

Title: The necessity of and value in researching power dynamics in candidate-supervisor relationships in South African doctoral education

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Abstract

This abstract enters into conversation with Amanda [Hlengwa's \(2021\)](#) HECU2022 think piece: Is mentoring higher education's novice academics a safety mechanism against transformation? In particular, its focus is trained on the issue of mentoring young academics within a diverse cultural and socio-economic higher education landscape, and within the doctoral supervision relationship specifically.

One of the subjects relevant to transformation in South African higher education is doctoral study attrition. The issue of attrition in doctoral education is both complex and important. It is important for a variety of reasons, including the fact, as Hlengwa (2021) notes, that "higher education institutions grapple with the challenge of recruiting and retaining sufficient numbers of qualified academic staff to cope with the implications of massification and globalisation." The objective of nurturing and training a new generation of academics is undermined by attrition in doctoral study.

A significant number of student-supervisor relationships involve cross-cultural and contrasting socio-economic dynamics inevitably impacting the nature, efficacy and outcome of the mentoring process. When the paths of seasoned mentors/supervisors (generally representing Western, European or Anglo-Saxon values and attitudes) converge with a younger, culturally diverse body of mentees/students, it seems inevitable that some form of transformation will occur. The key question, however, as Hlengwa (2021) alludes to, is whether the potential and diversity of this student cohort is celebrated and empowered to challenge and transform the higher education status quo, or whether they are instead pressured to conform to the existing structure(s) in order to retain their place at the table. Who determines what is valued within the field of doctoral education, and who gets included or not as a consequence?

Hlengwa (2021) notes that limited opportunities exist to closely examine challenges related to cross-cultural mentoring relationships, arguing that in-depth research is required to answer the question of whether the mentoring process within an establishment ultimately has the potential to rock the establishment's boat. Gaining a deeper understanding of the inner workings of this (often) private relationship may yield insights into the current nature and efficacy of the mentoring aspect of doctoral supervision, and whether it may result in positive transformation in South Africa's higher education sector, and beyond.

In addition to exploring mentoring dynamics in doctoral supervision, this abstract argues that there is both the need to elevate and value in elevating the voices of doctoral candidates who contemplate leaving or who have indeed left their doctoral degree programme.

Keywords

doctoral education, doctoral supervision, doctoral attrition, doctoral identity, power dynamics, field theory, narrative research