Does it have to be so hard? The path to the sacred cow at Université de Cocody-Abidjan and Université de Bouake, Côte d'Ivoire

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ABSTRACT

It is a truism that completing a doctorate degree is a unique experience that has its delights, but also and mainly its unavoidable painful trials. However, the situation of doctoral candidates at Université de Cocody-Abidjan and Université de Bouake commands attention in a particular way. On average, it takes candidates about 10 years to complete a doctorate program. This prompted me to look into this phenomenon by way of understanding underlying forces at play. The following questions guided the research: What are the major factors affecting the completion of the doctoral degree? In what way do they constrain it? To what extent may the situation be remedied? It turned out that degree completion was overly delayed because of some schemes of behaviours that have been built up over the years. In fact, cultural myths that have ensued have ended up securing comfortable silos that have encapsulated all parties involved in the process; something that consolidated an oppressive, stifling, and inhibiting political frame about which almost everyone seems obvious. In sum, there seems some characteristic laxness combined with a lack of structural and academic provisions and/or their enforcement thereof, among others that have seriously contributed to the situation.

Bios data

Université de Cocody and Université de Bouaké are the two most important academic institutions in Côte d'Ivoire, in terms of student populations and also the number and types of degrees delivered. Université de Cocody-Abidjan is the larger of the two. Initially built to accommodate less than ten thousand students, it now hosts over sixty thousands. Even though Bouake has fewer students, it nevertheless is striving to accommodate over thirty thousands, which is more than the double of its initial population.

At Université de Cocody-Abidjan, apart from the medical and dentistry school, other colleges have relatively new doctoral programs, which came into existing around the 1990s. Université de Bouake started its doctoral programs much later, about 10 years or so ago. However, they have both come some way, as over one quarter of the faculty members in higher education institutions operating in the country have graduated from these universities.

The population of doctoral students is overwhelmingly made of male students, but the female population has been steadily on the rise. Over the past 5 years, there has been gradual increase in the population venturing in doctoral programs thanks the swelling number of non-traditional students – workers and/or some professionals

Having worked at Université de Cocody since 1986, first as an adjunct teacher in the field of ESP at the college of Economics and Management and then as faculty member at the college of humanities and arts after completing a Ph.D. program abroad, I am empirically justified to state that the doctoral program seems to go against the grain at my institution. Though I have never taught at Université de Douaké, The two institutions under scrutiny are very close and do largely exchange faculty. By virtue of this, I know, like everyone does, that the situation does not hold much water at Université de Bouaké. A respectable number of people that have engaged in doctoral programs at various departments have been hanging in the air for about a decade or even more.

In most universities around the world, particularly in Europe and north America, the average time for completion of a doctoral program is somewhere between four and six years.

In most universities in the US system, doctoral students are given a maximum of five years to complete their dissertation. Failure to do so, they loose everything and must leave the program. By comparison, doctoral programs in the institutions under study seem to take twice as much time as programs elsewhere, especially in the US. And this is appealing in more than one way.

Moore (1985) in his article offering a sincere and realistic reflection on the doctorate program in US universities came to the conclusion that the Ph.D. can be likened with ". . . the most holy of the sacred cows in academia" (p.127), by virtue of not only the prestige around it, but also the numerous obstacles one has to leap before hitting the target. Extrapolating his analogy, I have referred to the doctorate degree in general as a sacred cow. The terminology offered here would make a lot of sense to anyone that has gone through the whole process of a Ph.D. program. That said, I will cast a glance at literature on the topic of concern here, intent on exploring underpinning forces at play in the process of doctoral programs.

The doctorate program and by extension the degree itself has been looked at from different peepholes and on different continents. Various investigations have yielded numerous and varied facts including those relating to civilisations and local cultures, gender and ethnic or race considerations, the nature of the educational systems from which they stem (cf. Lovitts, 1996; Anderson and Swazey, 1998). In a sense there are striking similarities and gaping differences. For instance, a constant is the ever growing number of doctoral students' population all over the world, including developing countries, because of the increase of non-traditional students. Another constant seems also the size of students who fail to complete their degree. Sigafus' (1998) investigation based on official records from a number of US universities shows that a sizable number of doctoral candidates never complete their dissertation. In the same vein, Snyder (1999) found that the records show that in the previous year about 40% of doctoral candidates failed to complete their dissertation in the US. Other findings are very convergent with the foregoing.

Various research endeavours carried out on doctoral programs around the world have revealed that factors both internal and external come into play in the process of a doctoral program and which influence the pace at which the program is completed (Anderson, 1998). Internal factors are those related to the doctoral students and the external ones are those beyond his control.

Internal factors include physical, emotional, motivational, and cognitive individual characteristics. For instance, an individual that is physically fit and sound in spirit and mind has better chances to complete a doctoral program than someone that is not. Likewise motivation is at issue; Monsour and Corman (1991) have it that a student that is intrinsically motivated is better armed to fight his way through successfully than one that is not.

In their efforts to better grasp internal factors some scholars have investigated cognitive styles of learning as to how they may affect the pace of students as they move through their doctoral programs. Sigafus (1998) found that students that are field-independent have also an internal locus control, that is they are self-reliant. Such students are self-directed that is to say they take charge and are goal-oriented. In contrast those students who are field-dependent also have an external locus control, meaning that they tend to depend heavily on other people – advisors, friends and academic community – to advance in their program. When that support does not come the way expected, frustration, annoyance, and fear of failure kick in and eventually translate into stress and everything leads to them abandoning the program.

Perfectionism according to Lenz (1995) comes in two basic forms: debilitating perfectionism (aka neurotic: Hamachek, 1978) often signaled by overly ambitious and unrealistic schemes and a square way of thinking. Neurotic perfectionists often procrastinate and subsequently fail to achieve their goal. Helping perfectionism also referred to as the

normal perfectionism (idem) identifies with students who have reasonable and realistic standards. These ones coincide with high achieving students.

Further exploring internal factor in terms of cognitive style of learning, Miller (1995) distinguished among the direct current, the alternate current, and the weak battery. The Direct Current is a metaphor for highly responsible and focused doctoral students who see the program as a personal thing and are emotionally, motivationally, and intellectually armed to take the challenge and carry everything through. The alternate current is resolved at the outset, but experiences difficulty moving steadily ahead when adversities come up. This type of students eventually achieves but takes far more time than the direct Current. The weak battery, as one would imagine, lacks in emotional and spiritual resources and needs to be jump-started now and then to move ahead. This type of student is prone to failure. Other personal traits besides the foregoing also apply. Now, let us linger on some of the external factors?

According to scholars who have investigated in the area, external factors seriously influencing success have to do with family circumstances, academic considerations including structural arrangements, programs and the academic community, material and financial resources (see Hatley & Fiene, 1995; Muszinski & Akamatsu, 1991; Miller, 1995).

Katz (1991) said that the doctoral program comprises of several phases of which the last three prove to be relentless and reckless in many respects as they give no candidate a break. Though he recognizes that the first phase of the last three (coursework) is not a given in any case, he said that in fairness the last two phases: picking a subject and subsequently writing a dissertation are the most dreadful ones. Numerous scholars have voiced the same concern. For instance, Wilson (1965), Madsen (1983), and Germeroh (1991) unequivocally pointed out that Literature is convergent on the fact that picking the topic stands outs among things the doctoral students need to successfully grapple with if they ever stand a chance to make it through.

However, picking a topic is just the beginning of the process, as a doctoral degree can only be awarded on the basis of successful writing of a dissertation that meets academic standard in both form and content. A number of scholars contend that writing a dissertation is likened with travelling an extremely rough and dangerous road (e.g., Gell, 1995; Weiss, 1987; Wiley III, 1993). Kluever (1995) who is of the same opinion underscores the fact that most doctoral students are generally brought into a fight for which they have little preparation. The difficulties during this phase are also compounded because doctoral students do not have any signpost to guide them, according to Bowen & Rudenstine (1995), who made a further comment that during the coursework students do have institutional support in terms of various interactions with instructors and department administrators, which is not the case when it comes to selecting topics and writing the dissertation. They insist that most students in most colleges are generally left to their own devices at this crucial phase of the doctoral program.

There seems a caveat here, though. In fact research has also shown that students in scientific disciplines, unlike their counterparts in other fields, seem better off when it comes to the last two phases of the doctoral program; especially concerning the choice of the topic. Literature is convergent on the fact that they generally receive substantial input from their advisors who generally are queenly interested in their research projects for various reasons (Anderson, 1996; Mah, 1996; Myers, 1999). Still because a doctoral program is a personal thing they have to sweat for it, somehow.

In his 1995's study, Katz' Help-Hindrance Scale reveals quite a few things that seriously weigh in. In this panorama, time is a major candidate because most students find it hard to complete a doctorate within the time allotted. Then comes next family pressure: some candidates often have to overcome pressing family issues, which seriously prevent them devoting time to their program. Family structure, materials, change in the marital status often

come to the fore. Katz (idem) also mentions issues relating financial considerations which often end up serious and severely constraining the program. Factors related to institutions that host the doctoral program also loom large. Beside the lack of appropriate structures and institutional provisions, the advisor is said to stand out. In fact, poor relationship with the advising body generally frustrates communication, learning, and end up putting a hold on the process of the program. Tension and friction resulting from relationship translate into serious impediment to dissertation completion.

Different institutions and systems in time and space may present different realities. What are the factors conducive to lengthy completion of dissertation at Université de Cocody-Abidjan and Université de Bouaké? In what way are these factors disruptive and inhibitive?

METHODOLOGY

Participants

Fifteen (25) doctoral students took part in the study as informants. They come from the two institutions under study here, specifically from the college of Humanities (UFR-Litterature, Langues et Civilisations) of both universities, and from the College of Medicine and the College of Dentistry of Université de Cocody-Abidjan. These include traditional students and non-traditional students. Participants were included based on their willingness to take part in the study. Therefore, informants represent a convenient sample.

Procedures: data collection and analysis

In order to collect data for this study a structured interview protocol was developed. part from a couple of people, all participants but eight were interviewed face-to-face, on the campus in my office or anywhere else that looked fit to do the interview on the campus. The interview was conducted over the phone for those of the participants who were physically available. Most interview sessions lasted over thirty minutes. Questions were asked in the order they come in on the interview protocol sheet. Although a few notes were taken down during the interview, the interviewer usually sat down and furiously wrote down information from memory. One research assistant helped collect the data.

The data were coded based on the categories of themes that came out of the interview. The recurrence of a particular theme was indicative of the extent to which it could be brought to bear in the phenomenon being looked into.

RESULTS

The questionnaire developed for the purpose for the interview covered a wide range of themes which shed some light on the topic that I researched on. As one would also expect, exchange during the actual interview incidentally generated other themes. In this section of the study I intend to summarize responses by themes. I will be concerned with the most recurring ones, for the obvious reason that they cut across the gambit of reactions of the overwhelming majority of participants. The following themes were very recurrent: support deficit, advisor ineffectiveness, structural issues, family, difficulties related to the doctoral program, and job related difficulties, all of which seem to significantly get in the way to doctoral program completion. I will also linger on a few outliers, which seem to commands attention in one way or another. The interview was intrinsically heuristic and holistic. As such it generated a number of factors that either inhibit or facilitate doctoral program in a significant way. However, in the responses of participants things regarded as constraining factors stood out more than helping ones. These are the very ones we will be most concerned with.

Recurrent Themes

Lack of structure to support doctoral program

The theme support covers a number of things. A foremost element in this order of things is what is referred to as the lack of administrative structure to buttress the doctoral programs in the institutions under study. Participants believe that the way education beyond the bachelor degree is organized has structurally built-in obstacles. First, it has characteristic of informal education, because it seems to be devoid of any type of rules and regulations that would be constraining to all parties involved in programs of study at this level. The extremely loose administrative and academic structures that doctoral students operate in makes one think that no one really cares about the program and anything, absolutely anything is permissible. For instance, they felt that there was nothing binding with respect to advisors and then, administration felt no responsibility beyond students' registration. In short, no real boundaries were set to ensure that everything concerning the program was properly channelled in a way that could lead to genuine development of the doctoral candidates not only as learners but also researchers.

Doctoral programs have been up and running for decades. Yet, participants noted that only a very few colleges have made the right provision to ensure that education at that level becomes something smooth and desirable, rather than a battle in which odds are against students from the outset. Most doctoral program suffer from a severe lack of academic resources such as books, journals, reference books, computer labs, to cite only these. Colleges offering top-notch degrees such as the doctorate degree seem deprived of the essence of what goes in for a proper conduct and realization of doctoral programs. As a result of this, candidates had to fend for themselves. In most cases they were dependent on private resources from the academic community, including advisors. This, they reported, did serious disservice to doctoral programs and by the same token to doctoral students.

The overwhelming majority of participants said they had no formal orientation as such in terms of ways and means and other working plans or management schemes to guide students, beyond signing paperwork for registration. As a result of this, they felt a bit disarmed and confused from start. Most candidates found that the doctoral program is very overwhelming, precisely because students seldom have any signposts to guide them.

Working on a doctoral program
is like shooting in the dark

Financial and material support deficit

Participants pointed out the lack of financial and material resources to support doctoral program. They deplored the fact doctoral programs are just like any other program on the campus. That is to say either they have no funding possibilities or are simply very poorly funded. Reference was made to the type of built-in support to graduate students one finds in developed countries, especially in North American universities: For instance, research and teaching assistantship or again fellowships. The only form of financial assistance available is government scholarships. Yet, less than 05 percent of graduate students receive any form of state funding. Moreover, the happy few only get their due on a yearly basis or even over. Given that working on a doctoral programs often entail a number of things, including field research, documentation, trips, etc., which necessitate sizable financial means, the lack of financial support was regarded as a major hindrance to degree completion.

Further, for doctoral students, housing is another important issue, because they are not allowed to live in residence halls be they on the campus or off campus. Given that it is very costly to live in good neighbourhood, most of them have no other option but to live in crowded slum-like neighbourhoods that usually are extremely noisy, unstable, unclean and

where security is a serious concern. Moreover, because of constant power failure and water outage that can last a day or so, everything looks disrupting there, to say the least. Not only conditions in such areas are not propitious for studies, but also life itself seems very precarious there.

Advisor deficit

The 'advisor' was the second best theme; participants noted that the advisory body showed a blatant deficit in a number of respects. Some candidates voiced the fact that some advisors often tried to bite more than they could possibly chew, literally speaking. It is often the case that they vowed to supervise several research projects presented to them by students, even though they knew quite well that they could not or were not in a position where they could actually do the advisory work. This even made some candidates say that 'it is all about money.' In other words, what these advisors were really interested in was the financial outcomes rather than truly advising on students.

Because the advisor was never available, feedback on students' work became a serious concern. Getting an advisor to read a write up was something hard to achieve. It was often the case that you seldom heard from the advisor regarding the feedback. Then, when one was lucky enough to receive some sort of feedback, it often was something literally expedited; something that rather get you confused than help you move ahead. Further, they said it was not uncommon that advisors keep a submitted work for a very long time and when pressured to give the feedback, they would either ask the candidate to resubmit another copy alleging that the one they had was misplaced, or it was just below expected standard.

Advisors often turned you over to a junior faculty. Sometimes if you were lucky enough, you might be monitored or your work might be read once in a while. There were numerous cases where the surrogate advisors failed to live up to the expectations of candidates. Sometimes, it turned out to be even harder to see them than it was to see the advisor himself. In most cases they were too busy with their own agendas, including career development to even devote some time to the candidate. Thus, candidates found themselves forsaken and abandoned and no one to turn to.

It was also reported that some advisors seldom had any time to devote to academic work because they were busy with their own enterprise or teaching in other institutions where they do part time jobs. This brought a participant to assume that most faculty members with advisory or doctoral directory status often vow to work with graduate students just for conscience sake

Time is a major factor in doctoral programs, something advisors seem to be oblivious about. Many candidates deplored the fact their advisors made them waste a lot of time just by giving them appointments they never honoured. That time could be used to advance other aspects the work ever so little. The lines below were said by a participant:

One would stands a better chance
to see God in person than trying
to see my advisor

In her closing comments, a female participant insisted that I should make note of the fact that doctoral students who had external advisors – scholars from foreign universities – tend to complete their degree program faster than those who have internal ones, but she would not offer any comments arguing that everything was self-explanatory.

Surprisingly enough over 60% of participants said that their advisors weighed in less than 30 % as far as the process of the degree completion goes. Their greatest support in terms of the traditional role of the advisory body – reading, orientating, and monitoring their

progress – came, in the first place from friends and other relations, then from advisors' surrogates.

Program-related difficulties

A number of respondents mentioned difficulties linked to the process of the dissertation. They said that finding a topic that could be of interest and worthwhile the trouble was very daunting. In science selecting a topic does not seem a big of a deal, as in the humanities and art, because topics of research are often stimulated or suggested by advisors. Further, doctoral students in this field are often mentored by their advisors who they said are often interested in their study for a series of reasons. However, a couple of doctoral students pointed out difficulties of another order, as we shall later. Concerning the last phase, the dissertation, all participants found it even harder engaging in the actual writing, which they said was a lonely venture strewn with defeating obstacles.

Family and job related constraints

At the doctoral level, most students are real adults, who either have some nuclear family obligations or have to support their parents and relatives in one way or another. Respondents said they were often hard put to make their uneducated parents and relatives understand that they did not have any means to support them because they still were studying for a degree, after having spent close to twenty years in school. Owing to this, most supposedly traditional doctoral students were usually made to do odds jobs, here and there, to support their loved ones and extended family, ever so little. For most of them teaching was the only viable way out. Private vocational colleges or secondary schools where they are often employed pay minimum rates, something short of exploitation. Then, in order for them to get enough money to meet their needs, they had to devote more and more time to the job, and because of this, they ended up running out time for the doctoral program.

Among family obligation that got in the way to the sacred cow, child birth was also recurrent among both male and female students. The former said they needed some time off to provide proper means for the development of their offspring, while the latter simply remarked that child birth was a serious hurdle on the way to the doctorate degree. A candidate even said that child birth was *incompatible* [sic] with doctoral programs.

Student workers said that their employers were not very cooperating. On the face of it they would sound very supportive of the project of the doctoral program; but that seemed all sham. Actually, for some reasons, most of them would not consent any sacrifice by way of helping them out in one way or another. A participant said that often time when she informed her employer about an important event in connection with her program, he would manage to send her out on a mission out of the town or demand that she did something that was pressing. On one such an occasion, when she reminded him about her project that was also due, the employer kindly reminded her that the job was her priority.

Outliers

As pointed out earlier, there are a couple of reactions about the central concerns that commands attention, not because they were recurrent, but because their nature was very appealing in many respects. One of these outliers has to do with the loose and quasi-informal nature of the doctoral programs, which a couple of respondents regarded as a blessing. Then, three candidates said that the most enduring factor was that they had no motivation whatsoever because, in the first place they were talked into enrolling on their doctoral programs. In the thinking of these students the programs were no more than a means to keep themselves busy pending better prospect on life, such as taking state exams that would help them secure a job in public administration. A gentleman, from the French Studies Department

of Université de Cocody added that he had no calling for teaching, which according to him is the only prospect for people holding a doctoral degree in their field.

A student said it took some students ages to complete their doctoral program because their advisors ripped them off their research. He mentioned a case in the field of science, medical studies and dentistry.

One candidate really surprised me by saying that a doctoral program is a personal thing. He insisted on the fact it behoves the candidate to push for it, and the first and foremost person to blame for a delay in the completion of the program is the student himself. This particular candidate said that he blamed himself for the 10 years plus time his program has been dragging on. "Where there is a will there is a way," he argued.

DISCUSSION

In this space of my study, I intend to revisit the themes noted above casting a critical eye on them by way apprehending their bearing in the matter under consideration.

Support theme

The theme 'support' is an overarching blanket terms that includes several subsets, all of which deliver on a category of things that inconvenience at the various levels that are brought to bear in a doctoral program and which were delineated in the result section. Participants denied receiving any orientation from their department, which made one think that there were no departmental structures to this effect; the type of structure that makes it possible to connect means and ends, "the effective arrangement of tasks and resources leading to desired results." (Sigafus, 1998, p.5). It is about setting the field for success, something that Bauer (1997) also underscored. One may thing of the type of structural organization that would doctoral students to get familiar with the contour of overall conditions that inform the completion of a program in academia, including the stages, length, content, management of a program. Understandably, colleges and departments failed to provide guidance and direction as to the ropes of doctoral programs, mainly in the field of arts and humanities.

The structure may be of a semi-formal or informal kind, such as the type suggested by Hatley and Fiene (1995) and which is an assortment of people from the academic community: faculty members, doctoral students including those who are near finishing and also those freshly starting. The role of such a group is to help doctoral students in various and sundry ways: initiation to research, proposal writing, operationalization of topics, and support during the dissertation phase, to cite just a few.

The laxity pointed out at the level of administration makes a lot of sense, for there is more to the prerogatives of an administration than just enrolling students in program. An administrative body that is just like an administrative body should prize on the learning and development of students under its care. In this line of thinking, Seymour (1992) said that an administration that is really serious about its mission should be a watchdog, a care taker and a supervisor whose main role should be to establish and maintain a progressive learning environment. But, in order for an administrative body to effectively play this role, it has to be responsible enough. No doubt that this is quite a touchy topic, but success in a program depends on good, strong, and responsible administrators who have a vision and guts enough to praise and also sanction for the benefit of the community they are entrusted with. For instance, it should see to it that no advisor fails to do their job and get away with it.

The doctorate degree is a too precious and hard-won degree to let the process that leads to it a 'chance work,' (Monsour & Corman, 1991) something that will devalue and demean such a prestigious award. Therefore, the institution under study should do their utmost to ensure that this degree is sought under rational and scholarly conditions to preserve

its aura, sanctity and sacredness, the very things by which it is the most hunted for and revered award on the planet.

That said doctoral programs should be ridden off blots such as the laxity pointed out about administrations hosting these programs, the carefree and irresponsible behaviours of advisors, and the lack of sense of rigor and diligence of doctoral students who feel that they can stay in a program for ever. It is the constraints, obstacles, and snares of all kinds that give the doctorate degree its pungent. The corollary is a program devoid of such constraining factors makes a degree that ensues from it look like a pale reflection, because it is stained. As such, like any stained 'award', it would seem to loose part of its glitter and lustre in the eyes of both the public and the award winner himself.

Issues relating to financial and material considerations reported by respondents are corroborated in studies carried out on factors that delay degree completion, beyond matters concerning tuitions and other fees (see Lenz, 1996, above). Further, several scholars, i.e., Gell (1995), Miller (1995), and Nerad (1996) have also pointed out the centrality of material and financial resources when one embarked on a doctoral program. Assistantships and fellowships are possible in North American universities because of a combination of several factors: high tuitions and fees, grants colleges, department, and faculty members have access to, and private individual or corporation donations. It would seem unthinkable that such funding be brought to bear here. In return, it seems unwise and utterly irresponsible to offer doctoral programs without giving students basic means to go for knowledge. If colleges at Université de Cocody-Abidjan and Université de Bouake are really serious about their doctoral programs, providing appropriate books, journals, reference books and research facilities such as labs is a must.

Because of the nature of the venture they have embarked on, doctoral students must be catered for in a particular way. That is why allowing them to live in residence halls would be more than salutary. For instance, living in a quite neighbourhood will allow for better focus and concentration, which will ultimately result in better learning and development of students as both individuals and scholars.

Advisor theme

As shown in the above discussion, very few advisors were praised by participants. The only thing that may be regarded as close to praise, at all often came as an after-thought such as 'I know he is responsible and would not hesitate to devote more time to my work, had I asked him/her.' To me this is nothing short of protecting 'one's butt'. Therefore, it is far from being something genuinely felt. And this really is telling. In contrast, they were literally nailed down by the overwhelming majority of respondents.

Participants have unequivocally shown that advisors have reconceptualized their work to fit their whimsical stance or to cope with their personal agendas. For instance, feedback to students' write-ups was sketchy, laconic and expedited. I was given a chance to see first hand inconsequential feedback on a write-up returned to a student. The neatly bound copy had no substantive feedback really directing to what was wrong with the work submitted and only a couple of red ink marks were made inside the copy. Comments on the cover read, " Problématique qui laisse à désirer; développement incongru. Il est très difficile de vous suivre. A re-écrire. " (The operationalization of your topic leaves much to desire. Incongruous development. I am having hard time following you. Please rewrite this [my translation]). These lines appeared on the front page of a fifty-page work returned to a candidate that had waited for about a year or so.

Turning students over to junior faculty is nothing short of a form of dereliction from duty. And this is all the more condemnable and despicable as junior faculty do not have doctoral directory status, therefore, they are not really qualified to do the job. A candidate

that had worked with a range of people – the surrogate advisor and subsequently personal acquaintances for quite a long time – was asked by the main advisor to reshuffle everything, which is, as one would imagine, a titanic task to carry out. Owing to this, overwhelmed and dispirited, the candidate, now a defeatist, has been going against the grain for about 14 years. Research has shown that despite their relative maturity, doctoral students are not very different from younger students, in that they also want to be nurtured (Cruikshank, 2001). It is my belief that close monitoring of the work of doctoral candidates would allow for anticipating on all such potential problems and avoid such excruciatingly disruptive situations.

Like teaching, advising is primarily an investigative activity rather than a reproductive one. This would entail that both parties reach a certain degree of understanding throughout the process of writing the dissertation. Now, because advisors barely devote any time to dissertation, so they do not really reflect deeper on what students write. This may explain why some students were asked to rewrite everything over again, after they had almost completed the whole thing. Ross Wayne (1992) contends that success here is dependent on how far the thinking of the two parties involved in the project converge.

The above discussion seems to evidence the fact that advisors have a bent for reproductive activities at the expense of processual ones. This reconceptualization of advisory work reflects what Hargreaves (1988) refers to as utilitarian perspectives; trite and contrived ways of doing and thinking in which everything is expedited.

A participant bluntly said that advisory job is just for money. Now everything comes full circle. Some advisors take scores of students they seldom see much less work with, and yet they get paid for that. Advisors have become positive gamblers. And like any gambler that is just like a gambler they look for the optimal gain with the least risk taking move. In the process colleges hosting doctoral programs have been turned in casinos, where money is the buzz word, the very word that makes the world go around.

Now, if it takes students under the supervision of external advisors less time to complete their degree program, a question to address is “Who holds everything back in the process?” I believe this could be an easy guess.

Overall, most students’ advisors have other things to do than helping students grapple through their programs. Thus, over years they have built up myths and strategies that have allowed them to relinquish from their duty without hurting themselves in the least. Education is too precious a thing to turn it over to ‘gamblers’. As it is made evident that advisors’ behaviours that were initially idiosyncratic or conjunctural have become the structural norm in the universities under study. Thus, as shown above the supposedly helpers have become stumbling blocks in doctoral programs.

Doctoral program

The handbooks of the institutions under study do have provisions about doctoral programs in terms registration limit, advisors’ prerogatives and the role of administration when it comes to the job of faculty members. Students are allowed to register four times maximum. A fifth time may be accorded at the request of the major professor. Advisors that do not properly do their advisory work may be suspended from advising on students, and chairs of department may be revoked if they fail to do their job of administrator properly. Unfortunately things are not enforced, which brings about total chaos in the way programs operate.

Family and job

Time and life wait on no one. From this perspective it makes a lot of sense to make children while on a doctoral program. But this should be understood as a personal choice and not a fatality. That said it is up to the individual to devise copying strategies that would allow for achieving both – get a child and also complete the degree. This has been seen before.

The employer's reaction is fair game, to say the least. However, that seems aligned with third world mentality. In the north, things have been moving the other directions for years, because employers have come to understand that well educated and well trained workforce performs and produces much more and better. The introduction of flexitime in most work places allows employers to help out their workers without disrupting the job for which they get paid. Some companies even offer incentives for studies, such as paying for the tuition for their employees' continuing education.

Outliers

One participant out the twenty five alluded to personal factors to justify why he was still struggling. This lonely honest and highly laudable stand corroborates what literature in this area has revealed about doctoral students. They tend to blame external factors for their tardy or incomplete program (Kluever et al, 1997; Miller, 1995). Yet, they too have their own blemishes. As hinted at earlier on, an incursion in literature on doctoral students shows that findings are convergent on the fact personal factors loom large in the outcome of doctoral projects (see Frost, Marten, Lahart, & Resenblate, 1990; Reed, 1985; Katz, 1995; Kluever et al, 1997; Lenz, 1997; Stronge, 2002). In fact a sizable number of students enrolling on doctoral programs are prone to procrastination, dependence and indolence; because they usually give in give in debilitating perfectionism. Though there is a certain blackout on personal factors that facilitate or inhibit program completion in participants' responses in this study, in fairness these factors do count a lot. For instance, good management skills, persistence, internal locus control, and field-independence are regarded as characteristic traits of dissertation achievers (See, i.e., Faghihi, 1998; Gibson, 1990; Green, 1995; McCormack, 2005)

Among the factors discussed above and which seriously constrain degree completion, some are changeable, some are exploitable and others are untouchable. For instance, university funding and other issues that are politically charged seem to be out reach. Such factors are untouchable. Factors relating to family, job, and other personal factors belong in this category, because they too are remote from teachers.

Factors concerning the management of colleges and departments also enclose lot of politics. However, because college and departments administrators are also faculty members, these factors may be exploited in a way that brings noticeable improvement. For instance, rules and regulations can be enforced. The bandit and gambler teacher can be sanctioned and discarded from the university advisory body. Colleges can also suspend a doctoral program until they get the minimum required in terms academic resources to be allowed to re-open it. In addition, colleges and universities can also undertake to screen doctoral students beyond academic records. Some scholars suggest that doctoral students be checked to see if they are able to complete a doctoral degree (e.g., McCormack, 2005, said something to this effect). I will suggest we also screen them for readiness. That will help prevent from having dead weights in the program, like those participants who got into the program just to kill time.

We, as faculty members, can change our ways if we want to. Therefore, factors relating to advisors are the most changeable ones. In the discussion that follows, I will develop a personal perspective as to how to improve upon advisors' job, by way of enhancing our doctoral programs and ensuring greater success of our student's population in record time.

Suggestions for an Effective Advisory Work

I would like to preface this section with a few comments: 1) advisory work is an instructional endeavour. As such it entails appropriate management or organizational scheme; 2) while there is no denying that a dissertation has its own expert – the very candidate, it is also crucial that advisor have a clear understanding of the contour of the topic, not only in terms of substance but also script. Failure to do so, the advisor will be not be able to communicate clearly with the doctoral student on essential issues regarding the project, and help him better articulate his ideas, encourage him and take him by the hand and arm him to proceed smoothly and inexorably toward the completion of the task.

Having said, I will suggest my niche in a few points below: the road map, the right conditions, emotional dimension, reflectivity, management and organizational skills, feedback, instructional endeavours, dialogic activity, performance

Road map

Dissertation is like a joint venture in which the main partners are the doctoral candidate and the advisor. And anyone travelling through an uncharted territory needs a road map to ease movement in space and time. Likewise, any instructor really serious about their teaching/course needs a syllabus. In the same way, advisors ought to have their 'syllabi' or road map laying out a clear timeline, an outline of what they need to accomplish in order to reach their common goal, a grocery list of 'does' and 'don'ts', be all of the preceding tentative. When you know where you are going you will know when you get there (Desimone et al., 2002).

From a personal experience as a doctoral student, the advisor sat for three solid hours and made a complete tour of what I wanted to do, how I wanted to do it, and what were the chances to do it given the constraints of time, among other things. That allowed us to draw a real road map for everything, including resources, anticipating on obstacles ahead, how to leap those obstacles, how long that might take, plan A, plan B, and even plan C, etc. Then, on my request[1] we met for about an hour every other week, and each and every week had its specific task. If for some reason, a party was not going to be able to make it they had to advise the other party and that meeting would be rescheduled. The overall planning showed a tentative date for the defence. Assiduity and punctuality were also emphasized and respected.

Social and emotional dimensions

A doctoral program is such a singular thing that an emotional preparation is necessary to ensure a smooth and easy ride. The first step is talking about the task in hands in a very open and friendly way. Talk about the magnitude of the task lying ahead, not by way of tapping fear in the candidate, but by being honest about what a doctoral program is. Talk in a way that he can almost visualize everything, build on personal or well known examples. Once that is done, show how much enthusiastic and confident you are about the project. It is essential and fundamental to let the candidates know that it is their 'thing', but you will always be there to back them and scaffold them through out the whole process. According to Berendt, (1999) and (Stronge, 2002) such a move is not only inspiring but also it likely to provide a form of reinforcement and encouragement. Advisors need to show candidates that they deem highly of them and that they have high expectations and that the battle – no matter

[1] I was an international student on a US grant in a US university. Given my circumstance, I laid out my plans clearly and made the request about meeting on a regular basis. And when the first advisor passed away while I was still in the middle of my dissertation, the advisor that filled also consented to meet on the same basis. It is often very helpful to have straightforward and honest talks with people one deals with.

how hard it may be – is in their grasp. This is much likely to boost them emotionally speaking and give him the right drive to move ahead.

Along the process of the dissertation writing, it is fundamentally important to always remember that you, the advisor, are a human being dealing with another human being. By virtue of this, it is important to be caring, empathetic, and understanding, something that will help the candidates cope with the high pressure they go through.

The two parties must also build the right social relations. The advisor may make himself available at any time and anywhere when there is something very pressing. It is also helpful to let the candidate have all your contact numbers to ease access. In order for this to work, the candidate should be introduced to all the members of the advisor's family, especially the spouse, because the support that comes from the advisor's family is invaluable. While the advisor consents to all of these, it should be made clear that everything should be kept in the right proportions, to avoid any sort of frictions. Moderation is a key word here. Positive social behaviours will enhance emotional behaviour and ensure success in the venture. Stronge (2002) believes that beyond the curriculum, positive and healthy social networking is key to students' achievement at higher levels in academia.

Any advisor knows how it feels to be a doctoral candidate, because they have been there. Therefore, respect and equity should rank high in the advisor-student relationship. Failure to achieve this will end up depleting students' self-esteem and decrease their chance to succeed.

Management and organizational scheme

Management is a blanket term that encloses issues relating to time and instructional dimensions in the process of the doctoral program. Given the relatively limited time that is allotted for such a huge task as producing a dissertation, time management is an essential cog in the doctoral machine. That is why time should be carefully managed to ensure the candidate achieves the goal, if not in a relatively short time, but at least in the legal time. Both advisors and candidates should behave rationally and selectively and see to it that completion time is optimized by remaining true and assiduous to the task. For this to happen, it is crucial that the advisor be really involved in the task he is advising on during all the period of the program.

The above entails an effective organizational scheme that lays out the procedures and methodologies that go into the realization of the project. This is nothing short of a design of the advisory work. For instance, they should be clear about the periodicity and structures of meetings, the periodicity of write-ups to submit and the method of submission, i.e., via mail, hard copy, etc., the periodicity of feedback and its management, to cite only the few. In other words, what I have in mind is a syllabus enclosing a realistic tasks/activities outline and a timeline by which all parties will abide. This syllabus must also include evaluation session to monitor the progress of the project and find corrective measures in the event that the team is not on schedule. I am calling for great care and vigilance when it comes to management procedures and methodologies, because these are important foci in a doctoral program

In terms of feedback management, Bruner (1985) contends that a paper with comments on is less effective than a joint deliberation be it a tutorial, a conference, or any form of discussion with the advisor, for the obvious reason that the dialogic activities in which the parties actually engage is a much more productive endeavour, intellectually speaking. Sociocultural theory on human development has it that parties involved in a dialogic activity scaffold each other's thinking, which eventually results in higher individual thinking for each party when they achieve intersubjectivity (Lantolf, 2002), a state in which there is real communion of both entities. As it is made obvious here, good procedures will

foster progress, learning and development of the candidate as a researcher, and bad ones will frustrate and disrupt the whole project.

According to Vygostky (1978), learning occurs twice, first at the interpsychological level in social intercourse, then a second time at the intrapsychological level, after the individual has reconceptualized at the personal level what has been learnt at the interpsychological level. Here comes in the importance of the dialogic activities that should be a central tenet in the student-advisor relationship, and for which I will be pushing for.

Scholars in the field of education insist that the manner and the time of the feedback are crucial and should be strictly observed to ensure that it (feedback) plays its role as a washback provider. For instance, Stronge (2002) said timely feedback is "one of the most powerful modification technique for increasing learning" (56). The same feeling is forwarded by Douglas H. Brown (2001), an American scholar, who insists that corrective feedback carried out in a timely manner has great potentials for substantive washback, than any other form of feedback. From the above it is made clear that careless and distant feedback will fall short off its aim and eventually hurt the beneficiaries by depressing and demeaning them. Further, experienced educators are well aware of the fact feedback that is supportive and encouraging is most likely to yield better learning outcome. Moreover, effective teachers also know that judicious and empathetic comments can turn a poor paper into a good experience that will boost up students' moral. Therefore, great care must be taken in the handling of feedback.

Respondents mentioned in passing the fact that advisors often defended their indolence and ineffectiveness by putting forward the fact that they were overworked and overwhelmed because of the ever increasing number of students. Yet, they have been doing the same thing in the same way and fashion, over and over again, without altering anything a notch. This is a defeatist attitude quite harmful to both parties: students do not learn much and end up producing average or near poor dissertations and advisor cease to grow professionally. A saying well suited in pedagogical intelligence (Manning and Payne, 1992) is that there is more than one way to skin a kin, and that the overall conditions will dictate the way to go about that. Our trade is about adapting and adjusting to context. Therefore, as faculty serious about our job, we should keep trying and weighing means and ways with success in mind at all time. There is shortcut to success, goes the saying. This is very much more sense in education. Therefore, both advisors and students must be "go-getters" and "just-do-it" people.

Experiences stems from reflecting on our activities said John Dewey, a revered American educator. Precisely, reflectivity is a key to innovative moves. Lacey (1977) suggests that in any constraining situations a viable way out is to develop social strategies, that is to say coping and survival strategies, by reflecting on overall occupational demands and constraints. From the foregoing, we may bet that if advisors really and truly engage in serious and deep reflection on the overall prevailing conditions and circumstances on one hand, and on overall occupational demands, on the other, they should be able to come up with means to ensure better success rate among doctoral students: such means develop from reflective activities are practical theories, the very theories best suited in their context. Thanks to those theories, they will be able to transcend disrupting and antagonistic environmental contingencies and move smoothly ahead, rather than being bogged down. However, there is a prerequisite: advisors must be really and professionally involved in the students' project as a sharecropper. It is all about becoming a real mentor to the doctoral candidate.

Advisors can and should do something to improve the outcome of doctoral programs in the universities under scrutiny. Innovative ways in management and organizational processes along side pedagogical shifts and reflectivity are good candidates if change is to occur for the better. Further, there is no denying that what is strictly structural may be beyond teachers' grasp, however by engaging in reflection at the technical, social and political levels,

they will be able to devise and develop practical ways of dealing with oppressive structural and environmental constraints.

The investigation carried out within the confines of this project has revealed that far from being fated, the deplorable situation of doctoral students at Université de Cocody-Abidjan and Université de Bouaké is simply a consequence a combinations of factors. Structural support both at the department and college levels were inexistent, which put a lot of strain on doctoral students. So did material and financial concerns, among other things such as family, study program, job, and personal considerations.

Among the factors engendered by the academic community, advisors and administration stood out. Some advisors, unfortunately a sizable number of them, under the tacit blessing of administration have literally ditched advisory work in academia, because their provisional adaptation to environmental demands have been routinized as normal and valid ways of operating in their host institutions. Consequently, worthwhile theories on advisory methodologies have been incidentally overshadowed by whimsical behaviours. And in the process greed overshadowed professionalism and the sense of duty..

Students are not reproachless, for like fishermen fishing in troubled waters, they grappled long and hard for degrees that may end up loosing their prestige because of the conditions in which they were obtained. Advisors and their cronies' lack of sense of duty and their carefree attitude and greed combined with students' complacency developed and nurtured over time have overshadowed sacred principles of gentlemanship and academic code of honour in the institutions we are concerned with. Owing to this, doctoral programs have been turned into "bazaars" where anything, absolutely anything is allowed. Regrettably enough, this comes as a stain on the whole academic community and to some extent on awards that ensue from it.

It seems that too many people in academia have turned a blind on too many disempowering myths and too much susceptibility that have undermined the institutions under study for quite a long time. As one would imagine, the whole thing has brought about inertia and a near-chaotic situation. That is why academia as a whole needs to look at things with fresh thought, for instance, from the perspective of critical constructivism (Taylor, 1998): we must reconstruct the whole academic community and education along with by courageously challenging myths, practices, and petty peremptoriness that have soaked our institutions, at least in its higher up spheres. That is to say teachers must get involved in the critical construction, not only of knowledge and mentalities, but also institutions that host them.

To the extent that doctoral programs should be improved upon, advisors and administrations need to operate a dramatic shift. Advisors, especially need to redeem advisory work as an instructional and investigative endeavour which require a methodical, rational, and effective organization and management skills for the benefit of students. There is an urgent need for them to become reflective practitioners devising practical theories, to serve the academic community more conscientiously, and thus get utterly involved in the re-construction of education as a viable social institution.

The academic rank does not grant scholarship in academia, performance does. While career development is highly desirable for faculty, one should not lose sight of our duty, which is to help develop individuals for the benefit of the society at large by performing to the best of our abilities. As faculty serious about our job we need to reflect on the following, ". . . nothing, absolutely nothing has happened in education until it has happened to a student." (Carroll, 1994, p. 65). In education, the ultimate benchmark of effectiveness is the result.

APPENDIX: **Interview protocol**

1. I am trying to understand the process of doctoral programs in your institution and would like to ask you a few questions. Is that ok with you?
2. May I have your name?
3. Would you please confirm that you are doctoral student?
4. What college (UFR) are you from?
5. Are you full time or part time student?
6. Do you have a family?
7. Does your spouse work?
8. Do you have any children?
9. How many are they?
10. When did you embark on this project/doctoral program ?
11. How long ago did you start?
12. Did it you take you long to flesh out a topic for your dissertation?
13. Why is that?
14. Working on a doctoral degree is not a joke, goes the saying. How far do you agree?
15. In any case it is not a snap/joke, is it?
16. Tell me a bit about you and your adviser
17. How did you get to know your present advisor: recommended by someone, someone you know personally, your teacher, etc?
18. Why did you decide to work with your current advisor?
19. Do you often meet with your advisor?
20. How often does that happen?
21. Do you have planned meetings or do you meet occasionally?
22. How long is the interval between meetings?
23. Why is that?
24. Do you have a timeline for the completion of your work?
25. On what rationale is that based?
26. Did your advisor initiate that?
27. Do things seem to be on schedule?
28. What are the conditions for learning like: optimal, acceptable, poor, etc.?
29. How do you explain that?
30. Have you ever talk about any timeline at all?
31. How do you proceed about input from your advisor? Do you meet face to face, or over the phone or via any other channel?
32. What motivated the choice of this channel?
33. Did you have planned and structured tutorials?
34. When do you plan on defending your dissertation?
35. Why is that? / How is that?
36. What do you see as the most constraining / facilitating factors in this project?
37. Why?
38. Would like to further comment on this?
39. How much help do you get from your family help you in any when it comes to your academic tasks?
40. Could you deliver on that?
41. Does your employer know that you are on a doctoral program?
42. How does he about that?
43. Do you have flexitime policy at work?
44. Is it easy to take time off to work on your program?
45. In what way does the fact of working come as help?
46. What is the nature of that help?
47. How supportive is your department/college?

48. In what way does the department support you?

49. What is the quality/nature of the support you get from your DPT?
50. What is your take on that support?
51. Do you know some doctoral student from your department/College?
52. How do you relate to them?
53. How long have you been on the program?
54. If you were to go back and start from scratch are there things you would do differently?
55. Why?
56. What do you think went or has been gong well?
57. What do you think has not worked so well?
58. How much do you think you weigh in the way things stand now?
59. What would do differently?
60. Why?
61. As far as this project is concerned, Who is your hero?

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