

## Graduation Condition in Nigerian University: A Nudge Towards Doctorateness?

### Abstract

*With the recent expansions in higher education, research has found quality of higher education to be a vital part in the growth of the knowledge economy which is hoped will find the solution to numerous challenges of the African nation. A step up in the graduation condition requiring doctoral student to publish and present a paper at a conference before graduation is hoped will bring a push in the quality of PhD. The study explains doctorateness and the associated theories of threshold and liminality. And these are used as a lens to examine the impact of the new graduation condition on the doctoral students to see if they experience liminality and if doctorateness is achieved. Using a mixed method which include interviews and questionnaires, four doctoral candidates' supervisors and thirty doctoral candidates form the research sample. Specifically, the 2021/2022 cohorts are used given their experiences with these concepts. The study finds that the graduation condition nudges doctoral candidates into liminality and towards doctorateness. This quality is hoped will bring about the needed emancipation through knowledge. Recommendation includes among others, adoption of pedagogies which ensures early exposure to literature.*

**Key words:** Doctorateness; threshold concept; liminality; graduation condition; publication.

### Introduction

Generally, in Africa, there has been an expansion in the education sector, (Kipchumba, 2019) with Nigeria having one of the largest education sectors (Akpan & Ekeuwei, 2022) (Kigotho, 2018; Fiesenhan, 2014). An expansion that has been termed unplanned. Even though there are more needs for further expansion to meet the growing population (Kigotho, 2018), these expansions sure bring with it massive challenges. (Akpan & Ekeuwei, 2022) These immense challenges tend to cease the continent in its bid to bring the benefits of education to its masses. The African universities are held ransom by the challenges which include lack of infrastructure, limited resources, poor developmental agendas (Kigotho, 2018).

This study's focus is on the effect of graduation condition on the quality of doctoral candidates in a Nigerian higher education. Looking closely now at higher education in Africa, according to Mohamedbhai (2018), some positive developments have been recorded. These include recognition of higher education as a valuable tool for African development by UNESCO. African Union has also recognised the fact that higher education has the potential of providing African led solution to the problems in Africa (Agbaje, 2023), (Mohamedbhai 2018), also, the Bologna seminar on doctoral programs recommendation recognises research training forms as a core mission of universities in Europe. Europe is now emerging as the global leader in reforming doctoral education (Salzburg II principle). This recommendation also emphasises the importance of research, research training, improving the quality of higher education among others. Another

critical development identified by Mohamedbhai (2018) is the recognition of the need for quality in expanding the educational system (Mensah, 2024; Makoe & Olcott, 2021).

These developments are welcome, but it will be helpful to keep in perspective the challenges which accompany such developments and begin on time to plan for the future which is already here. Internationally, efforts are being made to set higher education on the right track for the future, (Makoe, & Olcott, 2021). For instance, the world bank has centres of excellence in some African countries (Nigeria inclusive). The Salzburg II recommendation from the Bologna seminar mentioned some clues for success and one of such clues include outcome. This promotes early-stage researcher whose works are suitable for dissemination. (van Rooij et al, 2021)

The University of Nigeria in a bid to cultivate a research mindset of doctoral student continually improves the requirement for graduation. Currently, doctoral students are now required to publish in impact factor journal and present at conferences. This is in addition to the course work and thesis defence before graduation.

In this study, the researchers look at the theory of the doctorateness, and its associated concepts of threshold and liminality. Through the explanation of the theory of doctorateness, the researcher tries to examine the impact of the new graduation condition on the quality of doctorates. The study will try to examine if the new graduation condition is a deliberate nudge into liminality and through the conceptual threshold unto doctorateness. Specifically, the study will try to find out if the PhD candidates in the institution have earlier experienced stuckness or whether the graduation condition is causing them to experience stuckness. The research question therefore include:

RQ1 does the graduation condition push doctoral candidates into liminal space?

RQ2 does the graduation condition bring about doctorateness?

The remaining part the study is captured under literature review, methodology, findings and analysis and the conclusion and recommendations.

## Literature review

### Understanding doctorateness

Every doctoral student looks forward to the presentation of the thesis which mostly marks the end of the doctoral journey. During the defence, the supervisor looks out for particular features and quite consistently (Trafford & Leshem 2002) though their approach may be different as it enables them to form an opinion on the thesis presented (Shahab et al., 2021). Supervisors generally share the same view as to what makes up doctoral research (Trafford & Leshem 2009). According to them, in doctoral research, certain factors are integrative and complimentary which must be present (Chetcuti, Cacciottolo, & Vella, 2022). Trafford & Leshem (2009) explained doctorateness as a template which is used by both the examiners, the supervisors and the students. In becoming doctorate, there are certain qualities in the thesis that is watched out for when examiners assess the academic worth of the thesis. (Chetcuti, Cacciottolo, & Vella, 2022)

For doctoral students to be doctorate, all the component parts of a doctorate must be cohesive, and there must be synergism between these parts (Trafford & Leshem 2009). They explained that

the starting point to becoming doctorate is the exploration of literature. Again, Dimitov, (2012) also suggests that defining doctorateness may vary according to discipline. However, there are best qualities that have to be poised to be doctorate and that is being able to engage in literature and create new knowledge (outcome) from the theoretical underpinnings of that discipline. (Clarence & van Heerden. 2023)

Theorising is vital and fundamental to become doctorate, and its need cannot be overemphasised. Theories help put us in charge having been able to predict, Kiley (2015). Theories are a universal definition of concepts which allow usability and understandability of such concept.

Theories can also be defined as a unified, systematic causal explanation of a diverse range of social phenomena (Rainford, 2021; Kiley 2015). In the work of Kiley 2015, much emphasis is placed on theory and theorising, it was found that theorising broadens a specific research focus. When literature is combined with personal knowledge, then a theoretical perspective is arrived at. From this, a conceptual framework emerges and provides a guide for the research design. There is an exhibition of interrelatedness here. Demicolo & Park (2010) in their work suggest that doctorates have to do with a combination of qualities posed by the doctoral candidates. Such qualities include intellectuality, confidence independence of thinking, enthusiasm and commitment and having the ability to adapt to circumstance and opportunity as they arise. These attributes are even primary to be able to conceptualise and be able to learn new knowledge.

## Becoming doctorate

The research process has been found to be an integrated process, and until the doctoral students master this, they may not satisfy the examiner. Trying to integrate this process requires the acquisition of knowledge. In a bid to acquire these knowledge students are faced with difficulties. According to Kiley & Wisker (2009), doctoral students encounter challenge, and this occurs when they are urged to think and research in a new way. Researchers at doctoral level are expected to research at a new level of conceptual reasoning (Chetcuti et al 2022). Where theorising is inevitable (Clarence & van Heerden, 2023). At this level theorising is fundamental, yet it is a major challenge for doctoral students. Even with supervision theorising is not easy. Kiley & Wisker (2009) found that assisting students to be able to theorise or appreciate and understand the use of theories is one of the most difficult aspects of supervision. Mukumbang, (2023) also suggests that retroductive theorising and relativism offers a more acceptable method for blending both qualitative and quantitative research as compared to a pragmatic approach

For there to be a progression in the doctoral journey, new knowledge must be gained. This new way of understanding or interpreting or viewing something in other to progress is known as threshold concept (Basgier & Simpson, 2020, Cardoso et al, 2022, Meyer & Lard 2003). Because crossing over this threshold is vital for progression, to be aware of the intricacies of research is an indication that a candidate has gained knowledge of what doctoral level research involves and this will enable a candidate then begins to think like a researcher. However, candidate experience obstruction in their thinking process. This hampers their ability to conceptualize (Prøitz & Wittek, 2019). According to Mayer and Land (2003), when this obstruction of the thinking process occurs, its result is what is known as “portal of understanding”.

The threshold concept according to Trafford and Leshem (2009), (Prøitz & Wittek, 2019), provides a model of “learning gain which when a learner passes through, the learner changes in a

great way and becomes more capable of conceptualising. In fact, threshold concept has been interpreted by Trafford and Leshem (2009) as a scale which can be used for measuring and learning. The conceptual threshold is an essential concept for the doctoral candidate. According to Meyer & Land (2003), this conceptual path that leads to new knowledge may possess characteristic such as being transformative, irreversible, integrative and troublesome. Crossing over the conceptual threshold entailed certain stages. These stages are the separation stage, the margin and the aggregation (Kiley 2009). The separation stage is the stage of abandoning the old unknowledgeable state. The margin state which is the stage where the learning occurs is also known as “liminal period” (Meyer & Land 2003). The between period when an individual is torn between two worlds (Keefer, 2015). It can be described as a state when the old self is left behind but has not turned into a new self. In the third and final stage, the process is completed. The learner enters a new state. However, within these three stages, there are several ‘mini rites of passage’, these could entail, examinations proposals, seminars and conference presentation (Kiley, 2009).

Mayor & Lard (2003) proposed that a good understanding of the threshold concept in addition to other strategies adopted in crossing the threshold may help to make the problematic research journey less burdensome. Kiley (2009) emphasised the role of the research community and research culture as an essential practice which may assist doctoral candidates in passing over the conceptual threshold. Furthermore, engagement in seminars allows students to theoretically aware. Shanahan & Meyer (2006) also supported the exposure of candidate to research complexities as a means of setting them in the right path of knowledge

However, Wellington, (2013) has a contrary view. Wellington argues that family resemblance should be the basis for identifying doctorateness and not the presence of inner essence. But this argument was directly opposed by Poole (2013, 2015). Poole argued that if doctorateness and originality as a base for assessment of the doctoral thesis was to be avoided, then focusing on publishability should be the alternative and not family resemblance. Though Poole talks about the publishability of a thesis here, it is clearly a pointer that a condition to publish before graduation is an indication of a genuine desire to raise standard and a highway to doctorateness.

Given the numerous challenges in the African nations, and the support for liberation through education especially in the higher education, qualitative doctoral education is salient. It is therefore important to carry out this study to assess the impact of the graduation condition on the quality of doctoral candidates. The quality of the doctoral candidates is anchored on the ability of the doctoral candidate to navigate the liminal space and lunch into doctorateness. This study differs from previous studies as it relies on these theories that have been advocated by previous studies to assess the quality of doctoral education in Nigerian universities.

## Methodology

This research adopts case study research design to examine the impact of new graduation condition in University in Nigeria. Both the interview method and questionnaire are employed to obtain information. The University has a graduation condition which requires doctoral students to publish at least two articles in an international journal and also present a paper at a national or international conference. This is in addition to the course work and thesis, the thesis is defended before an external examiner. The implementation of this condition started with the doctoral

students of 2015/2016 academic session. This graduation condition is now well known and understood.

The doctoral students of the 2021/2022 academic year (numbering 94) and their supervisors form the study population. They have at this point concluded their course works, exams, and seminar presentation and would have commenced work on their thesis. They are better suited for this study as they would have started experiencing what it takes to work on a thesis. To be able to publish two articles before their final presentation, they would have had some experiences to share. This graduation condition should cause them to have some experiences because their work would have to be good enough to be accepted for publication in the international journals. This idea is based on the work of Bitzer, (2016) who opined that having the experience of liminality or stuckness could be an excellent benchmark on which to base the quality of doctoral work. According to Roscoe, (1975), Sekaran and Bougie, (2016), sample sizes ranging from 30 to 500 may be considered as appropriate. Therefore, the targeted minimum sample size for our study is 30. In other to research the effect of this graduation condition in enhancing the quality of the (PhD) and using the doctorateness (which is achieved through threshold concept & liminality) as the theoretical lens, a two-way study was carried out, which involved interviewing the doctoral supervisor and distributing the questionnaires to the doctoral students. The sample of the study consists of the doctoral supervisors, two professors and two associate professors, (all members of the faculty) and 30 candidates of the 2021/2022 cohort. The supervisors have all been involved in doctoral supervision for over eight years for the professors and over five years for the associate professors. Questions about the experiences of the students during their doctoral journey especially with the new graduation condition were thrown at the supervisors. They had been informed of the interview, and later a call was put through to elicit this information.

Doctoral students were given questionnaires with open-ended questions. The questionnaires were distributed during a faculty workshop which brought both the academic and doctoral students together. The doctoral students sat together in a part of the hall. The nature of the study being undertaken was explained to them, and their anonymity was also assured. The questionnaires were distributed to them, and they were given time to reflect on their responses before answering the questions. They returned the questionnaires by dropping them at the researcher's pigeonhole at the dept later in the week while some were returned by snapping the filled questionnaire and sending them through WhatsApp. This was to make sure it was convenient for them so that they may reflect before giving their best responses. The questionnaire contained 20 questions which include some personal data, years of study, information on whether they had completed their coursework and whether they had started research work and also if they were aware of the new graduation condition. The questionnaire also probed for the knowledge and use of theories, feeling of stuckness and what caused it and how they managed to cope with that feeling.

Certain limitations are inherent in this study. Given that it is a case study, the personal opinion of the researcher may come into play and this may affect the generalizability of the study's outcome.

## Findings and Analysis.

Using the discourse analysis method, the findings of this study are discussed under two headings. The interview with the supervisors and secondly the discussion of the questionnaire responses.

Among the four supervisors that were interviewed, two were females and two were males. Two were Professors and two were Associate Professors. Two professors who were interviewed had supervised for over ten years and two associate professors who were also interviewed had also supervised for over eight years ..

The responses are discussed in the following paragraphs. Similar responses are grouped together.

## The New Condition

The responses from the supervisors show that they believe the graduation condition was a tough one but very welcomed because most of the students are not grounded in research. They are not taught how to do research very well.

“It will help them to be more serious. It will force students to do real work and even gather real data.”

“This graduation condition is making them sit up. Some of them are not serious, and some are too busy because they have a job. However, they are sitting up now.”

The graduation condition is even believed to be too tough on the students

“The university sometimes brings unnecessary high standard but are our faculty members not even better than those reviewers and those at the conference?”

The interest of this study was to know if this graduation condition was pushing these students into liminality and finally unto doctorateness. They agreed students experienced this feeling. Because some do come to complain how difficult it was to move. “They get stuck on the way”.

“You find out they cannot progress. They are suck because they have not read widely enough. They are not able to theorise, formulate or even apply models. They get stuck and you cannot but guide them and work them up. Yes, they do have liminal period. They are not taught how to do research very well. They have a problem with conceptualisation.”

This supports the argument of Kiley (2009) which emphasizes the role of research culture and research community in passing over the conceptual threshold.

The researcher also got a slightly different view. “I will not say they get into liminality. Because when something like that is about to happen. I get them working. They engage in literature quite early. I ask them to do literature awareness (review about 200 articles) before work gets started.”

This finding also aligns with the works of Shanahan & Meyer (2006), which highlights the benefits of early exposure to research complexities.

The questionnaire analysis revealed that out of the 30 questionnaires that were distributed, all were received back, out of which two were not well completed. Majority of the respondents 41% were below the age of 40 years while 39% were below 50 years and 20% over 50 years. All the questionnaire analysed were filled by members of the faculty of business administration and were all admitted in the 2021/2022 cohort /academic year.

They had all completed their course work and were all aware of the graduation condition.

## Feelings about the graduation condition

None of the students found this easy. At first, they did not believe it would be enforced. Some said it was difficult to accept especially when the papers were meant to be published in an impact factor journal.

“This decision is a very tough one. We are expected to publish in journals with impact factor. This is not easy. Your paper must be of quality before they can accept it.”

“It was difficult to accept because it is a very challenging decision and could even extend the duration of ones stay here. You must be good to be able to publish in these journals.”

Some of the students liked the idea because they feel it will challenge them and bring out the best in them.

“This is to make us become real researchers, and it is quite tough though. I like the challenge”.

## Feeling of stuckness

The questionnaire contained some lines to explain doctorateness, liminality and stuckness before probing for this feeling of stuckness and at what stage they had experienced this feeling. Most of them had experienced stuckness in the course of writing their thesis. Some at the early stage even with choosing a topic and problematizing it, some at literature level, some at the level of methodology and most at the stage of generating suitable theory and constructs to be used as the specific objective of the thesis.

They had all started working on their papers for publication except for one person. Majority of them also experienced stuckness at this level. “Serious one” majority of them wrote”.

“This is no play, and you must bend down and do a good job. Otherwise, your paper will not be accepted. I just had to find a way out”.

“These journals want to see good work. They want to see you play with theories and show you are a true researcher before they can consider your work, so it took a lot from me. I was contemplating giving up, but I had gone far to go back”.

“Writing for publication is another tough one, it took me time before I could progress. I had to work.”

It was like they were experiencing liminality all over again, in order to write for publishing. They feel it is even more robust than doing their thesis. They are generally aware of the requirements of a good doctorate. They know they must theorise and be able to produce a coherent piece. However, there is an excellent feeling of stuckness that comes with publishing. This is in line with the finding of Badenhost and Amell(2019), who found that when the candidates are not grounded in research they may experience the feeling of stuckness. Kiley (2015), also found that when the candidates do not engage well with literature and theories, they are bound to be stuck. Though all the respondents complained about the inability to access good quality journals.

## Managing stuckness

Many of them already knew the way out of their stuckness. They resorted to discussion with the academics, getting immersed in literature some also mentioned going into collaboration with a senior colleague. It was good to learn some had published a paper. This finding is in line with McKenna (2016), who found that collaboration with others goes a long way to help in threshold crossing

## Conclusion

This study on the implication of the new condition for graduation as a doctoral student in UNN makes us conclude that the graduation condition nudges doctoral candidates into liminality and towards doctorateness. It highlights an evolution of the doctoral program through a deeper theoretical engagement, research methodologies and knowledge contribution. The study also finds that early exposure to literature assist candidates to crossover the conceptual threshold without necessarily entering liminality. This new method fosters a deeper mastery of the research process will also impact on the outcome. Focusing on doctorateness highlights the cruciality of developing research skills and critical reasoning which will also enhance the scholarly identity of the doctoral candidate. It can also be concluded that supervisory pedagogy also plays a significant role in the crossing over of the conceptual threshold and achieving doctorateness.

### **Recommendation and further studies.**

It is therefore recommended that the institutions should adopt an institution wide supervisory pedagogy that exposes doctoral students to literature (theorizing) quite early as a means of minimizing the occurrence of liminality. Development of doctorateness should be prioritised through deep engagement with literature and research methodology. This can be achieved through formation of research communities where research is discussed and resources are shared; workshops for doctoral candidates to highlight these challenges and ways of overcoming them and encouraging candidates to be part of the discussion.

There should be continuous training of supervisors on best practices of supervisory pedagogy that will reduce or even eliminate liminality and ensure doctorateness. Faculty and supervisors should provide the required guidance and needed support to navigate the complex process involved in research, example -collaboration. Doctoral students should also be engaged in workshops where they are made aware of these concepts early in their journey.

Efforts should be in place to ensure recommendations such as the Salzburg II are adopted and used in Nigerian institutions especially those that offer higher education. And especially endeavour to provide access to good quality publications

Further studies could also explore how different research pedagogies can affect the journey to doctorateness. Studies could also examine if variation in discipline has any effect on this journey and becoming doctorate.

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