



# **Unveiling the Essence of 'Doctorateness' in Ph.D. Mentorship: Navigating the Humanity amidst Academic Pursuits in Academia**

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## **Author's contribution**

*The sole author designed, analyzed, interpreted and prepared the manuscript.*

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## **ABSTRACT**

The paper explores the tension between humanizing and dehumanizing aspects of doctoral education ("doctorateness") in Ph.D. mentorship programs. It calls for a shift towards a more humane approach that prioritizes integrity, ethics, and the well-rounded development of doctoral candidates. Universities traditionally aim to bridge knowledge gaps and foster ethical research, but a failure to do so can lead to a dehumanized doctoral experience. Scholars emphasize the need for universities to cultivate humane environments that nurture innovative solutions through quality doctoral mentorship. This approach equips graduates with the technical and emotional intelligence needed to tackle global challenges. The true essence of "doctorateness" lies in a humanized process that fosters research, innovation, and capacity building. Quality doctoral graduates embody humanizing attributes and go beyond mere technical proficiency process. However, the current focus on quantity often results in graduates lacking the skills and humanity sought by employers. Universities must address these gaps by developing programs that train postgraduates in a

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humane environment. The root cause of graduate unemployment lies not in the number of graduates, but in the lack of quality, integrity, and humanizing elements embedded in doctorateness programs. An exploration of "doctorateness" within supervision processes highlights deficiencies in program approval, supervisor allocation, and the lack of robust monitoring mechanisms. The current landscape falls short of ideals that prioritize a humane and transformative doctoral experience. The paper proposes steps to cultivate a more humane doctoral mentorship environment: Integrate humanizing aspects into doctoral program approval, prioritize supervisor consultation for manageable workloads, provide comprehensive training for new supervisors, Implement ongoing monitoring and evaluation throughout the doctoral journey. By adopting these recommendations, universities can foster a doctoral mentorship environment that balances academic rigor with the holistic development of scholars, navigating the humanity inherent in academia.

*Keywords: Quality doctorateness; malpractice; misconducts; integrity; ethics; humanizing; dehumanizing; doctorateness.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Historically, universities have been seen primarily as centers of research, alongside their training and outreach roles. These institutions have established structured frameworks that facilitate the humanizing aspect of research. This aims to foster capacity building and bridge knowledge gaps both locally and globally, which is crucial for meeting economic demands and driving innovation.

Doctoral education programs, a cornerstone of universities, are tasked with producing highly skilled individuals. These individuals are equipped with advanced knowledge, governed by integrity and morality, and prepared to address national objectives. By upholding integrity and research ethics, universities instill human values and respect. This fosters a process deemed essential for achieving quality 'doctorateness.' However, failing to adhere to these structured processes and neglecting humanity can lead to injustices, lack of care, diminished commitment, a shortage of technical expertise, and insufficient capacity in disciplinary areas. Such lapses, viewed as malpractices and misconducts, contribute to the dehumanization of the doctorateness process.

A critical inquiry into the doctorateness process revolves around whether and to what extent universities are aware of these dehumanizing gaps and how they can address them. Scholars (Mouton et al., 2022); [1,2,3] argue that universities must cultivate environments grounded in integrity and sustainability. This will inspire and support supervisors and supervisees in developing innovative solutions to global challenges through a humanizing doctorateness

process. As research is a fundamental university function, doctoral education equips individuals with the skills to transfer their technical expertise, intellectual acumen, and emotional intelligence. This allows them to address global challenges through quality supervision (Bougey et al., 2019).

Earning a Ph.D. through a humanizing process arguably embodies the essence of quality 'doctorateness.' This approach is envisioned to promote research, innovation, and capacity building. It achieves this by generating relevant knowledge, skills, and accountability, all while embracing humanizing approaches. Consequently, quality doctoral graduates bridge the gap between postgraduate studies and the labor market, and beyond. They do this by embodying humanizing attributes, emotional intelligence, and integrity that go beyond mere technical proficiency (Mouton et al., 2022);[3].

While new knowledge generated through doctorateness is acknowledged as a central strategic and economic resource, contemporary society demands more. It demands that doctorateness transcends mere technical prowess and embraces humanity and fosters integrity, a value of paramount importance globally. Doctorate programs should be capable of serving humanity in times of crisis, such as conflicts like the Ukraine war, the COVID-19 pandemic, or in combating corruption and injustice. Hence, the crucial question arises: Are doctorateness programs cultivated through a humanizing process equipped to extend their virtues beyond academia and address these humanitarian needs? What factors hinder doctorateness from fulfilling such a service to humanity? Society requires more than just

disciplinary expertise and intellect; it yearns for honesty, humanity, and empathy – qualities that are often lacking but urgently needed. The sustainability of knowledge systems hinges on their ability to produce new Ph.D.s at an appropriate rate, with a continued focus on quality, integrity, and humanizing approaches [4].

Universities must address these gaps by developing relevant programs that train postgraduates in a humanizing environment. The current supply and demand dynamics of doctoral education in Africa, particularly East Africa, show evidence of an oversupply, leading to unemployment among doctoral graduates [5]. However, the crux of the issue lies not in the oversupply itself, but in the lack of quality, integrity, and humanizing approaches embedded in doctorateness programs. Why do some doctoral graduates remain jobless in disciplines with shortages? The root cause lies in the absence of integrity, which undermines the humanizing process and perpetuates dehumanizing approaches. This raises pertinent questions about the purpose, pursuit, and nature of doctorateness in the African context, particularly regarding the quality of skills and competence development. The dehumanizing process, which sometimes overlooks quality, humanity, and the soft skills required in the workplace, might be the hidden cause of the disparity between doctorateness and unemployment.

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### **1.1 The Doctoral Context in East Africa**

Students pursuing doctoral degrees in East African universities have a multitude of motivations. Scholarly consensus (Mouton et al., 2022) suggests that doctoral programs in Africa address specific contexts. East African programs, for instance, often emphasize professional development and enhancing knowledge within a particular discipline.

Universities offering these programs have their own objectives as well, ranging from meeting industry demands for specialized skills to increasing research output for global recognition. Similarly, students are driven by a variety of aspirations when seeking doctoral education. These aspirations can include career advancement, financial gain, the opportunity to explore interdisciplinary areas, and achieving societal recognition.

These varied motivations have fueled intense competition among universities, schools, and departments. Each strives to tailor programs and attract more students, often within a context of limited resources. Despite these constraints, East African institutions are under pressure to produce a high number of doctoral graduates. This focus on quantity raises critical questions that demand attention: Who is best suited to pursue doctoral education? Which institutions should be authorized to offer doctoral degrees? How can quality and academic integrity be maintained throughout the process? How can the doctorateness process be humanized to prioritize the well-being and development of both students and supervisors? Are Quality Management Systems (QMS) still effective in universities, and what additional safeguards are needed to ensure the quality of doctoral programs? These questions underscore the need to conceptualize doctorateness within a framework of integrity and ethics. This ethical foundation is vital for fostering a humanizing doctoral research mentorship experience in East African universities.

### **1.2 Understanding 'Doctorateness' in East Africa**

To fully grasp the essence of 'doctorateness' in the East African context, we must embark on a multi-faceted exploration. This exploration involves examining existing literature, delving into the intricacies of the doctoral education process, considering the unique circumstances of East African universities, and incorporating insights gleaned from experience as a supervisor and mentor of doctoral students. Scholars have offered diverse perspectives on defining 'doctorateness.' Trafford et al. [6] view it as the culmination of a journey, where various components, including research methodology and the steps taken throughout the process, come together to deliver a thesis or a collection of publications. In East Africa, universities perceive 'doctorateness' as both a numerical output and adherence to prescribed processes

and standards, as outlined by regulatory bodies such as the Commission of University Education [7] and the Interuniversity Council for East Africa (IUCEA, 2018), [8,9]. However, while guidelines are provided, they often fail to address critical questions raised by scholars (Mouton et al, 2022) regarding questions about measuring qualitative parameters such as the creation of new knowledge, the depth of literature review, and the effectiveness of the research process itself.

Furthermore, institutional expectations, regulations, and a relentless focus on throughput numbers often shape the definition of 'doctorateness' in practice. In some instances, universities prioritize quantity over quality, evidenced by mandates to graduate a specific number of doctoral students annually. This emphasis on numbers, while disregarding critical challenges like faculty shortages and inadequate facilities, can lead to a dehumanizing approach to doctoral education. For instance, in Kenya, universities were directed to graduate a specific number of doctoral students each year, alongside requirements for teaching staff to attain Ph.D. qualifications within set timeframes. However, the focus on meeting quotas overlooks the integrity of the doctoral process and raises fundamental questions about the true essence of 'doctorateness.'

### **1.3 Frameworks for Doctorateness**

Doctoral education is more than just a process; it is a comprehensive journey with distinct phases, each requiring careful consideration and adherence to established frameworks. These frameworks serve as the scaffolding upon which the entire doctoral experience is built, encompassing program development, student recruitment, mentoring, assessment, and graduation [10, 8] (IUCEA, 2018); [7]. However, the true essence of 'doctorateness' lies not only in these structural elements but also in the underlying purpose and humanity infused into the process.

In East African universities, various frameworks are in place to safeguard the integrity and quality of doctoral programs. The Commission of University Education (CUE) provides guidelines for program design, emphasizing alignment with institutional values and goals (IUCEA, 2018); [7,11,2]. While these guidelines set the stage for programmatic excellence, they often fall short in addressing the broader aspects of integrity, ethics, and humanity.

In today's rapidly evolving world, there is a growing need for technocrats who not only possess specialized knowledge but also exhibit integrity, emotional intelligence, and empathy. If doctoral education fails to cultivate these essential qualities, it risks becoming disconnected from the realities of society.

Real-world examples highlight the inadequacy of current doctoral programs in addressing humanity attributes beyond traditional skills and knowledge. For instance, the rationale of many Ph.D. programs emphasizes expertise in specific areas but neglects the broader context of integrity, ethics, and values [3].

Despite frameworks such as those provided by the Inter-University Council for East Africa (IUCEA) addressing various aspects of postgraduate studies, including admission and supervision, there remains a gap in ensuring the humanization of the doctoral process (IUCEA, 2018). While these frameworks aim to maintain quality assurance and enhance the overall experience, they often overlook the critical elements of integrity, ethics, and emotional intelligence.

The lack of explicit emphasis on these attributes raises questions about the true purpose of doctoral education. Is it merely to impart knowledge and skills, or should it also strive to nurture a sense of empathy, integrity, and ethical conduct among graduates?

Critical reflection on the doctoral process reveals numerous pitfalls that undermine its quality and integrity. From admissions to supervision and examination, there are instances where the human element is overlooked, leading to a dehumanized experience for both students and faculty [3,2].

Ultimately, the essence of 'doctorateness' lies in its ability to transcend mere academic pursuits and embrace the humanity inherent in the pursuit of knowledge. It is incumbent upon universities to reassess their frameworks and policies to ensure that the doctoral experience remains rooted in integrity, ethics, and a deep sense of humanity. Only then can doctoral education truly fulfill its potential to positively impact society and address the complex challenges of our time.

## **2. CRITICAL REFLECTION ON 'DOCTORATENESS' PROCESS**

This section delves into the dichotomy between the dehumanizing and humanizing aspects of the

'doctorateness' process, drawing from analytical insights as a supervisor and experiences shared by my students. The focus revolves around the admission process and the roles and responsibilities of supervisors and supervisees in evaluating 'doctorateness'.

### **2.1 Admission into Doctoral Programs**

The journey of 'doctorateness' commences with the application and admission into the institution, guided by established postgraduate rules and regulations [3] (IUCEA, 2018); [7,8,9]. However, inherent pitfalls in this process often undermine the integrity and ethics of 'doctorateness'. Unlike universities in South Africa and Europe, where potential students are required to identify a supervisor before admission, East African universities often admit students without this crucial step, leaving the allocation of supervisors to the discretion of departments and students.

This allocation process, typically overseen by department chairpersons (CoDs), aims to meet the demand for doctoral supervision but often leads to overburdened supervisors and a compromised quality of mentorship. Overloaded supervisors' resort to expedient means to meet graduation targets, sacrificing the essential elements of integrity, empathy, and ethics (Mouton et al, 2022).

Such practices breed misconducts and malpractices, including delayed supervision, compromised quality of mentorship, and strained supervisor-supervisee relationships. Additionally, the absence of guidelines exacerbates these issues, resulting in prolonged timelines, financial burdens, and academic distress for students. The following experiences shared by students exemplify the reality.

### **2.2 Ineffective Supervision Procedure**

Illustrating this, a student recounts their experience of being allocated two supervisors, one of whom lacked expertise in the student's area of interest. Despite seeking assistance from another knowledgeable faculty member, the student faced resistance and undue pressure to conform to the inadequacies of their principal supervisor. This led to delayed feedback, inappropriate assessment, and financial penalties, highlighting the systemic failures in supervision and mentorship.

### **2.3 Misconduct – Falsification of Data**

Similarly, another student narrates a case of research misconduct, where falsified data led to the graduation of a student without scrutiny. This blatant disregard for integrity and ethics underscores the systemic deficiencies in monitoring and adherence to research frameworks.

In both cases, the absence of robust monitoring mechanisms and ethical oversight perpetuated a culture of misconduct and dehumanization within doctoral programs. The responsibility for addressing these issues extends to supervisors, institutions, and society at large, emphasizing the urgent need for reforms in the 'doctorateness' process.

Ultimately, the essence of 'doctorateness' lies not merely in academic pursuits but in the cultivation of integrity, empathy, and ethical conduct. It is imperative for stakeholders to collaborate in redefining doctoral mentorship paradigms to ensure a humanized and holistic approach to 'doctorateness' in academia

### **2.4 Supervisor-Supervisee Roles and Responsibilities**

A blended model of traditional and co-supervision has informally emerged in universities, representing an improvement over the individual supervisor-individual student model. This blend offers both advantages and pitfalls, particularly in managing power dynamics within supervision relationships. While one would expect this model to balance the weaknesses of traditional supervision with the strengths of co-supervision, the reality falls short of this ideal.

The roles and responsibilities of supervisors are meticulously outlined in the postgraduate rules and regulation frameworks, delineating clear timeframes for graduation, supervisor-supervisee dynamics, and the workload limit of three Ph.D. students per supervisor [8] (IUCEA, 2018) [9,12]. However, the actual appointment process raises questions about the quality of 'doctorateness'. Supervisors are appointed by the Dean of the School of Graduate Studies based on departmental and programmatic recommendations, with contracts signed between supervisors and students. Additionally, supervisors must be senior lecturers or above and affiliated with departments offering the program. While the appointment process seems

clear, its execution profoundly impacts the quality of doctoral mentorship [13,14].

Assigning supervisors without considering their existing workload, adversely affects 'doctorateness'. Many supervisors find themselves juggling numerous students alongside full teaching, administrative, and outreach responsibilities. This overload compromises the quality time dedicated to individual students, undermining the negotiated learning space essential for effective mentorship. Furthermore, the lack of supervisor training in alternative supervision models perpetuates reliance on traditional one-on-one approaches, limiting innovation and efficiency. Meetings often devolve into unproductive critique sessions, with supervisors dictating rather than nurturing independent scholarly growth. This pressure-laden environment fosters dependency on supervisors, eroding the autonomy and agency of supervisees and perpetuating a dehumanizing dynamic.

The societal and labor market demand scholars who are independent, critical thinkers, and creative problem solvers. Doctoral graduates should be enculturated into their disciplines with a strong sense of humanity, capable of contributing original knowledge beyond mere academic qualifications. The disconnect between these expectations and the reality of many unemployed doctoral graduates underscores the deficiencies in current mentorship practices.

Moreover, issues such as ego conflicts and over-dependency on senior supervisors further complicate the mentorship landscape, creating distress for all parties involved. This leads to unconstructive feedback, lack of transparency, and ethical lapses, ultimately undermining the integrity of the doctoral process.

Overall, redefining supervisor-supervisee roles and responsibilities is crucial for humanizing the 'doctorateness' journey. Embracing innovative supervision models, prioritizing mentorship training, and fostering a culture of collaboration and independence are essential steps towards nurturing competent scholars capable of meeting the evolving demands of academia and society [15].

### **3. CONCLUSION**

The exploration of 'doctorateness' within the context of supervision processes is guided by a

commitment to integrity and ethics, aiming to discern the humanizing and dehumanizing elements inherent in achieving quality doctoral education. The examination of various processes and reflections offered in this paper underscores a prevailing sense of dehumanization that compromises the essence of quality 'doctorateness' as envisioned.

Critical pitfalls emerge primarily in the realms of program approval, supervisor allocation, supervision models and training, and the clarity of certain procedures outlined in postgraduate standards and guidelines. These deficiencies are exacerbated by the absence of robust monitoring and evaluation mechanisms capable of providing actionable feedback to enhance supervision practices and uphold the principles of research ethics and integrity.

In essence, the current landscape of doctoral mentorship falls short of the ideals espoused in this discourse. The imperative now lies in addressing these shortcomings and recalibrating supervision processes to foster a more humane, ethical, and ultimately transformative environment for doctoral candidates. Only through such concerted efforts can we realize the true essence of 'doctorateness'—a journey that not only equips scholars with knowledge and skills but also instills in them a profound sense of humanity and ethical responsibility amidst the rigors of academic pursuit in academia.

### **4. RECOMMENDATIONS**

In light of the reflections and conclusions drawn, the following recommendations are proposed to humanize the doctoral mentorship process while upholding integrity and ethics:

Incorporate components of humanity into the approval process of doctoral programs at universities, ensuring that the program design aligns with principles of ethical and humane education.

Prioritize consultation with supervisors before allocating students, aiming to maintain a manageable workload of no more than five students per supervisor at any given time. This approach fosters a more personalized and supportive supervision process.

Provide comprehensive training for novice supervisors prior to student allocation, emphasizing the importance of their roles and responsibilities. Additionally, clearly delineate the

roles of first and second supervisors in appointment letters to streamline the process and enhance clarity.

Implement ongoing monitoring and evaluation mechanisms throughout the doctoral journey to uphold quality 'doctorateness' and introduce checks and balances to safeguard integrity within the mentorship process. This continuous assessment will enable timely intervention and improvement where necessary.

By adopting these recommendations, universities can take proactive steps to cultivate a doctoral mentorship environment that prioritizes both academic rigor and the holistic development of scholars, thereby navigating the humanity amidst the academic pursuits inherent in academia.

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## COMPETING INTERESTS

Author has declared that no competing interests exist.

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