



REPORT

POSTGRADUATE RESEARCH INDABA
Co-hosted by the NRF & UNISA

at

The University of South Africa (UNISA)
20 -22 February 2007

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1. Aims of the Conference

The purpose of the Postgraduate Research Indaba was to provide a platform for all postgraduate research stakeholders to, among others:

- Reflect on issues affecting postgraduate research supervision and throughput at higher education institutions;
- Examine the potential mechanisms to facilitate high throughput and curb the high dropout rate at postgraduate levels;
- Promote the PhD as the key to the development of high skills in Sough Africa; and
- Develop strategies and guidance that could be used to inform policy directive.

2. Attendance/Participation

As per the attached attendance list, there were 230 delegates to the conference, mostly from higher education institutions of South Africa. About 90 of the delegates were postgraduate students from masters up to Post doctoral levels. Other stakeholders that were represented in the conference were Department of Education, Department of Science and Technology, Medical Research Council, National Science and Technology Forum, Agricultural Research Council, Human Science Research Council and the National Research Foundation. Dr Beatie Scholtz, the Director, Research Capacity Development, from the German Research Foundation was the only international guest and speaker at the conference.

3. Conference Proceedings

Day 1: 20 February

3.1 Activity:

3.1.1 Opening and welcoming:

The Cocktail function was held at Pretoria Restaurant of the UNI SA. The UNI SA Vice Chancellor, Dr Barney Pityana welcomed Prof Mangaliso.

Professor Mangaliso, the President and CEO of the NRF, gave a keynote address which highlighted among other issues the following:

- The need to design and intensify current strategies that are intended at overcoming the historic legacy in postgraduate research in South Africa;
- The importance of cultivating a research culture in our higher education institutions
- the importance of having researchers leading by example in order to inspire postgraduate students and prospective researchers.

Day 2: 21 February

3.2 Activities

1. Keynote address
2. Presentations
3. Breakaways

3.2.1 Keynote address: Beatie Scholtz

Dr Scholtz, the Director at German Research Foundation, gave a talk on international experience in Research Capacity Development. The talk focused on challenges and potential solution as well as future needs in the German context. This talk also demonstrated that the research capacity development challenges are not confined to South Africa only; however, countries such as German have made some strides in addressing the challenges.

3.2.2 Presentation 1: Prins Nevhutalu

Dr Prins Nevhutalu, Deputy Vice Chancellor, Research at TUT gave a talk entitled, "How do we locate the postgraduate students within the bigger debate of research transformation".

Highlights from the presentation:

- Honours level in the SA education system is the most expensive of all postgraduate studies but a crucial bridge in the progress to PhD level. It is at this level that most PG students drop-out.

- South Africa's pipeline to PhD qualification is 13 yrs whilst other countries on average take 8 years.
- The postgraduate funding regime is too uncoordinated with too many organizations funding postgraduate research.
- A question was raised on whether the SA universities can afford free tuition for PhD studies. This issue was to be explored in the breakaway sessions.

Recommendations from the presentation:

- Increase allocation by the NRF for each and every grant
- Developing a National Plan for Human Capital Development
- A need for student movement that will continuously critique the situation of postgraduate students – SA National PG Student Association (Don't silence the voices to create a vibrant democracy)

3.2.3 Presentation 2: Cheryl de la Rey

Prof Cheryl de la Rey, a Deputy Vice Chancellor Research at UCT gave a talk on "Postgraduate policy issues". The presentation was a reflection on the current policy frameworks that govern postgraduate studies and the need for new policies where policy deficiencies were identified.

Highlights from the presentation

- So far there is no policy that governs supervision and the number of years to complete the degree. In some institutions faculties from the same institutions will have different guidelines in as far as supervision is concerned.
- Are students able to voice their dissatisfaction without opening themselves up for victimisation by "cobra supervisors"? To minimize this, institutions such as UCT have developed the MoU system that protects both the supervisor and the students during the supervision process.

3.2.4 Breakaway sessions

A. Current Funding Regime

The Context

- The legacy of the past in which blacks and women were not active in research
- Low progression in postgraduate studies is affecting skill shortage in the country
- Poverty is a challenge for majority of black South African
- Some institutions might not be in a position to implement the tuition waiver.

Challenges of postgraduate funding

- The low participation of HBUs in knowledge production
- Striking a balance between time for teaching and research responsibility
- The value of the scholarship awards
- R&D investment should be backed by skills focus: Human Capital Development
- The funding formula is perpetuating the previous imbalances
- The longevity of postgraduate studies

Recommendations

- Free Postgraduate education need to be explored. It was suggested that a study be conducted that will look at how other countries have approached this including some countries from Africa that are already practicing this.
- In the interim, the value of national scholarships should be increased
- Providing opportunities for African students under the tutelage of SADC protocol. This, however, should not be done at the expense of SA students. Establishing NRF counterparts in the region and the continent should be encouraged. South African can play a role in influencing this
- Universities should give priority to postgraduate students in providing students with job opportunities/internships
- A collective national effort (in a form of a summit) for mobilizing postgraduate funding resources should be called.

B. Postgraduate Policy Issues

Challenges and recommendations

- Problem of Honours degree not being specialized anymore leading to under-prepared Masters students

- Masters degree ought to be a 1 year programme
- There should be a move towards a 4 year programme that includes research work
- Length and structure of our postgraduate system are issues to be considered as a part of the NQF debate
- Introduction of mentorship programmes should be considered
- A curriculum or contextual understanding of what the Masters will entail is necessary/ what is the post graduate curriculum?
- We have institutions in SA that are supposed to do post graduate work, but we lack capacity
- Post Graduate Student Association is an important consideration, but must be taken seriously by the institutions. This, however should be different from the current SRCs in the institutions
- Knowledge ought to be a respected commodity
- SA history requires us to respond differently to challenges, e.g. limited expertise around Ethics as there is possibly only 3 Black woman who have expertise in this field / How will they be able to supervise he whole country
- Role of Post Doctoral Fellow to be expanded in terms of development of scientists - careful consideration is required from the NRF
- Career development opportunities to be explored for Post Doctoral Fellows
- Institutions should expand their partnership particularly with the private sector in order to expand their capacity
- Consider entry and exit interviews for research staff that leaves institutions
- Organise training for Masters students e.g. writing skills
- Think new when it comes to research output funds. For instance, a possibility to share the funds between student and supervisor in the case of the joint publication need to be considered
- To consider implementing a needs analysis during 1st year of Masters studies

DAY 3: 22 February

3.3 Activities

1. Presentations
2. Breakaways

3. Summary and Closure

3.3.1 Presentation 1: Johan Mouton

The first address of the day was given by Professor Johan Mouton who is the director of the Centre for Research on Science and Technology (CREST) and Professor in the Department of Sociology at the University of Stellenbosch. Professor Mouton gave a reflection of the current throughput challenges that confront the South African higher education sector.

Highlights from the presentation:

- The need for a Doctoral Academy. The NRF should spearhead the formation of this academy
- How does the NRF driver of “production of a large number of PhDs” contribute to the current situation? Are the mechanisms put in place for the enhancement of this driver seeing that the NRF still:
 - Support doctoral study for 3 yrs whilst it takes at least 4 - 5 years to complete the PhD in SA
 - NRF funding amounts are still low and unattractive
 - Part time studies are not allowed
- Our qualification structure from Honours to PhDs is too long
- Is there evidence that shows that South African completion rates are too low or is it, maybe, the question of low numbers of students coming into the system

3.3.2 Presentation 2: Laetus Lategan

The second presentation for the day was given by Professor Laetus Lategan who is currently the dean of Research and Development at the Central University of Technology (CUT) in Bloemfontein. His talk was on postgraduate student supervision and its challenges in South African higher education institutions.

Issues from the presentation

- There is the perception that the PhD qualification is the licence to supervise (*The vehicle is roadworthy but not in good mechanical condition*)
- Can PhD student supervise Masters Students?

- Experienced scholars are too engaged with institutional administrative bodies to devote their time to supervision
- Should supervisors be paid to supervise, seeing that the institutions receive between R300 000 and R500 000 from the DoE for every student that qualifies
- Do we need a good technical person as a promoter or a promoter with less technical expertise in the subject matter but who knows how to produce a good PhD?

3.3.3 Breakaway sessions

C. Student Throughput

The context

- The relationship between throughput, supervision, funding etc
- How do we define throughput
- Is there an acceptable dropout rate?
- Difference between fulltime and part-time at doctoral level

The challenges

- Poor participation in the PG programmes
- Students level of preparedness to postgraduate studies
- Value of the qualification
- Reliable Measures/Indicators of success
- Retention from undergraduate to postgraduate level and migration to other institutions (particularly from former HBUs to former HWI s)

Recommendations

- Review learning pathways
- Institution need to establish Discipline/School Based Graduate Schools to, amongst others, attract more postdoctoral fellows
- Institutions to conduct in-depth case studies of their student challenges
- Develop reliable indicators to measure the success of the system
- Extension of NFSAS funding to Honours, and revisit 3 year funding of PhD by the NRF.

D. Supervision

Challenges and recommendations

- Consideration for a 'compulsory' Research Supervision Programme
- Consideration for research supervisors to be exposed to research ethics certification
- Students need guidance on how to deal with difficult supervisors
- Supervisors are also just as good as those they are supervising
- Amount of students to be supervised by a supervisor needs careful consideration if high quality research is important
- Investigate the problem where the Supervisor leaves before student finishes degree - can the student continue his/her research and under what conditions?
- Co-Supervisors must have sufficient knowledge/expertise and experience to play their role in the supervision process
- Quality assurance must be part of the whole supervision process
- The need for policies on publication by postgraduate students before or upon completion of the postgraduate studies was identified. Policies to guide joint publications of postgraduate research with supervisors were identified as a priority.
- The UCT example of a memorandum of agreement between postgraduate student and supervisors was seen as a step toward a right direction in controlling expectations and possible frustrations cause by the ambiguity of the supervisory roles.

4. Conclusion and the summary

The presentation, discussions and breakaways provided delegates an opportunity to engage the presenters as well as raising issues beyond the presentations that are pertinent to the topics. Robust engagements took place where contemporary challenges in the higher education system were evident.

Five key deliberations from the conference were as follows:

- *Free Education for Postgraduate studies*: postgraduate studies are still inaccessible to most students whether from disadvantaged or advantaged backgrounds. A compelling argument was made that universities should work towards *tuition free* postgraduate research frameworks. Considering the institutional benefits from government subsidy on completed studies, delegates were made to understand that with proper planning, universities can sustain postgraduate studies on a tuition free framework

- *Scrapping of the Honours level:* there was huge consensus in the scrapping of this level in the current postgraduate structure. Amongst the reasons cited was it being the most expensive as well as the barrier to progress to postgraduate studies. Furthermore, the South African postgraduate pipeline is currently one of the longest taking students on average 13 years to attain a doctoral qualification compared to 8 years in other countries. It was agreed that this should be taken up in relevant forums for more debate.
- *Establishment of the Doctoral Academy:* a need for the formation of this agency was supported. One of the roles of this body will be specialization in training of student to produce high quality thesis and also prepare the PhDs for supervision. It was agreed that the NRF explores this idea further and report at the next conference in 2008.
- *Establishment of the South African Postgraduate Student Association:* there is a need for the formation of this body to increase the debate between the management and students. The formation of this body can start at the institutional level which would affiliate to a broader national body.
- *Poor supervision system:* Serious weaknesses or flaws were identified in the current supervision system in South Africa's HEIs. The most severe problem is the lack of training by supervisors and the fact that students supervise other students. It was indicated that the MoU system that has been implemented in institutions such as UCT is starting to bear fruits in terms of relationships and policies between the supervisor and students. As such institutions are encouraged to explore implementing this.

5. Conference declaration

The following conference resolutions were **adopted**:

...that **WE**, the South African research community, that is, scientists, policy makers, funding agencies and postgraduate students meeting at the first Postgraduate Research Indaba, convened by the National Research Foundation (NRF) in collaboration with the University of South Africa (UNISA), in Pretoria 20-22 February 2007 note;

The necessity and importance of intensifying our efforts in dealing with the current challenges which are, among others, increasing the number of scientists particularly in sciences, engineering and technology (SET) and a demographically representative workforce, for the continuous development and sustenance of our country's research human development (RHD). We therefore...

HEREBY COMMIT OURSELVES TO:

1. Make our individual and collective contributions to build and sustain research human capital to meet the demands of this country
2. Work towards greater input to implementing policies that govern postgraduate studies in South Africa and improve institutional research cultures for the benefit of all South Africans;
3. Work towards a coordinated funding mechanism with participation by government, the private sector philanthropic and other international organization to overcome the current postgraduate research funding challenges;
4. Engage higher education administration to individually and collectively continue to seek mechanisms for the improvement of postgraduate research throughput rates
5. Strive towards a demographically representative research workforce that will better serve the diverse needs of our society;
6. Facilitate the establishment of postgraduate research associations for purposes of networking, knowledge sharing, acknowledging the importance of postgraduate students and improving their conditions, among others;
7. Turn the postgraduate research indaba into an annual event to be hosted rotationally by different higher education institutions for the purposes of continuously identify challenges and opportunities that require collective efforts in our pursuit of high level human resources development

ACCORDINGLY, WE THEREFORE AND HEREBY;

Adopt these resolutions as a basis for advancing, among others, postgraduate research excellence, a representative and productive research workforce that will advance our national imperatives and our research competitiveness globally.