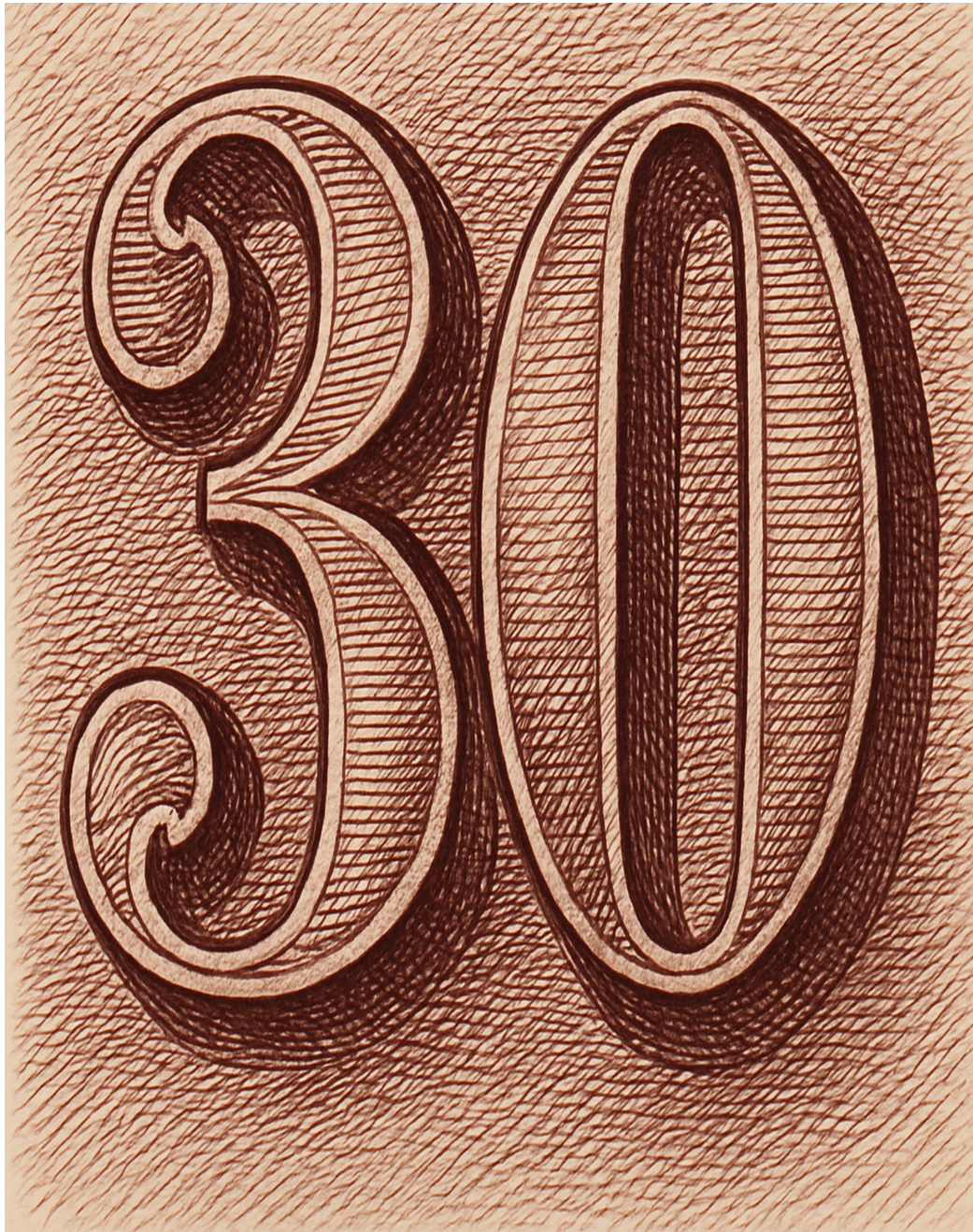


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DOCTORAL EDUCATION

Defining the Doctorate in Africa: Aligning Purpose with Context

Sioux McKenna and Patrick Onyango

A rapid rise in doctoral education across the African continent has occurred without sufficient engagement as to the purposes of a doctorate. The assumption that the doctorate drives the knowledge economy is evident in national policies, implicitly or explicitly, but there is neither interrogation of this supposedly causal relationship, nor deliberation as to how the doctorate might be positioned as a common good in postindependence countries.

Over the last several decades, there has been a rapid growth of higher education in Africa. The number of universities, for example, increased from 170 in 1969 to 2,389 in 2023. The increase in the number of universities on the continent has been accompanied by calls for more doctorates, with organizations such as the World Economic Forum indicating that Africa needs a million more doctoral holders if it wants to participate more evenly in the global research community.

Partly in response to such calls, governments of various African nations have put in place policies that set targets for increased doctoral outputs, specify supervision regulations, clarify credit requirements, and so on. But they say little about *why* we need more doctorates or what *purposes* they serve.

What is clear from these documents is that national-level efforts to increase the number of doctorates are driven by the assumed causal relationship within the “knowledge economy” between doctoral education and “development.” There is little interrogation of the validity of such claims nor of the extent to which the doctorate is the appropriate vehicle for driving economic growth. What is missed in these narrow assumptions is reflection on the colonial history of the doctorate in Africa. This means there is a lack of national-level deliberation about what the doctorate might mean for a postindependence context. There is thus little consideration of how positioning the doctorate *primarily* or, in some cases, *only* as a means of economic growth might constrain its potential to act as a public good, addressing social injustices and contributing to the forging of strong democracies.

Until the turn of the twenty-first century, a disproportionate number of African scholars attained their doctorates in the Global North. Those who returned and joined the higher education landscape designed programs that followed the

structure and assumed purposes of the doctorate in the Global North. This remains the predominant approach guiding the design of the doctorate in Africa, despite the diversity of linguistic, cultural, and socioeconomic contexts on the continent.

Some countries are making deliberate efforts to match the doctoral curriculum to the prevailing job market. While this is largely a positive move, positioning skills-based training for industry as the *key* purpose of doctoral education has the potential for the doctorate to be conceptualized primarily as a commodity. The consequences of constructing the doctorate—and by extension knowledge—as a product are numerous: time to completion becomes the focus instead of quality; production is foregrounded over the nurturing of a researcher; and the product is accompanied by a requirement to produce journal articles, which has led to the proliferation of predatory publications.

What is needed for doctoral education in postindependence universities across Africa are spaces to discuss the purposes of the doctorate with a greater reflection on taken-for-granted and often problematic assumptions.

What Is Needed?

What is needed for doctoral education in postindependence universities across Africa are spaces to discuss the purposes of the doctorate with a greater reflection on unchallenged assumptions across countries, national policies, and within institutions. Such discussions should not attempt to pin down

the doctorate to a narrow, shared purpose—rather they should open spaces for reflection on taken-for-granted and often problematic assumptions. They should allow for far-reaching, impactful, and decolonial approaches to be applied to the highest formal qualification. These discussions must take the prevailing realities of doctoral education on the continent into account: small and ever declining number of supervisors; most candidates pursuing their studies on a part-time basis; disproportionately older students; and with most candidates being self-funded, alongside a small but significant number receiving support from funding bodies in the Global North.

The absence of discussion at continental, national, and institutional levels about what a doctorate is *for* has the potential for generic, decontextualized assumptions to hold sway. Explicit

conversations about the nature of the doctorate should enable consideration of how context matters in the conceptualization of doctoral purposes and practices. For universities in Africa, such aspirational, future-focused discussions require critical introspection about colonial legacies.

Ironically, such careful reflection on context in framing the doctorate's purposes can pave the way for increased internationalization. When a country, an institution, a doctoral advisor, or a doctoral candidate can articulate what a doctorate is for and critically engage with the many unspoken assumptions about the doctorate, they will be well-placed to share experiences across a range of contexts. If we know what we want the doctorate in our own countries in Africa to be, we will be better placed to contribute with confidence in other contexts.

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