



Power and Standardisation in Doctoral Education: A Gramscian Perspective on South Africa's NQF and CHE Policies

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Abstract

In this article, the descriptors of the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) Level 10 and the Council on Higher Education (CHE) doctoral attributes in South Africa are critically explored using the concept of cultural hegemony by Antonio Gramsci. The study employs a comparative analytical approach to reveal the power and ideological dynamics of these frameworks as Gramsci understood culture as a practice, not as a value system. Document analysis and thematic comparison reveal how these standards reflect and may even challenge current structures of hegemony in doctoral education. The NQF Level 10 descriptors maintain standardisation based on traditional academic excellence concepts, while the CHE doctoral attributes redefine doctoral education to embrace social responsibility and contextual relevance. Gramsci's educational theory requires us to consider both conformity and spontaneity when we analyse these frameworks. We argue that even though these frameworks are necessary to organise doctoral education in South Africa, they can become hegemonic and limit the organic and dynamic nature of cultural and pedagogical processes. Our proposal for a transformative strategy for doctoral education engages critically with these frameworks while allowing for spontaneous and other kinds of knowledge.

Keywords: CHE doctoral attributes, cultural hegemony, doctoral education, NQF Level 10, power dynamics.

Introduction

Since 2018, South Africa has reached an annual production of 59 PhDs per million people (Khuluvhe & Netshifhefhe, 2023). However, the figure remains significantly below the target of one hundred PhD graduates per million people by 2030 (DHET, 2019). The disparity in doctoral graduation rates compared to DHET targets impacts educational success as well as other aspects that shape doctoral education throughout the country. According to the studies by Cloete et al (2015) and Nerad (2011), PhD programmes are essential to national and international development since they serve as core elements in the modern competitive world. This global imperative has manifested distinctively within the South African context, as evidenced by Tshuma & Bitzer (2023), who argue that South Africa's doctoral education transformation resulted from its educational

heritage and present situation, the expansion of post-industrial information capitalism, globalisation, and digitalisation factors. Seemingly, the pressures created by modern educational demands have transformed doctoral education while introducing complex new challenges due to conflicts between the volume of research output and quality standards. Waghid (2015) warns that doctoral research is turning into a technical exercise to increase throughput, which threatens to reduce the emphasis on developing essential research attributes and competencies. According to Burton et al. (2022), doctoral programmes should aim to nurture graduates who demonstrate critical engagement with their work while maintaining reflective practices. Furthermore, PhD programmes should transcend measurement-based evaluation to encourage competent researchers who can contribute to science and society.

Doctoral education in South Africa is guided by two major frameworks namely the National Qualifications Framework Level 10 descriptors and the Council on Higher Education doctoral standards. The South African Qualifications Authority established the National Qualifications Framework, which serves as an extensive structure for national education and training at every level (Combrink, 2022). Doctoral graduates are supposed to meet the detailed expectations and competencies of NQF Level 10 (SAQA, 2012), which serves as the quality benchmark for doctoral programmes throughout South Africa, while the CHE (2018) has established specific attributes that outline essential knowledge and skills necessary for doctoral graduates (Grossman & Crowther, 2020). The defined attributes extend past NQF standards to deliver a comprehensive perspective on what makes a doctoral graduate fully trained and competent. The NQF and CHE frameworks work together to improve and standardise doctoral student experiences.

The current frameworks that influence doctoral education in South Africa appear to be a noble initiative for personal and national development, but one wonders what Antonio Gramsci would think if he could examine these structures today. If Gramsci, who passed away in 1937, could evaluate today's educational frameworks, he would scrutinise their underlying decisions and imposed directions. The frameworks demonstrate potential benefits for improving both efficiency and quality in doctoral education. Gramsci (1971) maintained that these elements function within power structures which control higher education systems and represent what he defined as hegemony:

The 'spontaneous' consent of the great mass of the population to the general direction imposed on social life by the dominant basic group; this consent is 'historically' conditioned by the prestige (and consequent confidence) enjoyed by the dominant group by virtue of its position and function in the world of production (Gramsci, 1971, p. 12).

Gramsci asserts that dominating societal groups direct political activities and social

practices through organisation and influence. These groups maintain control through force and by establishing accepted cultural norms and ideas which become perceived as "common sense" (Gramsci, 1971). Several societal aspects, like educational institutions and their governing laws are influenced by the theory of cultural hegemony. Gramsci's theories challenge us to explore whether South African doctoral education frameworks reflect and reinforce current power structures. These systems appear to uphold standards and uniformity, yet function as mechanisms that sustain existing educational hierarchies, which restrict innovative practices in doctoral studies and research.

The influence of both the CHE and NQF on South African doctoral education allows Gramsci's cultural hegemony concept to analyse how higher education institutions implement dominant societal values in their policies and practices. Analysing doctoral characteristics frameworks can reveal their embedded power structures and ideologies while showing how they create possibilities and suppress diverse perspectives through hegemonic influence. Within Gramsci's theoretical framework exists the potential for counter-hegemonic resistance in doctoral education. Through critical analysis of the embedded assumptions and ideals within these frameworks, PhD candidates and supervisors can challenge dominant narratives and create new ways of thinking and living. Doctoral education systems can develop new frameworks that focus on equitable access and social justice while acknowledging PhD graduates' diverse societal contributions outside academic fields.

We begin by reviewing South African doctoral education literature to understand its historical progression and present challenges, as well as the effects of NQF and CHE structures on doctoral education frameworks. A comparative analytical technique combined with document analysis and theme comparison, as well as Gramsci's cultural hegemony notions, is used to critically examine the NQF Level 10 descriptors and CHE doctoral attributes. The outcomes reveal how frameworks relate to one another through similarities and differences and uncover existing gaps in these frameworks. We conclude by

emphasising the need for innovative frameworks alongside a novel doctoral education proposal which contests existing power structures to enable active critical involvement and the generation of democratised knowledge.

The scholarship of doctoral education in South Africa

The history of doctoral education in South Africa has been complexly moulded by apartheid's lasting effects and current transformation development challenges. Before South Africa's democratic transition in 1994, doctoral education remained exclusive to a limited group of privileged white males. The post-apartheid era has been marked by major initiatives to broaden doctoral education access and grow the number of doctoral graduates from groups that were marginalised during apartheid (Cloete *et al.*, 2015).

But various attempts have not yet overcome South Africa's considerable difficulties with both the volume and calibre of their doctoral graduates. South Africa graduated 3,445 doctoral students in 2019 which amounted to 0.06 per 1,000 people according to the Department of Higher Education and Training's 2021 report. South Africa's graduation rate is significantly below the global average of 1.5 per 1,000 population and remains much lower than the rates observed in developed countries such as the United States, with 2.5 per 1,000 population, and the United Kingdom, with 3.1 per 1,000 population (OECD, 2021). The quality and relevance of South African doctoral education face scrutiny as many graduates lack the necessary skills to support national development and to compete globally (Cloete *et al.*, 2015). The South African government has implemented several policy measures and frameworks to enhance both the numbers and standards of doctoral education. Since its introduction in 1995, the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) has served as an extensive structure for education and training at every level throughout the nation and incorporates doctoral studies (SAQA, 2012). The NQF Level 10 defines the required outcomes and skills for doctoral graduates to act as a standard for maintaining

uniformity and excellence in different doctoral programmes.

Together with the NQF's framework, the Council on Higher Education (CHE) has played an essential role in developing South Africa's doctoral education landscape. Quality assurance and promotion in higher education is the responsibility of the CHE, which created a framework for doctoral attributes that specify essential knowledge, skills and qualities for doctoral graduates (CHE, 2018). The attributes extend beyond the NQF's broad standards to offer a detailed and nuanced description of what makes a complete and capable doctoral graduate. The NQF and CHE frameworks help improve quality and standardise doctoral education, but they also risk maintaining dominant practices while excluding different viewpoints. Boughey and McKenna (2021) state that both the NQF and CHE frameworks represent knowledge and skills through a limited Western-centric perspective that emphasises individualism and market-driven principles. They suggest that these frameworks may not adequately recognise or value the diverse knowledge systems and ways of knowing that exist in South Africa, particularly those of indigenous and marginalised communities (Boughey & McKenna, 2021). Similarly, Maton (2014) contends that the NQF and CHE frameworks are shaped by the dominant discourse of the "knowledge economy," which emphasises the instrumental value of knowledge for economic growth and competitiveness. This discourse, he argues, may disregard other ways of understanding the purpose and value of doctoral education, such as its role in promoting social justice, critical thinking, and democratic citizenship.

These critiques highlight the need for a critical examination of the power dynamics and ideologies that shape doctoral education in South Africa. Gramsci's concept of cultural hegemony provides a useful theoretical lens for interrogating the NQF and CHE frameworks and uncovering the ways in which they may perpetuate hegemony practices.

Cultural hegemony: A theoretical framework for analysis

The concept of cultural hegemony developed by Gramsci (1971) provides valuable insights into how powerful groups sustain their societal control. Gramsci perceived culture to be a dynamic combination of daily practices rather than an unchanging system of values. According to Gramsci, culture functions as a societal activity which combines personal reflection on actions with an awareness of external reality. The concept presents a challenge to the notion that culture belongs only to an educated elite or represents a fixed system of values.

The ancient Greek word “heghestai”, meaning “to direct or lead”, serves as the linguistic root for the term “hegemony”, which evolved into “eghemon”, a title for leaders within Greek city-state alliances (Wilkinson, 2008). The term hegemony signifies dominance but also encapsulates its active role as a leadership process that provides direction. In Gramsci’s view, cultural hegemony refers to those aspects of cultural activity, including, but not limited to, formal education, that occupy leadership positions and attract people. Indeed, every hegemony relationship is in some way an educational relationship.

Gramsci’s concept of cultural hegemony is a powerful tool for understanding how dominant groups maintain their power and influence in different areas of society (Hall, 1986; Laclau & Mouffe, 1985; Lears, 1985). From this perspective, hegemony refers to the cultural, moral and ideological leadership exercised by the ruling class over subordinate groups (Gramsci, 1971). Leadership is not achieved solely through coercion or force, but rather through the manufacturing of consent, whereby the values, beliefs and norms of the dominant group are internalised by the wider society and accepted as “common sense” (Lears, 1985). The concept of hegemony is based on the idea that power is exercised not only by the state and its institutions, but also by civil society, which includes various non-government actors such as the media, religious organisations, educational institutions and cultural associations (Forgacs, 2000). These actors serve as key figures in

defining societal ideology while supporting the dominant group’s worldview.

Hegemony functions through a multifaceted network of social connections and institutional practices which influence how individuals and groups perceive the world (Gramsci, 1971). Indeed, the influence of hegemony permeates various aspects of society. One of the most significant spheres is education, where educational institutions, from primary school to university, play an important role in reproducing and legitimising the values and beliefs of the dominant group (Mayo, 2014). Through curriculum, pedagogy and assessment practices, educational institutions can shape students’ worldviews and maintain hegemonic norms (Apple, 2013).

Beyond the classroom, the media utilises news outlets together with the entertainment industry and social media platforms to exert substantial control over public opinion and discourse. Specifically, the media maintains existing power structures by framing issues in specific ways, which strengthens mainstream narratives while pushing alternative views to the margins (Herman & Chomsky, 1988). Similarly, religious institutions and beliefs serve as tools for dominant groups to legitimise their power structures while maintaining societal control. Religious organisations have the power to establish societal ideological frameworks by endorsing specific ethical standards which serve to uphold hegemonic norms (Fulton, 1987).

In addition to these institutions, cultural institutions such as museums, art galleries and performance venues can also be sites of hegemonic influence. By privileging certain forms of cultural expression and marginalising others, these institutions can shape public taste and reinforce dominant cultural norms (Bourdieu, 1984). Finally, political institutions and processes, including elections, policy making and public discourse, are shaped by hegemonic influences. Through these mechanisms, dominant groups leverage their economic and cultural power to steer political agendas and craft public opinion to sustain their power and privilege (Gramsci, 1971).

Gramsci acknowledged that hegemonic power remains always imperfect and incomplete. There is, too, the possibility of resistance or counter-hegemony. The Soweto Riots of 1976 and the #Falloist movements of 2016 in South Africa, for example, are expressions of counter-hegemony. Alternative worldviews and practices can and do displace entrenched practices. Gramsci argued that subordinate groups can challenge hegemonic norms through a process of “positional warfare” in which they build up their own cultural and ideological resources to challenge the leadership of the dominant group (Gramsci, 1971). The situation creates educational opportunities which enable people to examine the world critically and influence social transformation.

Gramsci maintains that educational institutions are essential for preserving and reproducing hegemonic structures within society. Schools and universities are not neutral spaces but rather places where dominant ideologies are transmitted and legitimised (Gramsci, 1971). Educational policies and frameworks such as the NQF Level 10 and the CHE doctoral attributes can be seen as manifestations of hegemony as they define what is considered legitimate knowledge, skills and competencies.

The tension between conformity and spontaneity in education, according to Gramsci, holds significant relevance for our analysis. Educational systems need conformity during basic learning phases to establish mental structures which later allow for spontaneous thought and critical analysis at advanced stages. The perspective presented here claims that doctoral education ought to be an environment which allows students to advance past simple conformity toward authentic critical analysis. Frameworks like the NQF and CHE standardisation conflict with Gramsci’s view of culture because they eliminate the dynamic cognitive and moral aspects he envisioned.

Methodology: A comparative analytical approach

The main argument of this article is based on the use of a full comparative analysis technique to examine the NQF Level 10 standards and the CHE doctoral characteristics. This technique is

used to examine how two different frameworks shape the landscape of doctoral education in South Africa and to identify their function as instruments of cultural hegemony in terms of Gramscian theory (1971).

The comprehensive document analysis represents the key element of the research approach. The basis for this approach rests on the understanding that official documents function as social constructs that both reflect and reinforce existing power dynamics, rather than being objective artefacts (Bowen, 2009). We look at the key materials that set the CHE and NQF Level 10 standards. These documents include policy documents, frameworks and academic literature relevant to this process. According to Braun and Clarke (2006), this technique enables a detailed understanding of the conceptual and practical differences and similarities that exist between the two frameworks.

Analysing the documents requires a careful examination of both the language and structure as well as the content of these texts. The analysis aims to uncover the underlying assumptions and ideological forces behind the creation of these frameworks. Gramsci’s concept of hegemony suggests that dominant groups maintain their power through both violent means and the creation of cultural consensus, which fits with the comparative method approach. We identify the ways in which frameworks contribute to the naturalisation of certain expectations and values in doctoral education by analysing the ways in which certain topics are prioritised, defined and operationalised in the frameworks (Mouffe, 2014).

To complement the document analysis, we use a thematic method to explore key concepts such as ‘quality assurance’, ‘doctoral competences’ and ‘educational outcomes.’ Document analysis in conjunction with theme comparison is a powerful method for gaining full knowledge of the function of these criteria within doctoral education (Morgan, 2022). However, it is important to be aware of the limitations associated with this practice. In the absence of data, such as interviews or surveys of the parties involved in the creation or implementation of the frameworks, there is a lack of information. The lack of direct

input from people affected by the frameworks limits its ability to document their experiences and viewpoints (Bowen, 2009).

By applying this dual methodological approach, our study contributes significantly to developing a critical understanding of how these

standards operate in the wider context of doctoral education and the role they may play in maintaining or challenging existing power structures. This comprehensive assessment is essential for the formulation of coherent and effective guidelines for doctoral standards that are cognisant of their potential hegemonic functions.

Documents as ‘data’: The NQF Level 10 descriptors and CHE doctoral attributes (truncated version)

NQF Level 10 DESCRIPTORS	CHE DESCRIPTORS
Scope of knowledge	Broad, well-informed, and current knowledge of field or discipline
Knowledge literacy	Expert, specialised, and in-depth current knowledge of specific area of research
Method and procedure	Evaluation, selection and application of appropriate research approaches, methodologies, and processes
Problem solving	Critical and analytical thinking for problem-solving
Ethics and professional practice	Ethical awareness in research and professional conduct
Accessing, processing and managing information	Not directly equivalent
Producing and communicating information	Communication skills, including relevant information and digital literacy skills
Context and systems	Insight into the interconnectedness of one’s topic of research with other cognate fields
Management of learning	Reflection and autonomy
Accountability	An original contribution to the field of study

Findings of the thematic comparison of NQF level 10 descriptors and CHE doctoral attributes

The comparison of the NQF Level 10 descriptors and the CHE doctoral attributes reveals a complex interplay of standards, expectations and ideological underpinnings in South African doctoral education. This comparison, viewed through the lens of Gramsci’s concept of cultural hegemony, reveals how these frameworks function as instruments of power that shape the landscape of higher education and reinforce dominant narratives (Gramsci, 1971; Mayo, 2015).

Both frameworks emphasise the pursuit of academic excellence and require doctoral students to demonstrate advanced knowledge and undertake original research that makes a significant contribution to their field. This shared emphasis on innovation and knowledge creation is consistent with global trends in doctoral education (Nerad & Evans, 2014). However, the apparent consensus on what constitutes “excellence” in

doctoral education requires critical scrutiny. The emphasis on “original contribution” in both frameworks, while seemingly neutral, can be seen as a mechanism for reproducing existing power structures in academia. As Bourdieu (1988) argues, the definition of what constitutes “original” or “significant” research is often determined by those who already hold positions of power in academic fields. This raises the question of whose knowledge is valued and what types of contributions are recognised as legitimate.

Both the NQF level 10 descriptors and the CHE doctoral attributes emphasise the importance of a solid theoretical and methodological foundation. Doctoral students are expected to have a deep understanding of existing theories and methods in their field and to apply them innovatively. However, this emphasis on established methods and theories can potentially reinforce existing paradigms at the expense of alternative or marginalised perspectives. As Connell (2007) argues in “Southern Theory”, the global knowledge economy often privileges theories and methods developed in the global

North, potentially marginalising indigenous knowledge systems and alternative epistemologies. This raises critical questions about whose theories and methods are privileged in this framework and whether they really enable the development of diverse and context-specific knowledge production.

Both frameworks recognise the importance of interdisciplinary collaboration and effective communication skills. This is in line with the global trend towards more collaborative and interdisciplinary research (Lyall *et al.*, 2015). However, these frameworks often fail to recognise the power dynamics inherent in interdisciplinary collaboration. As Frodeman *et al.* (2017) emphasise, interdisciplinary research is often about negotiations of power and prestige between different disciplines. The emphasis on interdisciplinarity in frameworks, while ostensibly progressive, can inadvertently reinforce existing hierarchies between disciplines, particularly favouring those disciplines that are more aligned with dominant economic and political interests.

While the NQF Level 10 descriptors provide a broad, national framework that applies to all doctoral disciplines, the CHE doctoral attributes provide a more contextualised and specific set of expectations. This different approach reflects a broader debate in higher education about the balance between standardisation and contextualisation (Teichler, 2014). The broader approach of the NQF aims to ensure uniform academic quality between institutions and is thus in line with the global trend towards standardisation in higher education (Amaral *et al.*, 2009). However, standardisation may lead to a homogenisation of doctoral education, potentially erasing important disciplinary and contextual differences. In contrast, the CHE attributes are tailored to the unique educational and social context of South Africa and address issues of social justice and historical inequalities. This approach is in line with calls for more contextualised and socially responsible higher education (Singh, 2011). However, it also raises questions about how these more specific attributes can be interpreted and implemented in different institutions and disciplines.

A notable difference between the frameworks is the CHE doctoral attributes' explicit emphasis on social and ethical responsibility, leadership and citizenship. This emphasis reflects a growing global trend that emphasises the broader societal impact of doctoral education (Nerad, 2015). However, it also raises critical questions about the role of higher education in society and the potential instrumentalisation of doctoral education for national development goals. As Manathunga (2017) argues, the emphasis on the production of "useful" knowledge and socially responsible graduates can be seen as part of a neoliberal agenda aimed at linking higher education more closely to economic and political goals. This raises important questions about academic freedom and the autonomy of researchers to pursue lines of research that may not align with predetermined notions of social utility or national development.

The CHE doctoral attributes explicitly mention technological competence, whereas the NQF Level 10 descriptors do not. This difference reflects broader debates about the role of technology in doctoral education and research (Dowling & Wilson, 2017). While the inclusion of technological literacy in the CHE attributes recognises the growing importance of digital skills in academic and professional contexts, it also raises questions about a potential digital divide and unequal access to technological resources among doctoral students.

This comparative analysis shows that while both frameworks aim to guide and shape doctoral education in South Africa, they do so in ways that reflect and potentially reinforce existing power structures within academia and society. The convergences between the frameworks often align with global trends in doctoral education and potentially reinforce a homogenised, globally dominant model of what constitutes "excellent" doctoral education. The divergences, particularly the more contextualised and socially oriented approach of the CHE, reflect attempts to address specific national concerns and historical inequalities. However, these attempts are partial and can be seen as part of a broader political and economic agenda. Ultimately, this analysis emphasises the need for continued critical

examination of the doctoral education framework. As instruments of cultural hegemony, these frameworks play a crucial role in shaping not only individual doctoral trajectories but also the broader landscape of knowledge production and dissemination in South Africa and beyond.

Discussion: Hegemony in doctoral education frameworks

The standardisation inherent in both the NQF Level 10 descriptors and the CHE doctoral characteristics poses a particular challenge if Gramsci's understanding of culture as a dynamic practice is taken as a basis. Whilst these frameworks aim to ensure quality and consistency, there is a danger that they act as what Gramsci might see as a straitjacket that stifles the dynamic nature of culture. This standardisation may contradict Gramsci's vision of organic intellectuals constructing progressive educational processes in collaboration with the dominant classes.

The NQF Level 10 descriptors, with their broad and generic nature, can be seen as a manifestation of this cultural hegemony. They provide a one-size-fits-all approach to doctoral studies, which may not fully capture the diverse and complex realities of different disciplines and contexts. By presenting a standardised set of criteria, they risk privileging certain forms of knowledge and ways of knowing over others, thereby reinforcing the dominant cultural consensus.

In contrast, the CHE Doctoral Attributes, with their specific and contextually relevant focus, can be seen as a challenge to this cultural hegemony. By placing a stronger emphasis on social and ethical responsibility, leadership, and citizenship, they explicitly acknowledge the role that doctoral graduates play in shaping society beyond the confines of academia. This emphasis on the broader social impact of research is a direct challenge to the notion of knowledge for knowledge's sake, which is often associated with the dominant cultural consensus. Furthermore, the CHE doctoral attributes explicitly mention technological literacy, which is a recognition of the increasing importance of technology in shaping our world and the need for doctoral graduates to be equipped with the skills and knowledge necessary

to navigate this rapidly changing landscape. This emphasis on technological literacy can be seen as a challenge to the traditional notion of the ivory tower, where academia is seen as a separate and isolated realm from the rest of society.

The thematic comparison also reveals potential gaps and limitations in both frameworks. For example, neither framework adequately addresses issues of access, equity, and social justice in doctoral education. There is also limited attention given to the role of doctoral graduates in contributing to social change and transformation beyond the academy.

Gramsci's concept of cultural hegemony reveals the power dynamics and ideologies that shape doctoral education in South Africa. Both frameworks can be seen as manifestations of hegemonic power, as they define what counts as legitimate knowledge, skills, and competencies for doctoral graduates. The NQF Level 10 descriptors, with their broad and generic scope, reflect a dominant narrative that privileges traditional notions of academic excellence and research productivity. While these are undoubtedly important aspects of doctoral education, the framework may marginalise alternative perspectives and approaches that do not fit within this narrow definition of success.

The CHE doctoral attributes, on the other hand, represent an attempt to broaden the conception of doctoral education beyond the traditional focus on research skills and knowledge production. The inclusion of attributes such as social and ethical responsibility, leadership, and citizenship reflects a recognition of the wider social and political context in which doctoral graduates operate. However, the framework still operates within a hegemonic system that may limit its transformative potential. From a Gramscian perspective, the gaps and limitations identified in both frameworks can be seen as opportunities for counter-hegemonic resistance and transformative doctoral education. By critically engaging with the assumptions and values embedded in these frameworks, doctoral students and educators can challenge dominant narratives and create alternative ways of thinking and being.

Challenging the frameworks may involve reconceptualising doctoral education as a site of social and political struggle, where knowledge production is not an end but rather a means of contributing to social change and transformation. It may also involve developing new models of doctoral education that prioritise access, equity, and social justice, and that recognise the diverse ways in which doctoral graduates can contribute to society beyond the academy, highlighting the potential for counter-hegemonic resistance and transformative doctoral education. By critically engaging with the assumptions and values embedded in these frameworks, doctoral students and educators can challenge dominant narratives and create alternative ways of thinking and being.

A South African response to the Gramscian perspective: A necessary hegemony

In the context of South Africa as a developing country seeking to improve its intellectual capital, the introduction of standardised frameworks for doctoral education, such as the NQF Level 10 descriptors and the CHE doctoral attributes, cannot be seen as oppressive hegemony instruments, but as necessary mechanisms for national development and global competitiveness. South Africa's approach to doctoral education needs to be understood in the broader context of post-apartheid transformation. As Badat (2010) argues, higher education in South Africa has been charged with multiple, often competing objectives: promoting equity and social justice, producing highly skilled labour for the economy and creating knowledge for global competitiveness. In this context, the standardisation of doctoral education has a critical function in raising the overall level of intellectuals in the country. The framework created by the NQF and CHE can be seen as an attempt to create what Gramsci (1971) called "organic intellectuals", namely, individuals who can articulate the interests and experiences of their social group and contribute to social change. By setting clear standards and expectations for postgraduate students, South Africa is actively working to develop a cadre of highly skilled intellectuals who can contribute to national development in various fields.

The need for standards and criteria to ensure a minimum level of competence in doctoral students is not unique to South Africa. As Nerad and Heggelund (2008) point out in their global study on doctoral education, countries worldwide are struggling with the question of how to ensure the quality and relevance of doctoral education. In this context, the NQF level 10 descriptors and the CHE doctoral attributes serve as crucial quality assurance mechanisms. These frameworks provide a common language and set of expectations for what constitutes doctoral-level work. This standardisation is particularly important in a country like South Africa, where the higher education terrain is characterised by significant differences which can be traced to the legacy of the apartheid era (Cloete *et al.*, 2015). By setting clear benchmarks, these frameworks help to ensure that a doctoral degree from any South African institution meets certain minimum standards, thereby promoting equity and improving the overall quality of doctoral education in the country.

While it is important to critically examine the influences of hegemony in educational frameworks, it is equally important to recognise that certain norms are necessary "levels" that fulfil important functions. As Bourdieu (1986) argues, educational systems inevitably involve the transmission of cultural capital. In the case of doctoral education, academic cultural capital includes specific methodological skills, theoretical knowledge and academic conventions that are recognised and valued globally. The reliance on methods, theories and dissertation components that align with Western norms can be seen as a pragmatic approach in the current global academic environment. As Connell (2007) notes, while it is important to challenge the dominance of Northern theories, engagement with these established norms enables scholars from the global South to participate in and influence global academic discourses.

It is true that the current framework for doctoral education in South Africa is heavily based on Western models. However, as Mbembe (2016) points out, the project of decolonising higher education is complex and ongoing. In the absence of a fully developed decolonising model of

doctoral education, working within existing structures and gradually transforming them may be the most effective way forward. This approach is in line with what Santos (2014) refers to as “epistemologies of the South”, forms of knowledge that challenge the dominance of Western epistemologies while engaging with them. The CHE doctoral attributes, with their emphasis on social responsibility and contextual relevance, can be seen as a step in this direction.

Rather than viewing these frameworks with scepticism or as hidden agendas, they can be seen as enablers that support graduates to make a difference in their country and compete internationally. As Cloete et al (2015) argue, quality doctoral education is critical to South Africa’s development and its ability to participate in the global knowledge economy. The emphasis on rigour and quality in these frameworks ensures that South African doctoral students can perform on par with their international counterparts. This is particularly important given the historical marginalisation of African scholarship in global academic discourses (Nyamnjoh, 2012).

Conclusion

While it is important to critically examine Western hegemony in doctoral education frameworks, it is equally crucial to recognise their potential as tools for national development and transformation. As Singh (2011) argues, social justice in higher education is not just about access, but also about the ability to succeed and excel. By setting clear standards and expectations, South Africa is working to ensure that its doctoral graduates are not only numerous but also capable of producing high-quality, internationally recognised research. This approach, while not without its challenges, represents a necessary step in South Africa’s journey towards becoming a key player in the global knowledge economy while also addressing its unique national development needs. In the words of Castells (2017), in the network society, exclusion from the global networks of knowledge production is perhaps the most damaging form of exclusion. By aligning its doctoral education with global standards while also emphasising local relevance and social responsibility, South Africa is working to ensure

its inclusion and active participation in these global networks.

The frameworks for doctoral education in South Africa should thus be seen not as rigid constraints, but as dynamic tools that can be continuously refined and adapted. They provide a necessary structure and common language for doctoral education, while also leaving room for innovation, critique, and the gradual incorporation of decolonial perspectives. In this way, they serve as a bridge between the current realities of global academia and the aspirational goal of a truly transformed and locally relevant higher education system.

The analysis of the NQF Level 10 descriptors and CHE doctoral attributes through the lens of cultural hegemony reveals the complex ways in which power operates in doctoral education. While these frameworks can reinforce dominant narratives and power structures, they also contain elements that challenge traditional academic hegemony. By critically engaging with these frameworks and the gaps within them, there is potential to develop more transformative approaches to doctoral education. Such approaches would not only produce high-quality research but also contribute to broader social change and the development of a more equitable and just society.

The challenge, from a Gramscian perspective, is to reconcile the practical need for educational standards with the realisation that culture, and therefore doctoral education, should remain a dynamic, evolving process. While frameworks provide the necessary structure, they must not stifle the spontaneity and critical reflection that Gramsci saw as essential to higher education. The key may lie in viewing these frameworks not as rigid prescriptions, but as flexible guidelines that can evolve through the cultural practices they are intended to shape. As Gramsci (1971) reminds us, hegemony is never complete or stable. It is constantly being negotiated and contested. In the realm of doctoral education, this contestation offers opportunities for reimagining what a PhD can be and do in the 21st Century.

Disclosure

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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