

Keynote

Transforming Doctoral Education in South Africa: Challenges, Trends, and Future Directions

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‘Think Piece’

Since the advent of democracy in South Africa in 1994, higher education policies and structures have undergone profound changes aimed at redressing past injustices and making doctoral education more accessible. Despite notable progress, including increased doctoral enrollments and graduations, equitable participation and success remain hampered by systemic inequalities, decades of unequal access to poor-quality education, and challenges in policy implementation. Deep structural disparities within South African society are mirrored in the higher education system, reflecting persistent barriers to transformation.

Projections by the National Planning Commission (2012) underscore the urgency of enhancing doctoral education, targeting a rise in the percentage of academic staff with PhDs from 34% to 75% by 2030, alongside the production of over 100 doctoral graduates per million people annually (NPC, 2012). Yet, with around 5,000 doctorates currently produced per year, the system faces significant challenges. Universities exhibit wide disparities in doctoral staffing and student numbers within a highly differentiated system (Mouton, Boshoff & James, 2015). Concurrently, the pan-African demand for aligning human capital development with economic growth persists, emphasising the critical need for skilled graduates to support continental development (van Schalkwyk et al., 2021).

This paper examines shifting policy trends in South African doctoral education from 2010 to 2022, a period marked by extensive restructuring of the higher education landscape. Drawing on data from the Higher Education Management Information System (HEMIS), it highlights key trends in access, participation, and success across variables such as race, gender, age, and discipline. These insights are contextualised within three intersecting discourses of doctoral education—scholarly, labor market, and personal development—identified by Backhouse (2011), each with unique implications for policy and practice.

The paper also interrogates the limited demand for doctoral study among black South Africans, exploring critical barriers such as funding, limited career opportunities in academia and industry, undergraduate curricula with inadequate research exposure, and structural challenges within doctoral processes. Using Critical Theory, it notes how systemic inequities in funding, curriculum design, and institutional culture perpetuate exclusion and limit transformative progress. Applying Human Capital Theory, it critically analyses the economic imperative of broadening access to doctoral education as a means to enhance national competitiveness and continental development. Incorporating Transformative Learning Theory, it explores the role of doctoral education in fostering reflective, empowered individuals capable of driving societal change through innovation, leadership, and advocacy.

The analysis concludes by proposing actionable recommendations to attract more young black South Africans to doctoral study. Central to these recommendations is a call to revisit the purpose of the doctorate—balancing its role in serving public versus private goods—and to address

resource allocation issues to achieve ambitious policy goals. Grounded in these theoretical perspectives, the recommendations aim to reimagine doctoral education as a space for critical reflection, skill development, and transformative action, ensuring its alignment with equity, excellence, and developmental priorities.

This paper contributes to ongoing debates on the role of doctoral education in fostering academic, economic, and societal advancement in South Africa. It argues that achieving equity and excellence in doctoral education requires a systemic reimagining of policies, practices, and resources to ensure meaningful transformation and unlock the nation's full potential.

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