

Standards for PhD Trajectories in Public Administration are Based on Choices

Are We Making the Right Ones?

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the requirements and current conditions for awarding the degree of PhD in Public Administration in South Africa. It distinguishes different models regarding the aim of such trajectories, the kind of supervision, the needed knowledge and skills of PhD candidates, the need for mandatory graduate courses and the institutionalisation thereof. The question can therefore be posed whether we are satisfied with the current quality and standard of the PhD in Public Administration in South Africa. And should the current quality be found to be lacking, could international standardisation be the solution?

The article is based on a desk-top literature review comparing and synthesising PhD trajectories and existing standards, and provides a critical reflection of what has been proposed in scholarly articles and books together with the content of international standards. The trend in other parts of the world, as seen through the Bologna Treaty and the Salzburg Principles, is towards greater standardisation of doctoral education. This standardisation is linked to globalisation and the increased movement of graduates and the workforce around the world. Although standardisation has benefits, which increases the quality of PhD graduates, it also results in a generic tick box exercise that dampens creativity and the ability to use initiative in research and writing.

INTRODUCTION

PhD graduates belong to a rare species. It is estimated that worldwide, only 0.7% of the population has a doctoral degree (OECD 2014; 2019), which is the highest academic degree. In the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries, the percentage of the population with a doctorate is estimated to be around 1%, with notable positive exceptions in Switzerland and Slovenia (around 3%), while in developmental countries, the percentage is mostly below 0.1% (UNESCO 2014). Breaking such figures down to the various academic disciplines results in severe problems. We simply do not know the number of PhDs in, for instance, Public Administration. In some countries, PhD graduates in this field are categorised under Management Sciences, in others, under Law, Economics or Political Science. One can only estimate such numbers. One thing is certain though: the percentage of the population with a doctorate in Public Administration in whatever country is a fraction of the 1% mentioned – probably below 0.02% – with figures far lower in developmental countries such as South Africa.

The rarity of PhDs, and the fact that graduates have often sacrificed three to 10 years of their life to obtain this degree, implies that obtaining it is something special. Holding a PhD – also known as a Doctor of Philosophy (D Phil) – instantly increases status; one is seen as belonging to the academic, and often also to the social elite. This is even more so with economic growth and innovation said to depend on the number of doctorates. They are deemed crucial for the knowledge economy (Shin, Kehm and Jones 2018), and serve as a critical resource to solve old problems, causing changes in all spheres of life (Sira, Vavre, Kravcakova and Kotulic 2020; Dill and Van Vught 2010; Powell and Snellman 2004). Knowledge and information are viewed as the ‘electricity’ of the knowledge economy and universities are viewed as the main knowledge producers, with the number of doctorates being their most important output. Universities produce new knowledge through PhDs and research; PhD education creates new human capital that is expected to provide the high-level skills necessary for the growth of an advanced, knowledge economy (OECD 2019).

The question that arises and is addressed in this article concerns what one has to accomplish in order to obtain a PhD in Public Administration, and how to judge the requirements and standards in light of what is expected from PhD candidates in Public Administration.

The PhD in Public Administration has, over the years, received some attention from researchers and has been investigated from different perspectives by various authors (Raadschelders and Douglas 2003; Reichard and Kickert 2008; Brewer, Facer, O’Toole and Douglas 1998; Wessels 2008; Ndima 2009). In such

research, one sees a shifting focus regarding PhD standards and quality as well as the internationalisation of the qualification. This specific shift in focus is due to increased globalisation and the rise of the knowledge economy, also known as the information society. Governments have become increasingly dependent on new knowledge and information to support economic growth and productivity (Etzkowitz and Leydesdorf 1995; Chan 2016). PhD graduates are seen as the drivers of such development. They often work in different countries from the one in which they graduated. This movement of PhD graduates (the internationalisation narrative) requires adherence to an international standard (benchmark) to ensure quality and to meet the expectations of employers. However, PhD education has not yet been standardised. Different countries and universities use varying criteria to award the degree. Creating and adhering to international standards is important since this assists universities to benchmark their qualifications against a global standard (QAA 2020).

The first part of this article elaborates on the existing research on PhD trajectories in Public Administration. We address quality assurance standards for PhD trajectories. Many countries have their own standards, as is the case in South Africa, with the development of the Council on Higher Education (CHE) Qualification Standards for Doctoral Degrees published in 2018. However, international standards remain important to ensure a universal quality for the PhD. Attempts at creating international or regional standards were made by the European Union (EU) and the East African Community, specifically, the Bologna Conference (1999), the Salzburg Principles and recommendations of 2005 and 2010, Taking Salzburg Forward – Implementation and New Challenges (2020) and the East African Qualification Framework for Higher Education (2015). For the discipline of Public Administration, standards were created by the International Association of Schools and Institutes of Administration in 2009, but these were predominantly focused on MA degrees and not on PhDs. Currently, the only existing ‘international’ standards pertaining to PhDs were created by the Network of Institutes and Schools of Public Administration in Central and Eastern Europe (NISPACEe) and the National Association of Schools of Public Affairs and Administration (NASPAA).

After conducting a literature review on PhD trajectories and comparing existing standards, the last section of this article gives a critical reflection by synthesising what has been proposed in scholarly articles and books with the content of international standards. The section deliberates on what is present and what is needed to fulfil academic and societal expectations on PhDs, specifically in Public Administration.

Thus, the aim of this article is to describe, compare and analyse the international standards relevant to the PhD degree in general, and in Public Administration in particular, to determine whether the standards existing in South Africa meet

international standards. The article concludes with a reflection, suggestion and deliberation on the standards for PhDs, outlining what is apt and what is missing.

METHODOLOGY

This article must be seen first and foremost as a conceptual study, analysing the nature of doctoral studies and developments in this field. This includes reading the relevant literature – books and journal articles – on the subject of PhDs as well as studying primary sources comprising authoritative publications, the internet and official documents. This article is therefore first based on a literature review.

Searches were conducted on the internet, university library databases, Research Gate and Google Scholar using terms such as ‘doctoral studies’, ‘doctoral research’, ‘doctoral education’, ‘doctorates’, ‘postgraduate studies’, ‘PhD trajectories’, ‘PhD theses’, ‘graduate school’, ‘grad schools’, ‘graduate education’, ‘graduate training’, ‘research school’, ‘doctorate holders’, ‘doctorate degrees’, and ‘doctoral graduates’.

Second, the snowball technique was used to search the reference lists of publications that seemed to be useful. Checking the references of a potentially relevant article expands the search by 20 or more other potentially relevant publications, and by checking the reference lists of those additional publications further expands the search. The abstracts and conclusions of these identified publications were initially scanned to determine relevance. If an article was deemed relevant, the full text was then analysed.

Within the publications read, additional terms were identified, such as ‘transferable skills’, ‘internationalisation’ and ‘standardisation’. These terms are deemed necessary for graduate programmes. Hence, subsequent searches were conducted of the internet, the university library databases, Research Gate and Google Scholar using these new identified terms.

Furthermore, it cannot be denied that the opinions presented in this article are also based on the authors’ personal experiences as supervisors and external reviewers of PhD theses. Over the last two decades, the authors reviewed more than 30 South African PhDs.

Although there is always the possibility of omissions occurring, this article nonetheless presents a comprehensive overview and reflections on doctoral programmes and PhD trajectories in different countries.

WHAT’S IN A NAME?

To obtain a Doctor of Philosophy in Public Administration is an achievement. But what does one expect from somebody having been awarded this title?

What it means to be a Doctor

First, the degree gives one the title of 'Doctor'. This name suggests that the person will be able to diagnose problems, find the causes and propose solutions. In other words, a doctor is expected to understand research traditions and conduct advanced scholarly research using different research techniques. Because of this part of the title, all over the world, a PhD candidate must prove that they are able to conduct cutting-edge research by writing a dissertation (known as a thesis in South Africa). This dissertation will be on the specific subject being investigated in depth, according to scholarly requirements and approved by senior peers (i.e. university professors). In 1806, the German Humboldt University was the first to specify that the PhD is a research apprenticeship conducted over many years and requires a dissertation. The writing of a dissertation is still seen as the crucial part of the PhD trajectory. The most recent Salzburg Principles still acknowledge that "the core component of doctoral training is the advancement of knowledge through original research" (European University Association [EUA] 2010:ii).

Discussions about the contents of the PhD dissertation remain, however. Some see the dissertation as a 'master test' – the result of years of learning according to the mediaeval 'pupil-journeyman-master principle', which shows that the apprentice has mastered his work. This is the point made by Fulgence (2019), who states that a PhD is the basic requirement to become an academic. A student is expected to do independent research as an apprentice, in close collaboration with a supervisor. Some PhD programmes may require classes and examinations while others only expect PhD candidates to teach undergraduate students while producing a dissertation that is of an intellectual nature (Fulgence 2019).

Others conceive the dissertation as a masterpiece, through which the PhD candidate demonstrates that they have enriched the discipline. Langrish (2000) argues that a PhD indicates an advancement in knowledge and that the degree requires the graduate to discover something new.

The first point of debate is about the content of the dissertation. Should the content simply prove that the candidate has mastered the research process? Or should it prove that the candidate has advanced the discipline? The dominant model varies over countries, over time, over universities within a country and sometimes, even between departments of the same university. As for Australia, the government required in 2013 "all its doctorates to have a thesis or the equivalent that makes an original contribution to a body of knowledge, covers research methods, and is examined by experts of international standing" (Erwee and Perry 2018:3). In various European countries, the trend seems to be moving away from the requirement of necessarily writing a dissertation with original research that contributes to the advancement of the discipline, although this varies across universities and even for individual professors.

Showing that one has mastered research methods and is able to write a decent monograph containing adequate research on a specific subject – a master test – is formally sufficient for awarding the degree. In countries such as Norway, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom (UK), Sweden and Denmark, before the turn of the millennium, it was the norm to conduct original research (i.e. to produce a ‘masterpiece’ in order to be awarded the degree). Germany, Austria and France, had two levels of dissertations. In Germany and Austria, the thesis and the ‘Habilitation’ for obtaining the degree of ‘dr.’ or ‘dr. habil’ requires a significant and original contribution to the discipline. In France, a distinction is made between the doctorate and the ‘habilitation à diriger les recherches’, with the former known as the ‘little thesis’ and the latter as the ‘grand thesis’. In the USA, the trend seems to be in the opposite direction, i.e. from a mini-thesis comparable to an essay to an extensive and comprehensive thesis. In developmental countries such as Sri Lanka, the requirement for a doctoral degree includes the ability to carry out high level research under the guidance of a supervisor holding a qualification at a PhD level. The PhD candidate must make a significant and original academic contribution, creating new knowledge (Sri Lanka Qualifications Framework 2016:22–23). This therefore indicates that there is no universal requirement for a doctoral degree, with some countries and universities requiring an original contribution to the subject and others not.

What it means to be a Doctor of Philosophy

The second focus of this article is on the ‘philosophical’ aspect of the degree. This aspect implies that knowledge of philosophy, especially the philosophy of science, would be included in the degree. This may be especially relevant in the South African context, since its academia has witnessed a serious dispute – initiated by students – about the need to ‘decolonise’ science (Van Jaarsveldt, De Vries and Kroukamp 2019). One would expect a Doctor of Philosophy to be able to reflect on discussions, take a reasoned position in debates and have a thorough grasp of research methods. This requires knowledge of theories regarding ‘truth’ by renowned philosophers as well as the criticisms of these different standpoints from an African perspective. However, whether these theories and philosophical aspects are reflected on by PhD candidates in Public Administration in South Africa remains questionable.

Whereas the first point in our discussion focused on the *output* of a doctoral degree – the dissertation – this point is more concerned with the *process* of a doctoral degree. In other words, what has the PhD candidate learned during the process, and whether mandatory courses are in place or even required. This concerns the question of whether PhD trajectories involve training through required PhD modules before starting with the thesis, and if so, what kind of courses.

A PhD in Sweden is not subjected to mandatory courses or comprehensive exams. In Sweden, a doctoral degree requires a great deal of autonomy, management, responsibility, discipline and the ability to formulate and process scientific problems autonomously from the very beginning to the end. This means that there is no longer teaching, lecturing, tutoring and continual assessment through examinations. The doctoral candidate must be the driving force for individually conducting studies, with supervisors largely in a supportive role (Swedish Council for Higher Education 2021).

The opposite is seen in the USA, where the first two or three years of PhD trajectories consist of courses deemed necessary for PhD students. It is obligatory for the graduate student to participate and successfully complete exams before starting the thesis. In this instance, the focus is more on the learning than on the result, as doctoral dissertations are still seen as so-called 'grey' literature and the PhD is the starting point of an academic career (Sadlak 2004; Simon Fraser University 2021). After graduating, the PhD holder must prove they are able to contribute to the discipline by writing books and publishing in journals.

In the Netherlands and other European countries, there is a 'middle way'. Students have to complete a minimum number of PhD courses – some held in the graduate schools by the university in which their professor is employed, and some by a consortium of universities. It is not a prerequisite for PhD students to pass any exams during their PhD trajectory (The Young Academy 2018). However, the Netherlands Institute of Governance (NIG 2019) programme requires of PhD students to complete a core course on the Philosophy of Science. This indicates the importance of reflecting on philosophy and developing theory as part of a PhD trajectory.

What it means to be a Doctor of Philosophy in Public Administration

Third, there is a specification, namely, that one becomes a PhD in a certain domain – in this case, Public Administration. This implies that one expects the doctor to have knowledge about the Public Administration discipline, about its development and about its main theoretical traditions. As indicated in the preceding points, this could be especially important in the South African context. Public Administration theories on governance, organisational theories and theories on the policy process, which are dominant in the Western context of Public Administration, are disputed for their (ir)relevance. A search for theories that are more suitable for the South African context has been called for. Partly, Public Administration knowledge is reflected in the dissertation; it could be a part of the process towards becoming a PhD candidate in Public Administration. Of course, such knowledge could be taken for granted, given that doctoral candidates in Public Administration are required to have first obtained a master's degree in Public Administration, and this

subject is part of the curriculum. However, there are also countries in which this subject is a mandatory part of PhD programmes (NIG 2019).

PhD trajectories have been criticised for not being academic enough. Raadschelders and Douglas (2004:230) argue that doctoral education often ignores the longer-term objectives of doctoral programmes, such as training scholars to also be intellectuals, training teachers, training practitioners and educating citizens. The authors argue that an intellectual is someone who is also able to 'travel' in and between different bodies of knowledge to derive new insights; someone who is able to delve into themselves and conceptualise explicitly their reality instead of addressing the problems raised by others, as scholars do (Raadschelders and Douglas 2004:232). The dilemma they point out is that writing a thesis with a narrow focus is ill-aligned with the candidate becoming an intellectual. In Public Administration, this involves being trained (or not, as the case may be) to think in a multi- and inter-disciplinary manner. It also involves the candidate acquiring an in-depth understanding of the structure and functioning of government, which should go beyond mere knowledge of particular skills and techniques (Raadschelders and Douglas 2004:234). PhD candidates are also citizens and a PhD trajectory should prepare graduates to become exemplary citizens, if not intellectuals.

Recently, an opposing view has also emerged, namely, that PhD programmes are too academic. Especially in OECD countries and the EU, several scholars have pointed out that PhD graduates increasingly find employment outside academia, in government, for example (EUA 2010; OECD 2012; European Science Foundation–ESF 2009; Scholz 2011). They also argue that research is increasingly done in collaborations between universities, government and business. This is referred to as the 'triple helix construction' and is meant to make research more innovative. Doctoral training should, of course, include research methods and theories, but in this new constellation, doctoral training should also extend beyond academia to meet the needs of the employment market (EUA 2010:ii). Central in this discourse is that PhD candidates are to be trained in transferable skills – that is, skills learned in one context that can be useful in another (ESF 2009:47; OECD 2021:17) and that can be applied in a broad variety of work situations. For example, communication skills, leadership and management skills, entrepreneurship skills, dealing with intersectoral mobility, teamwork, networking, problem-solving, supervisory skills, creativity and abstract thinking, negotiation skills and in general, 'career management' (OECD 2021:18). Although these skills are important for both the academic environment and government, the question can be asked if these transferable skills should form part of the PhD trajectory? Such skills could, for example, form part of the master's degree curriculum in Public Administration that is required before enrolling for the PhD.

The three sections discussed above are summarised in Table 1.

Table 1: Extreme approaches to doctoral training

The goal of doing a PhD	Becoming an intellectual To become highly qualified to evolve into an intellectual	Entering the labour market To become highly qualified for a career inside and outside academia
The nature of the thesis	Thesis as a masterpiece Showing that the candidate has the capacity to conduct original research contributing to the advancement of the discipline	Thesis as a master test Showing that the candidate has the capacity to conduct cutting-edge research to answer research questions
Nature of supervision	Apprentice model Individual pupil-apprentice-master relation	Programme model Structured through predetermined doctoral training programmes
Institutionalisation of supervision	None Completely dependent on the personality, ideas and demands of the supervisor and needs of the PhD candidate	Complete Institutionalised in research schools, graduate schools, doctoral programmes, progress reports, advisory committees etc.
Content of doctoral training/ education	Needs-based As determined by the student and/or the professor based on the perceived need to conduct the research	Supply-based As determined by outside authorities, with the same courses for all PhD candidates
Nature of courses	Knowledge-oriented Training in research methods, philosophy of science, development of the discipline	Skills-oriented Training in transferable skills
Attendance of courses	Voluntary	Mandatory

Source: (Authors' own construction)

Every choice taken in the PhD trajectory has its merits and awards. One should also not misinterpret the contents of the Table as being 'either/or'. Represented are the extremes on a scale, and not dichotomies. Combinations are possible and seen in practice. Having a predetermined graduate programme does not necessarily imply that PhD candidates cannot take electives or participate in additional courses fitting their needs. It would be preferable if the options on the left and right were viewed as trade-offs: more of the one means less of the other. This implies one cannot have it all because that would extend the doctoral trajectory by many years. The question, however, remains: What (combination) works under which circumstances? What is optimal in different countries and even in different

universities, depends on many aspects, among them, the amount of funding for PhD candidates, whether the majority of them are part-time or full-time, the academic background – subject of the master, subject of the PhD, the career plans of PhDs candidates, the needs of society and governments and the preferences of the university. Asking these questions, and given the associated factors, implies that the authors of this article are sceptical about universal proposals and about standards to structure doctoral programmes according to administrations outside academia.

Multiple models of PhD education, training and supervision are possible and actually in use in different parts of the world. Shin *et al.* (2018) distinguish a European apprentice model, an Anglo-American programme model and an East Asian mixed model of doctoral education. They base this distinction on the social perception, the training model, the employment/student status of doctoral candidates, tuition charges and potential training after the doctoral degree (Shin *et al.* 2018). Nonetheless, trends towards the Anglo-American programme model are visible and the need for training in transferable skills is visible. In Europe, there seems to be a clear trend towards this model because of concerns about time-to-degree and doubts about the quality of supervision (Shin *et al.* 2018). It would therefore make sense to investigate international standards for doctoral training/education to determine what position they take and how the South African system compares with such standards.

COMPARISON OF SOUTH AFRICAN DOCTORAL EDUCATION WITH INTERNATIONAL STANDARDS

Standards are statements of what students should know and be able to demonstrate (North Central Educational Laboratory–NCREL 2007). According to Reichard and Van der Krogt (2014), standards indicate an expected level of performance and assist with benchmarking. They can also be viewed as threshold concepts and are connected to accreditation, which implies a criterion. Erasmus and Loedolff (2019:237) indicate that standards are related to quality assurance. According to their view, quality assurance is a process that determines the value of a programme in a systematic way to determine whether the benchmark was achieved.

Trends in South Africa

In South Africa, the Higher Education Act 101 of 1997 regulates and provides a uniform, national plan for higher education in the country. This Act ensures a single coordinated higher education system for South Africa and aims to ensure

that quality education will be provided by all universities in the country. The South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA) is a statutory body, regulated in terms of the National Qualifications Framework Act 67 of 2014. SAQA is made up of 29 members appointed by the Minister of Education, in consultation with the Minister of Labour. It is mandated by legislation to oversee the development and implementation of the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) for South Africa. The NQF sets the parameters, principles and guidelines, providing a vision, a philosophical base and an organisational structure for the construction of qualifications. All education and training provided in South Africa is regulated and falls within this framework. The NQF consists of 10 levels divided into three bands. Levels 1 to 4 equate to high school grades or vocational training; Levels 5 to 6 refer to college diplomas and technical qualifications; and Levels 7 to 10 are university degrees. NQF Level 10 specifically refers to the PhD degree and indicates the knowledge and literacy that a student at this level should demonstrate.

According to SAQA (2014), at PhD level, a student should produce knowledge in a specific area, develop new methods, techniques and processes, solve problems, address and manage ethical problems, access and process information, produce substantial, independent, in-depth and publishable work which meets an international standard, demonstrate intellectual independence, research leadership and management of research and research development in a discipline, field or practice.

The Higher Education Qualifications Sub-Framework (HEQSF 2013) provides more detail on the doctoral degree. It states that this degree can be awarded in the form of a PhD, DPhil or DLitt by any of the universities in South Africa. According to the HEQSF (2013), the doctoral degree is generally completed by submitting a thesis, which forms the basis of the qualification. However, peer-reviewed articles and, in certain fields, creative work such as artefacts, compositions, public performances or public exhibitions, can also be accepted in partial fulfilment of the research requirements. The defining characteristic of this qualification is that the candidate must demonstrate high-level research capability and make a significant and original academic contribution to a discipline or field. In addition, the HEQSF (2013) states that the purpose of the doctoral degree in South Africa is to prepare students for an academic career; students should be able to supervise and evaluate the research of others in the area of specialisation concerned.

In 2018, the CHE published the EQSF containing qualification standards for doctoral degrees. These standards are intended to develop quality and establish benchmarks for PhDs in South Africa so that they meet international standards. According to the CHE (2018), the PhD provides training for an academic career, with candidates undertaking research at an advanced level and culminating in the submission of a thesis. The thesis must include a significant and original academic

contribution. The PhD qualification standards that should be attributed to a graduate, according to the CHE (2018:13–14), must include the following:

- **Knowledge:**
 - Well-informed and current knowledge of the field of study or discipline through independent study.
 - Expert, specialised and in-depth knowledge of the specific area of research.
 - Insight into the interconnectedness of the research topic with other fields of study.
 - Ethical awareness and compliance of research with professional conduct.
 - An original contribution to the field of study that shows innovative thinking.
- **Skills:**
 - Evaluation, selection and application of appropriate research approaches, methodologies and processes to achieve research objectives.
 - Demonstrate reflection and autonomy and the ability to work independently while arriving at defensible conclusions and solutions.
 - Communication skills at an advanced level, including the ability to write rigorously, digital literacy, the ability to critically analyse the work of scholars in the same knowledge domain, ability to communicate research findings effectively to experts and non-experts and disseminate research in appropriate forms.
 - Critically and analytically think about problem-solving in diverse contexts.

From the above it can be seen that a PhD in South Africa is becoming increasingly regulated by legislation. It prioritises the finalisation of a thesis under the guidance of a supervisor, showing that the candidate has the required knowledge and skills. The aim is for the PhD student to emerge as a highly qualified researcher who will be working at the university after graduation. The standards for the PhD mentioned above are in line with the expectations discussed in this article pertaining to a Doctor of Philosophy. In South Africa, emphasis is also starting to be placed on PhD candidates being trained in transferable skills. Nonetheless, it seems that South African doctoral training is still heavily based on the classic European apprentice model.

Trends in the European Union

Given the varying requirements for the PhD as well as the increased integration in the EU – seen in the mobility of people, goods and capital – the EU has focused on the internationalisation of training and research standards. This process stemmed from the Bologna Conference of 1999 (De Rosa 2008). The Bologna Treaty was a European attempt to harmonise higher education on the continent. However, according to Jabes (2008:11), the treaty was only a first step due to increased

globalisation. The development of the internet supported cross-institutional learning and online study around the world, which was perceived to require the standardisation of higher education. The Bologna Treaty aimed to ensure excellence by introducing a quality framework for degrees based on learning outcomes (EUA 2005). The treaty led to the Europeanisation of university education, including a framework for two educational cycles – the bachelor and master’s over a five-year period (Reichard and Kickert 2008:56). In Prague in 2003, EU countries agreed that the doctoral degree should form the third and top cycle of higher education. In Salzburg in 2005, EU countries proposed 10 principles for PhD education, which underpinned the guidelines and standards for quality assurance of PhD education in Europe. These Salzburg Principles are listed below:

- Principle 1. The *core component of doctoral training* is the advancement of knowledge through original research. At the same time, doctoral training must increasingly meet the needs of an employment extending beyond academia.
- Principle 2. Related to *institutional strategies and policies*, universities need to ensure that their doctoral programmes and research training are designed to meet new challenges and include appropriate professional career development opportunities.
- Principle 3. The rich *diversity* of doctoral programmes in Europe – including joint doctorates – is a strength that has to be underpinned by quality and sound practice.
- Principle 4. Doctoral candidates as early-stage researchers should be *recognised as professionals* – with commensurate rights – who make a key contribution to the creation of new knowledge.
- Principle 5. Relating to the crucial role of *supervision and assessment*, for individual doctoral candidates, supervision and assessment should be based on a transparent contractual framework of shared responsibilities between the candidates, the supervisors and the institution (and where appropriate, other partners).
- Principle 6. To achieve *critical mass*, doctoral programmes should seek to achieve critical mass and draw on innovative practices being introduced in universities across Europe, bearing in mind that different solutions may be appropriate to different contexts and across larger and smaller countries. These range from graduate schools in major universities to international, national and regional collaboration between universities.
- Principle 7. Doctoral programmes should operate within an appropriate time *duration* (three to four years full-time as a rule).
- Principle 8. *Innovative structures* should be promoted to meet the challenge of inter-disciplinary training and the development of transferable skills.
- Principle 9. Doctoral programmes should offer geographical as well as inter-disciplinary and inter-sectoral *mobility* and international collaboration

within an integrated framework of cooperation between universities and other partners.

- Principle 10. Quality doctoral programmes and their successful completion by doctoral candidates requires appropriate and sustainable *funding*.

The 2005 Salzburg Principles can be interpreted as an attempt to move away from the classic apprentice model, giving more responsibility to universities, emphasising critical mass, international mobility and interuniversity and even international collaboration. These principles also stressed the need to impart transferable skills alongside academic knowledge (Reichard and Kickert 2008:57). In 2010, the second round of Salzburg Principles (Salzburg II) amended this framework, indicating that:

- A PhD is fundamentally focused on research, which differentiates it from any other degree.
- The PhD candidate must be given independence and flexibility to develop and grow, since every research project is unique.
- Universities should take responsibility to develop a research mindset (EUA 2010).

In 2015, the Salzburg Principles were once again revised, and a new set of recommendations was published: *Taking Salzburg Forward – Implementation and New Challenges*. These recommendations were based on extensive consultation with 200 universities from different countries. The 2015 principles emphasise that new challenges have emerged which are relevant for PhDs and which need to be addressed. These challenges include digitalisation, open education, social media, the need for training in research ethics and the global vision of the PhD. Salzburg 2015 states that universities must show that they respond to concerns about research ethics and ensure good research is conducted by PhD candidates. Ethical behaviour needs to be a daily practice for PhD candidates, who should be aware of ethical issues related to their field of study and research. Universities are therefore required to ensure that PhD candidates receive training on research integrity and international standards.

The progressive stages of development of the Salzburg Principles reflect the different traditions, opinions and preferences on doctoral training in Europe. On the one hand, the EU wants more standardisation and adaptation to global developments, including preparation for jobs outside academia, in public or private organisations, with all the skills needed. On the other hand, many scholars and universities still stress the importance of academic knowledge. They oppose the commodification of knowledge or trends towards the entrepreneurial university. For instance, Zaza Hansen of the Career Development Working Group at the European Council of Doctoral Candidates, said, "Certainly, we encourage

doctoral candidates to better communicate their skills to their potential employers. But it would be incorrect to assume that making ‘transferable skills’ courses mandatory – which would surely prolong the time-to-degree – would improve the situation” (University World News 2021:1). Criticism of the new model includes that such doctoral studies are second-class, with theses lacking intellectual depth. However, opposing views are becoming stronger, as evident in the following quotation: “[P]ublic criticism of doctoral education and training has become evident: too long, too many drop-outs, too specialised, questionable quality of supervision and lack of competences for non-academic labour markets” (Kehm, Freeman and Locke 2018:110).

Trends in the United Kingdom

In the UK, the notion of introducing transferable skills originated in 2010 through the Researcher Development Statement (RDS) (Roberts 2002). The RDS “sets out the knowledge, behaviours and attributes of effective and highly skilled researchers appropriate for a wide range of careers – making explicit the continuity expected between doctoral training and subsequent career development” (Kehm, Freeman and Locke 2018:109).

In 2020, the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) for the UK published the Doctoral Degree Characteristics Statement (2020) and indicated the quality standards that PhD graduates should have, including:

- search for, discover, access, retrieve, interpret, analyse, evaluate, manage, conserve and communicate an ever-increasing volume of knowledge from a range of sources;
- think critically about problems and produce innovative solutions and create new knowledge, plan, manage and deliver projects, select and justify methodological processes, minimise and evaluate risk;
- exercise professional standards in research and research integrity, engage in professional practice, including ethical conduct;
- collaborate, communicate and network with colleagues;
- appreciate the need to engage in research with impact and to communicate research to diverse audiences; and
- build relationships with peers, students and stakeholders, with sensitivity to equality, diversity and cultural issues.

The QAA (2020:5) also states that apart from the research knowledge gained during the doctoral study, PhD candidates must also develop specialist knowledge in their discipline, have access to an active research environment, develop professional skills in research and research management and have contact with other PhD candidates or researchers.

In summary, there is a clear focus in the UK towards monitoring supervision, completion rates, skills development and increased coursework (Kehm, Freeman and Locke 2018:105).

Trends in the East Africa Community

The East Africa Community (EAC), which comprises Burundi, Kenya, Rwanda, Tanzania and Uganda, implemented a national qualification framework. The East African Qualifications Framework for Higher Education (EAQFHE 2015) includes all levels of study and all qualifications. In terms of the PhD, the EAQFHE (2015) states that research, investigation and the development of new knowledge that supports scholarship is crucial. PhD candidates should understand research principles and master their field of study, understand theoretical knowledge, think critically, communicate theoretical propositions and methodologies, work independently, take responsibility for their research and generate new knowledge.

In this regard, the EAC seems to be on the side of the classic apprentice model. This is especially seen in what it does *not* promote. It does not call for PhDs ready for professional career development, professional skills development, planning and management skills or networking skills, nor does it put limits on the time-to-degree.

Comparison of PhD standards

The four models discussed are summarised in Table 2. One should, however, not exaggerate the differences. All approaches call for PhD dissertations showing fundamental, original and impactful research. It is expected of a PhD candidate to show that they are able to create new knowledge and to understand, select and apply research principles and methodology. These requirements conform to our understanding of being a Doctor of Philosophy in Public Administration. However, differences are evident concerning standards, internationalisation and the perceived need to develop transferable skills.

The EAQFHE (2015) in East Africa is the only framework that does not require PhD candidates to be ethically trained while the QAA (2020) in the UK is the only framework that does not expect a PhD candidate to work independently. The CHE in South Africa (2018) is the only PhD framework that expects PhD graduates to have in-depth knowledge of the research focus area, solve problems in different contexts, determine the interconnectedness of the research topic and reflect on their research. As to including professional skills, only the two European models have incorporated this idea.

Table 2: A comparison of PhD standards

Standard	Salzburg Principles (2005, 2010, 2015)	QAA UK (2020)	East African Qualification Framework (2015)	CHE South Africa (2018)
Fundamental, original, new and impactful research	X	X	X	X
Professional career development	X			
Create new knowledge	X	X	X	X
Understand, select, apply research principles/methodology		X	X	X
Achieve research objectives				X
Critical thinking			X	
Theoretical understanding and knowledge			X	
In-depth knowledge of research focus				X
Clear role of supervisor	X			
Joint PhDs	X			
PhD candidate is a professional with professional skills	X	X		
Transparent assessment	X			
Innovative and sound practice	X	X		
Time-to-degree standard: 3 to 4 years	X			
Develop transferable skills	X			
Support geographical mobility	X			
Adequate funding	X			
Independence of PhD candidates	X		X	X
Solve problems in different contexts				X
Universities must create a research mindset and environment	X	X		
Open education, digital and social media knowledge	X			
Ethically trained, must have integrity	X	X		X
Global vision	X			
Retrieve, analyse, interpret and communicate knowledge, theories and methodology		X	X	X
Plan, manage and deliver projects		X		
Network with colleagues and researchers		X		
Sensitivity to equity, diversity and culture		X		
Specialist subject knowledge		X	X	X
Interconnectedness of research topic				X
Reflect on research				X

Source: (Authors' own construction)

CONCLUSION AND REFLECTION FROM A PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION PERSPECTIVE

Standards typically specify three elements: (i) standards about being something, (ii) standards about doing something, and (iii) standards about having something (Røvik 1996:4–8). Røvik introduced the concept of ‘institutionalised standards’. This refers to socially constructed ‘building blocks’ that are widely accepted prescriptions for how parts of an organisation or an organisational field should be organised (Røvik 1996:142).

The process of standardising is formally similar to policy development. The need for a standard has to be expressed. The standardising organisation needs to put this on the agenda. Subsequently, technical experts in the field elaborate on a definition of the standard, seeking as much agreement as possible. Afterwards, a technical committee is charged to work out the detailed specifications. The last phase involves the production of a draft standard, for circulation among members, who can object or requests amendments. Lastly, a final draft is put up for adoption (Matti and Buthe 2003:8).

Although standards certainly have merits – as a way to improve things, for example – they are also beneficial for those adhering to them as well as to outside stakeholders. The main argument is that standards create an optimal degree of order in an otherwise chaotic world. This is because they provide an optimal solution to the given problem and increase predictability and reliability (Brunsson and Jacobsson 2002:170). Standards are said to facilitate interaction and exchange between members, who must follow the same rules and procedures in pursuit of the same goals. However, they also come at a cost (den Butter and Hudson 2009; Jones and Hudson 1996). Adapting to standards involves a trade-off: on the one hand, there is the benefit of having assured quality and the guarantee that something is useable; on the other hand, there is the drawback of the administrative burden of compliance, implementation and control of the standards (den Butter and Hudson 2009:154). Furthermore, standards are only a short step away from what is called a one-size-fits-all solution, which disregards contextual variation reflected by, for instance, political-economic and socio-cultural variances or differences between academia, the public and private sector (Sobis and De Vries 2017).

This argument also applies to the proposals to standardise doctoral education in general, and in Public Administration in particular. Already in the 1970s in the USA, the NASPAA started a debate over the quality of PhDs in Public Administration. During the 1970s and 1980s, it was indicated that doctoral theses were of low quality, included too little research methodology and public management research and failed to prepare graduates for an academic or research career (Overman, Perry and Radin 1993:359–360). At the turn of the millennium, Felbinger, Holzer and White (1999:460) still supported this view, arguing that very

few graduates with a PhD in Public Administration contributed to the body of knowledge in this field. They maintained that the candidates needed to develop competent research skills. In addition, Adams and White (1994) stated that a 10-year review of doctoral work in public administration indicated a low standard in comparison with other social science research. As a result, NASPAA created a Committee of Doctoral Programmes in 1989 that issued a policy to improve PhD education. According to this policy, the PhD in Public Administration is a research degree that should allow candidates to undertake significant research and prepare graduates for a career in either government or academia. The policy also indicated that PhD candidates should be given research training, quality academic supervision should be provided, academic staff should be research-oriented, research chapters and work should be carefully monitored and periodic quality assurance of theses should be conducted to ensure quality (Brewer, Facer, O'Toole and Douglas 1998). This was the start of a process towards standardising doctoral studies in Public Administration.

The above discussion suggests that attempts to standardise education and training stem from a perceived problem – in the US case, the low quality of PhD dissertations. The same remarks made about standards in general, can be made about standards for Public Administration training at the doctoral level. The push to change standards is driven by the perceived mismatch between the knowledge and skills that PhD candidates possess and the knowledge, and especially the skills, needed by the market in a knowledge economy. Especially in the EU and the UK, the trend is to place greater emphasis on training in transferable skills, to standardise such education in doctoral programmes and to limit the time-to-degree.

The authors of this article argue that there is a trade-off between the classical apprentice model, in which the personal relation between the senior professor and the PhD candidate is central and the development of transferable skills. It does not imply that we oppose the visible trends. Given the elite status of PhD graduates in society, expectations have to be met. This article sketched out those expectations, but what is seen in practice does not always conform to those expectations. This is not only the case in Europe. South Africa too, has had its share of scandals and incidents, where degrees in Public Administration were awarded by universities despite the scepticism of external reviewers. When one already has doubts about the quality of supervision, or as it is called in other countries, “the secret garden of supervision” (Park 2007:28–29), such incidents push administrations into standardising procedures, no matter what the merits and drawbacks. In Public Administration, the same argument has been heard. In 2014, the renowned Public Administration scholar, Christopher Reichard, together with Theo van der Krogt, pleaded that the best way of improving the quality of PhD qualifications is through internal and external quality assurance, standards and accreditation of PhD qualifications with international organisations/bodies (Reichard and Van der Krogt 2014).

Whether this plea also applies to the South African context is a matter of debate. We as authors of this article do not take a position. Unlike the 'standard' of having firm conclusions at the end of an article and the 'standard' of having to answer the questions posed in the introduction, we made the choice to end by simply asking questions based on the differing approaches we presented above. We deem this justified in a discussion paper. It is up to the interested readers to discuss the themes addressed and to judge what is necessary for the advancement of the Public Administration discipline in South Africa. Are we satisfied with the current state of PhD education in this discipline? If not, is more internationalisation and standardisation needed?

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