

Capacity Building for Knowledge Producers in the Humanities and Social Sciences: A PhD Programme for Selected SADC Countries

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Abstract

The paper discusses a capacity building initiative (in the form of a PhD programme) that is being undertaken by the College of Humanities of the University of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. The programme is targeted at four Southern African Development Community (SADC) countries: Botswana, Malawi, Swaziland and Zimbabwe, with specific reference to disciplines in the Humanities and Social Sciences. An analysis of this capacity building initiative is situated within the realm of knowledge production and knowledge-based economies/societies. The paper offers a motivation for the PhD programme. The paper also provides brief descriptions of the higher education situation in each of the four target countries. The PhD programme runs on the basis of the cohort model of supervision, and this model is outlined in the paper. The paper also narrates some advantages, opportunities and challenges that are linked to the PhD programme. This capacity building programme is a contribution to the strengthening of the skills of African knowledge producers. It is also contributing to the reduction of dependence on the West as a training ground for African knowledge producers.

Keywords: capacity building, cohort model of PhD supervision, humanities, knowledge production, social sciences

Introduction and Background

The paper discusses a human resource capacity-building initiative, in the form of a PhD programme, undertaken by the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN) through one of its four colleges, the College of Humanities. The initiative, championed by the School of Education, is taking the PhD programme to some Southern African Development Community (SADC) member states, namely: Botswana, Malawi, Swaziland and Zimbabwe. This is a South to South (or Africa to Africa) initiative in contrast, for example, to the SANPAD initiative (Smit et al 2013) which is a South-North initiative. The UKZN's Africa to Africa initiative is a positive response to at least three calls. First, the initiative is responding to the UKZN strategic plan (University of KwaZulu-Natal 2012) which calls for internationalisation through the forging of strategic partnerships. Second, the PhD programme is also responding to a call made by the SADC protocol on education and training (SADC 1997) and the government of South Africa (Republic of South Africa 2011), encouraging collaboration and sharing of educational resources among African countries. The PhD project is an Africa to Africa initiative that aims at growing the next generation of African scholars and knowledge producers. As Altbach (2013: 326) has observed,

the majority of academic staff in developing countries do not hold a doctorate. While there are no reliable statistics available, only a minority of academics in developing countries hold a doctorate.

As such, there is an acute need to upgrade academics' qualifications and research capacity through the acquisition of PhDs. In addition, there is recognition and appreciation all over the world that a PhD can add value not only to academic institutions but also to non-academic work environments in the private and public sectors.

Naturally, African countries are concerned about the low number of academics who possess PhDs. Zimbabwe, for example, has taken a very bold step by demanding that by a specified date, all academic staff (as knowledge workers in higher education) should be in possession of PhDs. South Africa has also intensified the drive to have more academics as PhD holders. The desire to have an increase in PhDs at national level is evident in key South African policy and strategy documents such as the national development plan

(Republic of South Africa 2012a), the green paper on post-school education (Republic of South Africa 2012b) and the strategy for a knowledge-based economy (Republic of South Africa 2007). In a world in which knowledge-based societies are the preference, and also realizing the critical importance of a PhD as a tool for enhancing knowledge production skills and expertise, there is no doubt that the acquisition of a PhD is not a luxury (World Bank 2002). Higher education is now regarded as the engine of development in what is called a knowledge-based economy. Actually,

if knowledge is the electricity of the new informational international economy, then institutions of higher education are the power sources on which a new development process must rely (Castells 2001, cited in Botswana Tertiary Education Council 2006: 18).

The highest concentration of knowledge producers in Africa lies in higher education institutions such as universities. The role of higher education institutions in a knowledge-based economy is threefold. First, higher education institutions train personnel. Secondly, higher education institutions generate knowledge and disseminate it. Thirdly, higher education institutions build capacities and networks for accessing knowledge and adopting it to local use (World Bank 2002). It is through a PhD programme that an individual 'practices and perfects the process of generating knowledge' (Backhouse 2009: 266). So, if Africa is to increase the scale and quality of knowledge production, then the continent has to invest significantly in the training of knowledge producers who are equipped with PhDs. Knowledge producers who are trained in Africa and by a university (UKZN) that champions African scholarship should be able to respond more creatively to African realities than knowledge producers who are trained in the Euro-centric academic tradition.

In view of the importance of knowledge production in any society, capacity building for knowledge producers becomes a critical undertaking. This is especially true in Africa where the knowledge generation capacity is very low. It is against this background that in the current paper, we discuss a capacity building exercise currently being undertaken by the College of Humanities of the University of KwaZulu-Natal, and targeted at four SADC member states. The paper is based on our direct experiences in setting up the capacity building programme. We have travelled to Botswana, Malawi,

Swaziland and Zimbabwe and held discussions with prospective PhD students and leaders of the relevant higher education institutions in those countries. We have also overseen the registration of some of the students into the PhD programme. In the process, we have had a lot of communication with potential and current students and other stakeholders. The current paper, therefore, draws its information from our experiences in these encounters.

The paper proceeds as follows. We begin by outlining the motivation for the capacity building project. After that, we provide brief profiles of the target countries in the following order: Botswana, Malawi, Swaziland and Zimbabwe. In the next section, we discuss the cohort model of PhD supervision that has been earmarked for the target countries. This is followed by a discussion of what we consider to be advantages, opportunities and challenges that exist. We close the paper with a summary and conclusion.

Motivation for the PhD project

The UKZN, through the College of Humanities is running the capacity building exercise through a PhD programme targeted at four SADC members. Three of these countries (Botswana, Swaziland and Zimbabwe) share borders with South Africa, and a good number of citizens from these countries go to South African universities for PhD studies (and even some undergraduate programmes). Later in this paper, we provide brief profiles of each of the four countries. The project did not start off as a College of Humanities initiative. It started off as an initiative of the School of Education, the largest School in the College of Humanities. Later, it became clear that prospective students in the PhD programme were interested in Education and other disciplines in the Humanities and Social Sciences. The PhD project then widened its scope to include all the six Schools in the College of Humanities: the School of Arts, the School of Applied Human Sciences, the School of Built Environment & Development Studies, the School of Education, the School of Religion, Philosophy & Classics, and the School of Social Sciences. In the process of setting up the PhD programme, it was also realized that some of the prospective postgraduate students were interested in pursuing a Master's degree programme. Whilst the original idea was to provide a PhD programme, it was later realized that a Master's degree programme would serve as a good feeder into PhD programmes. A Master's degree programmes should be considered to be a contribution to the training

of knowledge producers. To this end, a Master's degree (Master's by thesis only) is also offered in addition to the PhD programme. This Master's degree programme is crafted along the same lines as the PhD. Students on the Master's programme are also involved in the cohort model of supervision.

But what motivated the College of Humanities to embark on the PhD programme for some SADC countries? First, the College is mindful of the UKZN strategic plan which calls on Colleges to foster strategic partnerships as part of internationalisation, and 'allow the University to contribute to staff development in other African universities' (University of KwaZulu-Natal 2012: 11). Second, by coming up with the PhD project, the College of Humanities is responding to the SADC protocol on education and training which requires that at least 5 % of the student population in any university in the region should be international students (see SADC 1997). Third, South Africa, as the biggest economy in the SADC region, and endowed with the most developed higher education system in the region, has the capacity and obligation to assist other African countries in capacitating the next generation of knowledge producers/knowledge workers (see also Bolsmann & Miller 2008). One can also see the UKZN initiative as part of the broader transformation of higher education and also a change in the political image of South Africa. During the apartheid days, South Africa's security agents used to attack neighbouring countries, accusing them of harbouring liberation struggle movements. South Africa of the apartheid days was associated with destabilizing independent African states. In sharp contrast, the new and post-apartheid South Africa is one that is expected to promote peace and also serve as a locomotive that can pull other African countries out of poverty and lack of development. In our view, the PhD programme lies in the realm of internationalization, aiming at the consolidation of strategic alliances and the promotion of solidarity and regional integration at SADC level.

Target Countries

The starting point was when the School of Education initiated a South to South PhD collaborative programme with the Mauritius Institute of Education (MIE) on the Indian Ocean island of Mauritius (see Samuel & Mariaye 2014). The current paper is, however, based on what has been done after the creation of the Mauritius initiative. The School of Education, on behalf of the College of Humanities, is working on establishing doctoral

schools in four countries, namely: Botswana, Malawi, Swaziland, and Zimbabwe. In actual fact, the doctoral programmes are already in operation in Zimbabwe and Swaziland. The four countries targeted for the doctoral programme share a lot in common with South Africa. First, all the four countries are members of SADC. Second, three of the countries share borders with South Africa, thus they share proximity to South Africa. Third, all the four countries share a common British colonial history. As a result of this colonial history, all the countries belong to the so-called English-speaking African countries (also known as Anglophone countries). As such, students from these countries will not face linguistic challenges whilst pursuing PhD studies with UKZN. The fact that South African higher education uses English as the language for the delivery academic programmes is one of the factors attracting international students to study in South Africa or study by distant mode through a South African higher education institution (Kwaramba 2012). Fourth, all the four countries are landlocked, and also have South Africa as their major trading partner. Fifth, none of the four countries has a higher education system that is more robust than that of South Africa. It is, therefore, a common trend that some citizens of the four countries go to South Africa for postgraduate studies. In actual fact, after the demise of apartheid in 1994, the number of international students enrolling in South African universities has been on the increase, and the majority of them come from the African continent and the SADC region in particular (Bolsmann & Miller 2008; Republic of South Africa 2011; Kwaramba 2012).

Botswana

Botswana recognizes the contribution of higher education towards the transformation of the country into a knowledge based society (Botswana Tertiary Education Council 2006). The country has for a long time had one public university, the University of Botswana (UB). But now a second public university of science and technology has been established. In the teacher education sector, the UB and the colleges of education have been handling the undergraduate and postgraduate studies (Tabulawa & Pansiri 2013). This obviously put a strain on the UB in catering for the human resource development in education and other disciplines, especially in the postgraduate domain. In view of this strain, a second public university (a university of science and technology) has been established. The UB offers some PhD

programmes, but this is not yet fully grown. The postgraduate sector of UB is still young, hence weak in capacity (Bolsmann & Miller 2008). As a result, the majority of Batswana pursue their PhDs outside of the country, and due to geographical proximity, South Africa is one of the favourite choices.

Malawi

The oldest and largest public university in Malawi is the University of Malawi (UNIMA). The university is largely a teaching university and centred on undergraduate studies. The institution has over the years lost some very senior and competent academics. The losses have come through brain drain i.e. a number of academics of Malawian origin fled the country during the leadership of the late President Hastings Kamuzu Banda who ruled Malawi with an iron fist and severely muzzled academic and other freedoms (see Kerr & Mapanje 2002). Other well qualified Malawian academics went to foreign universities for greener pastures to attain better working terms and conditions. Other senior academics have been lost through deaths and retirements. All this has left UNIMA as a university that is in need of senior academics and PhD holders. The lack of adequate numbers of doctorate holders is not confined to UNIMA only. It is a feature of the other public and private universities in Malawi. The need for PhDs is, therefore, very evident. Apart from UNIMA, Malawi has three other public universities.

Swaziland

Currently, Swaziland has one public university, the University of Swaziland (UNISWA) (see Kwaramba 2012). This university was established in 1982.

For a long time, the University of Swaziland was the only university in the country. This resulted in many qualifying students failing to get admitted because of limited space (Mazibuko 2013: 217).

As a result, many Swazis are enrolled in South African higher education institutions and elsewhere. For postgraduate studies, UNISWA is very limited in its offerings, and South Africa is the destination for many who are in search of postgraduate programmes. Now new providers of university education have entered the scene: Limkokwing of Malaysia, Southern

African Nazarene University (SANU) and the Zimbabwe-based Midlands State University and others. The production of postgraduate qualifications, however, continues to be very low. This means that Swaziland heavily relies on foreign universities for postgraduate training (Mazibuko 2013).

The idea of a doctoral school/cohort started off with a discussion between the School of Education and a delegation of government officials (which included a principal of a teacher training college and the permanent secretary in the Ministry of Education). At that point, the Swazi delegation requested assistance and collaboration from the School of Education with regard to the formulation of a new Bachelor of Education programme. Through this programme, the college (which is a currently a diploma-awarding institution) would then become a degree-awarding institution. It was noted that for the college to graduate to this new status, academic staff qualifications would have to be upgraded. It was argued for BA holders, they would have to acquire a masters or even a PhD to be able to offer a credible B.Ed programme. Later, it emerged that it is not only Ngwane College whose staff needed upgrading of qualifications. Other institutions joined the quest for postgraduate training.

Zimbabwe

Zimbabwe boasts of a number of public and private universities such as the Bindura University of Science Education, University of Zimbabwe, Great Zimbabwe University, Lupane State University, Zimbabwe Open University, Midlands State University, Chinhoyi University of Technology, National University of Science and Technology, and others. There are also colleges and polytechnics (Kwaramba 2012). There is no doubt, therefore, that Zimbabwe has invested significantly in higher education. Zimbabwe has taken the decision that by some date, all university lecturers should be PhD holders. This has tremendously increased the demand for PhDs in Zimbabwe.

Cohort Model of Supervision

The traditional apprentice model (one-on-one master-apprentice model) of PhD supervision has been criticized as being inadequate to produce a more round and competent PhD holder for the modern world. In this model, a student (like an apprentice) learns the skills of research/ knowledge

production and knowledge dissemination from one supervisor (master). In some cases, two supervisors may be assigned to one student. There is now a shift from the apprenticeship model to that of a community of practice. The latter means that PhD training is not offered by just one or two supervisors but by a team of academics drawn from diverse disciplines, and that peers of the PhD student also contribute to the training (Nerad 2012). The cohort model of PhD supervision (see Govender & Dhunpath 2013) falls under this philosophy of PhD training.

Under the cohort model of PhD training arrangement, students will be assigned to individual supervisor(s). Either a student is given one supervisor or more than one member of staff can co-supervise. In addition, students are grouped according to cohorts. A cohort model means that the group will be together for period of three years. Apart from receiving supervision from personal supervisors, the cohort of students meets over weekends (Friday to Sunday). They meet between 4 and 5 weekends per annum. During the cohort meetings, students are taken through seminars on research theory and methodology. Facilitators vary from staff members, visiting scholars to former and current PhD students. There is a team approach. Students receive critique from fellow students and supervising staff. Students are able to revisit and refine their ideas. They have an opportunity receive extra support, in addition to the support provided by their individual supervisors. In no way does the cohort replace the supervisor, and students are advised to use ideas raised by cohort very wisely, through objective reflections with their individual supervisors. The cohort allows students to realize that they are not walking alone on the PhD journey. They are able to compare notes with other students, and even those who have graduated. The cohort meetings provide spaces for students (and supervisors) to celebrate together, cry together, and it can be a very rewarding activity. A Zimbabwean, Munyaradzi, commented that ‘the cohort system is the most convenient way for a host of Zimbabwean people who are eager to attain doctorate degrees’.

A cohort is expected to operate for 3 years. The cohort sessions are arranged as follows. The first year takes care of proposal development. In the second year, the focus switches to data generation whilst the third year focusses on data analysis and writing up of the thesis.

It is not only UKZN staff that will provide PhD supervision. Academic staff from the other participating countries can also co-supervise

provided they qualify. Such staff will have to be affiliated with UKZN through an honorary appointment. This position will allow the non-UKZN staff to supervise PhD students in collaboration with their UKZN counterparts. In this way, academics in the participating countries are given opportunities to gain experience in PhD supervision. It becomes another form of capacity building exercise.

On the other hand, one has to appreciate that the cohort model of supervision is not without its own challenges. For example, Govender and Dhunpath (2013) indicate that the cohort model of PhD supervision is capable of producing both harmony and conflict. Thus, by the end of the day, it is up to the users of the cohort model to ensure that it gives them the best outcomes. It is also important to stress that the cohort model of PhD supervision

supplements the one-to-one master-apprentice supervision with the collective expertise of a group of experienced and novice supervisors and student peers working collaboratively (Govender & Dhunpath 2013: 220).

Advantages, Opportunities and Challenges

There are some advantages, opportunities and challenges that are associated with the PhD programme. The first advantage is that students will not experience the stresses and discomforts of studying away from home. Backhouse (2009: 282) has documented the challenge of studying in a foreign country as follows: ‘Those who have left families behind have the added worry about their families that detracts from their work’. By studying at home, students are able to enjoy the support of their families and other social sectors, something that is not easily available when one is studying outside their country. Of course, studying in one’s own country does have its own disruptive tendencies. For example, one has to attend to family issues such as weddings, burials, clan meetings and others. Whilst South Africa has far much better higher education facilities than the vast majority of the African countries, some African students are scared of xenophobic tendencies and the high crime rate in South Africa. For such people, pursuing a PhD whilst stationed in one’s own country shields them away from the harsh realities of xenophobia and crime. A student from an African country

studying at a South African university had this to narrate as his experience: ‘the only places that I find solace in are my study room at the [university] campus; when I am with my supervisor in his office and when I am in the library’ (Pithouse-Morgan *et al.* 2012: 84). On the other hand, one should also consider what one misses by shying away from pursuing a PhD on South African soil. One is, for example, not able to enjoy direct (face to face) social and intellectual interaction with other students. Whilst some international students in South Africa have been victims of xenophobic and crime, it is a gross exaggeration to think that each and every international student has a sad story to tell.

After the fall of apartheid, South Africa has become the big magnet that is attracting students, scholars, academics and intellectuals from other African countries (Republic of South Africa 2011, Bolsmann & Miller 2008). There is an expectation that students from other African countries will return to their home countries after graduation. ‘However, graduates are tempted to remain in the country and take employment in the local market’ (Bolsmann & Miller 2008: 227). This leads to brain loss on the part of the home country of the foreign worker. When students study in their own countries, chances of them migrating to South Africa are reduced. Of course, one cannot rule out the possibility of anyone trying to migrate to South Africa irrespective of whether they have a South African degree or not.

Another advantage is of a linguistic nature. All the four targeted countries (namely Botswana, Malawi, Swaziland and Zimbabwe) belong to the so-called English-speaking Africa (Anglophone Africa). As such, English is the common language of the academy shared by South Africa and the targeted countries. This, however, does not mean that English language challenges can be ruled out just because the target students come from the so-called English-speaking countries. Our assumption is that whilst students from the so-called English-speaking countries can face some language challenges as they pursue their postgraduate studies through the English medium, the challenge for students who come from non-English speaking African countries is bound to be more pronounced. It is only natural to expect students from Lusophone and Francophone countries to face more language challenges than their counterparts who come from Anglophone countries. A study conducted at Fort Hare University in South Africa made an investigation into the language challenges faced by Congolese French-speaking students. The study found that the Congolese students had problems

in understanding lectures and also had speaking problems. As such, they needed an English language support programme from the university (Mubembe 2012). It has to be stressed that even with South African students, the language challenge is not absent, especially amongst black South Africans. Language is one of the major hurdles that black South African students face as they try to gain epistemological access in higher education (Boughey 2005). A significant number of black South African students are linguistically underprepared to undertake university education through the medium of English.

There is an opportunity in the form of high level of commitment at institutional leadership level. For example, at one Zimbabwean university, the vice chancellor is very keen to see the programme bear fruits. A Zimbabwean university offered its support to its staff: ‘we have arranged for those who could not pay registration fees to be helped out by the University’, wrote a senior academic. The same enthusiasm was exhibited by higher education leaders in Swaziland and Malawi.

In addition, the PhD programme has received a positive reception. For example, from Botswana, Tshepo wrote: ‘This is a really good programme’. Writing from Malawi, Kondwani noted:

The individual or their institution will be required to meet all the necessary costs. However, note that the costs are minimal as the students will be required to pay tuition fees only and air ticket, no insurance costs as the training will be conducted in Malawi.

Another opportunity is that all is not about the PhD project. There is more beyond the PhD project. UKZN and higher education institutions in the four countries plan to collaborate and co-operate in other academic activities. It is in this regard that a Zimbabwean senior academic, said ‘My VC is keen to see a firm relationship extending beyond the PhD project. He has been inquiring how we are taking the relationship to higher level’. Indeed, beyond the PhD project, UKZN is working with institutions in the four countries to put in place memoranda of understanding (MoU). As part of internationalisation, UKZN provides for ‘collaborative ventures such as co-supervision of students, co-authorship of papers and joint applications for research grants’ (University of KwaZulu-Natal 2012: 10). In addition, there are also possibilities for other mutually beneficially activities such hosting of

academic staff on sabbatical and appointment of external examiners.

There are some challenges. One of them is the very advantage that the PhD student are physically located in their own home countries. The home is supposed to be a place of comfort, in contrast to the discomforts of studying in a foreign country. However, the home ground advantage can also turn into a challenge and/or disadvantage. For example, being in one's own home country means that one is in direct confrontation with the day to day demands of the family (and the extended family) life. For example, one has to attend to family events and issues such as weddings, bereavements and others. Such events can consume time and energy and shift away one's attention from the PhD. The work environment can also be so demanding that one may not have enough time to devote to the PhD study.

The lack of adequately equipped academic libraries is a challenge for students studying for a PhD outside South Africa. However, students on the UKZN PhD programme now have electronic access to the UKZN libraries. This means that as long as a student has good internet connections, they can access online library resources. One has to acknowledge that sometimes, depending on a particular country's situation, poor connectivity can sometimes frustrate students' efforts to remotely access the UKZN library. Going forward, the use of technology to support the PhD programme will have to be enhanced. The use of email, skype, video conferencing and other technologies will have to be brought in in order to support the students.

Summary

In this paper, we have discussed a PhD programme which the College of Humanities at UKZN is bringing to some SADC member states. We have provided the motivation for the project. We have also provided brief descriptions of the higher education situation in each of the four target countries. The PhD programme runs on the basis of the cohort model of supervision, and we have explained how the model works. Like any other undertaking, there are some advantages, opportunities and challenges that are linked to the PhD programme, and we have outlined them.

Conclusion

The training of knowledge producers, which is in line with the SADC proto-

col on education and training (SADC 1997), is a contribution towards regional integration. The initiative is specifically tailored (in terms of its venue of delivery, mode of delivery and model of PhD supervision) to be sensitive to African realities. Through this PhD programme, students will not have to be resident in South Africa, hence no need for student visas, and no need for food and accommodation costs that could have been incurred in South Africa. In addition, the students, by remaining in their countries, minimize chances of being seduced to migrate and work in South Africa, hence minimizing brain drain. We are of the view that this South to South (or Africa to Africa) initiative will contribute significantly to the education and capacitation of knowledge producers in the context of knowledge-based economies. As Africa is looking for opportunities to increase the number of PhD holders, the temptation to look up to the West for training opportunities can be real and strong. But this is one area in which an African solution should be brought in to solve an African problem through tasking African universities to train African PhD holders right on the African soil. It is in this way that UKZN is contributing to the reduction of dependence on the West as a training ground for African knowledge producers. This is also an act of intellectual liberation.

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