

Strengthening Postgraduate Environments in African Academia

1. The Panel

Convenors

Chrissie Boughey, Henk van den Heuvel, Wil Hout and Sioux McKenna

Participants

- Professor Chrissie Boughey, Professor Emeritus at the Centre for Postgraduate Studies and former Deputy Vice Chancellor for Academic and Student Affairs, Rhodes University, South Africa
- Dr Henk van den Heuvel, Director of the Centre for International Cooperation, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, The Netherlands
- Professor Wil Hout, Professor of Governance and International Political Economy at the International Institute of Social Studies, Erasmus University Rotterdam, The Netherlands
- Professor Sioux McKenna, Director of the Centre for Postgraduate Studies, Rhodes University, South Africa
- Dr Paul Ayodele Onanuga, Lecturer in the Department of English and Literary Studies, Federal University Oye-Ekiti, Ekiti State, Nigeria, and presently a Georg Forster Postdoctoral Fellow of the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation at the Technische Universität Chemnitz, Germany.
- Dr Rotimi Olowojaiye, Lecturer of Literature-in-English in the English Programme of Bowen University, Iwo, Nigeria.

Panel abstract

This panel contained papers dealing with experiences of supporting and improving PhD supervision in Africa, or broader, the ‘postgraduate environment’. The panel discussed issues around calls for the Africanization of higher education and the implications for the content and nature of the PhD at African universities, as well as for the process of PhD supervision. Core papers were based on the recent SPS-EPE-CPC experiences, which contained programmes supported by NUFFIC and the European Union. The Strengthening Postgraduate Supervision project (SPS, 2010-2015) was focused on strengthening supervision in South

Africa, while Enhancing Postgraduate Environments (EPE, 2016-2018) focused on broader issues related to the postgraduate and research environment of universities in South Africa. The Creating Postgraduate Collaborations (CPC) project has started in 2020 and focuses on South Africa and Kenya and relates to postgraduate supervision and strengthening the postgraduate environment. The third paper discusses experiences on postgraduate supervision in the humanities in Nigeria

2. The Papers

Strengthening postgraduate environments in African academia: The Nigerian Humanities doctoral supervision example

Paul Ayodele Onanuga (Federal University Oye-Ekiti, Ekiti State, Nigeria) and Rotimi Olowojaiye (Bowen University, Iwo, Nigeria)

This paper explores the history of postgraduate education in Nigeria, identifies the contemporary realities of postgraduate supervision in the humanities, and recommends possible ways through which homegrown solutions can resolve these challenges. Inhibiting factors include the bureaucratic administrative structures, heavy workload for academic staff, absence of domestic research grants, poor supervisor-supervisee relations, quality and professionalism of doctoral candidates, infrastructural and technological deficit, and deficient research culture. The paper argues that systemic reorganisation, sustained in-house trainings and collective call-to-action of stakeholders could lead to reinvent the supervision system in the humanities and the Nigerian postgraduate system as a whole to become more practical-oriented and more attuned to evolving global realities.

Capacity building in higher education: Lessons from Erasmus+ CBHE projects

Wil Hout (Erasmus University Rotterdam, The Netherlands) and Henk van den Heuvel (Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, The Netherlands)

This paper discusses experiences with financing instruments of capacity building in higher education in Africa, focusing on the way in which relationships are framed in donor documents and applications forms used in the EU's Erasmus+ programme. The paper reflects on how reciprocity in collaboration, which is rhetorically one of the objectives of the programme, can be operationalised in reality given the structure of financing and reporting required. The paper discusses the pitfalls of the programme structure for 'knowledge transfer'

to and 'capacity building' of so-called 'beneficiary institutions' in Africa, particularly in view of the reproduction of dependency relations in knowledge production and ownership produced by that structure. The paper reflects on how attempts at more equal knowledge production can be successful in capacity building projects both in Africa and in Europe.

Developing institutions as important as developing individuals

Chrissie Boughey and Sioux Mckenna (Rhodes University, South Africa)

This paper reflects on the 'Strengthening Postgraduate Supervision' course, which has been offered over 60 times at 22 universities in South Africa. The course aims to develop supervision capacity and is underpinned by a focus on the public good benefits of postgraduate education. The paper discusses some of the lessons about doctoral education that have been learned. It focuses on some major findings related to institutional structures and cultures that may be of relevance across national contexts. Participant evaluations, facilitator reports, and facilitator observations are analysed to make sense of the role of structures, cultures and agency in doctoral education. The key findings relate to the need for institutional support for novice advisors, the ways in which institutional hierarchies can constrain graduate education, and the need for flexibility to engage with 'alternative' models of doctoral education.

3. Discussion

The discussion on the papers was organized in a series of breakout sessions, which all focused on two questions:

1. How does the institutional environment affect the postgraduate supervision process?
2. Do partnerships between institutions from the global South and North benefit or hinder postgraduate education in both contexts? If so, how (share experiences, give examples)?

The discussions focused on the experience of panel participants in a variety of African and European higher education contexts. The most salient points of the discussions in the breakout groups were highlighted in the plenary session. There was quite general agreement on the observation that institutional environments are important determinants of the successes or failures of postgraduate supervision, in close interaction with the individuals inhabiting those institutions. Likewise, there was agreement on the potential of partnerships between

institutions from the global South and North, but clear pitfalls in that relationship were also identified.

Comments on the discussion questions related to issues such as the following:

- The cultural dimension is very important in creating an enabling environment for research to flourish. Among other things, research culture is very important for the creation of a community of young researchers to discuss their own work without fear.
- We need to pay attention to structural inequalities in knowledge creation, where fieldwork in the global South is used to gather data for publications produced in the global North.
- Classical supervision models of one-on-one or two-on-one supervision need to be challenges. “In such situations, good supervision may just be the result of some coincidence”.
- Partnerships between institutions from the global North and South need to become more equal, so that universities in the South become more than just a source of cheap research assistants and translators.
- There are major challenges arising from policies that are set up by university management without the involvement of supervisors and supervisees. “Management sometimes comes up with solutions to problems that are imagined rather than real”.
- Inequalities in supervision relationships require much attention; for instance, inequalities relating to age, patriarchy or status.
- Many universities do not use the expertise in didactics, for instance in departments of education, sufficiently in postgraduate training. “How can we bridge the divide between didactical experts and day-to-day postgraduate supervisors?”
- Capacity building projects should include measures that attempt to balance out existing inequalities between institutions from the global South and North.