DISMANTLING COMMON PERCEPTIONS OF RESEARCH PROPOSALS THROUGH SOUTH AFRICAN DOCTORAL STUDENTS' AND SUPERVISORS' EXPERIENCES

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ABSTRACT

Aim/Purpose
There is a significant amount of research on supervision, assessment, and socio-economic benefits in South Africa. However, there have been relatively few attempts to analyse the research proposal phase, which remains a critical part of doctoral education in South Africa.

Background
As part of the broader transformation agenda in South Africa, universities are under pressure to produce vastly more high-level doctoral graduates. The aim is to allow South Africa to build its knowledge base so it can address the socio-economic problems inherited from the apartheid regime. In South Africa, quality in doctoral education is mainly understood and measured in terms of throughput rate. The danger is that greatly increasing the number of doctoral graduates will have a deleterious effect on the quality of the studies done. At present, the general view is that the research proposal phase is an administrative requirement or merely a planning phase in doctoral education. However, the research proposal phase is when doctoral students have their first opportunity to show their capacity for high-level intellectual engagement. This article explores what doctoral students and supervisors regard as necessary for a quality research proposal and how they view this phase of the doctoral journey.

Methodology
This qualitative research used phenomenology to capture the lived experiences of participants. There were nineteen (19) participants from three South African universities. Eleven (11) of them were supervisors and eight (8) were

doctoral students. Semi-structured interviews generated the data that were used to explore how participants experience and construct their understanding of quality at the research proposal phase.

Contribution	The study makes three contributions: (i) it increases our understanding of the research proposal phase of doctoral education, (ii) it provides an alternative understanding of quality attributes: those centred on research learning. At present planning to meet administrative requirements dominates notions of quality; and (iii) it positions the doctoral research proposal at an intersection of different views of knowledge production: mode 1 that favours disciplinary knowledge production, mode 2 that favours cross disciplinary knowledge production and mode 3 that favours quadruple helix innovation systems of knowledge production.
Findings	The findings indicate that participants understand quality in terms of planning for research, compliance with administrative requirements, confinement of research ideas within disciplinarity boundaries and the calibre of academic support. These understandings inform the common perceptions of the research proposal phase and its quality attributes. Participants' narrow understanding of the research proposal phase and its quality attributes have, in turn, supported the view that writing of research proposals is a matter of technical compliance. This has deprived the research proposal phase from harnessing the full potential of research learning. It has also restricted the epistemological imagination of students, as econometrics parameters are being used to measure the production of knowledge.
Recommendations for Practitioners	The possibility of enhancing the quality of the doctoral research proposal phase could be increased if those directing doctoral education were more aware (i) that the support programmes should encourage significant doctoral research; (ii) of the importance of having courses that are an integral part of the research proposal phase, which enable candidates to develop the ability to sustain a cohesive, coherent, critical and logical academic argument, and (iii) of the necessity for interdisciplinary research at the level of doctoral education.
Recommendation for Researchers	Researchers from diverse social and cultural contexts need to improve the quality of their research proposals through engaging in research learning. This would require deeper understandings of social and cultural diversity of the context from which the research proposal phase is being experienced. This requires further research on understanding how students negotiate the transition from different social learning contexts into doctoral education.
Impact on Society	Implementation of the recommendations would help to establish a robust standard of doctoral education, which could enhance the personal, professional, social, and economic growth of South African society.
Future Research	Future research should explore different approaches to support services to identify the kind of support services that would enable doctoral students to engage in quality interdisciplinary research.
Keywords	doctoral education, research proposal phase, doctoral students, supervisors, quality

INTRODUCTION

Factors such as globalization, the advent of mass access, changing relationships between universities and the state, and the emergence of new technologies is affecting higher education worldwide (Altbach, 2013). South Africa has chosen to move away from relying on a resource economy in its macro-economic policy to embrace a knowledge economy (Klyukanova & Chiappa, 2014; Samuel, 2016). A knowledge economy takes the view that knowledge along with human intellectual capital is at the centre of economic growth and development (Pont & Werquin, 2001). This shift in macro-economic policy requires strong input from high-level higher education graduates. Since becoming a democratic state in 1994, the South African government has seen high level graduates as the way to build its knowledge base and address the socio-economic problems it inherited from the apartheid regime. More specifically, it wants universities to produce vastly more doctoral graduates who will provide the essential input needed to modernize the economy and play a significant role in an emerging knowledge economy (Maistry, 2014; Nerad, 2011; Waghid, 2015). Universities in South Africa are thus under pressure to produce vastly more doctoral graduates. There has been considerable criticism of this kind of economic instrumentalist approach to doctoral education which sees the production of more doctorates as a driver of economic growth and economic innovation (McKenna, 2017). This economic rationale is likely to influence quality attributes of doctorates in South African universities. An alternative view suggests that the production of doctorates should be seen as a driver of knowledge as public good (Maistry, 2014; McKenna, 2017).

In an attempt to respond to the need for more doctorates, the National Planning Commission (NPC) of South Africa set a target of more than 5 000 doctoral graduates each year by the year 2030 (NPC, 2011). This target is part of the broader transformation agenda set out in South Africa's *National Development Plan: Vision for 2030* to increase the number of doctorate graduates produced, especially African and female students, per year. In order to achieve the target of 100 doctoral graduates per million of the populace each year, South Africa needs more than 5,000 doctorates per year as opposed to the figure of 1,423 in 2010 (NPC, 2011). However, many scholars see this target as a pipedream (Cloete et al., 2016; MacGregor, 2014; Mohamedbhai, 2012).

In 2010, the Academy of Science for South Africa (ASSAf) report, *The PhD study: An evidence based study on how to meet the demands for high-level skills in an emerging economy*, recommended that doctoral education participate in a wider global discourse to foster a global knowledge society if it is to "prevent irresponsible massification of doctoral graduates at the expense of quality" (ASSAf, 2010, p. 18). The implication was that there should be more emphasis on examining the doctoral education process in terms of research planning (the proposal), supervision, and examination in the interests of raising the level of quality. More recently, the Council of Higher Education of South Africa (CHE) initiated a national review aimed at benchmarking the standard of quality across universities (CHE, 2019). This independent statutory body, which was established in May 1998 in terms of the Higher Education Act (Act No 101 of 1997), also functions as the Quality Council for Higher Education in terms of the National Qualifications Framework Act (Act No 67 of 2008). This means that the CHE has a legal right to exercise oversight over the quality of doctoral education. At present, numeric quantification of doctoral education is encouraging the view that quality should be understood and measured in terms of throughput rate (Cloete et al., 2016; Simmonds & Du Preez, 2014; Tewari & Ilesanmi, 2020). This view is strengthened by technocratic policy directives. Without a robust understanding of the kind of quality that would ensure the production of doctoral graduates with high level skills, the rationale of the South African government might well prove to be misconceived (Du Toit, 2012). It seems clear that alternative perspectives are vital. Research on the lived experiences of how quality is enacted and perceived in doctoral education is one way of generating such perspectives. This kind of research can contribute to dismantling numeric quantification of quality, particularly in the research proposal phase of doctoral education.

In South African universities, it is common practice for students to prepare a research proposal at the initial phase of doctoral education (Verhoef & Doh Nubia, 2018). This is different from some universities in the USA where the research proposal phase of doctoral education comes after a successful first year of coursework. The research proposal is where doctoral students and supervisors have their first opportunity for high-level intellectual engagement (Jansen et al., 2004; Jansen, 2018). A written research proposal, as it is most commonly presented in South Africa, is characterized as both a developmental and a transitional phase in doctoral education (Jansen et al., 2004). This requires a strong infusion of quality. However, in South African universities serious concerns about students' readiness, the rising numbers of enrolments, supervisory capacity and high attrition rates (Blignaut & Els, 2010; Du Preez & Simmonds, 2018a; Motseke, 2016) trouble this scenario. This makes the research proposal phase an ideal site to explore the notions that doctoral students and supervisors have when they embark on the journey to produce knowledge and the acquisition of skills (Cloete et al., 2016; Motshoane & McKenna, 2021).

There has been a great deal of research aimed at gaining insights into doctoral education in South Africa in the area of supervision (Motshoane & McKenna, 2021; Mouton et al., 2016; Sefotho, 2018), assessment (Du Preez & Simmonds, 2018a; Schulze & Lemmer, 2019) and socio-economic benefits (Cloete et al., 2016; Nerad, 2011). However, there have been relatively few attempts to explore the research proposal, a critical phase of doctoral education in South Africa. One of these, which is on research learning, maps doctoral students' experiences of initial scholarly growth at the research proposal phase (Jansen et al., 2004). There are two other research studies that relate particularly to our study. The one is a personal reflection by Fataar (2005) aimed at understanding how students negotiate their identity during the developmental phase of research proposal. In the second one, Verhoef and Doh Nubia (2018) argue that a doctoral research proposal, a crucial dimension of becoming a scholar, should reflect the ability to provide a cogent account of the intellectual purpose of the doctoral study. This article aims to contribute to this body of scholarship by exploring the lived experiences of doctoral students and supervisors' so as to offer alternative perspectives of the research proposal phase in doctoral education. In view of this, the paper discusses doctoral students' and supervisors' experiences and understandings of quality with regard to the doctoral research proposal phase. In exploring evidence-based accounts, this article therefore asks: What do doctoral students and supervisors' regard as necessary for a quality research proposal and what are their experiences of this phase in the doctoral education journey?

LITERATURE REVIEW

SOME PERSPECTIVES ON THE RESEARCH PROPOSAL AS AN ADMINISTRATIVE REQUIREMENT

There are several reasons for writing a research proposal. One is to apply for funding for a project or for postgraduate education at a university (Locke et al., 2014; Maree & van der Westhuizen, 2016). Another is to obtain permission to conduct research from the relevant university committee (Jansen, 2018). There is a concern that "faculties within institutions [that] make the submission of a successful research proposal a prerequisite for continuation in doctoral studies" (Jansen, 2018, p. 315). Making a research proposal a prerequisite for engaging in research reflects an administrative understanding (Fraenkel et al., 2015; Maree & van der Westhuizen, 2016). This administrative understanding of a research proposal applies to all forms of doctoral education in South Africa, including the traditional monograph, professional doctorate and/or thesis by article publications.

Doctoral candidates have to submit research proposals that meet the epistemological requirements of the discipline (Maree & van der Westhuizen, 2016; Verhoef & Doh Nubia, 2018). These guidelines rarely require doctoral candidates to demonstrate their ability to mount a skillful academic argument to convince the reader about the importance of the research: the end result is merely a descriptive exercise in which research ideas are fragmentally put together under the required sections

(Verhoef & Doh Nubia, 2018). Jansen (2011, p. 139) contends that within the South African context there is a "lack of significant doctoral research engagement" (in research proposals). The reliance on guidelines at that point appears to have a negative effect on the level of research engagement and thus hinders preparation for doctoral education. These prescriptive guidelines can encourage conformity as opposed to conceptualizing coherently justified proposed research (Verhoef & Doh Nubia, 2018).

Understanding a research proposal merely as an administrative requirement is reductionist and void of the very epistemological essence that doctoral education is intended to have. This means that the prescriptive administrative requirements prevent the research proposal phase from encouraging diverse forms of knowledge. Amongst others, one of the purposes for writing a research proposal is to help students become specialists in a particular area. However, conformity and reliance on administrative requirements are likely to influence students' ability to become such scholarly experts. This is because, doctoral students' conceptualizations of a research proposal seem to be influenced by the format in which it is presented to them (Maree & van der Westhuizen, 2016; Mertens, 2014; Mouton, 2002). This contributes to the perception that a research proposal phase is first and foremost an administrative requirement. Although the use of guidelines seems to have its merits, it also has inherent limitations, especially with regard to designing a coherently argued research proposal. Given that a candidates' ability to think critically and independently and to make well-justified claims has been identified as a requirement to improve the quality of doctoral research (Jansen, 2011), this is a serious concern.

RESEARCH PROPOSAL AS PLANNING AND THE NEED FOR AN ALTERNATIVE UNDERSTANDING

Planning at the research proposal phase in doctoral education makes both personal and scholarly demands (Choonara, 2016; Creswell, 2012; Punch, 2006). Scholars such as Punch (2006), Creswell (2012), Fraenkel et al. (2015), and Maree and Van der Westhuizen (2016) provide persuasive arguments for seeing planning a research proposal as an essential part of preparing to do any research project. This is because planning is conceived as the first step to getting the researcher's intention on paper (Jansen, 2018). At this stage, there is a constant stream of initial ideas between supervisors and students.

As a scholarly exercise, planning requires students to gather research-related information on the niche area of a proposed study, a feasible research design, the step-by-step procedures to be followed, and the ethical aspects, along with a contingency plan of action to ensure that the implementation phase of the proposed research is carried out (Fraenkel, et al., 2015; Locke et al., 2014; Maree & van der Westhuizen, 2016; Mertens 2014). Bringing all of these components and aspects together requires a clearly justified intellectual argument to convince a university's review board that the research is essential, is feasible and is ethically responsible. For it to be a research development process, planning must be underpinned by "an appropriate academic question that suggests an interesting intellectual puzzle worthy of scholarly study" (Fataar, 2005, p 37). Supervisors have an important role in ensuring that the ensuing research proposal is convincingly knitted together. For this to occur, "more attention needs to be oriented towards conceptual justification" in the joint planning and designing of the research proposal (Verhoef & Doh Nubia, 2018, p. 125). This requires a series of interviews, where thought-provoking questions are posed to encourage students to think critically about the proposed research. Meanwhile, doctoral students must engage in the scholarly exercise of planning the way they will respond questions such as *what* they plan to research, *how* they intend to go about the proposed research, and *why* they opted for a specific research strategy or design as opposed to the alternatives (Maree & van der Westhuizen, 2016; Punch, 2006). The literature related to research proposal length and depth reveals that only a brief explanation of the essential components is usually required in a research proposal (Creswell, 2012; Maree & van der Westhuizen, 2016; Punch

2006). It is important to note that in South Africa, the nature and expectations of doctoral research proposals vary across disciplines, departments, faculties and universities (Samuel & Vithal, 2011).

Jansen et al. (2004, p. 79), who use the term, "research learning", to refer to the developmental and learning experiences of doctoral students, found that "there are no clear steps to be followed in writing of the proposal … each student's traverse is filled with obstacles, reversals, breakdowns and, yet, progress". Narrowly summing up a research proposal phase as a planning stage could mislead doctoral students and their supervisors and limit the conception of the doctorate as a journey. Unfortunately, research is often dominated by attempts to stipulate the 'right' way to prepare doctoral students, which could in itself be detrimental to understanding planning as an ongoing endeavor for knowledge production through doctoral education (Jansen et al., 2004). Juxtaposed knowledge production (Fataar, 2005) also offers experience of research learning acquired by students as they negotiate their scholarly identity as another important aspect of the doctoral journey. In this case, the epistemic dimension is foregrounded. Foregrounding the epistemic dimension of a research proposal so that it becomes more than mere planning can contribute to the dismantling of a research proposal as planning, while simultaneously creating avenues for a deeper understanding of research learning. Hugo (2009) emphasizes this when he says that "the very real need for students to submit to the rules, processes and realities of academic communities is a precondition to finding their academic voice within it" (pp. 705-706). Instead of approaching the proposal as an end in itself, there should be an emphasis on developing doctoral students' scholarly voices through constructing the proposal. The current understanding of research proposals and the need for doctoral students to "submit to rules" (Hugo, 2009) appears to hamper that possibility. Jansen et al. (2004) and Fataar (2005), who explore the development of the student's scholarly voice in the initial stage of a doctoral journey persuasively argue the need for an alternative understanding of the research proposal phase of doctoral education.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

To re-think alternative understandings of a research proposal and how such understandings can best foreground doctoral students' scholarly voices, we draw on Gibbons et al.'s (1994) theory entitled: *The new production of knowledge: the dynamics of science and research in contemporary societies*. We also used Carayannis and Campbell's (2012) theory entitled: *Mode 3 knowledge production in quadruple helix innovation systems*. These theories are related to the development of researchers during the proposal phase of doctoral education aimed at eventually contributing to the production of knowledge needed for a knowledge economy. Each mode of knowledge production understands and interprets quality differently. Such an interpretation has direct implications for the way quality is interpreted and the way a research proposal could and should be approached to be in line with South Africa's aspiration to be a knowledge economy (Du Preez & Simmonds, 2016; Le Grange, 2009; Nerad, 2011). For this article, we also draw on Harvey and Green's (1993, pp.17-21) quality perspective of "fitness for purpose" in their article entitled: *Defining quality*. The current understanding of a research proposal as an administrative requirement and planning supported by guidelines reflects the narrow view of a research proposal as an end in itself. To frame our understanding of quality within the perspective of fitness for purpose, we explore alternative perspectives of what the role of a research proposal during the production of knowledge. Such an alternative perspective should, on the one hand, contribute to helping us dismantle the narrow view of a research proposal whilst creating the possibility of research learning as an alternative view of the research proposal phase, on the other. To this end, we focus on what constitutes quality as defined by each mode of knowledge production.

Mode 1 knowledge production is characterized by separate disciplines in which quality is determined and defined in peer review contexts (Hessels & Van Lente, 2008, p. 741). The production of disciplinary, homogeneous, expert-led and peer-reviewed knowledge is primarily limited to university-based knowledge (Gibbons et al., 1994). It is increasingly evident that disciplinary-based knowledge cannot adequately address the complexities of the problems in our contemporary world (Le Grange, 2009).

Mode 2 knowledge production offers an alternative to Mode 1 knowledge production, with different quality attributes. It emphasizes knowledge that is transferable, transdisciplinary, heterogeneous and applicable to particular contexts (Gibbons et al., 1994; Hessels & Van Lente, 2008). In this mode, quality is measured in terms of reflexivity and social accountability (Hessels & Van Lente, 2008). The advent of the knowledge economy as evidenced by the commercialization of knowledge, the market-isation of higher education, and the increased focus on collaboration and globalization has contrib-uted to the movement from a Mode 1 to a Mode 2 approach in university research activities (Hessels & Van Lente, 2008; Le Grange, 2009; Nerad, 2011). Adding to the characteristics of Mode 1 and Mode 2 knowledge production, Mode 3 introduces a focus on the interconnectivity of knowledge producers in the form of triple helix alliances made up of universities, industries and governments (Carayannis & Campbell, 2012). The production of knowledge in Mode 3 is not exclusively university based. This implies that quality attributes that are the exclusive preserve of the university are no longer the only criteria used to assess the fitness for purpose of knowledge production.

Through the lenses of these modes of knowledge production, we explore the possibility of an alter-native perspective of a research proposal that would reflect the quality attributes of each mode along with the needs of a knowledge economy and the acquisition of high-level skills. The current under-standing of a doctoral research proposal is not enough to serve the knowledge and skill needs of the contemporary South African society, which until recently have largely been informed by a Mode 1 approach. An alternative understanding of research proposals opens up the possibility of producing other modes of knowledge through doctoral education, going beyond academic disciplines to multi-, inter-, and transdisciplinary research. For this alternative understanding to be achieved, it is impera-tive for one first to understand and dismantle common perceptions of the research proposal phase that are likely to hamper the attainment of such an alternative understanding. As an integral part of doctoral journey, the research proposal phase, therefore, finds itself at a crossroad where disciplinary boundaries are blurred (McBean & Martinelli, 2017). On the other hand, there are emerging modes of knowledge production beyond the traditional theory-based peer-reviewed approach. An alterna-tive understanding of a research proposal at this crossroad should incorporate all aspects of this crossroad. At the same time, it should contribute toward significant research engagement as a critical dimension of research learning and the process of becoming. In so doing, it would enable students to develop a scholarly academic voice.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Punch's (2006) approach to a research design was used to understand the complex experiences of su-pervisors and doctoral students during the research proposal phase of doctoral education. We "relied on a few cases and many variables" compared to other research traditions where "researchers rely on few variables and many cases" (Creswell, 1998, p. 15). This positioned our work within the qualitative research tradition, enabling us to have rich descriptions of participants' experiences. We framed our work within an interpretivist paradigm where reality is socially constructed and cannot exist inde-pendent of perceptions, feelings, motives, values, or experiences of a given context (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Our role, in this respect, was to "understand, explain, and demystify social reality through the eyes of different participants" (Cohen et al., 2011, p. 19). We were conscious of the possibility that supervisors and doctoral students could have multiple understandings of reality during the research proposal phase.

PHENOMENOLOGY

Our research was designed within the parameters of phenomenology. Phenomenology is the system-atic reflection "aimed at people's perceptions of the world in which they live and what it means to them; a focus on people's lived experience" (Langdridge, 2007, p. 4). This methodology allowed us to understand our participants' lived experiences of the research proposal phase. We viewed lived expe-rience as "free from theoretical, prejudicial, and suppositional intoxication" (van Manen & Adams,

2010, p. 449). For this reason, it was important for us to be aware that quality is an elusive concept and that human experiences are subjective when we were making sense of the research proposal phase. This awareness made us recognize the importance of being systematic in our reflections on the lived experiences of our participants.

SAMPLING AND DATA GENERATION METHOD

Cohen et al. (2011) contend that there are five key sampling factors: the number of participants, representativeness and the parameters of the participants, access to participants, sampling strategies and the kind of research being undertaken. We purposively "hand-picked" participants who met the particular characteristics being sought (Cohen et al., 2011, p. 156). The criteria we used were that they all have the required experience of the research proposal phase: the students had had their research proposals approved by a university's review board, and the supervisors had supervised and graduated at least one doctoral student. In this case, the particular characteristics were purposively sought for at universities that formed part of our research project. The project was funded by the South African National Research Foundation (NRF) and was entitled: *Education research for quality doctoral study curriculum-making: A South African meta-study* (2014–2016) (Du Preez, 2014). Nineteen (19) participants from three (3) universities were involved in the study. Of the nineteen (19) participants, eleven (11) of them were supervisors and eight (8) were students. Table 1 is a list of the purposively selected participants from the collaborating universities. Pseudonyms are used in the interests of confidentiality and anonymity.

Each of the participants took part in a semi-structured interview, during which they shared their perceptions of what is necessary for a quality research proposal. They also divulged their experiences of this phase in the doctoral education journey. A semi-structured interview was used because it is one of the most appropriate ways of generating data for a study that intends to use interpretative phenomenological analysis (Smith & Osborn, 2015). Interpretative phenomenological analysis has been successfully used as a method of data generation and analysis in nursing (Snelgrove, 2014), education (Rizwan & Williams, 2015) and psychology (Smith & Osborn, 2015). Data obtained on participants' opinions, feelings, emotions, experiences, and sensitivity (Denscombe, 2010) provided a valuable source of information to understand social reality. The semi-structured interview allowed us to probe using more nuanced questions. Participants, therefore, were free to express themselves and could diverge from the question, depending on how interesting they conceived the question (Stuckey, 2013). Our participants had the opportunity to decide whether they would prefer to have their interview on Skype, over the telephone or face-to-face. Each interview took an average of one hour.

Table 1. List of participants

No	Pseudonym	Gender	Years of experience	Category of participants from each university	University
1	Mary Supervisor 1	Female	6		
2	Michael Supervisor 2	Male	16	4 supervisors	
3	Jane Supervisor 3	Female	7		
4	Andre Supervisor 4	Male	11		Collaborating university A
5	Patrick Student 1	Male	4		
6	Cleo Student 2	Female	5	4 students	
7	Tshepo Student 3	Male	4		
8	Refilwe Student 4	Female	4		
9	Martin Supervisor 5	Male	7		Collaborating university B
10	Oliver Supervisor 6	Male	5	4 supervisors	
11	John Supervisor 7	Male	9		

No	Pseudonym	Gender	Years of experience	Category of participants from each university	University
12	Doris Supervisor 8	Female	5		
13	Rose Student 5	Female	3		
14	Dikeledi Student 6	Female	4	3 students	
15	Mapelo Student 7	Female	4		
16	Mbali Supervisor 9	Female	15		
17	Belinda Supervisor 10	Female	4	3 supervisors	Collaborating university C
18	James Supervisor 11	Male	18		
19	Carine Student 8	Female	4	1 student	

DATA ANALYSIS

To analyse the data, we used interpretative phenomenological analysis which involves segmenting and taking apart the generated data before putting them together to derive meaning (Creswell, 2014). This stand-alone data analysis method makes it possible to gain a deeper understanding of what is important to individuals, and how their meanings have been constructed (Charlick et al., 2016). We followed a two-stage interpretation process in which we analysed how participants try to make sense of their world; and how we try to make sense of our participants trying to make sense of their world (Smith et al., 2009). In this case, we first allowed our participants to make meaning of their world; then we tried to construct that meaning to make sense of the participants' meaning making processes (Noon, 2018). This interpretation process led to a thematic presentation of the main research findings.

FINDINGS

During our search to understand the experiences of the participants at the research proposal phase and to acquire alternative understandings of the research proposal in doctoral education, the following themes emerged: 1) mediating transitions into doctoral education; 2) research proposal as deeply vested in administration and planning; 3) playing by the rules of disciplinarity; and 4) academic support programmes: relevance and questionable significance.

1. MEDIATING TRANSITIONS INTO DOCTORAL EDUCATION

The challenges that transition to doctoral education presents are often underestimated since universities assume that doctoral candidates have already mastered research learning. Our analysis revealed transition as a complex and a demanding process, albeit exciting. Some students' experiences of mediating the transition to doctoral education illustrate this.

"*I cannot forget my first meeting with my supervisor, I had so many ideas on how I want to do my research… he [supervisor] gave me the chance to express my opinion and after I finish, he asked me some few questions… then I began to realise what I have gotten myself into*" (Tshepo, Student 3).

"*I was really scared when I started… I think my supervisor picked that up because I will make silly mistakes. I did not want to do anything wrong but because I was scared, I made too many mistakes. It is the idea of doing a PhD that got me panicking, I think it was something in my mind back then. Now I am comfortable*" (Rose, Student 5).

"*My husband was there to give me extra help, so I did not have any problems. I have to be honest it was very demanding for me. I do not know if I would have continued without the help of my husband. He will help me think through what I was supposed to do*" (Dikeledi, Student 6).

The experience of these students challenges the assumption that transition from a master's level to a doctoral level is a discrete cognitive process. Jansen et al. (2004) make a similar point, stating that, after ongoing interaction with a supervisor, students make significant personal shifts in order to achieve a level of success in their study. For some students, this is a demanding process as it reveals their readiness for research learning (Motseke, 2016). Some supervisors expanded on the complexity of the transition from master's level to doctoral level research. Mbali (Supervisor 9), for instance, expressed this view: *"I do not think anybody is quite ready for doctoral education until they really start it. Once you have to write a proposal and you start thinking about the project you are going to embark on, then you actually realise what it takes and how ready you are to do a PhD … So I do not know if a student is ever ready".* While Mary (Supervisor 1) expressed some doubts in saying that, *"the entry requirements like a master's qualification is supposed to measure competence to some extent".* Mbali (Supervisor 9) expressed a similar view: *"[F]or a student to say they are ready simply because they have a master is not what I can agree with … The student must start to see if they have it in them to do a PhD. It is by going through the process that you become ready to be a doctorate. Once you complete your thesis and graduate that is the final point to say you have made the transition to a doctorate".* Jane (Supervisor 3) stressed that when students are admitted into doctoral education, they are on a journey. She argued that *"it takes 3 to 5 years to get to [doctoral] level … you become a PhD student by being a student".*

The research proposal should be part of the mediation process as it is the first part of doctoral education. However, as one participant's comment reflected, this phase is affected by an administrative view of a research proposal phase: *"a proposal phase is literally what it means, a proposal … a person proposes to the university what research they intend to do"* (James, Supervisor 11). Such an understanding, which does not reflect a mediation process, is an inadequate representation of the complexities of this phase in doctoral education. The process of supervising and mediating a doctoral research proposal has to take into account the relational dynamics between students' previous learning experiences, the needs of doctoral students and the interactions with a supervisor as an intellectual exercise (Fataar, 2005). Although supervisors were aware of the complexities of transition from different social learning contexts into doctoral education, students tended to become aware of the demands of doctoral education only at the research proposal phase. Participants associated the process of negotiating the transition with emotions, excitement, and feelings of being overwhelmed with cognitive demands (Jansen et al., 2004).

2. RESEARCH PROPOSAL AS DEEPLY VESTED IN ADMINISTRATION AND PLANNING

Participants perceived the research proposal phase as *"the most important part in doctoral education"* (Mary, Supervisor 1). This is because, as Mary added, *"if you have a poor plan, no matter how perfect your execution is, your project will fail".* Similarly, Doris (Supervisor 8) saw *"the proposal [as] the skeleton of the study".* Martin (Supervisor 5) expressed his view of the research proposal in more concrete terms: [a research proposal is] *"a document that tells you what the student wants to do, why they want to do the research in that topic and how the student will do it".* (Doris, Supervisor 8) supported this view of the research proposal as a document: *"[T]he research proposal gives a good sense of what the research is and what the researcher intends to achieve at the end of the research".* Other supervisors expressed similar views:

"When you fail to plan you plan to fail … it is very important that the proposal is done right. That is what I keep in mind when I assist my students at the start of the study. For me, when you use the research proposal to plan, you are also doing the design part of the research ... Not in depth but in its framework or structure" (Mbali, Supervisor 9).

"At this stage, I do not ask much from students, my focus is how I can best plan the study. I tell my students you need to know why you are doing something, what you are going to do, who you are going to work with, how you are going to do it, how you going to analyse the data in other to reach your outcome" (Belinda, Supervisor 10).

James (Supervisor 11) presented this justification of planning in a research proposal: *"[I]t helps the student to have a sense of direction for the research that they envisage doing … you can only do this during the research proposal phase"*

These Some supervisors see appropriate understand planning as essential as a student's ability to envisage the research process. For John (Supervisor 7), a well-planned research proposal demonstrates a student's "*potential and willingness to learn in the process"*. Many doctoral students perceived a research proposal as *"only a plan"* (Cleo, Student 2) or *"a draft"* (Carine, Student 8) or *"only a blueprint that keeps on changing"* (Tshepo, Student 3). Rose (Student 5) was directed to consider a research proposal as *"only a skeleton that will need more work after it has been approved"*. Refilwe (Student 4)'s view was a little different. She found it helpful to see the research proposal as a plan and she *"frequently referred to her research proposal to refresh her mind when unsure about something or what the next step was"*. This view is similar to Cleo's (Student 2):

"I think the research proposal helps you as a student to get a better understanding of your study, to have a plan that is focused on exactly what you want to do. For me, when I started to have ideas of my topic, I was not focused on exactly what I want to do, I made many mistakes. When I started writing … I begin to realise the most important of my planning".

It became evident that some supervisors and students' perceived understandings of a research proposal are steeped in administration and planning. The literature supports this view. Creswell (2012), Fraenkel et al. (2015), and Maree & Van der Westhuizen (2016) reflect a methodological understanding of research proposals and suggest ways of extending it to serve administrative purposes. The possible benefit of this perspective is that it meets stringent administrative demands such as the requirement that students' research proposals be approved by institutional review boards within a specified period (usually between seven to twelve months of the first year of study) (Verhoef & Doh Nubia, 2018). However, a focus on stringent administrative demands could rob the research proposal phase of its inherent potential to contribute to the diverse possibilities of knowledge production which research learning makes possible (Jansen et al., 2004).

3. PLAYING BY THE RULES OF DISCIPLINARITY

For many of the participants the production of knowledge in doctoral education is primarily structured along disciplinary lines from the point of registration. James (Supervisor) attests, "*a student has to register in a department and in the department, there are rules and norms and discipline"*. For Michael (Supervisor 2) this dovetails with the expectation that students engage deeply with theory in their discipline. Oliver (Supervisor 6) added this was necessitated by students' having to be able to *"analyze literature and sources so that they will be able to understand the trends, the surrounding discourses and possible gaps"*.

Although the research proposal is the initial phase of doctoral education, some supervisors expect a student's work to show where it can *"make possible contributions in the field of knowledge"* (Martin, Supervisor 5). A similar understanding was expressed by Doris (Supervisor 8). Her view was that it is the *"first and most important thing. I need to see the golden thread that runs through the study … at the proposal level, one must begin to see the golden thread. For me, it has to be something that can contribute to a particular specialisation [discipline]"*. James (Supervisor 11) expressed a similar understanding when he stated: *"it has to be a researchable question that will extend the boundaries of a discipline or topic that is able to make some contribution(s) in extending the knowledge in the field"*.

Although some supervisors emphasized disciplinarity in the research proposal phase, others acknowledged that there were opportunities for doctoral research in the field of Education to work across academic disciplines (Gibbons et al., 1994). One of the reasons that they gave for a reluctance to made use of these opportunities was the current organisation of knowledge at universities which privileges disciplinarity. James (Supervisor 11) described his experience as follows

"One of the challenges I had with co-supervision across discipline was a transdisciplinary study … the study was not located within a particular discipline. The problem that the university had was that there was no place to locate a transdisciplinary study … there were challenges when it came to the proposal stage, of getting accepted because there was an argument that this does not meet the traditional requirement of the discipline and the insights. This has been the problem with research with interdisciplinary studies at the university. This is because they do not have the requirement for these types of study. So when you do a study that is either interdisciplinary, multidisciplinary or transdisciplinary if you do not actually have a way in which the study can be located in a centre or an institution that will value transdisciplinary work. You could actually have challenges when the study needs to be approved by people who are strictly working within a particular discipline."

James (Supervisor 11) saw the structural organisation of knowledge production at universities as a hindrance to the production of knowledge across many disciplines. Although these knowledge structures have some merits, it is evident that they are no longer adequate to solve contemporary problems (Le Grange, 2009). Nevertheless, supervisors who work within the rules, norms and discourse of their discipline appear to be more prone to channelling research proposals and students' initial research ideas into narrow disciplinary conceptions. Therefore, universities would need to reinvent the research proposal phase of doctoral education to encourage and accommodate modes of knowledge production other than Mode 1 (Carayannis & Campbell, 2012; Hessels & Van Lente, 2008).

Some doctoral students revealed that their initial research ideas were not situated within disciplinary boundaries. In the course of producing their research proposals, these students had been directed toward disciplinary norms or rules so that they could contribute to disciplinary discourses. This is how students experienced the rules of disciplinarity.

"I am very interested in what my research can do in my community. But when I registered my supervisor told me some of my ideas were good and he would love to work on them but it would not work well within the discipline I was registered… I had to rethink my ideas again to suit the requirement of the department. This was strange to me because I did my masters in Europe and it was possible to work on a similar topic" (Patrick, Student 1).

"I did not have a problem with what I wanted to study, it was an extension of my master's and my supervisor wanted to work with someone working on my topic … I had other problems like having my supervisor to read my work but it was never about my topic" (Cleo, Student 2).

"At some point, I quickly realised that if I do not work as my supervisor says then my proposal will not be sent for approval … all I knew was that I have to do what my supervisors say, I honestly did not want some of his ideas but I had no choice, I wanted my proposal to be approved" (Dikeledi, Student 6).

One of the purposes of doctoral education is the production of knowledge; the research proposal phase is intended to provide initial research learning experiences for students to that end. The students' voices revealed that the current structure and organisation of knowledge has inherent limitations that directly impede students' ability to engage in the wider process of knowledge production during the research proposal phase (McBean & Martinelli, 2017). Much of the attention appears to have been on disciplinarity and the acquisition of skills which could be at the expense of innovative knowledge (Carayannis & Campbell, 2012; Maistry, 2014).

4. ACADEMIC SUPPORT PROGRAMMES: RELEVANCE AND QUESTIONABLE SIGNIFICANCE

Students enter the research proposal phase with different levels of preparedness and the academic support programmes provided have different levels of relevance to student preparedness. Some participants questioned the significance of the support programmes provided by their respective faculties as they found them to be of no consequence to learning at the research proposal phase. Mary (Supervisor 1) said: *"I have never been part of the training program so I cannot say anything about it, I personally do not know if it was useful … [My] students have not told me that they learnt anything from the training programme … what they learn is what we mostly do during our contact sessions or when working on their own".*

The academic support programmes appear to have been designed in a 'one-size-fits-all' manner informed by a particular view of the support students need at the research proposal phase. However, some supervisors had a different view of the support programmes. This is how they expressed their experiences:

"I have been a programme leader for the training programme and I think it is alright, and the programme tries to cover all the aspects needed by students at a proposal level" (Doris, Supervisor 8).

"I think it is helpful to students because you can see the influence of the training programme in their work in terms of their referencing and academic writing, methodology and analysis" (Mbali, Supervisor 9).

"*As a supervisor, one can't give every support, so at the training program, they can get more concise assistance. Most students struggle. The training program offers support services that help the students to improve. I think the training programme should be made compulsory for students at the research proposal level"* (Belinda, Supervisor 10).

These supervisors consider the support services as relevant to students in that they provide much needed support for developing research learning and to prepare and defend a well conceptualized research proposal. Although other supervisors and students acknowledged the relevance of the services, they were very critical of their shortcomings. These are some of their reflections on their experiences:

"The programme is not relevant because it is mostly generic and basic information being presented" (Jane, Supervisor 3). A similar view was expressed by Patrick, (Student 1) when he said: *"I see the training programme as something most students [PhD] already know. I attended them twice and I never did again."*

"I think they are good for master's students because at that level they need to be told what they need to do … what we [PhD students] need to do is very detailed and specific" (Dikeledi, Student 6).

The concerns raised by these supervisors and students highlight the challenges that designing a support service programme at the research proposal phase in doctoral education present. Other supervisors are sceptical of the possibility of training programmes to suit the needs of every student at the research proposal phase. They expressed their concerns as follows:

"*I understand some people doubt the relevance … because the nature of training that is given to students is more theoretical and they sometimes do not understand them in relation to their study"* (Martin, Supervisor 5).

"They [student] all know what a research design is before and after they go for the training, but to link what they say with the nuances of their study is another issue. Sometimes they do not see how their discipline is related to what they are being told. That is where my problem is with the training program, it is too theoretical (John, Supervisor 7).

"Training is aimed at supporting students. This is not the same as a coursework ... which can be more detailed and will take longer. For me, I think there is a place for coursework in South Africa, but universities do not do it" (Martin, Supervisor 5).

The experiences and expectations of these participants vary. While some participants found the design and form of the academic support programmes frustrating, other participants expressed a need for academic support that largely accords with the findings in the reported literature: support to produce academic writing which includes learning to sustain a coherent and complex argument (Jairam & Kahl, 2012; Scott & Johnson, 2021; Verhoef & Doh Nubia, 2018). Meanwhile, the guidance some supervisors offer has made the support services currently being provided appear redundant (Jansen et al., 2004). The voices of the participants opposed to the support programmes and of those questioning their relevance, strengthen the view that an administrative understanding of the research proposal phase of doctoral education prevails. The support service appears to be dedicated to the technical compliance that tends to underpin doctoral education (Waghid, 2015). While this situation prevails, there is little possibility of an alternative understanding of a research proposal.

DISCUSSION

The participants' understandings of what is necessary for a quality research proposal developed within the spheres of planning for research, compliance with administrative requirements, confinement of research ideas within disciplinarity and the shortcomings of academic support. Participants' emphasis on the importance of planning as a quality attribute is problematic as it risks compromising much-needed research learning experience. In the light of concerns about the need for research learning, Jansen et al. (2004) call for more emphasis on research learning in the research proposal phase. In our study, we found that some students have to fend for themselves as they negotiate the transition to doctoral study (Rose Student 5), take ownership of their learning (Patrick Student 1 & Cleo Student 2), and work toward meeting the requirements of this phase (Tshepo Student 3). This reduces attention to research learning. Administrative requirements related to quality include a focus on structural issues such as timeline for completion of proposed research (Michael Supervisor 2 & Refilwe Student 4), the use of critical readers (James Supervisor 11 & Dikeledi Student 6), and academic support programmes (Mary Supervisor 1 & Doris Supervisor 8). This administrative understanding of quality attributes dominates students' voices as students are expected to submit to the rules, processes and realities of academic communities (Hugo, 2009). As the experiences of the participants show, the focus on planning and administration experiences constrains opportunities for intellectual engagement between students and their supervisors. This resonates with Jansen et al.'s (2004) finding that not all students make progress at the same pace although they engage in similar research proposal procedures. The narrow understanding of quality is depriving students of an opportunity to benefit fully from research learning and thus identify knowledge gaps, produce rich and coherent academic micro and macro argumentation, and learn to employ critical and logical thinking (Du Preez & Simmonds, 2018b). Dismantling this narrow understanding of the research proposal phase means we can begin to create opportunities for research learning to be at the centre of quality attributes as opposed to planning and administrative requirements.

The findings in this article have revealed that most doctoral students associate quality with ongoing interactions with their supervisor which usually involved critical feedback (Carine Student 8, Tshepo Student 3 & Patrick Student 1). This finding is similar to Jairam and Kahl (2012) findings on the importance of the support services students receive from their supervisors. Some of the supervisors constructed their understanding of quality within the parameters of disciplinarity. During supervision, they advised students to draw on theories, norms, and discourse of their discipline (James Supervisor 11 & Michael Supervisor 2). Such an understanding of quality reflects a mode 1 understanding of knowledge and quality and its attributes (Gibbons et al., 1994). The knowledge structure and its quality attributes could inherently inhibit the research proposal phase from contributing to the production of knowledge across disciplines. Unless the role of a research proposal is rethought, so that it can make provision for the diverse ways through which knowledge can be produced, the research proposal will continue to be inhibited by the shortcomings of disciplinarity. The narrow understanding of the research proposal phase and its quality attributes have also restricted the epistemological imagination of students and concomitantly the possibility of exploring the production of knowledge beyond the current gauging of econometrics parameters (Maistry, 2014) and technical compliance (Waghid, 2015).

Another important finding is that many of the participants felt that the research proposal phase should and could be an active learning phase of a doctoral journey. The need for more doctorates to be produced has had the unintended consequence of preventing active learning from coming into its own. The pressure on participants to complete this phase within a stipulated time frame has a share in this working within the requirement of a narrow confines of planning, administration, and generic support services. At the same time, they have contributed to constructing the students and supervisors' current understanding of quality in the research proposal phase. The activeness of this phase has, unfortunately, been overshadowed by what is considered to be necessary for a quality research proposal. The overwhelming belief emanating from a narrow view of the research proposal phase as

planning and administration is that more appropriate academic support services and intervention will enhance the quality of students' experiences. At present, an instrumentalist understanding of quality is being privileged over opportunities for research learning (Jansen et al., 2004; Jansen, 2018). The result is that students' voices are simply being understood in technicist terms with more calls for technical aspects to inform academic support services. as revealed by the opposing voices as a roadmap for the way forward to enhance quality. Participants' complex experiences of research learning are being treated as if they were technical issues, and students and supervisors amount to mere abstractions for knowledge production and skills acquisition. It is only through the dismantling of these technical issues of planning and administration that one can begin to foster quality attributes of research learning shaped by an alternative understanding of quality.

Up till now the main findings have been somewhat problematised through the critique of a procedural, fixed, and restricted view of quality. Quality (although a complex construct in itself) needs to measure not only the delivered product (research proposal) but the multiple dynamics that embody it. At present, it seems that the research proposal phase is understood at face value. Not acknowledging the elusiveness of quality means this phase has yet to construct itself as a process that takes into account the element of human diversity Fataar (2005) identified in his study of the research proposal phase. In addition, this phase has yet to also make the most of other avenues of knowledge production such as multi-, inter-, and transdisciplinary research. The current procedural, fixed and restricted view of quality has therefore led to increased uniformity of administrative requirements, planning, disciplinarity, and support services (Hessels & Van Lente, 2008; Le Grange, 2009).

Our findings have revealed the need for doctoral education in the field of Education to look beyond technical compliance with research proposals (Waghid, 2015) and harness the possibilities of research learning in the proposal phase of the doctoral journey (Jansen et al., 2004). This could become possible if doctoral education were more vigilant of (i) the inability of their support programmes to meet the needs of its students and supervisors, contributing to a lack of significant doctoral research engagement (Jansen, 2011); (ii) the importance of courses or training with a focus on academic argumentation and coherence, critical and logical thinking skills to be part of the research proposal phase. These quality attributes of research learning would help students shift their understanding of quality from the prescriptive guidelines being presented to them at the research proposal phase (Verhoef & Doh Nubia, 2018); (iii) the necessity for research across disciplines to be institutionalized at the level of doctoral education. Disciplinary knowledge produced through doctoral education is increasingly unable to solve the problems of our contemporary world (Le Grange, 2009). In the interests of contributing to the knowledge economy, doctoral education should reconfigure itself to accommodate these knowledge production challenges.

CONCLUSION

In this article, we have explored the production of a greatly increased number of doctorates by South African higher institutions and the influence this is having on conceptions of quality. We have identified the research proposal phase as one of the avenues in which quality in doctoral education can be enhanced. We have also unpacked common perceptions of planning and administration that have influenced doctoral students and supervisors' understanding of quality during this phase of doctoral education. In doing so, we foreground research learning with a view to the adoption of alternative understandings of quality in doctoral education. Our intention has been to highlight the experiences of students and supervisors to gain an understanding of how they perceive quality and its attributes. Our findings reveal that quality is mainly perceived as meeting procedural requirements, including a fixed and one-sided construct of disciplinarity. This understanding discourages the kind of research learning that is essential for raising the quality of research proposals. It is, therefore, our hope that this article will encourage deeper understandings of the role the research proposal phase can play in raising the quality of doctoral research. In particular, we hope that there will be a shift

from quality conceived as meeting certain quantifiable requirements toward quality conceives as encompassing the complexity of knowledge and the diversity of the human element (of students and supervisors' experiences). At present, treating the complex requirements of research learning as if they were technical issues, comes at the cost of deep and rigorous research learning. To enhance the quality of the research proposal phase, we, therefore, recommend that universities provide more appropriate support services, broaden doctoral courses and open up possibilities of research across disciplines in doctoral education. Further studies should explore the possibilities of other kinds of support services anchored in a broader understanding of knowledge production and the diverse learning needs of students from different cultural and economic backgrounds.

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