers. This study investigated the engagement of 67 doctoral students conveniently sampled from different departments of Addis Ababa University. Engagement was operationalised in terms of vigour, dedication and absorption in academic activities and measured by the adapted Utrecht Work Engagement Scale for students (UWES-S). Qualitative data were also gathered to explore the sources and challenges of engagement. The results show that 62.7 percent of these doctoral students reported an average level of engagement and that there were no differences in terms of gender and field of study. The need for professional growth, a sense of contribution, social recognition, and improved employability and income were found to be important sources of engagement. Inadequate research funds, poor facilities, extended coursework, difficulty balancing family and academic responsibilities, and relational concerns with supervisors were the major challenges of engagement.

**Key words:** Student engagement, doctoral education, higher education in Ethiopia, challenges of doctoral students, academic engagement

La formation doctorale permet de cultiver des penseurs et des chercheurs. Cette étude analyse l'engagement d'un échantillon de 67 doctorants issus

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de différents départements de l'Université d'Addis Ababa. L'engagement des doctorants a été mesuré en termes de vigueur, de dévouement et de participation dans des activités académiques, en adaptant la « Utrecht Work Engagement Scale for Students » (UWES-S : Echelle d'engagement au travail d'Utrecht pour les étudiants). Des données qualitatives ont aussi été collectées pour explorer les sources de cet engagement et les défis qui y sont liés. Les résultats montrent que 62.7 pour cent de ces doctorants font preuve d'un niveau d'engagement moyen et qu'il n'y a pas de différence entre les genres et les domaines d'études. Le besoin de se développer professionnellement, le sentiment de contribuer, la reconnaissance sociale, et les perspectives d'emploi et de hausses de salaires sont d'importantes sources d'engagement. Des financements insuffisants pour la recherche, de mauvais équipements, une charge de cours accrue, le difficile équilibre entre responsabilités familiales et académiques, et des inquiétudes liées à la relation avec le directeur de thèse sont les principaux problèmes faisant obstacle à l'engagement.

### Introduction

Doctoral education is an important process in preparing highly qualified human resources that are critical in the formation and socialisation of the next generation of scholars, as well as in advancing the frontier of human thinking through research and scientific inquiry, and conveying knowledge and skills in the form of teaching and advising (Gardner, 2008; Golde and Walker, 2006). It offers opportunities for developmental and academic transition through self-directed training in scientific inquiry and academic writing (Nsamenang and Tchombe, 2011). Doctoral studies also enhance independent thinking and lay the groundwork for autonomous research and a high level of scholarship (Austin, 2002; Brew, Boud, and Namgung, 2011; Pyhalto, Nummenmaa, Soini, Stubb, and Lonka, 2012; Rudner and Schafer, 1999; Turner and McAlpine, 2011; Walker, Golde, Jones, Bueschel, and Hutchings, 2008). In transforming individuals from being a student to becoming a scholar (Nsamenang and Tchombe, 2011), it produces "stewards of a discipline" (Golde and Walker, 2006) that generate new knowledge (research), disseminate it (publishing and lecturing), and responsibly convert it into practice (application).

Realisation of these goals and missions requires serious academic engagement of candidates throughout doctoral education programmes. Such engagements have been consistently reported as decisive drivers of academic as well as personal development. Astin's (1984, p. 528) developmental theory of student engagement defined engagement as "the quantity and quality of the physical and psychological energy that students invest in their college experience." Fredricks, Blumenfeld, and Paris

(2004) described engagement as a multifaceted construct that encapsulates students' behavioural, emotional and cognitive involvement in their education.

In the context of doctoral education, engagement has been conceptualised as a positive, fulfilling college experience operationalised in terms of students' vigour, dedication and absorption (Schaufeli, Martinez, Pinto, Salanova, and Bakker, 2002; Schaufeli, Salanova, Gonzalez-Roma, and Bakker, 2002). Vigour refers to high levels of energy, vitality, and persistence while dedication relates to a sense of meaning, enthusiasm, inspiration, pride, and challenge. Absorption, on the other hand, refers to being fully focused and passionately absorbed or immersed in one's academic and research work and feeling excited about that work.

There is increasing recognition of the importance of understanding doctoral students' engagement. According to Fredricks, Blumenfeld, and Paris (2004), the notion of student engagement has attracted growing interest among developmental psychologists and educationalists as a means to improve the negative experiences (e.g., poor academic achievement, student boredom and disaffection, and dropout rates) of students in higher education institutions (HEIs). Recent research on student engagement has focused on understanding students' college experiences from a strength-based perspective. According to Schaufeli *et al.*, previous studies on doctoral education disproportionately focused on student attrition and malfunctioning rather than on involvement and optimal functioning (Schaufeli, Martinez *et al.*, 2002).

Investigations of doctoral students' engagements have brought many findings to light. First and foremost, they note that, engaged doctoral students are successful in their academic and research work and resilient in difficult situations (Vekkaila *et al.*, 2013a). Virtanen and Pyhalto (2012) found that, engagement was a significant predictor of student satisfaction, degree completion, and persistence in doctoral studies. Similarly, Akobirova (2011) reported a strong association between international doctoral students' academic and social engagement and their achievements. On the other hand, disengagement has been associated with experiences of inefficiency, cynicism, and exhaustion (Vekkaila, Pyhalto and Lonka, 2013b) and incompetence and attrition (e.g., Golde, 1998; Lovitts, 2001).

Another understanding that emerged from previous research is that engagement is a function of multiple factors in the constant interplay between the student and his or her learning environment (Vekkaila, Pyhalto, and Lonka, 2013a; Phalto, Stubbs, and Lonka, 2009). In meaningfully organised doctoral learning environments, students are likely to receive feedback and support from supervisors (e.g., Ives and Rowley, 2005; Hoskins and Goldberg, 2005), cherish opportunities to interact with

faculty and the scholarly community (e.g., Gardner, 2007; Gardner and Barnes, 2007; Hoskias and Goldberg, 2005; Pyhalto, Stubb, and Lonka, 2009; Vekkaila, Pyhalto, and Lonka, 2013a) and experience free and periodic discussion about issues surrounding teaching and learning (Hoskias and Goldberg, 2005). Doctoral students also participate in undergraduate teaching and research projects (e.g., Gardner, 2007; Gardner and Barnes, 2007; Hoskias and Goldberg, 2005; Pyhalto, Stubb, and Lonka, 2009; Vekkaila, Pyhalto, and Lonka, 2013a). Meaningfully structured learning environments generally promote higher motivation levels, and immersion in doctoral activities. Conversely, in less suitable and less meaningfully structured learning environments, students exhibit passivity and disengagement (Vekkaila, Pyhalto, and Lonka, 2013b).

The different roles learning environments play in structuring doctoral students' academic engagement suggest that engagement is domain specific and environmentally structured rather than universal in nature. However, the learning environment of doctoral students in Ethiopian higher education settings in general and students' engagement in their academic work in particular have not been explored. The study was, therefore, conceived to explore the nature, sources and challenges of doctoral students' engagement in Addis Ababa University (AAU).

### **Doctoral Education in Ethiopia: An Overview**

Ethiopia is experiencing unprecedented expansion of higher education in general and post-graduate education in particular. This makes sense to the extent that faculty with advanced degrees is available to run programmes in the various universities. In its last five-year Growth and Transformation Plan (GTP), the Ethiopian government envisaged producing about 5,000 PhD holders through different modalities (distance and face-to-face) and locations (locally and abroad) not only to empower newly-established universities but to reverse the brain drain that has severely affected the country, by promoting a home-grown PhD programme. Addis Ababa University was earmarked to take the leading role in this project. The University is thus witnessing a significant increase in the number of PhD programmes and doctoral students.

Doctoral education in Ethiopia is a late 20<sup>th</sup> century phenomenon that was inaugurated in 1987 under the School of Graduate Studies (SGS) at AAU, the country's premier university, in four areas of study: Biology, Chemistry, History, and Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL). Graduate education in general and doctoral programmes in particular aim to produce qualified teaching faculty for HEIs across the country, and train researchers in various fields of science and technology as well agriculture, medicine, and the social sciences (AAU, 1980,1987; Moges, 2013).

However, progress has been slow. The number of doctoral programmes at AAU grew from 11 in the 2004/05 academic year to 24 and 58 in 2007/08 and 2010/11, respectively. Furthermore, the University conferred only 96 doctoral degrees from 1987 to 2010/11 and 51 from 2005 to 2009 (Moges, 2013).

Doctoral education has burgeoned in Ethiopia recently, mainly in response to the urgent need for qualified teaching faculty in recently established HEIs. The number of PhD students has shown a remarkable increase in AAU and other universities. By 2011, AAU alone had more than 1,300 doctoral students enrolled in more than 58 programmes (Moges, 2013). A similar trend has been observed in several other universities (e.g., Haromaya, Hawassa, Bahir Dar, Jimma, Mekelle, Gondar, and Arba Minch). Table 1 below shows that, PhD admissions at the national level increased almost tenfold in the past five academic years.

**Table 1.** Trends in doctoral student enrollment in Ethiopia

Academic Year	Enrollment by Gender		
	Male	Female	Total
2008/09	299	26	325
2009/10	744	47	791
2010/11	690	99	789
2011/12	1,530	319	1,849
2012/13	2,809	356	3,165

Adapted from: Education Statistics Annual Abstract (2013), FDRE Ministry of Education, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia

However, insufficient attention has been paid to evaluating these blossoming PhD programmes. While some studies have been conducted on various issues relating to graduate education, particularly MA programmes, (e.g. Desalegn, 2009; Tsigie 2010; Wossenu, 2009, Belay and Yekoyalem, 2014) , there is a paucity of scientific research on doctoral education in the country. Cognizant of this trend, the present study investigated one of the most vital components of doctoral education, doctoral students' engagement in academic and research work bearing the following questions in mind:

- What is the nature and extent of doctoral students' engagement in their academic and research work in AAU and to what extent does such engagement differ by gender, and year and field of study?
- Does the perceived quality of the feedback obtained from dissertation

supervisors significantly affect the level of engagement in doctoral work?

- What other sources contribute to doctoral students' engagement in their academic and research activities in AAU?
- What challenges do doctoral students confront in their engagements in academic and research activities in AAU?

## **Methods**

### **Research design and participants**

A quantitative approach was used to examine the nature and extent of doctoral students' engagement, while a qualitative approach was employed to explore the factors that contribute to and the challenges that impede students' engagement in their academic and research work.

The participants were 67 (12 female and 55 male) conveniently sampled doctoral students from the Colleges of Social Sciences, Education and Behavioral Studies, and Languages and Humanities at AAU. The participants were at different phases of their doctoral work. Criteria for participation were doctoral students that had completed at least two semesters and that stayed on campus, making them more accessible. The overall characteristics of the participants are presented in Table 2.

In addition, one department head from each of the three colleges was interviewed, specifically in relation to the factors that hinder students' engagement in doctoral work. These interviews were conducted in Amharic, and lasted nearly an hour. The interviewer took notes during the interview with the consent of the interviewee. It was assumed that department heads were more informed than coordinators about doctoral programmes as they attend different conferences at university level, regular meetings in the academic commissions of the respective colleges and graduate committee meetings at department level which they chair.

**Table 2.** Background characteristics of the participants

Variables	Categories	N	%
Gender	Male	55	82.1
	Female	12	17.9
	<b>Total</b>	<b>67</b>	<b>100</b>
Year of study	First	13	19.4
	Second	7	10.4
	Third	15	22.4
	Fourth	12	17.9
	Fifth	13	19.4
	Sixth	6	9.0
	Seventh	1	
	<b>Total</b>	<b>67</b>	<b>100</b>
Field of study/college	<b>Social Sciences</b> ( <i>Social Anthropology, Geography, Political Science, Sociology, Social Work</i> )	20	29.9
	<b>Education &amp; Behavioural Studies</b> ( <i>Psychology, Educational Management, Special Needs</i> )	25	37.3
	<b>Language, Journalism &amp; Humanities</b> ( <i>Linguistics, Literature, Philology, English and Amharic Languages Teaching, Folklore</i> )	22	32.8
	<b>Total</b>	<b>67</b>	<b>100</b>

## Measures

*Demographic measure:* The study employed a self-report measure to obtain data on the participants' demographic characteristics, engagement, and the quality of the feedback they receive. A standard demographic questionnaire was used to collect data about participants' age, gender, programme/field of study, and year of study.

*Utrecht Work Engagement Scale for Students (UWES-S):* Doctoral students' engagement in their academic and research work was determined by a 14-item self-report survey known as the *Utrecht Work Engagement Scale for Students (UWES-S)* (Schaufeli, Salanova et al., 2002; Schaufeli and Bakker, 2003). The items of the *UWES-S* are grouped into three sub-scales that reflect the fundamental dimensions of engagement: vigour, dedication, and absorption. Vigour and dedication were each measured by five items,

while absorption was measured by four. All items are scored on a 7-point Likert scale with scores ranging from 0 “Never” to 6 “Always.”

The *UWES* was originally developed for Dutch students but was cross-culturally validated in more than a dozen of countries (including South Africa) and 17 languages (Schaufeli and Salanova, 2007; Schaufeli and Bakker, 2003). Storm and Rothmann (2003) studied the psychometric properties of the *UWES* in the South African context and concluded that it is a reliable measure of work engagement in diverse cultural settings. The *UWES* has also been adapted for Nigerian samples and demonstrated good psychometric properties (Ugwu, 2013). Furthermore, it has been used to examine the engagement of poly tech students in Namibia (Shimaneni, 2013). Given its wide use and acceptance, the *UWES* student version was contextualised and employed to measure doctoral students’ academic engagement in AAU. It showed high internal consistency with alpha .90 for the overall scale and .79, .82, and .68 for the vigour, dedication, and absorption sub-scales, respectively.

For the purpose of this study, the mean score of the three *UWES-S* sub-scales and the total mean score of the *UWES-S* scale that ranges between 0 and 6 were computed and the five level interpretation guideline developed by Schaufeli and Bakker (2003) was employed to determine the extent of doctoral students’ engagement. According to Schaufeli and Bakker, an overall mean score of less than or equal to 1.93 is interpreted as a “very low” level of engagement. Mean scores that range from 1.94 to 3.06 and 3.07 to 4.66 are scored as “low” and “average”, respectively. Scores from 4.67 and 5.53 and mean scores greater than or equal to 5.54 are scored as “high” and “very high” levels of engagement, respectively.

*Sources of engagement:* qualitative and quantitative data were gathered to assess the sources of engagement in doctoral work. While quantitative data were obtained by measuring the role of the perceived quality of feedback, interviews were used to explore the other sources.

*Perceived quality of feedback from dissertation supervisors:* The quality of feedback was assessed to determine if this could significantly affect doctoral students’ level of engagement. The participants’ perceptions of the quality of feedback received was assessed using three items adapted from the MED NORD questionnaire that was developed to measure students’ perceptions of the learning environment (Lonka et al., 2008). An example of an item is “my supervisor(s) are supportive and I get personal attention from them.” All items were rated on a 4-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (not true at all) to 4 (very true).

*Sources of engagement–qualitative data:* qualitative data on sources and challenges of doctoral students' engagement were obtained through unstructured (open-ended) items included in the students' questionnaire. An example of an item included to generate data about students' sources of engagement is “*what motivates or inspires you to be engaged in your doctoral work?*” The question: “*what are the challenges that obstruct you from your doctoral work?*” is an example of an item used to collect data about challenges in doctoral education. In-depth interviews were also conducted with department heads to explore the sources of students' engagement from macro-level university factors to departmental level. Department heads were specifically interviewed about the sources of disengagement relating to students themselves, departments, and college and university concerns.

### **Data Analysis**

Descriptive statistics were used to examine the nature of students' engagement (overall level of engagement and engagement on each of the three dimensions). Group differences in students' engagement were subsequently examined employing the independent samples t-test to examine gender differences, and ANOVA to test if differences exist by field of study. Pearson's linear correlation analysis was also used to examine if year of study and perceived quality of supervision would affect the level of engagement. Finally, the qualitative data were thematically analysed to explore the sources as well as the challenges of students' engagement.

### **Results**

The main purpose of this study was to examine the nature, sources and challenges of doctoral students' engagement in their academic and research activities. Data from 67 doctoral students and three department heads were analysed.

#### **Engagement in doctoral work**

The literature notes that doctoral students' engagement in their research and academic work is crucial in the preparation of scholars and researchers. Thus, the nature of students' engagement in their doctoral work was determined. Firstly, the extent of students' engagement (overall as well as in the three dimensions) was examined using mean scores and frequencies based on Schaufeli and Bakker's (2003) interpretation guideline. Mean differences were then tested considering gender (independent samples t-test) and field of study (one-way ANOVA). Correlations among the study variables were also examined using Pearson's linear correlation.

The overall mean score was 3.94 with a standard deviation of 0.95. As per the interpretation guideline, the mean score indicates an average level

of students' engagement in their doctoral work. Further analysis of the extent of engagement showed that a large proportion of the study participants (62.7 percent) reported an average level of engagement in their doctoral activities. Surprisingly, none reported a very high level of engagement. In terms of engagement dimensions, the participants demonstrated higher levels of vigour ( $M = 4.13$ ,  $SD = 1.00$ ) than absorption ( $M = 3.86$ ,  $SD = 1.02$ ), and dedication ( $M = 3.83$ ,  $SD = 1.13$ ). Further descriptive statistics for each engagement dimension by gender and field of study are presented in Table 3.

An independent samples t-test was run to test gender differences in doctoral students' engagement. There were no significant gender differences in the three dimensions: *Vigour*:  $t(65) = -2.419$ ,  $p > .05$ ), *Dedication*:  $t(65) = -1.205$ ,  $p > .05$ ), and *Absorption*:  $t(65) = -.449$ ,  $p > .05$ ); as well as *overall engagement*:  $t(65) = -1.535$ ,  $p > .05$ ). Similarly, one-way ANOVA results showed that students in different fields of study did not differ in their engagement: *Vigour*:  $F(2, 64) = .107$ ,  $p > .05$ ), *Dedication*:  $F(2, 64) = .757$ ,  $p > .05$ ), *Absorption*:  $F(2, 64) = .113$ ,  $p > .05$ ), and *overall engagement*:  $F(2, 64) = .141$ ,  $p > .05$ ). The correlation matrix in Table 4 also shows that year of study does not correlate significantly with all the dimensions of engagement.

**Table 3.** Doctoral students' engagement by gender and field of study ( $n = 67$ )

Engagement dimension	Gender		Field of study		
	Male (n = 55) Mean (SD)	Female (n = 12) Mean (SD)	SS (n = 20) Mean (SD)	EBS (n = 25) Mean (SD)	LH (n = 22) Mean (SD)
Vigour	4.00 (1.00)	4.73 (.73)	4.08 (1.04)	4.10 (1.05)	4.21 (.91)
Dedication	3.75 (1.17)	4.18 (.77)	4.08 (1.09)	3.78 (1.16)	3.66 (1.13)
Absorption	3.83 (1.01)	3.98 (1.11)	3.94 (1.23)	3.79 (.96)	3.86 (.92)
<b>Overall</b>	<b>3.86 (.98)</b>	<b>4.32 (.73)</b>	<b>4.04 (1.05)</b>	<b>3.89 (.95)</b>	<b>3.92 (.89)</b>

SS= Social Science, EBS= Education & Behavioral Studies, LH= Language & Humanities

Note: Standard deviations are in parentheses

### Sources of engagement in doctoral work

Table 4 also presents an inter-variable correlation matrix depicting the nature of the relationship among the dimensions of doctoral students' engagement with the quality of feedback to determine if this could be an important factor that affects the level of students' engagement.

**Table 4.** Correlation among the study variables

Variables	Correlation index				
	1	2	3	4	5
Year of study (1)	-				
Vigour (2)	-.139	-			
Dedication (3)	-.099	.764**	-		
Absorption (4)	-.001	.690**	.712**	-	
Overall (5)	-.093	.910**	.928**	.867**	-
Quality of feedback (6)	.009	.230*	.265*	.331**	.300*

\*Correlation is significant at the .05 level

\*\* Correlation is significant at the .001 level

As shown in Table 4, positive and significant correlations were observed between students' perceptions of quality of feedback and *vigour*  $r(67) = .230$ ,  $p < .05$ , *dedication*  $r(67) = .265$ ,  $p < .05$ , *absorption*  $r(67) = .331$ ,  $p < .05$ , and *overall engagement*  $r(67) = .300$ ,  $p < .05$ .

The participants were asked to describe the sources that contribute to their engagement in academic and research activities. At the outset, they identified various factors that inspire them to stay engaged even in the face of difficulties. The descriptions were thematically analysed and the most frequently described sources are summarised below.

The most common factors cited by the participants as sources of engagement in doctoral activities were professional growth (such as the need to become an independent researcher and recognised scholar, develop new knowledge and acquire advanced research skills), and a sense of contributing to society as well as their respective field of study. They also cited interest in working as a university instructor, the need for social recognition (having a PhD degree), status, and improved employability and income. One student expressed this as follows:

Since I am in the academia, I believe that professional development is imperative and working on my PhD is part of this professional progress. In addition, I have an internal motive to have a PhD. There are also some external rewards like promotion, salary incre-

ment that could be obtained by getting the PhD. I also believe that the more I learn, the more I will be contributing to the institution and to the society. All these reasons encouraged me to continue the PhD work.

Another participant remarked:

I am very much eager to engage myself in research work and want to be an independent researcher and renowned scholar in my field of study.... I am striving to contribute something meaningful to my field of study.

Analysis of the sources of the students' engagement revealed that engagement experiences seem to mainly originate either in their strong need for learning and development as scholars and desire for personal growth and development, or their interest in obtaining a PhD. As the following extract shows, they also highlighted making a contribution in their field of study as well as their community as a significant source of inspiration:

The area I am working on always inspires me to be engaged. Because I am studying one of the disadvantaged groups in Ethiopia, I always feel as I am contributing something in solving their problems. Their [the disadvantaged groups'] eagerness to see the results of my study gives me the strength to keep on going despite the challenges.

Asked to describe enjoyable experiences in the course of their doctoral work, most of the participants cited exposure to new knowledge, discussions and debates in class, participation in seminars and workshops, networking with scholars abroad, and relationships with classmates and the scholarly community in the University. As one of participant described:

Getting new knowledge from the literature, discussions and arguments in the lecture classes, and doing the dissertation are the most enjoyable experiences. But what is most enjoyable to me is the relationships and connections I have established with friends and the scholarly community. I truly enjoyed it indeed.

### **Sources of disengagement in doctoral work**

Reduced levels of engagement and dropping out have been identified as major problems in doctoral education worldwide (Bair and Haworth, 1999; Lovitts, 2001; Nerad and Miller, 1996). Studies have found that 40 percent to 60 percent of doctoral students in the US do not persist with their studies for various reasons. In light of this, the study participants were asked to reflect on the challenges or problems that affect their engagement in doctoral activities. Concerns raised included a lack of human resources (course teachers, supervisors, and examiners), inadequate research funds and financial problems, and poor facilities (internet, library, office space).

As one student noted:

This is one of the biggest universities in the country. But the academic environment is futile at least in my area of study because people who do not know the area at all are assigned to advise, supervise, and examine you. How can a person do a PhD in such a situation?

The students also reported poor course design, extended course work and hostile supervisors as major factors that compromise engagement in doctoral work and undermine their dedication to PhD studies. A participant reported:

I took 12 courses in the PhD programme. It took us about four years to complete the course work. There were long gaps between the courses and sometimes in the process I lost my motivation and interest and disengaged myself from the study.

In relation to supervision, another participant stated that:

My supervisor is very rude. He does not treat me as a human person. I don't feel free to talk about issues in relation to my dissertation. Even he did not read my paper carefully and provide me constructive comments.

Some students highlighted that balancing PhD and family responsibilities distracted them from their engagement with doctoral studies. A participant shared:

As a wife, mother and student, I sometimes find it very challenging to balance my family life and PhD work, even if my family is very supportive. The other point is meeting social expectations/responsibilities that usually consume my time....

Overall, the sources of doctoral students' engagement varied from their need to complete a PhD in order to gain recognition and respect, to becoming a distinguished scholar in their field of study. The challenges ranged from personal concerns in relation to balancing PhD work and family responsibilities to problems relating to programme and course design and a lack of material and human resources.

Department heads were specifically interviewed about the sources of student disengagement. These were found to relate to students themselves, departments and macro level university concerns. Seven recurrent themes were identified: students' background; multiple responsibilities; motivation and commitment; programme demands; expatriate staff involvement; a lack of resources; and follow up and monitoring mechanisms. These themes are discussed below using only one quotation for each issue.

- Academic background of students

Because there are very limited PhD programs in the University, it is quite common that students from a different MA programme can

choose to join those available ones. This means that students need to take more time to familiarise themselves to the new field and proceed to advanced readings so that they would identify research topics of relevance to the field of study they intend to specialise.

- Multiple responsibilities

Doctoral students naturally encounter many distractions that keep them off-focus. Many students have already established their own families, support extended family, engage in extended social network as well as many other civic responsibilities as we all do. The existing Ethiopian reality urges them to consider the PhD studentship only as one of these responsibilities; in fact, with a bit of priority. Hence, there is no excuse if you fail in any one of them. Doctoral students are urged to be fulltime students, parents, relatives, workers, and civilians. Imagine what this means, particularly for female doctoral students.

- Lack of motivation and commitment among both students and professors

Students tend to develop an understanding that there are little benefits in getting a PhD mainly after joining the programme. This particularly applies for students with a strong academic background. This perceived lack of benefit also looms large in material terms. Even academic promotion would proceed with an MA degree to a comparable level that one would do with a PhD. Hence, students may opt to use their time to earn a living. Those coming from regional universities may devote a portion of their time to work part-time and get better income. Those in AAU are also to assume a reduced load that still allows using their time to work for additional income. In the meantime, the students adjust their life accordingly. This finally affects their commitment. There is no doubt that the same problem of motivation exists among professors. There is no privilege of any kind a professor may earn in teaching at a doctoral level.

- Programme demands

PhD programmes are international degrees and there is a need to gauge quality in terms of meeting external standards as well. On the other hand, we are in the early years of running PhD programmes and feel pressured to ensure quality along this line. Naturally programmes tend to be demanding at the beginning partly because of some feelings that we may not be to the required level of standard. Such expectations will gradually subside.

- Expatriate faculty involvement

Some doctoral advisors and teachers are expatriate staff. We need to schedule our programme keeping the convenience of their schedule

than that of students. In so far as the engagements these professors have back home is their primary responsibility, they, too, need to abide by the schedule of their university. In fact, these are transient concerns and will improve in few years. They are reduced even much more now compared to the first few years of our PhD programmes.

- Setting up programmes without resources  
PhD programmes were simply added to the existing programmes of the various departments without resources. In my department, for example, we were only given two laptops when the programme was launched; no space for doctoral students, no rooms for conducting classes, no laboratories... I remember a time in which we cancelled a programme in which series of public lectures were offered by guest and local professors for doctoral students and to the faculty, too. It was a very inspiring forum that could also initiate opportunities for collaborative research. This was terminated after serving for years because the room was transferred to a finance office.
- Follow up and monitoring mechanisms at various levels  
PhD students are left to themselves. Although they are expected to submit periodic progress report to supervisors and supervisors to departments, these reports rarely happen. Follow up mechanisms are there but not implemented. This is a country with many implementation problems.

### **Discussion and Implications**

Given that doctoral education is an expensive educational investment and the fact that Ethiopia is an emerging economy with a limited national budget, doctoral education programmes cannot afford to fail to pay back. Students' engagement in their academic and research activities is the key to success. The study's findings show that there is only a moderate level of student engagement in doctoral programmes in the fields of social sciences and education at AAU. The level of engagement and its dimensions (vigour, dedication, and absorption) is similar in terms of gender and across the colleges considered in this study; however, the pattern might be different in the natural sciences.

Doctoral students' engagement relates to the quantity and quality of the physical and psychological energy deployed in a learning experience (Astin, 1984) to enable students' behavioural, emotional and cognitive involvement in their education (Fredricks, Blumenfeld, and Paris, 2004). Such engagement ultimately determines academic achievement (Akobirova, 2011), personal development (Astin, 1984), and resilience in difficult situations (Vekkaila et al., 2013a). Thus, students' engagement is a predictor of student satisfaction, degree completion, and persistence in doctoral studies

(Virtanen and Pyhalto, 2012). In contrast, disengagement results in inefficiency, cynicism, and exhaustion (Vekkaila, Pyhalto and Lonka, 2013b), and incompetence and attrition (e.g., Golde, 1998; Lovitts, 2001; Pyhalto et al., 2012). The moderate levels of engagement revealed among doctoral students at AAU thus suggest that at best, moderate outcomes will be achieved and at worst, even lower ones.

Given that doctoral engagement is, among other things, the result of student-environment interaction (Vekkaila et al., 2013a; Phalto, Stubbs, and Lonka, 2009), what factors structure these moderate levels of engagement? The most common sources of engagement cited by the study participants were intrinsic (professional growth and the desire to contribute to society and their field of study) and extrinsic (interest in working as a university instructor, need for social recognition, status, and improved employability and income). On the other hand, both students and professors highlighted the lack of human (course teachers, supervisors, and examiners), material (internet, library, office, poor facilities) and financial resources; balancing PhD work and family responsibilities, and programme design and expectations as sources of disengagement. In line with the findings of previous studies, they stated that poor supervision experiences, negative feedback and support from supervisors (e.g., Ives and Rowley, 2005; Hoskins and Goldberg, 2005), and a lack of open and regular discussion on issues surrounding their learning and dissertations (Hoskias and Goldberg, 2005) negatively affected their engagement. Previous research on postgraduate (MA) student thesis advisement found that graduate advisees had negative perceptions of their advisors' credibility (i.e., competence, caring and character) and reported low levels of interaction with their thesis or dissertation advisors (Belay and Yekoyealem, 2014).

Unlike the students that adopted an 'I am okay, you are not' kind of attitude and externalised the problem, the department heads extended accountability to all parties (students, departments, and the University), endorsing a 'we all are not okay' attitude (shared accountability) to explain student engagement. Deficient student backgrounds and the multiple roles expected of them, a lack of motivation, programme demands, resource (human and material) constraints and follow up problems were among the factors cited by department heads that compromise students' engagement.

The following recommendations are made on the basis of the study's major findings:

- empower students through training on any one of the dimensions of engagement (they are significantly correlated and hence improving one could enhance others),
- empower students to function within the existing constraints (plan for one's studies ahead of time, learn from those who thrived amidst

- constraints, and develop an internal locus of control),
- revisit programmes with students at regular intervals,
  - hold regular, transparent faculty-student consultative meetings,
  - enforce existing follow up and monitoring mechanisms,
  - address the needs of female doctoral students, and
  - budget for doctoral programmes.

Finally, although not clearly articulated by the participants, the importance of meaningfully organising students' learning experiences, conditions, environment, and curricula so that they are inherently engaging cannot be over-emphasised (e.g., Gardner, 2007; Gardner and Barnes, 2007; Hoskias and Goldberg, 2005; Pyhalto, Stubb, and Lonka, 2009; Vekkaila, Pyhalto and Lonka, 2013a). This includes creating possibilities for interaction with faculty and the scholarly community, involvement in undergraduate teaching and research projects mainly for students from regional universities, and providing space (a room/office at least in groups) so that supervisors are in close proximity.

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