

Research Application Summary

The PhD Journey in Agricultural and Rural Innovations at Makerere University: Seven years of experience

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Abstract

The PhD journey is a systematic process of both academic and personal development for the doctorate student. The PhD journey is systematic process involving a decision on the topic, choosing an appropriate supervisor, managing the challenges of supervision, back and forth methodological planning of your research and writing up the thesis. The doctoral journey is a collaborative process in which networks of support between people and institutions are established to contribute to production and development of the PhD study. The PhD journey is an emotional, spiritual, intellectual and stressful journey. The PhD journey is also a lonely, endless, frustrating and full of rejection from peers and supervisors. The PhD journey is full of competition from fellow PhD students and supervision challenges. The PhD journey is also composed of institutional, faculty and departmental politics. It involves a struggle between academicians and supervisors to increase individual research output or retard completion rate of students of fellow academicians and supervisors within the same department or within the same faculty or within the same University. Therefore, for successful and timely completion of the PhD, there is need for establishing networks of support with fellow PhD students, other academicians, and supervisors, extensive reading, self-learning, self-management, persistence, good communication, diversity management, proper planning, commitment and determination and continuously appreciate your uniqueness.

Keyword: Doctorate, journey, Makerere University, supervision, social support, social networks

Résumé

Le trajet du doctorat est un processus systématique de développement à la fois académique et personnel pour le doctorant, impliquant une décision sur le sujet de recherche, le choix d'un superviseur approprié, la gestion des défis de la supervision, la planification méthodologique de la recherche et la rédaction de la thèse. Le parcours doctoral est un processus collaboratif dans lequel des réseaux de soutien entre les personnes et les institutions sont établis pour contribuer à la production et au développement de l'étude doctorale. Le voyage du doctorat est un voyage émotionnel, spirituel, intellectuel et stressant. Le voyage du doctorat est aussi un voyage solitaire, sans fin, frustrant et plein de rejets de la part des pairs et des superviseurs. Le voyage du doctorat est plein de compétition avec les autres doctorants et de défis de supervision. Le voyage du doctorat est également composé de politiques institutionnelles, professorales et départementales. Il implique une lutte entre les académiciens et les superviseurs pour augmenter la production de recherche individuelle ou retarder le taux d'achèvement des étudiants de collègues académiciens et superviseurs au sein du même département, de la même faculté ou de la même université. Par conséquent, pour réussir et terminer le doctorat dans les délais, il est nécessaire d'établir des réseaux de soutien avec les autres doctorants, les autres académiciens et les superviseurs, de lire beaucoup, d'apprendre par soi-même, de s'autogérer, de persévérer, de bien communiquer, de gérer la diversité, de planifier correctement, de s'engager et de se déterminer et d'apprécier continuellement son

caractère unique.

Mot clé : Doctorat, parcours, Université de Makerere, supervision, soutien social, réseaux sociaux.

Background

The Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) in Agricultural and Rural Innovations programme at Makerere University in Kampala is a multidisciplinary programme that was developed to produce high level professionals with integrated thinking and skills required to provide guidance in innovative and integrated agricultural and rural development at regional and national levels. The programme was developed to produce multi-skilled professionals with interdisciplinary orientation to support development of institutions/ organizations that harness knowledges for sustainable agricultural and rural development for poverty eradication, economic growth and competitiveness. The programme is based on the Innovation systems thinking (Rajalahti *et al.*, 2008) and aimed at producing professionals needed to implement the innovations systems thinking at national, regional and international levels. The programme is jointly offered by Makerere University, Egerton University and Sokoine University of Agriculture in collaboration with Wageningen University with support from RUFORUM (Kyamanywa, 2012). The programme started in 2012 and has produced a number of PhD students.

Literature Review

A doctorate degree historically was a license to teach in a University as a member of a faculty. However, a doctorate has much wider connotations outside academia and many of the students do not have academic teaching posts. The concept stems from the need of faculty member to be an authority in full command of the subjects right up to the boundaries of current knowledge and be able to extend them. As the highest degree that can be awarded, it proclaims that the recipient is worthy of being listened to as an equal by the appropriate university faculty (Phillips and Pugh, 2005). The holder of the PhD is a full commander of the study field and can make worthwhile contribution. The Doctorate candidature has been variously referred to as a journey (Ryan, 2018; Lai and Lai, 2019) full of emotional, spiritual and intellectual voyage (Dovona -Ope, 2008).

The doctoral journey is a collaborative process in which networks of support between people and institutions are established to contribute to production and development of the PhD study. Such networks are important for the provision of instrumental, academic and emotional support. In doctoral education one has to take personal responsibility for managing own learning and for earning the PhD though there are other people around you to help such as; your supervisors, other academics or peers, your family, friends and other institutions (Dovona-Ope, 2008; Mantai and Dowling, 2015).

The PhD journey is a systematic process involving decisions on the topic, choosing an appropriate supervisor, managing the challenges of supervision, back and forth methodological planning of your research and writing up the thesis (Amran and Ibrahim, 2012; Aziato, 2015). The PhD journey can be described as an invisible process full of darkness and a feeling of inferiority and foolishness.

At some point it can be a lonely, endless, frustrating and full of rejection from all others. There is a constant feeling of retreat or withdrawal filled with a sense of no direction. Dovona-Ope (2008) suggested that in such situations the PhD student requires motivation from other colleagues and their supervisors through encouragement. The author further adds that encouragements from others sow positive thinking when the journey gets tough. But with an eventual self-discovery the PhD student gradually acquires a feeling of “no retreat no surrender”. Persistence therefore becomes key to successful progress and completion of the PhD journey (Dovona-Ope, 2008).

Experiences and challenges of my PhD training at Makerere University

In juggling their way through the PhD journeys, students tend to experience emotional setbacks, stressful situations, state of confusion caused by too many responsibilities and demands that they have to handle (Lai and Lai, 2019). While the student joins the PhD programme alone and under the inspiration of one or two individuals, the student is usually accountable for the time consumed during the PhD process to their family, the hosting institution, the funding organization, their supervisors and whole world in general. This causes a state of confusion and at some point the student loses his/her mind requiring sometime to recollect oneself and get back on track. So the need to prove yourself (Ryan, 2018) and the mere fact that you are already into it with no pulling back, no retreat no surrender, the need to get done with whole thing so that you go on with your life and be free is what motivates you to hang on and continue (Dovona-Ope, 2008). This is what I faced at Makerere University.

The PhD process makes everything in life stand still. Once you join the PhD programme there is no more fun, no freedom and time to do other things. You only focus on the PhD work. Your ability to manage all the needs and responsibilities in life, i.e., your family, your work, your relatives, your classmates or colleges, your supervisors, university politics and your PhD, is what makes you earn your PhD (Phillips and Pugh, 2005). In such situations self-control becomes key in managing such complex and difficult situations. Indeed Phillips and Pugh (2005) suggest that the need for self-management is the key to successful completion of the PhD journey.

In struggling to conceptualize your work, learning to read widely and making sense out your work, getting on terms with supervisors, harmonizing their expectations, their personalities and differences in their backgrounds, there is need for diversity/ personality management. Managing conflicting interests of your supervisors and managing divergent fields of experts of your supervisors (Niyibizi, 2018) as well as your colleagues and utilizing them is important for successful completion of the PhD programme (Dovona-Ope, 2008; Mantai and Dowling, 2015). This also applies to your colleagues.

The PhD journey is that of competition between the PhD students and their colleagues. It is composed of the struggle between the students on who completes first influenced by the desire to grab opportunities that come with successful completion of the PhD programme. Somehow your colleagues get to know your potential and then fight hard to instill a state of confusion in your mind by providing you with wrong information for your study. The PhD student usually loses track of his/her work and falls back while his/her colleagues utilize that time to move ahead of the PhD student. This usually leads to a period of loneliness among PhD students (Ryan, 2018), caused by self-selection among the students in the PhD programme in their struggle for identity. In such a situation, understanding who your colleagues are and utilizing their potential (Niyibizi, 2018) is very important for successful and timely completion of the PhD programmes.

It is important for the PhD student to understand the personality, feelings and interests of their colleagues. Some give constructive input or contribution while others give negative input. However it is important for the PhD students to carry out self-learning and build resilience (Murphy and Wibberley, 2017) by establish positive relationships with their supervisors and colleagues (Hohaia, 2016; Corner *et al.*, 2018; Ryan, 2018). This will enable them locate their voices as doctoral students and achieve commitment and determination necessary for progress of their PhD study (Ryan, 2018).

The PhD as a journey is also composed of institutional, faculty, and departmental politics and politics among the lecturers and supervisors. There is also a struggle between lecturers and supervisors to increase individual research output or retard completion rate of students of fellow lecturers and supervisors within the same department or within the same faculty or within the same University. This involves the students' research topics being taken up or stolen by supervisors for their students. The affected student ends up getting back to the drawing board (starting from zero) while the other students

move ahead and in most cases even get to graduate before the affected students in order to take up teaching positions within the universities and departments and to grab other opportunities as foreseen by the lecturers and supervisors within the University.

Achievements of my PhD journey. By the end of Seven years of my PhD journey, I had; Completed my research, thesis write-up and submitted the thesis for examination, and published three articles:

- Alio, D., Okiror, J.J., Agea, J.G., Matsiko, F.B. and Ekere, W. 2017. Determinants of credit utilization among SACCO members in Soroti District, Uganda. *African Journal of Rural Development* 2 (3): 381-388
- Alio, D., Okiror, J.J., Agea, J.G., Matsiko, F.B. and Ekere, W. 2017 Influence of social networks and social support on credit utilization in the Savings and Credit Cooperatives in Soroti District, Uganda. *Journal of Agricultural Extension and Rural Development* 10 (3): 54-60
- Alio, D., Okiror, J.J., Agea, J.G., Matsiko, F.B. and Ekere, W. 2017 .Institutional determinants of credit utilization in the Savings and credit cooperatives in Soroti district, Uganda. *African Journal of Rural Development* 2 (2):175-182

Lessons for successful and timely completion of PhD Programme

To benefit from your supervisors and to obtain their support, you must ignore the negative comments about you and your work and take the comments positively (Corner *et al.*, 2018). This reduces the burden of hatred the PhD students usually feel. This helped me a lot in this long, and meandering journey. I also had to believe in myself and my work. In other words I developed confidence in what I was doing.

It is also important not to show your academic colleagues and supervisors that you are more knowledgeable in the subject than they are by listening to them. This allows you to adjust your thinking and include new thoughts and approaches in your work. However, know what you want, where you are going, set targets and plan well how best to complete your PhD study, and above all read widely (Dovona- Ope, 2008).

To manage the politics of the PhD journey, it is better for the PhD student to keep silent and not indulge in the political struggle among the supervisors and lectures and just watch the game. Allow them to upfront the students of their interests while maintaining the determination, confidence and focus of your study. To manage your fellow PhD students in the struggle, just maintain your self-esteem by constantly reminding yourself that you are the best, you are not stupid and that you will make it no matter what and continuously appreciate your uniqueness (Sverdlik *et al.*, 2018).

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