

Research Application Summary

Challenges in the collaboration between European and African universities for doctoral training

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Abstract

Historically, doctoral training in its structured and formalized form through graduate schools, i.e., the organization of specific, often intensive training for doctoral students, has mostly developed in North America and particularly in the U.S. Up till quite recently, doctoral training was following another logic in Europe: the doctoral student was indeed attending a few PhD seminars and possibly some targeted (albeit not mandatory) training, but this training was mostly gained through the mentoring of the PhD supervisor, scientific missions, informal discussions with other researchers, etc. Currently, in European countries, doctoral training is becoming increasingly formalized, with training paths, Credits (ECTS) to be obtained through the latter etc. It is also within that context that many African universities have begun to launch doctoral training and doctoral schools. As their European counterparts, African universities find themselves in an intermediate position between the graduate schools tradition and the tradition of self-learning through the PhD research itself. When European and African colleagues collaborate within the framework of doctoral training in Africa, they meet numerous and multifaceted challenges, but these challenges can be addressed and the experience can turn out to be win-win both for the European and African colleagues.

Key words: Africa, challenges, doctoral training, Europe, North America

Résumé

Historiquement, la formation doctorale structurée et formalisée sous forme de « graduateschools », c.-à-d. l'organisation de formations spécifiques, souvent intensives, à l'attention des doctorants, s'est surtout développée en Amérique du Nord et singulièrement aux USA. En Europe, jusqu'il y a peu, la formation doctorale suivait une autre logique : le doctorant était amené à suivre quelques séminaires doctoraux, voire quelques formations ciblées (mais rarement obligatoires), et son apprentissage se faisait surtout au contact de son promoteur, lors de missions scientifiques, d'échanges informels avec d'autres chercheurs, etc. A présent, dans les pays européens, la formation doctorale est de plus en plus formalisée, avec des parcours de formation, des Crédits (ECTS) à obtenir par ce biais, etc. C'est dans ce contexte également que nombre d'universités africaines ont commencé à lancer des formations et Ecoles doctorales. Tout comme en Europe, les universités

africaines se retrouvent en position intermédiaire entre la tradition des « graduateschools » et la tradition de l'auto-apprentissage via la recherche doctorale elle-même. Lorsque les collègues européens et africains collaborent dans le cadre de la formation doctorale en Afrique, ils font face à de nombreux défis, de différents types, mais ces défis peuvent être relevés et l'expérience peut se révéler « win-win » à la fois pour les collègues européens et africains.

Key words: Africa, challenges, doctoral training, Europe, North America

Introduction

The aim of this contribution is to examine the difficulties, but also the “virtuous models” that can be developed to allow the best North-South synergies for doctoral training in Africa. Our reflection is nourished both by our practical experiences (each of the two authors) in Europe and Africa and by a first analysis we have recently carried out on the difficulties of North-South university cooperation (Rihoux and Kabwigiri, 2015); this analysis can of course be complemented by other analyzes that have been conducted by others in recent years (Quintana and Calvet, 2012). The questions we ask ourselves about doctoral training cover other broader issues such as North-South cooperation, North-South research, but also South-South cooperation.

Which are the Major Issues? When European and African colleagues collaborate in doctoral training in Africa, they face many challenges. These are related to institutional resources, financial resources, the availability of qualified academic staff and sometimes to the gaps between the “theory” and the “real life” of doctoral research in Africa.

- a. **Institutional resources.** Building a doctoral school, doctoral training courses, etc., require sufficient management resources (e.g. specialized administrative staff, etc.). It is already difficult to mobilize these resources in many European universities (especially smaller or medium-sized universities), and hence this difficulty is a fortiori strongly encountered by African Universities.
- b. **Financial resources.** Setting up and running a quality Doctoral School also requires considerable financial resources both from the university (necessary infrastructure, in particular research infrastructures) and from doctoral students (how to cover the cost of training for the PhD students?).
- c. **Availability of qualified academic staff.** These are the staff members willing to supervise doctoral students and to act as instructors in doctoral programs, doctoral seminars, etc. This availability is already not obvious for colleagues in the North, in a context of increasing “multi-tasking”; it is even less obvious for colleagues in the South, as they have to be involved in many functions and must also guarantee the supervision of large numbers of students at undergraduate and graduate levels.
- d. **Gaps between the “theory” and the “real life” of doctoral research in Africa.** There are sometimes discrepancies between doctoral research as it is “conceived in the North”

and the “real life” in doctoral research in Africa. In some human and social sciences, for example, many scientists in Europe have easy access to scientific databases, large public databases etc., whereas in the African context the researchers most frequently have to build their own data. In Applied Sciences, for example, it is often obvious in Europe that the doctoral student will have easy access to various ‘standard’ equipment and equipment of sufficient quality in his/her own university; by contrast, this often is a real difficulty in the African context.

Some solutions to those challenges. Without claiming to be exhaustive, based on our own experience, we would like to suggest proposals for solutions to these challenges in order to successfully initiate and manage a Doctoral School in the African context. These are:

- a. Facilitating South-North mobility not only for doctoral students from the South, but also (1) for South-based thesis supervisors [this is planned at the Doctoral School of the University of Burundi], so as to create strong tandems of co-supervisors; (2) for qualified South-based administrative staff members (capacity-building for this specialized staff);
- b. Organizing North-South mobility of North-based supervisors and instructors. These missions are beneficial in at least three respects: (1) they directly contribute to doctoral programs in the South; (2) they contribute more effectively to the co-supervision of theses; (3) it enables Europe-based scholars to also discover another context of research, different in terms of “comfort”, etc. as compared with Europe;
- c. Ideally also (although this is rarely done!): organizing North-South mobility of doctoral students or post-doctoral students from the North. They can therefore interact very fruitfully (win-win) with the South-based Doctoral students, also participate in cross-seminars, etc.; this is in fact very instructive both for young researchers from the North and the South;
- d. Bring incentives to academics involved in doctoral training. One can usefully refer to the theory of incentives (Clark and Wilson, 1961), which indicates that in fact every human being acts according to a search for incentives, that is to say, different forms of gratification or ‘benefits’, not just economic ones. It is therefore possible to motivate scholars with or without additional financial costs, by giving them for instance more visibility.
- e. Also developing South-South networking and partnerships (e.g., for the University of Burundi: towards East Congo, the East African Community countries, West Africa, etc.); which are often very successful and which allow overcoming ‘bottlenecks’ in terms of resources. For example, South-South mobility is much less costly, doctoral programs co-organized by a few universities in the same region not only bring together a sufficient ‘critical mass’ of participants, but also pool resources, enhance skills of the South, and even increase the possibilities of obtaining scholarships - certainly with regard to international scholarships;
- f. Making the best use of the opportunities offered by ICTs to combine physical networks and online networks, also with regard to the doctoral programs themselves. This makes it possible to operate in a fairly cost-efficient manner – obviously

minimizing the costs of North-South or South-North travel.

Conclusion

Doctoral training, i.e., the training of young researchers, is at the heart of the mission of most universities, in the North and in the South alike. In all contexts, both in the North and in the South, it is a difficult, demanding, costly undertaking, consuming human and financial resources. This is another reason for working in networks, in partnerships – with partners in the North, but also in the South. The more a Doctoral School from an African university is networked to the North and the South (note that: the two are not at all opposed!), the more opportunities for young Doctoral students in the South, the more they can exchange ideas (and also bring their own!), good practices, receive publishing opportunities, build their CVs more efficiently, develop their own networks, etc.

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