



SECOND ORAL SUBMISSION TO THE FEES COMMISSION

On postgraduate funding sources

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Introduction

The term Postgraduate students mainly refers to those students undertaking studies beyond the undergraduate funding. However, in many universities priority is given to Masters and Doctorate candidates. This creates a problem in that funding the stepping stone (Honours or BTech) towards Masters and PhD is neglected or made difficult, yet one needs good throughput at Honours or BTech in order to have significant qualifying students to take up a Masters and subsequently a PhD.

My approach to the Commission has always been that we must deal with the funding issue cognisant that we are also dealing with a rather inefficient sector insofar as costing and utilisation of funds it currently receives. Therefore I will identify some funding sources while I have a brief reflection.

DHET as a funder for Postgraduate students

It has now been ten years since the funding framework for research outputs has been updated in significant ways. I am going to use extracts from the Department of Higher Education and Training's report of 2013 that was chaired by the current Deputy President, Mr. Cyril Ramaphosa.

“The current research funding framework was adopted by the DHET in October 2003 and came into effect in the 2004/05 financial year. Compared to the preceding framework, a number of very significant changes and additions were made with regard to the funding of research outputs. The most important of these were the following:

a) Ring-fencing a dedicated amount for rewarding research and knowledge production at South African universities. An immediate consequence of this decision was that the monetary value of a research subsidy unit increased (more than threefold between 2004 and 2005) and continued to increase to **current levels of around R120 000 per subsidy unit.**

b) **The expansion of the notion of ‘research output’ to ‘knowledge output’, with the inclusion of ‘research masters’ and ‘doctorate’ graduates to qualify for research subsidy”** (DHET 2013:292).

This means that institutions now receive money for each Research Masters and/or Doctorate graduate they produce. It is however not clear what institutions use this money for because it does not currently go directly to the students. Universities are still not transparent about what incentives they give to their Masters and PhD students for the revenue they generate for Universities upon graduation. As it stands most postgraduate students must fend their way through difficulty trying to secure funding for their studies while the Universities reap the benefits of their graduation.

“The purpose of the various components of the funding framework is as follows:

i. *Teaching input funding*, which funds universities for delivering teaching services **and the supervision of postgraduate masters and doctoral students.** The teaching input grant uses

a funding grid for the distribution of grants to universities. The funding grid is based on the relative cost of offering teaching and research supervision in various fields of study.

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iii. *Research output funding*, which encourages the publication of peer-reviewed articles and books, as well as the graduation of masters and doctoral students. **The category of doctoral graduates receives the highest funding weight, as an incentive to produce much-needed graduates for research and innovation as well as the next generation of academic staff.**” (DHET, 2013:126)

Therefore, universities cannot claim that the research output money funds supervision of the Research Masters and PhD students because this function is already compensated for by the DHET in the teaching input funding. Viewed this way, it seems as though DHET is already making Research Masters and PhD no-fee functions. The University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN) embodies this thinking in its approach to give fee remission for these two full-time postgraduate studies. Other institutions are still charging exorbitant tuition fees for these degrees that are somewhat fully funded by DHET.

My proposal to the Commission is that it advises DHET to consider splitting the research output grant on graduations with a portion set aside to fund the student directly in the form of a bursary to assist their research work and living expenses. Especially in light that NSFAS also does not provide funding to Masters and PhD, which means the current funding model inhibits the intellectual growth of those considered as “the poor”. Even with the tuition fee remission in an institution like UKZN, the students must still find money for accommodation, transport, food and field work. What has started to happen, due to poor funding of our postgraduate students is that the students suddenly gravitate away from conducting research studies that require deep, in-depth and expensive fieldwork because there is no one to help with the funds. As a result, Research Masters students look much closer to home, explore low hanging fruit studies and ultimately these researches yield very little impactful quality. This is the main threat of poorly funded postgraduates – producing research that does not have significant scholarly impact or innovation power to shift society’s development trajectory.

The importance of postgraduate studies:

“The European Commission (2011) emphasises that doctoral training is a primary progenitor of new knowledge, which is crucial to the development of a prosperous and developed society. Developed economies rely on new knowledge and highly skilled knowledge workers to feed a process of continual innovation. It is essential to ensure that enough researchers have the skills that will be demanded by a knowledge economy. The Commission observes that more and more universities in Europe are setting up doctoral schools that deliver structured programmes for cohorts of students. The majority of universities in Europe have set up doctoral schools or programmes across several or all of their departments/disciplines.

This might be worth investigating as a way of improving doctoral study outputs in South Africa.” (DHET, 2013:296)

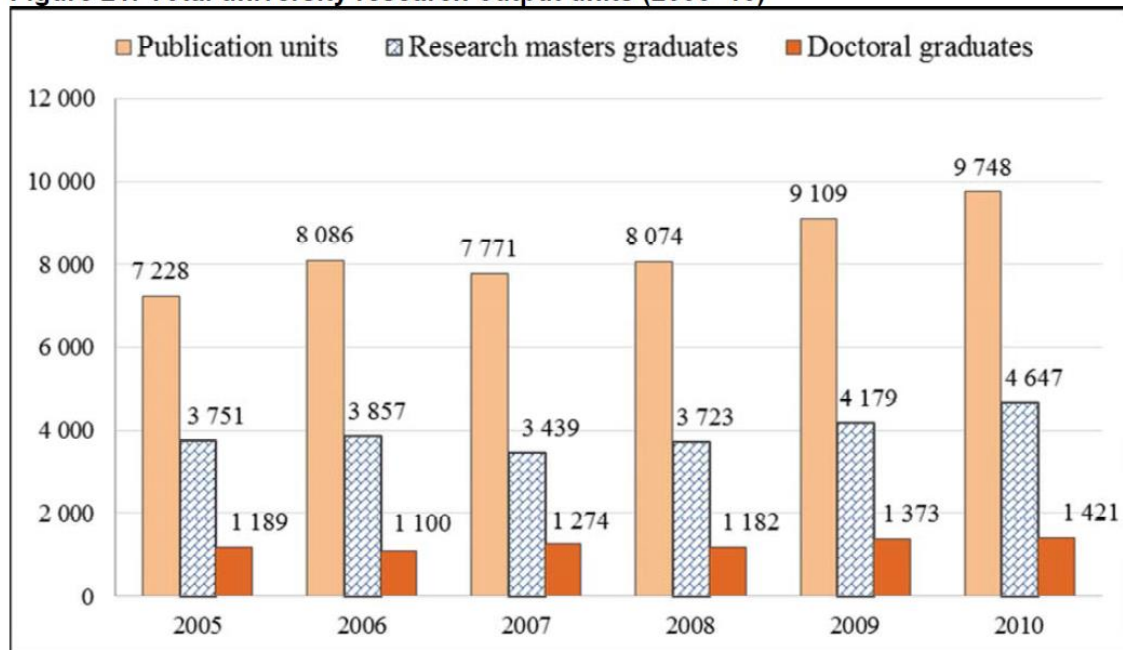
Discussion on funding must encompass certain changes to improve participation of people at Masters and Doctoral levels of study. One of the ways in which to achieve this is to actually have four year degrees that are standard across board – what we call degrees with Honours. This allows students to move from their Degree to a Masters and possibly to a Doctoral Degree. This is important also because Honours students fall through the cracks very easily, yet they are the building blocks towards Masters and PhD. Some universities and DHET keep being

unsure of an appropriate classification of this category between undergraduate and postgraduate. This is especially prevalent in the Humanities and Social Sciences.

If all undergraduate degrees were with Honours, we could see more people being able to leave the University and then return to join at a Masters level rather than being demotivated by the fact that they will have to start at Honours level and then Masters Level. Worse still is that Honours level tends to be only full-time in most of our institutions which then means it is difficult for people who are employed to further their studies if they left University having not acquired an Honours. Having all degrees encompass the Honours also means institutions would be releasing to society individuals with high training on knowledge acquisition and production.

The table below taken from the 2013 DHET report also indicates that our Research Masters and PhD graduates are not increasing at levels that are expected for a developing nation like ours. The National Development Plan has created an ambitious target to grow throughput at the Doctoral level to more than 100 graduates per million per year by 2030, which implies over 5000 doctoral graduates a year.

Figure 21: Total university research output units (2005–10)



Source: DHET (2012e)

Other Funding Sources:

According to DHET (2013:298), the NRF supported “16.2% of all enrolled doctoral students, 7.6% of all enrolled masters students and 4.7% of all B Tech and honours students through NRF grants in the year 2011/12”.

There are other sources of funding such as:

- The Mellon Foundation (<https://mellon.org/>) which is based in the United States funds projects dedicatedly focusing on the Arts and Humanities. This Foundation’s budget

for South Africa is at about \$9-million (allocated annually on short to long-term projects), which is expended on a limited number of institutions in the country, I think less than 10 if I am not mistaken. The commission might want to make contact with Dr Saleem Badat (Former Rhodes University Vice-Chancellor) who is projects director for South Africa and beyond the borders of the US. Majority of the projects funded make it mandatory for postgraduate students to be part of the project through bursaries/scholarships set aside to support the academic work of those students.

- Special strategic funds of Deputy Vice-Chancellors and Vice-Chancellors
- Some Supervisors use their research codes to clear debt of students that work with or under them as students. But this is very rare, especially because of the bureaucracy that surrounds the utilisation of these funds.
- Internships in entities like the HSRC and other institutions that are looking at hiring students assist the students to generate an income that they can direct towards their studies. Again, these are not widely spread and cannot cover for the increases in participation at postgraduate level that we would like to see.
- The National Institute of Humanities and Social Sciences (NIHSS) has a Doctoral Scholarship programme of this nature:

“The NIHSS collaborates annually with the South African Humanities Deans Association (SAHUDA) to extend 150 scholarships per annum to full-time PhD students based at South African universities. The main objective of this programme is to promote scholarship and address inequities in the humanities and social sciences. To ensure that successful applicants are provided with structured intellectual and mentorship support, the NIHSS-SAHUDA cooperation has created an ambitious national doctoral programme for the humanities and social sciences. The NIHSS Strategic Plan for 2015 – 2020 sets a target of 900 South African students partaking in Doctoral Schools by 2020.” - <http://www.nihss.ac.za/content/doctoral-scholarships-0>

- There are of course other funding sources such as endowments bequeathed by various individuals to specific institutions for specific disciplines of focus.