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'Regulation time' for doctoral degrees: A discursively constituted concept?

Significance:

Through this Commentary, I seek to spark debate about the use of the term 'regulation' or 'minimum' time in relation to doctoral education and, in doing so, contribute to enhancing students' experiences, to ensuring that theses are rigorous and that the graduate attributes outlined in the 2018 Qualification Standard for Doctoral Degrees are developed.

The 2004 funding formula for higher education[1] uses 'subsidy units' as a means of driving efficiency and increasing 'outputs' from universities. The funding for research and postgraduate education is generally perceived to be particularly lucrative by institutions, given that an article published in an accredited journal earns one unit and the successful graduation of a doctoral student three. In the case of postgraduate education, time to graduation enters into the calculation for funding, resulting in the development of a discourse privileging completion in 'regulation' or 'minimum' time, which, in the case of the doctoral degree, is taken to be three years.

Discourses, or sets of ideas that 'clump' together in language and other sign systems[2] and the practices associated with those ideas, are powerful in that they contribute to the emergence of events and experiences which may not always be favourable[3]. Foucault[4] argues that discourses are

> *… practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak … Discourses are not about objects; they do not identify objects, they constitute them and in the practice of doing so conceal their own invention.*[4(p.49)]

In the case described above, a set of ideas related to the normative length of time taken to complete a doctoral degree, the privileging of efficiency in relation to throughput and graduation rates, the valuing of the amount earned in subsidy, the power that bodies such as the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) and the Council on Higher Education (CHE) can exercise over universities, and the need for universities to comply with their edicts come together in a 'discourse of regulation time' which has implications for both students and supervisors. For supervisors, the picture is complex, particularly in the case of students who are experienced as being 'underprepared'[5] to work at advanced levels or who are registered, as approximately 60% are[6], for part-time study. In such cases, an additional year (or even six months) of study can make an enormous difference in the quality of a thesis or, perhaps more importantly, in ensuring that the doctoral candidate demonstrates the graduate attributes or 'doctorateness' outlined in the Qualification Standard[7]. Doctoral level study is often cited[8] as requiring change at the level of identity – a point emphasised by Denicolo and Park[9] who define graduate attributes as a

> *reflection of the mix of qualities required of a person who is acquiring doctorateness, including such things as intellectual quality and confidence, independence of thinking, enthusiasm and commitment, and the ability to adapt to changing circumstances and opportunities.*

A doctoral candidate's previous educational and life experiences will impact on the ease and pace at which these attributes are developed, meaning that many will require more than the 'regulation' or 'minimum' time of three years and a great deal of support from supervisors. Other implications for supervisors arise at institutional level. In at least one university using a workload allocation model, for example, students who exceed the 'minimum' or 'regulation' time are removed from the supervisor's workload, leaving them to work with these students in their 'spare' time. At the very least, supervisors (and students) are likely to be subject to pressure for completion from universities. For supervisors, this pressure can be seen to impact on their autonomy and ability to judge when a student is 'ready' for assessment and, hopefully, graduation.

The implications for students are equally serious. Funding for doctoral study is often allocated for only three years, and self-funded students undercalculate the amount of money they will need to support themselves, expecting that they will need to study only for that amount of time. Many (if not most) students want to complete a qualification as quickly as possible, given that, increasingly, a doctoral degree is seen as a route to better paid employment. As a result, they can experience frustration and even a sense of failure when they take longer than the 'minimum' or 'regulation' time. At institutional levels, the idea that they are 'deficient' results in students being 'pathologised', even though the average time to completion in the USA (often held up as a paragon of education quality) is 5.3 years in the sciences and 6.7 years in the humanities and social sciences.[10] The pathologising of students was certainly evident at a conference on postgraduate education hosted by the Council on Higher Education in 2023 when many of the papers focused on initiatives to enhance 'throughput' at doctoral level and constructed students as a 'problem' in the process.

But what if the problem is not that students take longer than three years to complete a doctoral degree, but rather the three-year period itself? Where did the concept of the 'regulation' or 'minimum' time of three years come from anyway? It is questions such as these that critical discourse analysis seeks to answer by 'deconstructing' the discourse itself. In the case of the 'discourse of regulation time', the deconstruction begins by asking about the origins of the idea that a doctoral degree should take three years to complete.

Policy documents such as the 2004 funding framework[1] and others related to the introduction of the Higher Education Qualification Sub-Framework (HEQSF)[11,12] do not introduce the concept of a 'regulation' or 'minimum'

time for a qualification. The HEQSF states the minimum number of credits to be achieved for its award, and number and level of those credits on the Sub-Framework, noting[6] that:

> *The credit-rating system rates 10 notional study hours as equivalent to one credit … Certificate, Diploma, Bachelor's Degree and Bachelor (Honours) Degree qualification types assume a 30-week full-time academic year. Master's Degree and Doctoral qualification types assume a 45-week full-time academic year. An average full-time equivalent student is expected to study for a 40-hour week thus requiring a minimum credit-load of 120 credits per academic year for Certificates, Diplomas and Bachelor's Degrees and 180 credits per academic year for Master's Degrees and Doctorates.*

The idea that a doctoral qualification carrying 360 credits has a 'regulation' or 'minimum' time of three years could therefore be posited to stem from the understanding that the 'average' student can complete 120 credits per academic year. This understanding would seem to arise from experiences of undergraduate education, however. The fact that "Master's and Doctoral qualification types assume a 45-week full-time academic year" and that, therefore, students registered at this level can be assumed to complete 180 credits per academic year, makes nonsense of the assumption. Following this line of thinking would mean that the 'regulation' time for a doctoral degree would be two years when, in practice, managerial discourses construct it as three years.

Given the absence of the mention of 'regulation time' in official documents, what would appear to be the case, therefore, is that the concept of 'regulation time' is related to ideas privileging efficiency in earning subsidy, the power accorded to bodies such as the DHET and CHE and the need for compliance in a discourse of 'regulation time'. This discourse then exercises its power in leading to the development of systems and attempts to manage throughput by keeping records of student progress, issuing warnings and imposing cut-offs for registration.

However, not all efforts to manage progress are negative, as, increasingly, universities are establishing postgraduate support structures and training supervisors. As they do this, however, institutions would be wise to consider the validity of the claim that 'regulation' or 'minimum' time for the completion of a doctoral degree is three years and whether doctoral education might not be better enhanced by allowing students and supervisors the time they need to develop a robust study and the characteristics of the 'doctor' valued in the Qualification Standard.[4] In making this statement, the point is not to advocate that students should be allowed to remain registered indefinitely, as monitoring students' progress is important, both for them and for institutions. The point, rather, is that what constitutes reasonable progress and cut-off deadlines for exclusions need to be determined in conjunction with supervisors, who know their students and are aware of the standards required for the award of a degree, rather than being imposed as the result of a non-existent 'regulation'.

Declarations

C.B. is the SAJS Associate Editor for Humanities, Social Sciences and Education. There are no competing interests to declare. There is no AI or LLM use to declare.

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