Appendix F1 Additional Data and Documents

Doctoral Student Focus Group

- A focus group led by Alison Bucholz and Dorothy Stevens met on 18 February 2020.
- Three SU doctoral students signed consent forms permitting us to conduct the discussion and use their feedback in the report.
- The National Review of Doctoral Degrees was explained to the group.
- The process of writing the SER was also described.
- The Graduate Attributes were introduced to the group.

The following worksheet guided the discussion:

Focus group discussion topic: *Doctoral education at Stellenbosch University (SU)*

Preamble

The Council for Higher Education (CHE) announced a National Review of Doctoral Degrees in July 2019. Our Postgraduate Office is coordinating the SU institutional report and the process encompassing the Review. To date, we have consulted across all faculties and gained an institutional perspective. However, in order to round out the view we have of doctoral education at Stellenbosch University, we need to add the perspective of doctoral students.

Purpose of the Focus Group Discussion

The purpose of this focus group discussion is to gather your inputs and gain insights into your experience as doctoral candidate at Stellenbosch University. Institutional, supervisory and personal barriers and successes will be discussed in order to identify processes and mechanism that are currently working, as well as where better practices can be developed.

GUIDING QUESTIONS OUTLINE

1. Institutional support

- What institutional supports/interventions/resources have you accessed/completed? (E.g. workshops, seminars, etc.)

- Any challenges?

- Any gaps in support? What did you need from the start that was lacking?

- How did you go about solving any issues?

- Have you had inter-disciplinary exposure/engagements to expand your knowledge?

2. Supervisory support and guidance

- Did you discuss and sign an MoU? Revisit it at intervals?

- What has your experience re: your supervision been?

- Are you clear on what is required of a PhD? Doctoral attributes?

- Have you been allowed to grow your independence? How?

- Have you discussed/are you clear on what 'an original contribution' entails?

- Have you had opportunities to attend conferences (local/abroad)?

- Opportunities to acquire science communication skills (relaying your research to industry or lay audiences)?

- Other opportunities? (e.g. teaching/lecturing) - How have they contributed to your doctoral growth?

- What has your experience w.r.t. research integrity/ethical awareness and the ethics clearance process been? Describe the guidance you received.

- W.r.t. Examination preparation and support, do you know what to expect w.r.t. your dissertation examination and oral defense?

3. Your suggestions on how the quality of SU doctoral candidates' education can be improved?

Summary feedback from the SU doctoral students focus group

The supervisor-student relationship has been critical in helping this group enjoy a good doctoral journey thus far. They have all had a good experience but cautioned that there were others who do not. A good working relationship with one's supervisor is not one thing. Some candidates are given a lot of freedom while others are more closely monitored. In the group, one student was in the habit of signing an annual agreement with her supervisor in order to release her stipend. Another student had never signed a student-supervisor MoU. However, it was clear from the discussion that she did share a common understanding with her supervisor about what was required, a timeline, progression, etc. She was encouraged to discuss the student-supervisor MoU with her supervisor since this is now a mandatory document at SU. The third student signed a student-supervisor MoU for the first time in 2020 even though she is in the third year of her PhD. She found the exercise to be really useful, especially in terms of giving and getting a time commitment for feedback on work done.

All three students feel that they know 'more or less' where they are going with their research but that they are all dependent on the feedback that they are receiving to know that they are still on the right track and even more importantly, that their work is still capable of making an original contribution. There is a tension in this because the nature of doctoral study can mean that the student begins to surpass the supervisor in terms of their knowledge about a particular specialised area and then who do you go to for guidance? This is of course, all part of the necessary development of independence but it can be quite scary.

Each student is pursuing a different format of dissertation. One is completing a monograph, another is preparing a monograph but publishing one or two publications and one is preparing several publications which will be combined into her dissertation. However, none of the group felt that they had a clear idea what to expect from their PhD examination. They all knew that they are aiming to make an original contribution or contribute some new knowledge but they felt that what examiners would expect was not explicit. One student mentioned the emotional rollercoaster of getting her first paper published. It was such a 'big deal' and now it is difficult to work up to the next one. Another mentioned the value of peer-review of her journal article which was feeding into her dissertation and also guiding her enquiry.

All three students have a main and a co-supervisor. In one case, the student had very little to do with her co-supervisor until just before an event where she needed to present her work. This proved to be a bit stressful but worked out well when she realized that he was informed about her work and was supportive. Another student felt that her supervisor almost trusts her too much. She gave an example of how she didn't know that she had to make her own arrangements to defend her proposal and found out quite late. Fortunately it went well but it would have been better had this been made clearer to her. She felt that not all students would cope equally well without clearer guidance and therefore this is something which could be improved more generally in her department. The intensity and seriousness of the research proposal defence differs between faculties. These students reported that others have become stuck at this stage and it can end up adding a huge amount of time to a student's enrolment.

Opportunities to teach and present have been available for these students in the form of guest lecturing, conference attendance, department do 'dry runs', research units doing seminars which give good opportunities to test one's thinking, ideas, get input, etc.

The group had all had some experience of teaching either as part of their PhD or previously during their Masters. The group were not equally familiar with the nature of an oral defense. Two of the group felt confident that they had done and were doing presentations for different groups (research unit, departmental seminars, local annual conference, etc.) and that this was all good preparation for defending one's work but also for input.

Among the group, it was interesting to note that all three are doing doctoral studies with the possibility that they would like to pursue an academic career if it is an option, even if on a part-time basis or as a combination with something else.

All three students had made extensive use of all the skills development opportunities available on campus. They did indicate that not all of their peers or their academic departments were aware of the skills development offering. They were also of the opinion that SU students who had come through the ranks from undergraduate level did not tend to explore opportunities and that such students were missing out. Their experience was that not knowing about certain support at the outset meant that they could have benefitted from something that they came across later on that was more phase appropriate at the outset.

Two of the three students felt that ethics was not dealt with explicitly enough in their collective experience. There seems to be a practice of asking a friend who had jumped through all the ethics clearance hoops to share examples of what they had done. The process of applying for clearance feels onerous and was described as an annoying hurdle. The controversial article published by a group of SU researchers that had caused so much hurt and damage in 2019 was mentioned in the discussion by one of the participants. She reported that the article had made her feel vulnerable as a researcher but on the other hand, she had developed a higher level of consciousness about how others would interpret her work. The gap which this student felt was overlooked is the necessary thought and consideration that researchers may need to exercise when presenting their findings. She also expressed the risk of non-expert audiences misunderstanding information. The whole group felt that dealing with ethics needed to be made more visible. Some suggestions were that examples of low, medium and high risk studies could be made available as guidelines as well as simple instructions for how to apply.

On balance, the group felt that resources and facilities like the Library are very good. The PG Skills programme, including Pop-Up cafes and Shut-Up & Write sessions, is also very helpful. One of the students had arrived late and felt left behind. She then actively sought any available courses that she thought would help her to find her feet. She felt that she benefitted enormously from the PG Skills offering and she was also fortunate enough to win a Teaching Assistantship on the ADA programme. The added bonus for her (and the other two students confirmed this) was that the ADA course she took appeared on her transcript which means that she can substantiate her claims of having completed this training. The other comment was that she would have liked to taken Dr Layla Cassim's course at the beginning because that would have been more phase appropriate.

In conclusion, the group felt that postgraduate students in general were discovering support and development opportunities by accident. One participant mentioned several services on campus which she had found to be extremely useful even though she had initially been skeptical to make use of them. The group felt that this could be improved by departments actively encouraging (almost endorsing) students to make us of the additional development opportunities available on campus.