

THE PLACE OF THE PHD DEGREE IN AN ACADEMIC CAREER

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By

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Preamble

I thank the organizers of this Workshop for inviting me to present this Keynote. I presume that Professor Olukoya Ogen, rather than Dr. Insa Nolte, knowing that I spent donkey years on my PhD programme, felt that I was better qualified to speak on this subject than those who sped through theirs in half the time I took. It is possible, of course, that the organizers of this Workshop had other considerations besides that dubious distinction. The important point is that this is a forum for sharing experiences, both salutary and unsavoury, and I hope that all of us shall be better educated at the end of the day. To return to my experience, the good news is that I did deliver the thesis after all, some six months to my promotion to Senior Lecturer! By divine favour, I was teaching, publishing and rising through the ranks with my M.A.degree, even earning an accelerated promotion to Lecturer I, while working on the PhD. The higher degree had become a requirement for further promotion by the time I got it. But I can assure you from my own experience - which others could learn from - that adversity does have its uses. I now speak briefly on “The Place of the PhD Degree in an Academic Career.”

The PhD Degree in Perspective

By definition, the Doctor of Philosophy degree or PhD is, ordinarily, the highest degree awarded in the university system. We may note in passing that PhD has also been jocularly interpreted as “Pull Him/Her Down,” “Professional Hair Dresser,” “Potentially Huge Deficit,” or “Permanent Head Damage.”¹ The degree confers on its possessor the right to be addressed as “Doctor” (abbreviated as “Dr”), a distinction that attracts much respect all over the world, as it is known that medical doctors, who also bear the same title, earned a first degree (albeit a double degree), which is not equivalent to a Master’s degree, much less the Doctorate. A variant of the doctorate is the D.Phil, which is still awarded in some British universities, such as Oxford, York and Sussex. The PhD or D.Phil is different from the higher doctorate - D.Sc., D.Litt. or Habilitation - which is earned by the submission of a thesis or a collection of publications on a theme. In the nineteenth century, the D.Phil in the UK was equivalent to the D.Litt, while the PhD was regarded as vastly inferior to it. However, from about World War I, British universities embraced the PhD and jettisoned the old D.Phil that was equivalent to the modern higher doctorate (D.Litt./D.Sc.). This was because they were losing students to US universities which permitted students to earn the PhD after registering for it with the bachelor’s degree. At the time, as only the D.Phil. or D.Litt. degrees were awarded in the United Kingdom, prospective students had to wait till they were 30 and, unless there was a student exchange agreement, they could only register in their alma mater.²

¹ I thank Dr. Sunday Akinola Olukoju, himself an “extra time” PhD holder, for this humorous insight.

² Source for this paragraph: <http://www.degreeinfo.com/off-topic-discussions/10033-phd-dphil-differences.html>, accessed on 2 June 2014.

That said, the PhD is the qualifying licence for teaching at the university level. In Nigeria, until recently, it was possible to attain the full professorship without it. All that changed with a government policy that made the PhD the minimum qualification for a university teaching career. It is still possible in the United Kingdom, Ghana and some other countries, for a non-PhD holder to attain the professorship unlike in the United States, where the PhD has been a sine qua non for obtaining a tenured teaching position in the university system.

Before we proceed, we need to clarify the status of the PhD degree itself. The PhD is earned by thesis (or, dissertation, as the Americans prefer to call it) with or without taught courses. The North American system insists on course work on the PhD programme, and that scheme has been adopted in some UK universities. Either way, the PhD degree is distinguished by its possessors' ability to satisfy examiners that they have mastered a particular area of knowledge and also advanced the frontiers of knowledge in it through research. The addition to knowledge could take the form of new discoveries in a field, a re-appraisal of canons or the discovery of new sources. It is possible to earn lower degrees without research but it is not the case with the PhD.

There is no single road to the PhD. In terms of entry requirements, many institutions accept a bachelor's degree in the First or Second Class Upper Division for direct admission while others insist on a Master's degree with a stated cumulative grade point average (CGPA) equivalent to a minimum score of 60 per cent. The mode of supervision also differs from place to place. While, even in the same country, sole supervision in the PhD-awarding academic department is the norm, co-supervision is preferred by others. Indeed, some universities draw the supervisors from multiple disciplines to strengthen the examination process. Still

others operate the split-site mode, based upon joint supervision by partner universities. Split-site (or, split location) PhDs have the following elements:³

- Same duration as normal PhD (minimum of three years and maximum six years for full-time study; minimum of six years and maximum of eight years for part-time study);
- Same requirements for thesis length (subject-specific) and examination (by oral examination);
- Same award;
- The doctoral researcher to attend University of Birmingham for a total of between six and twelve months over the total period of study to meet the supervisor and conduct research using Birmingham resources. Apart from requirement to visit Birmingham at start of PhD, the duration and timing of visits is determined by the doctoral researchers and their supervisor;
- Alongside a supervisor at University of Birmingham, the doctoral researcher has a suitably-qualified local academic adviser to help with day-to-day issues and provide support. The adviser is appointed on an honorary basis, and is normally a member of staff at the institution with which the doctoral researcher is associated;
- The supervisor at the University of Birmingham maintains regular contact with the doctoral researcher and the local adviser through a medium such as Skype, and by email.

³ This section is based on the content of the MOU between the University of Birmingham, UK and Caleb University, Nigeria, signed in September 2013.

Another route to the PhD is distance learning, for which the University of South Africa (UNISA) has carved a niche for itself. This is different from the split-location PhD as the degree and supervision are wholly domiciled in a particular university. But both have the common feature of residence away from home for a period of time, depending upon the requirements of the programme.

The PhD thesis is examined by at least one external expert, who makes a categorical pronouncement on the suitability or otherwise of the research and presentation of findings. Depending on the academic culture of different nations and universities, the defence of the thesis (*viva voce*) could take either of two forms – before a committee comprising the external examiner (an expert in the field) and internal members of the university; or, an open defence before an audience of faculty, students and others. What is important is the candidates' ability to convince the examiners that they did conduct the research leading to the submission of the thesis, and that the work merits the award of the degree.

What the PhD Entails

Without prejudice to institutional ambience, funding and other factors, at least two parties – the candidate and the supervisor(s) – are critical to the successful completion of the PhD. Their ability to work together, rather than at cross purposes, determines the duration and destination of the programme. Both must be prepared to create time for it and make the necessary sacrifice for success.

As for the PhD candidate, who is the principal actor and major beneficiary, I need to stress that *attitude* – of fortitude, diligence and discipline - is as important as *aptitude* in getting the job done. Fundamentally, while one should aim to finish up in record or good time – three to four years – it is important to know that getting

the PhD, and a good one at that, is an endurance test, a marathon, rather than a sprints race, such as a hundred metre dash. Hard work, staying power, guts and grit must complement intelligence quotient in achieving success. In the end, only a high quality thesis can justify the effort of the candidate. There is no point rushing through a PhD and delivering a mediocre thesis, only to experience frustration in the academic world. If you did not sweat to earn your PhD, you will shed extra sweat to make a mark as an academic. But it is possible to have the best of both worlds – short duration and excellence – as was demonstrated recently by Dr. Hallowed Olaoluwa, who completed his PhD programme in Mathematics in three years and, yet, submitted the overall best thesis out of 109 produced at the University of Lagos.⁴

Many outstanding scholars built their academic careers on a strong PhD. To achieve this, the following must be assured: a viable topic that is researchable within a reasonable (3-4 year) period; a clear idea of what one wants to achieve; the gap that the topic fills in the literature by revising or challenging received wisdom, breaking new grounds or unearthing new/unused source material. If the topic is not challenging, the candidate might end up doing a routine PhD that will have no enduring impact.

We should note that the PhD training is also a period of tutelage, when the candidate could be called upon to render service as part of mentorship. As graduate or teaching assistants, you might be directed to teach, handle tutorials, grade test

⁴ Dr. Olaoluwa's sensational feat has, understandably, been celebrated in Nigeria, especially in the media, including a half-page editorial and multiple-page interviews. See, for example, Charles Abah, "Mathematician bags doctorate at 24," *The Punch*, 17 June 2014, p. 47; "Hallowed life," *The Nation*, editorial, 19 June 2014, p. 17; Ayo Olukotun, "For a change, a burst of excellence," *The Punch*, 20 June 2014, p. 64; and Gbenga Salau and Ujunwa Utueyi, "Hardwork, key to great achievements, says youngest PhD holder," *The Guardian*, 23 June 2014, pp.82-83.

scripts, record marks, prepare results, mentor undergraduate students, participate in research projects or assist in collecting data. It is unwise to shirk any of these responsibilities or to grudgingly carry them out as some burdensome drudgery. But experience has shown how rewarding active and diligent participation can be. To cite a personal experience, it was in the course of assisting my supervisor to collect data from the Herbert Macaulay Papers in the University of Ibadan Library that I myself got invaluable data for both my thesis and postdoctoral work, leading to several critical publications. The moral is that you serve yourself while serving others. Hard work and diligence are also required.

As a corollary, it is important to stress that earning the PhD demands character, enterprise and integrity. True scholars must not only have an inquiring mind, they must be humble enough to take responsibility and accept blame for their deficiencies, respect opposing views and defer to their mentors as appropriate.

PhD candidates should appreciate the value of omnibus research – collecting data on both the subject of the thesis and related topics that could be of future interest. Again, this has helped me in the course of my career as what I collected along the way proved very useful long after obtaining the PhD. I am still drawing from that data bank.

A corollary of this is the imperative of voracious reading – the way termites feast on paper - both around the subject of the PhD and beyond. In my days, I spent hours scouring the serials section of the library and textbooks to read and take extensive notes for my current and future use. It can be said that that was the period when I read most intensely since obtaining my first degree. An elderly recipient of the PhD degree admonished as follows: “you ... have to dig deep ... especially for the literature ... and without reading you cannot do it. PhD is not a

joke, it's not a carnival. It calls for hard work. I am not saying it to frighten anybody but that's the truth."⁵

One other thing is the need to identify and address one's deficiencies. In my case, I audited undergraduate courses in Economics to make up for my shortfall in basic knowledge. PhD candidates can develop capacity by way of reading, data collection, ICT skill acquisition or knowledge update, and, where necessary, additional language acquisition via regular and online sources.

Funding is an issue in PhD research and it stymied my own programme for at least four years. Fortunately, we live in the age of grants and scholarships targeted at ensuring the production of a sufficient number of PhD holders for the Nigerian university system. Participants in this Workshop will, hopefully, receive advice on how to obtain such support.

There should also be recognition that, though the PhD will, ultimately, be conferred on one person (the candidate), it is a joint enterprise. Without doubt, the bulk of the work is done by the candidate and it is the extent to which candidates discharge their obligations that other stakeholders can be fairly judged. Partners in the enterprise include the supervisor(s), mentors, library and archive staff, and informants, whose cooperation is critical at various stages to the success of the work. But none is more important than the candidate, who has to answer the question posed by my supervisor at my viva: "What is the thesis of your thesis?"

Finally, discipline, time management and a single-minded focus on the task at hand are indispensable to the successful prosecution of the PhD programme. Candidates

⁵ Dr. Wole Oyelese, a former Nigerian Minister, who obtained his PhD 38 years after his Bachelor's degree, interviewed in Bisi Oladele, "Most of our politicians have no business in politics," *The Nation* (Lagos), 18 June 2014, p.34. However, he added that it "goes beyond reading, there is a lot of learning that you have to do."

who combine a regular job with it must allocate time to the programme without jeopardizing other legitimate commitments to the employer, family and society. In addition, the PhD programme should not suffer neglect in the course of pursuing publications for promotion or earning an extra income to fund objects of social status, including fancy cars that now adorn staff car parks on university campuses, expensive apparel and gadgets, and lavish parties. Many have been known to have lost the drive for the PhD as a result of such distractions.

Why the PhD is so Important

Beyond the feeling of achievement and the respect attached to the title, the PhD is critical to the career progression of a committed academic. At a mundane level, it can be claimed that in a status conscious society such as ours, the PhD does cover a multitude of “sins.” For example, within and outside the university system, most people would accord higher respect to the Senior Lecturer who has a PhD than to the Associate Professor who is addressed as “Mr/Mrs/Ms.” Most may not even bother to know the number and quality of the publications of the PhD holder in the first instance. It is gratifying that in this era of the conferment of honorary doctorate degrees on all manner of people in Nigeria, the “PhD” at the end of a scholar’s name remains an emblem of distinction. Indeed, it enhances self esteem and confers a feeling of accomplishment.⁶ On ceremonial occasions, such as convocation ceremonies, academic staff process in the doctoral gowns of their alma mater, adding colour to the event. Professors are usually robed in their PhD gowns while delivering their Inaugural Lectures. Such is the pomp - and prestige - associated with the degree. But, in practical terms, having a PhD helps in the following ways.

⁶ Dr. Oyelese asserted that “there is a feeling of satisfaction, a feeling of accomplishment” on earning the degree.

First, when you are being assessed for a higher position, you earn the maximum marks (ten out of ten) under “academic qualifications.” Masters by dissertation or MPhil will earn eight marks while Masters by coursework get only six. This gives the holder of the PhD a headstart in a race for the top.

Second, in Nigeria unless in exceptional circumstances (such as if a non-PhD holder had attained the professorship), only holders of the PhD are allowed to supervise PhD candidates. In other words, without a PhD, you cannot be listed among postgraduate teachers in your Department. PhD supervision also gives you the opportunity to reproduce yourself and develop successors in your academic unit and discipline. To cite a personal example, two of my successful PhD candidates are already mid-career colleagues in my Department at the University of Lagos while a third is at another university, in the Department where I taught him at the early stage of my career. The others teach at other Nigerian universities.

Third, only PhD holders can apply for and get post-doctoral fellowships, a classification that is exclusive by its very nomenclature. For the avoidance of doubt, the number (and quality) of postdoctoral fellowships and awards won or utilized by a scholar – in addition to the quality and impact of scholarly publications - is one of the major criteria for assessing that person’s academic worth and global competitiveness.

Fourth, a PhD degree is universal and does not require conversion – as is done with foreign first degrees in some countries - to meet the standards of another country. University teachers have migrated seamlessly into jobs across national and cultural boundaries on the basis of their PhD and academic publications.

Fifth, having a PhD boosts the profile of your Department or institution in this country, where there is a reported deficit of 26,000 PhD holders. A 2012 Report of the Federal Government Committee on Needs Assessment of Nigerian Public Universities contained two significant revelations – only 43 per cent of lecturers in public universities had the PhD and in only seven universities did up to 60 per cent of the staff hold the PhD degree.⁷ It can be argued with some justification that a Department in which virtually everyone has a PhD is more likely to produce high quality graduates and postgraduates than one with a handful of them. By extension, the postgraduate programme of that Department will enjoy much credibility and the prospective students will not lack competent supervisors, who would give the students a wider variety of options in terms of choice of topics.⁸ In terms of programme accreditation, the National Universities Commission (NUC) requires that at least half the number of listed teachers must have the PhD. In effect, you are an asset to your Department/Unit and the degree it offers if you have the PhD. For, any programme that scores lower than 70 percent under “Staffing” can only get interim accreditation or, even, suffer denial of accreditation.

Finally, many careers have been built on a sound PhD thesis, from which major publications, which came to define the scholar, were published. These could be articles in learned journals, chapters in edited books or a monograph, all of which must have been developed beyond the PhD thesis version. This speaker generated fifteen offshore publications, mainly in key journals, from his PhD thesis. A

⁷ I owe this insight to Olukotun, “For a change.”

⁸ The Department of History and Strategic Studies, University of Lagos is a good illustration. It has only two non-PhD holders of its 17 lecturers, of whom there are five full professors and three associate professors. The Department has produced two winners of the Best PhD Thesis in Nigerian Universities competition – Dr. David Aworawo and Dr. Adetunji Ogunyemi.

revised version of the thesis minus the first 122 pages of the original text but with the addition of an opening chapter that extends the coverage by a decade was published offshore thirteen years later. This is a clear indication of the possibilities of the PhD in the career progression of an academic.

Conclusion

In my early years as a university teacher, I set two targets – the PhD and “PoP” – which drove my career progression. I was not focused on the professorship but on my academic reputation irrespective of my academic rank. It is a path well trodden by scholars who set out to make a mark in their chosen fields. Assuming that you faced (or, are facing) an uphill task on the PhD programme as I did, I implore you to persevere and sustain, if you cannot increase, your work rate or the tempo of your scholarly performance after the PhD. Indeed, the PhD is an incentive to stretch yourself to the limit and then sustain that lifestyle till you retire. My publishing record – and, by extension, my career - is largely a product of divinely enabled maintenance of the tempo with which I concluded my PhD in the face of diverse challenges. You too can attain any academic height and even surpass your wildest dreams. The PhD is a veritable stepping stone to success, which is yours for the taking, if you adopt the right approach to it. I shall conclude with an admonition – following Kwame Nkrumah - that parodies a popular passage of *The Holy Bible* (Matthew 6:33, KJV): “Seek ye first the PhD, with the right attitude of doggedness, discipline and diligence, and all other things shall be added to you.”

I thank you for your patience. God bless.