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Choosing right PHD supervisor

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Jaramogi Oginga Odinga University Chancellor Vimal Shah confers a PHD graduand during a graduation ceremony. PHOTO | TONNY OMONDI | NMG

As executives conquer the business world, they often imagine a different career for the second half of their life that involves university lecturing.

Commensurate with Kenya's Commission for University Education (CUE) directive that all university lecturers hold an earned doctorate in their field of teaching, the demand for PhDs continues to surge.

Following last week's Business Talk article on "What to look out for when choosing a PhD programme", many current disgruntled doctoral students sent a flood of requests seeking advice to ascertain supervisors, courses, and institutions once already enrolled.

Inasmuch, Business Talk will undergo a multi-part series to assist doctoral learners already in programmes.

The dissertation stands as the ubiquitous pinnacle of every doctoral programme. It represents a labour of love, toil, and devotion to a specific topic with deep unique research and analysis. A doctoral supervisor who works one-on-one with doctoral candidates proves integral to achieving dissertation completion.

Last week we delved into how to select a supervisor based on their credible high-quality research output. Today, let us examine additional criteria for doctoral supervisor selection revolving around their supervisory approach and motivation.

READ: [What to look out for when choosing a PhD programme](#)

First, doctoral candidates may face the “floater”. Doctoral supervisors famously love to let their students float. Instead of utilising instructive behaviour as is done with Masters and Bachelors students, most doctoral supervisors utilise response behaviour.

They tend to only respond to direct questions and are less likely to assist the student to formulate their ideas, do analysis, or point in right directions in literature.

So, students at the doctorate level wait, revise, ponder, and get confused in often never-ending cycles without quite getting the clarity they so desperately seek.

Doctoral candidates should seek a supervisor who assists them to connect the dots and logically connect concepts found in literature and methodology techniques without too much metaphorical handholding.

Second, on the other hand, some doctoral students may experience a rarer breed of supervisor who is equally problematic called the “free rider”.

Some supervisors try to thrust their own personal research agenda onto the student in a quest to ride on the back of the learner’s hard work so as to attach their name to the student’s publications but within the supervisor’s specific interests and passions and not those of the student.

Instead, supervisors should try to provide candidates with the scientific backdrop to the candidate’s dreams and goals and help the student examine a plausible problem scientifically.

Third, one may face the “nit picker”. Doctoral supervisory nit-picking often originates from a lack of personal research achievement or knowledge in their discipline, so they focus on correcting students’ minutia instead of empowering the learner with the bigger and broader cutting-edge trends needed for a credible doctoral dissertation.

They feel the need to show off that they are providing some value to the student, so they take the candidate in circles on non-content issues like fixing margins, page numbers, font sizes, table labelling, and often immaterial sample size changes.

There is no solution for such supervisors and their students often hold the dubious honour of least likely to ever graduate. Quickly change your supervisor.

Fourth, there exists the “money grubber”. Money grubbers push through doctoral candidates as fast as possible, so they get assigned new students that bring them even more money.

Universities that give faculty supplemental pay for each doctoral student supervised are more susceptible to money grubbers. Ask your university directly how many other doctoral and Masters students your supervisor is currently supervising.

The CUE only allows a faculty member to supervise three doctoral students or five Masters students in a given year.

But many universities across Kenya flout this regulation. Some doctoral students like working with money grubber supervisors because the supervisor often ignores quality and just pushes the student to graduate regardless.

READ: [Lecturer crisis looms on shortage of PhD holders](#)

But, as a doctoral student you want a dissertation that will be respected beyond the microcosm of your own university.

It is always a shame to hear of unfortunate doctoral alumni who fail to gain employment with reputable companies and universities because of their dismally subpar dissertation.

Does your doctoral supervisor fall into the floater, free rider, nit picker, or money grubber category? If so, seek reassignment and get a new supervisor.

If you have not started your doctoral programme yet, then investigate your potential supervisors' publication quality as well as their supervisory approach. Ask other learners who have worked with specific supervisors.

You will be glad you did. Never just let your university just arbitrarily assign you a supervisor.

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