

## **Managing Loneliness among Doctoral Students**

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### **Abstract**

The doctorate is important in the promotion of innovation, development and knowledge economy of the African continent. Enrolment into doctoral programmes at African universities has been rapidly rising in the recent years. To ensure good quality of the doctorate, training of supervisors on supervision is imperative. The Centre for Research on Evaluation, Science, and Technology based at Stellenbosch University in South Africa carried out an online training course for supervisors of doctoral candidates at African Universities. The training took place in 2020, for a period of six months. Over seventy supervisors, both male and female, senior and junior/novice drawn from several African Universities participated in the training. One of the topics addressed in the training was the subject of loneliness among doctoral candidates. Loneliness when compounded with liminality, crossing conceptual thresholds and imposter syndrome, negatively affect students' progress and throughput rates, and quality of the doctorate. In one of the discussions fora, on the topic of loneliness, the question "what one can do to resolve the problem of the 'lonely scholar' and help students develop supportive communities for the postgraduate journey?" was posed to participants. All participants responded to the question. In this study, the participants' responses to the question were compiled and grouped into themes and sub themes based on similarity, while comparing with literature review on the subject. This comparison was necessary for gauging whether the approaches for managing loneliness suggested by the supervisors was reflected in the existing body of literature. An integrated framework for addressing loneliness was subsequently developed. In the framework, effective support systems for addressing the problem of the lonely scholar are recommended. These are Institutional, supervisor based and peer to peer support systems, and to a limited extent an external support system involving leveraging on expertise and resources from outside the Institution. An integrated approach is preferable because there is no single support mechanism that is a one fit all solution to loneliness. These approaches when adopted are expected to manage loneliness among the doctorate candidates, and subsequently promote their progress and throughput rates, and quality of the doctorate. The paper relates to the conference theme "Critical Approaches to Close-Up Higher Education Research and Bruce Macfarlane's think piece on academic freedom, the ethics of academic practice, and intellectual leadership.

### **Keywords**

Africa, Doctoral students, Loneliness, Support systems