

## **Towards a PhD for Every Academic Member of Staff: A Case Study of a South African Research-Led University**

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**Abstract:** One of the staff development initiatives in South African universities involves the acquisition of PhDs by academic staff. There is a realization that as the highest qualification in the academia, the PhD empowers and prepares an individual for an academic career. Within South Africa's transformation towards a knowledge-based economy/society, the PhD is an important and essential tool. With specific reference to the University of KwaZulu-Natal (one of the Research-Intensive Universities in South Africa), the study discusses support mechanisms, incentives and progress monitors that are in place for academic staff who are pursuing PhDs.

**Key words:** Knowledge-based economy, PhD, South Africa, staff development, University of KwaZulu-Natal

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### INTRODUCTION

The study takes off from the premise that one way of improving the quality of university teachers and other academic staff is for them to acquire PhDs. One of the challenges in higher education in Africa as a whole is the low numbers of PhD holders who are on academic staff lists. A related challenge in Africa is the brain drain that has resulted in some PhD holders not working in their home countries. As a result, some PhD holders have migrated to better-paying African countries such as South Africa, Botswana, Namibia and also beyond Africa. There are many new institutions of higher education that are being established in a number of African countries and they are in acute need of academics who are in possession of PhDs. Within South Africa itself, the PhD is being sought by higher education institutions in line with the aspirations of the country's National Development Plan (NPC, 2012), the green paper on post-school education and training (DHET, 2012) and the 10 years plan on innovation towards a knowledge-based economy (DST, 2007). As South Africa aspires to transform into a knowledge-based economy, innovation and knowledge production are critical and PhD holders become critical players in this endeavor (World Bank, 2002). The current paper dwells on the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN) where there is a robust staff development project whose goal is to have university teachers acquire PhDs. Academic staff have been informed in that the institution has no space for those who do not possess PhDs or those who refuse to obtain PhDs. This staff development project is personally monitored by the UKZN Voice Chancellor and other members of the executive

management. The project's progress is regularly discussed at high ranking meetings such as council, senate, executive management, executive and deans' Forum and others. This study addresses the following critical questions:

- What mechanisms are in place at UKZN to support the staff PhD project?
- What incentives are there for UKZN staff to pursue PhDs?
- What forms of progress monitors have been put in place?
- What challenges does the UKZN staff PhD project face?
- What lessons can UKZN offer to other higher education institutions in South Africa and beyond?

**Academic staff development at UKZN:** A brief overview the UKZN is a South African higher education institution that is a product of a merger that took place in 2004 between the then University of Durban-Westville and the then University of Natal. The merger created the University of KwaZulu-Natal in 2004. With a student population of forty thousand, the UKZN academic division is structured around four colleges. These are the College of Agriculture, Engineering and Science (made up of five schools), the College of Health Sciences (made up of four schools), the College of Humanities (made up of six schools) and the College of Law and Management Studies (made up of four schools). These are 19 schools in total. Each college is headed by a Deputy Vice Chancellor whilst a school is headed by a Dean. The UKZN vision is "to be the premier university of African

scholarship” (UKZN, 2012a). For a university to be of such a status, it requires academic staff that are highly qualified and a PhD is one of such qualifications. We also see the mission of UKZN as being “a truly South African university that is academically excellent, innovative in research and critically engaged with society” (UKZN, 2012b). A PhD is one of the tools that can assist an academic to become innovative in research since a PhD trains one in research. According to the UKZN strategic plan, goal number 3 is about pre-eminence in research. The following strategies have been outlined and the relevance of a PhD towards the accomplishment of these strategies can hardly be doubted:

- Developing a group of research thrusts that advance African scholarship
- Becoming a hub for the dissemination of African scholarship
- Fostering collaborative partnerships in research and innovation
- Supporting and developing research capacity
- Seeking to attract postgraduate students in niche areas, nurturing them to become productive researchers (UKZN, 2012a)

The UKZN strategic plan makes a clear statement about PhDs as follows: “The university will focus on transforming staff capacity and investing in future academics through personal development plans that stress the importance of achieving a PhD. This is seen as fundamental to producing high-calibre, motivated, research-responsive talent that will position the university to achieve excellence and advance its goals” (UKZN, 2012a). The institution is clearly aware that in a knowledge-based economy, academic staff must not only have PhDs but also demonstrate the ability to produce high levels of research outputs, conduct research-led teaching and undertake research-led community engagement. In other words, the academic trinity should be research-led and for that to happen an advanced academic qualification (at PhD level) becomes the gateway.

**The demand for PhDs at national level:** The UKZN demand for PhDs for academic staff has to be appreciated within the context of the institutional mission and vision, and also national interests. In the earlier study, attention was drawn to institutional vision and mission. In the current study, we focus on national policy documents that speak about the importance of acquiring a PhD. These policy documents include: the national

development plan (NPC, 2012), the 10 years plan on innovation and transformation towards a knowledge-based economy (DST, 2007) and the green paper on post-school education and training (DHET, 2012). It is to these policy documents that I now turn. We begin with the national development plan. This document outlines South Africa’s vision and sets targets to be achieved by 2030. The national development plan recognizes PhD holders as the main drivers of innovation and knowledge production. The plan also recognizes that a PhD empowers academic staff and enhances their capacities to teach, conduct research and perform community engagement. With respect to academic staff, the following three targets for 2030 are worth highlighting. The first target is that by 2030, 75% of university staff shall be PhD holders. The second target is to increase the number of Africans and blacks holding PhDs. Thirdly, at national level there is an expectation that South Africa will produce >100 PhD holders per million people (NPC, 2012). It is evident, therefore that the UKZN staff development project is a direct and positive response to the national development plan.

We now turn to South Africa’s 10 years plan towards transforming into a knowledge-based economy. The plan clearly outlines the place of a PhD: “To build a knowledge-based economy positioned between developed and developing countries, South Africa will need to increase its PhD production rate by a factor of about five over the next 10-20 years” (DST, 2007). The PhD is a qualification that is useful within and outside the academia. Whilst the academia constitute the biggest group of people engaged in knowledge production, PhD holders also find their way into non-academic jobs. In today’s world, knowledge has become the basis for social and economic development. In other words, people’s skills and knowledge have become crucial for national development (World Bank, 2002). The importance and relevance of a PhD in this kind of society can therefore not be faulted. The UKZN academic staff development project is clearly answering to the call made by South Africa’s 10 years plan on innovation towards a knowledge-based economy.

Thirdly, we turn to the green paper for post-school education and training and what it says about PhDs. The green paper acknowledges universities as key sites for knowledge production. The paper further argues that “The production of PhDs among black students provides the solution to both improving the demographic profile of academic staff at the historically white institutions and providing the human resources needed to improve the quality of historically black institutions” (DHET, 2012). According to the UKZN

transformation charter, the institution aspires to promote high quality research. This aspiration is in line with the green paper. The UKZN transformation charter (UKZN, 2012b) agrees further with the green paper with regard to the call for mentorship programmes that will develop, support and nurture black and female academic staff members. As can be noted, UKZN and the green paper for post-school education and training speak the same language on PhDs.

## **MATERIALS AND METHODS**

Data for the study were collected through a combination of the following methods: direct participation in the management of the PhD project (the researcher being directly involved monitoring progress of staff in the PhD project), an analysis of university policy documents and a review of related literature. Through the case study approach, I was able to make an in-depth examination of the staff PhD project at one South African research-intensive university. In keeping with the tradition of case studies, the findings from the current study can not be generalized to other universities in South Africa. However, despite this lack of generalizability, one should be able to learn from an institution's successes and failures. Through the case study approach, I was able to understand the complex realities and institutional dynamics associated with staff PhD project. Each institution is unique. As such no two institutions are the same. Therefore the situation on the ground for a particular higher education institution has to be fully appreciated.

The current study is based on data collected from a selected publicly funded university in South Africa. This is one of the 23 public universities. The UKZN was selected as a site of study using a combination of purposive sampling and convenience sampling. The purposive sampling and convenience sampling came about because I was interested in picking a university that had taken a robust move towards the acquisition of PhDs by its academic staff and UKZN happened to be the most convenient institution. I work at the institution and I am directly involved in monitoring the staff project for academic staff. He therefore as an insider became the key informant for the study. The study draws on both qualitative and quantitative data. There is a combination of qualitative and quantitative data in order to create a more comprehensive picture of the PhD project at UKZN. It should be mentioned that there is pre-eminence of qualitative data over quantitative data.

## **RESULTS**

**UKZN and national profile:** According to the UKZN report on key indicators for 2012, the highest qualifications of permanent academic staff were as follows: PhD (50%), Masters degrees (28%) and 'other' (22%). The UKZN DABA reports about UKZN and national standings as follows:

- The percentage of professors with doctorates in the national system in 2010 was 84%, UKZN was 87%
- The percentage of associate professors with doctorates in the national system in 2010 was 70%, UKZN was 78%
- The percentage of junior lectures with doctorates in the national system in 2010 was 5%, UKZN was 50%

On the basis of the figures above, it is clear that UKZN is walking on a promising path regarding the acquisition of PhDs by academic staff. Of course, it is no easy walk. A lot of challenges stand in the way. What is of particular interest in this study is that the UKZN has taken a bold stand to push for PhDs.

**Support mechanisms, incentives and monitoring:** There are a number of support mechanisms for UKZN staff that are pursuing PhDs. One of the support mechanisms is the granting of sabbaticals so that staff can concentrate on their PhD programmes. The length of the sabbatical varies from individual to individual. During the sabbatical, teaching relief is provided. Another form of support to staff is made through provision of funding. These funds can be used for any aspect of the PhD programme, e.g., purchase of equipment, hiring of research assistant (s) and payment for services such as data analysis and others. One also has to mention that the UKZN pays for tuition fees for staff who are pursuing PhD studies. The PhD programme can be undertaken at UKZN itself or other university. As an incentive, any member of staff who graduates with a PhD automatically receives 60 research productivity units and these are converted into cash that goes into the PhD holder's research account. These funds are for research purposes. To ensure that staff take the PhD project as a serious human capacity development initiative, all staff on PhD programme are required to have the PhD project as one of the key performance areas in their performance management agreements.

In addition, deans are required to monitor and produce progress reports on staff in their schools (faculties) in terms of: who is not yet registered for PhD and why and also when they will register? For those who

are already registered for PhD, deans are required to indicate the anticipated dates of PhD completion. In addition, deans are also expected to monitor progress of the PhD studies and bring in interventions where necessary. The PhD project is a topic of discussion at high level meetings such as the senate, executive management and council. It should also be mentioned that the voice chancellor does not stand aloof. He is directly involved in the monitoring staff progress.

**Challenges for the PhD project:** Retirement age is one of the challenges facing the PhD programme. Those who are about to retire did not find it worthwhile to register for a PhD programme. This position was respected and accepted by the university. It is not economically viable to invest in someone who does not have any more time with his/her employer. It is on the other hand, worthwhile to invest in younger or those that still have many years to spend in their academic career. It is critically important to grow the next generation of academics.

Another challenge was that in some disciplines, it was not common practice for one to go for a PhD. Examples included accountancy, law and others. These are not purely academic disciplines. These are professional disciplines where a PhD is not regarded as a luxury. For those in the College of Health Sciences, some cited heavy clinical workload as the reason that prevents them from pursuing a PhD. As such registering for a PhD means clinical services will suffer. For others, the challenge is that they are registered for PhD at other universities and not at the UKZN. This means that the supervisor is not within easy reach. But of course with modern technology, the issue of physical distance between supervisor and PhD student should not really become a concern. Change of supervisors due to retirement or death of supervisor or other reasons has also been another challenge facing the PhD project.

Some academics argue that at the time of their appointment as members of academic staff, they were not obliged to do a PhD. As such they find it strange now that the rules of the game have changed and are working against them. Such members of staff argue that it is illegal on the part of the university to force them to do a PhD. Some even go to the extent of arguing that as part of their academic freedom, they should not and cannot be forced to pursue a PhD against their wishes. Some members of staff simply shift from one excuse to another. There is always an excuse for them not having registered for PhD.

**Some lessons:** What are the lessons from the UKZN case study? Several lessons can be learnt. The first is that the drive for PhDs at UKZN is powerfully led by the Vice

Chancellor. The project therefore, enjoys the support at the highest level of institutional level. In this way, the PhD project is taken very seriously. The lesson therefore, for other institutions is that the top leadership of an institution should be at the forefront and not leave it to the lower levels of leadership to drive the staff development project. Another lesson learnt is there is always needs to have a monitoring system of the PhD project. For example, there is regular reporting on the PhD project at various senior committee structures. Deans who are heads of schools regularly get in touch with staff and submit progress reports directly to the voice chancellor. A third lesson is that there is need for various forms of support towards staff that are pursuing PhDs. At UKZN, for example, in the form of teaching relief, sabbaticals, scholarships, fee remission and others. There is also some institutional pressure that comes through the embedding of the PhD project within the performance management system. This means that PhD becomes a performance issue and no one can opt out. There is also an incentive in that anyone who graduates with a PhD earns 60 research productivity units.

In neighbouring Zimbabwe, academic staff at universities are currently rushing to acquire PhDs. The government has set a deadline beyond which a PhD will become the minimum qualification for entry into an academic career. There is no doubt that Zimbabwe, like South Africa and also UKZN, recognizes the critical importance of a PhD in academia. Some years ago, the University of Botswana did set a PhD as the minimum entry qualification for a lecturer position. The same institution also withdrew attraction of external funding for research as part of the criteria academic promotion. Having withdrawn the two criteria, it becomes questionable whether the University of Botswana can still attain its goal of becoming a research-intensive university by 2021.

## DISCUSSION

Why has the UKZN embarked on the staff PhD project? First, the UKZN is a research-intensive institution and a PhD is one of the main tools for a robust researcher. UKZN can not be a premier university of African scholarship without academics who are well trained in research and a PhD offers such training. In addition, the National Development Plan (2012) and other national policy documents also acknowledge the critical and important contributions to a knowledge-based economy. Furthermore, the UKZN strategic plan (UKZN, 2012a) says by 2016, 70% of its academic staff shall be PhD holders. In the study, we have

discussed staff development in the form of a PhD project for academic members of staff. How does UKZN staff PhD profile rank in the context of the national standing? We have demonstrated that UKZN is operating above the national figures. We have also highlighted mechanisms that are in place at UKZN to support, incentivize and monitor the staff PhD project. We have also addressed the question of challenges that the UKZN project faces. There are obviously some lessons for other higher education institutions in South Africa and other African contexts.

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## **CONCLUSION**

Furthermore, the study identifies challenges for this staff development initiative. The study also offers lessons for other universities that aspire to embark on academic staff development.

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