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Enhancing quality postgraduate research productivity in Africa for sustainability: Roles of governance structures and policies

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Abstract: The quest for quality postgraduate research productivity through education is on the increase. However, in the context of the African society, governance structures and policies seem to be impacting on the quality level of the provided education. Hence, this conceptual study explored the roles of governance structures and policies in enhancing and ensuring quality postgraduate education programmers in African institutions of higher learning. To this end, various relevant literature was reviewed. The findings showed amongst others that governance structures and policies affect the quality of education provided. Meanwhile, other factors such as curriculum, foreign influence, lack of resources, training, amongst others contribute to the quality of education provided. The study concludes that there is need for the current structures of governance and the designed and implemented policies for postgraduate education to be reviewed and adjusted towards ensuring the desired transformation.

Keywords: Africa; globalization; glocalization; governance structure; policies; quality postgraduate education

1. Introduction

The provided quality of education in tertiary institutions of learning in the Global South, which comprises developing and underdeveloped countries (Benabdallah et al., 2017; World Population Review, 2022), predominantly Africa, Central and Latin America, and most of Asia (Hollington et al., 2015) is on the decline (Damon et al., 2016; Kwasi-Agyeman et al., 2021; The World Bank, UNESCO and UNICEF, 2021). This is considered to have affected the African continent in various ways (Musau, 2018). For instance, Musau (2018, p. 5), reporting for the United Nations Africa Renewal, states that poor quality education in Africa has aided the lingering inequalities, poverty and inefficiencies in sectors such as “preprimary, technical, vocational and informal education, which are severely underdeveloped”. In congruence, an analysis of the report of Winthrop (2022) shows that poor quality education in Africa promotes violent conflict, instability in politics, health crises, increase of ungovernable territories, among others. This contributes to the increase in the immigration of many African students to other parts of the world (mainly the Global North). Meanwhile, the reason for poor or lack of quality education in many African institutions of higher learning has been attributed to issues such as lack of qualified personnel (Evans and Acosta, 2021; Habitat for Humanity, n.d.; Owoyokun, 2022), poor monitoring (Owoyokun, 2022; UNICEF and the African Union, n.d.), lack of funding (Owoyokun, 2022; UNICEF and the African Union, n.d.), lack of infrastructure (Fomba et al., 2022), curriculum issues (Habitat for Humanity, n.d.; UNICEF and the African Union, n.d.; Winthrop, 2022), corruption (Fomba et al., 2022), policy issues (Agbor, 2012; Evans and Acosta, 2021; UNICEF and the African

Union, n.d.), traditional attitudes (Habitat for Humanity, n.d.), among others. Thus, according to De Sousa Santos (2014, 2018), it can be considered as a case of interconnections between different systems and institutions as an “ecologies of knowledge” approach, which challenges the dominant gaze of global hegemonic forces. Conversely, in some instances, the poor quality experienced in higher education systems in the African context seems to have been attributed to the influence of foreign practices in such institutions (Boughey and McKenna, 2021; Mbabazi, 2013), especially considering the quest for decolonization in some parts of Africa (Ezebuilo, 2020). For instance, in a country like South Africa, the quest for the decolonization of the education system led to struggles and campaigns like ‘fees must fall’ (Griffiths, 2019) and ‘Rhodes must fall’ (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2016). Hence, attempts are being made to infuse African thoughts, trends and innovations in different ways in institutions of higher learning in Africa (Ndlovu, 2018; Thondhlana and Garwe, 2021). For instance, Ndlovu (2018, p. 95) states that “The major challenge faced by Africa is how to redeem itself from its present predicament, when the continent and its people remain *trapped by the enduring colonial domination in their ways of knowing, seeing and imagining*” (italics added for emphasis). Nonetheless, regardless of the efforts made, quality in higher institutions of learning in Africa remains a major issue (Acholonu and Njie, 2020; Afolabi and Idowu, 2019; Zeleza, 2021). The foregoing in alignment with the submission from the work of Thambinathan and Kinsella (2021), indicates that values, in terms of what constitutes postgraduate education and all that it entails are based on the lived experiences of people. Likewise, the required interventions for quality to be enjoyed in higher institutions of learning as it concerns postgraduate education, which is the focus of this study is also hinged on the lived experiences of the people (Thambinathan and Kinsella, 2021). Suffice it to state that the lived experiences of the people play a crucial role in promoting quality in postgraduate education.

According to Nerad, Bogle, Kohl, O’Carroll, Peters and Scholz (in press), for education to be regarded by people as a process of dialogical independence of asserting individuals to re-read their world, then the roles of policymakers, managers, funders, support systems, administrators, students and supervisors alike, as well as their prospective employers are to be put under the microscope to examine the existing sets of relationships to ensure transformation of such (relationships) where necessary. In congruence, Boughey and McKenna (2021) suggest that the nuance in existing structures of governance, designed policies and implemented policies in the form of actual practices, affect the available quality education in postgraduate education programmers in African institutions of higher learning. This has discouraged many students from furthering their education to the postgraduate level (Dampson and Edwards, 2019), especially where they are unable to travel to countries in the Global North for such purposes due to reasons like language barriers, cultural misunderstandings, monetary issues, family, friends, among others (Peden, 2017; Von Wendorff, 2022). These suggest some challenges capable of affecting postgraduate education. Similarly, current challenges in postgraduate education and research productivity on the African continent include access issues (Mba, 2017), poor/lack of funding and resources (ACE Report, 2016; Igiri et al., 2021; Mba, 2017), lack of motivation (Igiri et al., 2021), heavy duty load (Abe and Mugobo, 2021), amongst

others. The identified factors negatively affect research productivities in terms of brain drain in the continent (Igiri et al., 2021; Mba, 2017), decline in the quality of research, teaching and learning (Mba, 2017), poor socio-economy/underdevelopment (Igiri et al., 2021; Mba, 2017).

Conversely, policies and governance structure have been identified as remedies, however, at the present state, they are contributing factors hampering quality postgraduate education and research productivity in the African continent. For instance, sequel to the review of the works of scholars such as Abe and Mugobo (2021), Aithal (2016), Frantz et al. (2022), Uwizeye et al. (2022), policies are considered as pivotal factor affecting quality postgraduate education as well as research productivity in Africa. These policies could be institution and/or nation based. Similarly, the works of Assan (2021), Nkala and Ncube (2020), and Varghese (2016) indicate that governance structures cannot be ruled out, rather they are worth considering. However, Asongu and Odhiambo (2020, p. 2) using the specific context of Sub-Sahara Africa report that “governance variables are *negatively correlated with poor education quality*” (italics added for emphasis). Similarly, Mbatia and Beauty (2024) using the case of South African Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) explain that governance structures through monitoring and evaluation of performances of institutions of learning can contribute to the quality of education provided. This indicates that governance variables such as structure and policy can negatively affect quality education in the African society. Hence, the question remains: to what extent has governance structure and policy impacted on the quality of education provided to postgraduate students? Thus, this study explores how the roles of governance structures and policies impact quality in the provided postgraduate education in African institutions of higher learning with emphasis on postgraduate supervision through a concept note. This concept note is guided by the research question: How do the roles of governance structures and policies continuously impact quality in the provided postgraduate education in African institutions of higher learning?

The concept paper is structured in the following manner: conceptualizations of terms which is targeted at being used to give a working definition for some key terminologies used, issues bordering around curriculum and quality in postgraduate education, the impact of structures of governance on the quality of postgraduate education, the impact of policies on the quality of postgraduate education. This is followed by the conclusion which is drawn from the reviewed literature. Recommendations are made sequel to the conclusion, before the limitation and suggestion for further study.

2. Conceptualization of terms

Globalization is “an extensive network of economic, cultural, social and political interconnections and processes which goes beyond national boundaries” (Yalcin, 2009). According to the Peterson Institute for International Economics (2021), “Globalization is the word used to describe the growing interdependence of the world’s economies, cultures, and populations, brought about by cross-border trade in goods and services, technology, and flows of investment, people, and information.” In the view of Youmatter (2020), “Globalization means the speedup of movements and

exchanges (of human beings, goods, and services, capital, technologies or cultural practices) all over the planet.” This implies that globalization encompasses nations, regions and continents. In this study, globalization is used to represent the world view and/or standard of a subject.

Global North (GN) refers to countries located mostly in the northern hemisphere (Graml et al., 2021). These countries are considered to have been previously identified based on their level of development, technological gadgets and know-how, wealth and dominance as “the West” or “the first world” (Graml et al., 2021). In the context of this study, Global North implies countries located in the northern hemisphere and described as first-world nations due to their levels of advancement in different spheres of human endeavor as well as wealth and dominance.

Global South (GS) is the reverse of Global North. It is used to mean countries situated in the southern hemisphere. These countries are predominantly known to be low in technological advancement, and experience high rates of poverty, unemployment and illiteracy, among others (Department for International Development, n.d.; Kowalski, 2020; Surbhi, 2020). In this study, Global South is used to mean countries that are rated as developing or underdeveloped, of which African nations are predominant.

Glocalization: Following the submissions of Grigorescu and Zaif (2017) as well as Roudometof (2015), glocalization is a term used to mean proffering solutions to problems faced by local communities in developing nations while attempting to meet the global standard. In this study, glocalization implies efforts made by African institutions of higher learning in proffering solutions to identified problems of local communities while at the same time meeting the global standard.

Quality postgraduate research: Houston (2015, p. 1) views it as “*an ideal or value aspired to by many constituents of the higher education system; a measure of the performance of higher education institutions in achieving institutional, national and regional policy aspirations and targets; a complex human process embedded in complex environments; the outcomes and outputs from engagement in learning and research processes by postgraduate students, their supervisors and other staff in higher education institutions*” (italics added for emphasis). Meanwhile, in Australia, Quality Postgraduate Research is a programme held once every second year by the Adelaide University, South Australia, to bring together educational researchers, research students, policy makers, research degree supervisors and university leaders to better understand the processes, practices, pedagogies, and theoretical frameworks of doctoral education (QPR, 2022). This implies that Quality Postgraduate Research is limited to doctoral education, leaving out master’s students, perhaps due to the level of research undertaken at that level. In this study, Quality Postgraduate Research will be referred to as an ideal, value or standard to be upheld by institutions of higher learning in postgraduate education programmes; master’s and doctoral levels inclusive. It would be represented as ‘QPR’.

Governance structure refers to “the framework of project management, especially regarding rules, procedures, roles and the division of responsibilities within the whole decision-making process” (Drys, 2020, p. 1). Meanwhile, according to Harris (2000), a governance structure is that which, if well-established, has the potency to guide the development of integrated justice information systems (IJIS). In this study,

governance structures imply the framework, rules, regulations and guidelines put together by and for the management to direct and control activities within the institutions of higher learning.

3. Findings and discussion

Sequel to the reviewed relevant literature, the findings of the study are presented and discussed using identified relevant themes.

3.1. Theme 1: Impacts of governance structures on the quality of postgraduate education

Governance structures in institutions of higher learning impact the quality of the education provided (Hénard and Mitterle, n.d.; Rathod, 2020; Sengupta et al., 2022; Zaman, 2015). For example, in the South African context, Olivier (2021, p. 158) holds the view that governance structures are pivotal to the extent that “there is a myriad of resources available for ... governance structures in HE to build on”. Conversely, Du Plessis et al. (2022, p. 1) state that there is a “need to adapt leadership and self-leadership approaches to the changed ways of working in higher education institutions”. This suggests that the current governance structures need to be adjusted to approaches suitable for the changed ways of working in higher institutions of learning. This finding corroborates the work of Müller et al. (2022) which shows that school leaders have much work to do in ensuring the provision of quality education regardless of prevailing challenges. Meanwhile, review of the work of Chanda and Chitondo (2024) which shows the need for paradigm shift in leadership, and calls for “mentorship and leadership development programs to cultivate a cadre of leaders equipped to address the unique challenges facing Africa” Chanda and Chitondo (2024, p. 2395) further advocate for “the identification, cultivation, and support of leaders who prioritize sustainable development, social justice, and inclusive economic growth”. In support, UNESCO (2024) considers the need for academic leaders and government representatives to explore the possibilities of unlocking the transformative potential of HEIs towards societal development. This indicates that the role of leadership is critical in ensuring the desired provision of quality education and success even at postgraduate level in institutions of higher learning. However, the leadership must be adjusted for relevance.

3.2. Theme 2: Impacts of policies on the quality of postgraduate education

Academic policies impact postgraduate education and affect the learning abilities as well as the academic performances of students (Beerkens, 2018; Mzangwa, 2019; Swuste et al., 2021). The work of Lange (2017) shows that the quality of provided education in tertiary institutions of learning is greatly impacted by the policies guiding them. These policies include those of the government and the institutions of learning. Masenya (2023) indicates that the policies contributing to the level of the quality of the provided education can include social, national and international. This implies that policies from western countries can influence the quality of education provided in the

African continent. Thus, this calls for African nations to be intentional on their adopted policies in HEIs which taking cognizance of the desired quality and relevant education.

Other factors affecting and contributing to the quality of provided education are presented and discussed in the identified themes below:

3.3. Theme 3: Curriculum versus quality in postgraduate education

This finding of the study showed that quality in the education system is crucial (Akareem and Hossain, 2016; Norad, 2015; Patrinos et al., 2014; UNESCO International Bureau of Education, 2022;), inclusive of higher education (Eaton, 2021; Pavel, 2012; Saikia and Bezborah, 2014; Williams and de Rassenfosse, 2020) which is the context of this study. Meanwhile, the curriculum is considered pivotal to ensuring quality (Lam, 2022; White, 2019; Williams, 2019). According to Beigi, Yeganeh and Mohammadi (2011, p. 783), “curriculum quality as one of the most important components of universities system is necessary for different levels in higher education.” Liu (2020) conducted a study on the impact of quality assurance policies on the development of curriculum using the case study of postsecondary education in Ontario, Canada. A review of the study suggests that while the curriculum influences the quality of teaching and learning together with other factors, several phenomena affect the curriculum. For instance, Liu (2020, p. 53) states that “*different approaches that postsecondary institutions chose to use in response to quality assurance policies and the mechanisms that may account for different experiences.* These mechanisms include *endeavors to balance accountability and continuous improvement, leadership support, and the emerging quality assurance function of teaching and learning centers*” (italics added for emphasis). Similarly, Butter, Aguilera, Quintana, Pérez and Valenzuela (2017) had earlier conducted a study on quality assurance for postgraduate programmers, in an attempt to design a model applicable to a selected university in Chile. Based on the study, a matrix of eight dimensions was considered crucial and necessary for use by leaders of postgraduate programmers in institutions of higher learning. The matrix is “Institutional, Curricula, Academic, Research, Management, Infrastructure, Services, and Institutional relationships” (Butter et al., 2017, italics added for emphasis). Also, curricula are stated as one of the areas earmarked for interest when working to ensure relevant standards, policies and practices capable of allowing “for the appropriate comparison and to determine the distance between reality and standard” (DEAC 2016 cited in Butter et al., 2017). Meanwhile, Hénard (n.d.) reporting for the OECD and Institution Management in Higher Education (IMHE) on a review of quality teaching in higher education, emphasizes the importance of the curricula. Hénard (n.d., p. 5) goes as far as stating that “Students must be committed to providing feedback on curricula and teaching through programmer evaluation”. This suggests the importance of curricula to postgraduate programmers in higher institutions of learning and the need for the involvement of all relevant stakeholders including students in the design and implementation of the curricula of different higher institutions of higher learning. Additionally, Hénard (n.d., p. 6) adds that “Educational institutions must strike a balance between technical aspects of quality support (e.g., development of course evaluation questionnaires) and fundamental issues (e.g., *assessing the added value of the teaching initiatives in*

achieving curriculum objectives)” (italics added for emphasis). Thus, Hénard (n.d., p. 25) recommends the need for “institutions ... to ensure the coherence of their programmers and *curricula within each programmer, and the quality of the learning environment* (e.g., availability of equipment, mentoring students)” (italics added for emphasis). This indicates the importance of and need for quality design of curricula guiding postgraduate programmers inclusive of supervision in higher institutions of learning. Meanwhile, sequel to the study on the quality curriculum evaluation in postgraduate studies using a case study of Educational Management and Planning in the public Universities of Tehran City conducted by Beigi et al. (2011), six criteria were considered critical in relation to curriculum implementation. These are “objectives and content, space and anatomical features, students’ freedom, professional characteristics of faculty members, time and students learning assessment” (Beigi et al., 2011). Sequel to the findings of the study based on the analyzed data collected from students, Beigi et al. (2011, p. 3730) submit that “Five criteria (objectives and content, physical space and facilities of curriculum implementation, professional characteristics of faculty members, time been taken for curriculum implementation and evaluation of students learning) according to the view of students were relatively desirable, except the students’ freedom in curriculum implementation criteria was undesirable, according to the view of faculty members only objective and content were desirable and other criteria were relatively desirable.” Conversely, according to Tsui (2009) cited in Beigi et al. (2011, p. 3724), curriculum of institutions of learning should attempt to answer the following questions: “(1) why; (2) what; (3) when; (4) where; (5) how; and (6) and who can teach us?”. Suffice it to state that curriculum is expected to be unique and dynamic and should vary from place to place, and not be ‘one size fits all.’ By implication, the curriculum of institutions of higher learning must be peculiar to each considering features of the environments in which they are situated as well as the reason for their establishment.

3.4. Theme 4: Westernized education system

This finding of the study showed that the western system had previously and continues to influence the experiences and what is obtainable in the African education sector. For instance, the work of Pinto (2019) shows that colonialism impacted the education of African nations which till the present times still have effect on the system. This suggests that different African nations continue to embrace the practices of the western education system, regardless of the difference(s) in the societies and their demands. According to Pinto (2019, p. 5), alluding to the case of Ghana, “the British colonial government did not serve the indigenous population well. Rather, it denationalized and facilitated the indignity and loss of cultural identity of the Ghanaian. The missionary and colonial education aimed at character training and civilization resulted in cultural annihilation and religious, and linguistic hegemony”. Similarly, alluding to the work of Turner (2010), Meanwhile, Grossman and Crowther (2015, p. 6) had earlier stated that “*A further challenge is the current predominance of an overtly Western approach to learning which does not take into account the more didactic approaches found in other parts of the world*” (italics added for emphasis) Conversely, Bacwayo et al. (2017, p. 34) state that “Most African Universities have

taken good practice from universities in the western world and have minimum qualifications for graduate student supervision”. This suggests a contradiction in research findings with regards to the inclusion or embracing of western education and practices with regards to research supervision. However, it can be deduced that there is need to embrace and accept best and workable practices in the western education system while leaving out others which may not be considered useful to the African society.

3.5. Theme 5: Lack of resources

Resources perform pivotal role in enhancing research. However, lack of resources has affected the quality of productive research. For instance, alluding to the case of the most populated black nation in the world, Igiri et al. (2021, p. 3) state that “The resources required for research activities are all seriously inadequate and in bad shape to carry out the basic function”. Similarly, Daramola (2021, p. 17) states that “*In Africa, due to resource limitations, the university library may not have subscribed to some elite academic databases, which makes it difficult for students to access some papers that require a paid subscription*” (italics added for emphasis). This indicates that one of the factors hampering the output of research and postgraduate supervision in the African continent is the lack of resources. In the same vain, review of the works of authors such as Jung (2012), Quimbo and Salabu (2014) show that the lack of resources has the potency of affecting research productivity. According to Daramola (2021), “*Postgraduate students in Africa also have many challenges of their own such as a lack of ... research resources*”. This shows that lack of resources cuts across different areas: individuals, institution, among others.

3.6. Theme 6: Training

Training is paramount in attempt to ensure success with regards to postgraduate supervision. Review of the works of Grossman and Crowther (2015) as well as Turner (2010) show that there is need for training as formal training for many postgraduate supervision is insufficient. In support of this, Bacwayo et al. (2017, p. 29) submits that, “The Sub-Saharan region is currently engaged in what has been termed as a “catch-up” period as is reflected in rapid growth in investment in education at all levels, with an increased recognition over the last decade of the need for increased number of graduates at the tertiary level. *This expansion has implications on the quality of training and research*” (italics added for emphasis). This is based on the report of the work of Bacwayo et al. (2017, p. 32) which alluding to Halse and Malfroy (2010) shows that “Better training and monitoring of supervisors has been identified as one of the training areas in Europe to supervision of graduate students. This shows that as far back as prior to 2010, training of research supervisors has been considered important in the European society. The foregoing indicates that while universities in the African continent are trying to catch up with the rest of the world with regards to postgraduate supervision and research, lack of training is a major factor capable of hampering research productivities. Daramola (2021, p. 16) highlighting the importance of training and using personal experience states that “I will argue that like me, many supervisors also have some inherited ideals included in their supervision

practices. This could be good or bad depending on the kind of influence that they were exposed to during their training”. Daramola (2021, p. 18) further reports saying” *I have also evolved in my general knowledge of supervision by taking a training course on postgraduate supervision, and attended workshops that were organized for supervisors*” (italics added for emphasis). The work of Daramola (2021) suggests that workshops for supervisors is one of the ways by which postgraduate research supervision trainings can be organized. “training workshops have provided opportunities to compare notes with other supervisors to learn about their good practices” (Daramola, 2021). The foregoing shows the importance of postgraduate supervision training for supervisors and how such can be done. It is envisaged that such has the potency of improving the quality of provided postgraduate education with regards to research.

3.7. Theme 7: Funding issues

Funding is a major factor capable of enhancing postgraduate supervision as well research productivity. This is in congruence with the work of Callaghan (2020) who submits that funding plays a critical role in supporting research in different ways as well as its productivity. For instance, “*Postgraduate students in Africa also have many challenges of their own such as a lack of funding ...*” (Daramola, 2021). According to Grossman and Crowther (2015, p. 3), “Even dedicated supervisors bewail their inability to supervise optimally because of university pressures to chase and raise third stream research funding” (italics added for emphasis). This shows that lack of funding is capable of affecting both students and supervisors. In this case, the research supervision process and research productivity can be negatively affected. However, in many African universities, funding is a major issue. This is in congruence with the finding of the work of Kigotho (2021, p. 6) who states that “*many public universities, especially in Sub-Saharan Africa, are currently facing funding difficulties, with the bulk being absorbed by wages and other running expenses rather than investment in equipment or research and development*” (italics added for emphasis). This suggests that due to lack of fund for different costs such as running expenses, research is not given the duly required attention.

4. Conclusion and recommendations

It is possible to develop a relevant African-led scholarship for teaching, learning, research and other related fields of relevance in the higher education system. However, for such to be achieved, the structures of governance, as well as the designed and implemented policies for postgraduate education directed toward the transformation of education in Africa are to be reviewed and re-aligned for such purpose. In other words, there would be a need to reconsider by reviewing the current curriculum of postgraduate programmers in different African institutions of higher learning, ensure a redesigning of the curriculum where necessary and possible, as well as ensure appropriate monitoring and continuous evaluation. To this end, the following recommendations are made:

- Governance structures in institutions of higher learning should be approached deliberately and intentionally knowing that it impacts the success of postgraduate

students. Thus, where necessary and possible, the governance structures of institutions of higher learning should be reviewed and made to involve different stakeholders at various levels that would ensure accountability.

- Adequate monitoring of postgraduate supervision should be put in place. In other words, a suitable structure that would enhance proper monitoring of supervision, the relationship between supervisors and supervisees should be put in place. This would enhance the supervision process and enable supervisees to get adequate support to help them finish in record time.
- Policies of institutions of higher learning, especially those guiding postgraduate supervision programmers, should be reviewed periodically to ensure their relevance and workability. Policies are meant to guide activities, thus, periodic review of policies would help to know the workability and relevance of such, in this regard, when applied to the process of supervision of postgraduate students.
- The curricula of postgraduate programmers in institutions of higher learning should be reviewed periodically. This would enhance their relevance at local and international levels. It would also aid the standardization of such curricula where necessary and possible.

5. Limitation and suggestion for further study

The study is a concept note that was limited to the review of relevant literature from different published works of scholars in various fields. Hence, it is suggested that further study be conducted in this regard while using the quantitative and/or qualitative or mixed-method approach. Also, a similar study can be conducted whilst comparing the impacts of governance structures on the quality of postgraduate education in selected institutions of higher learning within and outside the African continent.

Data availability: The data generated during and/or analyzed for this current study are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

Conflict of interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

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