

Redesigning doctoral education in South Africa: The case for structured coursework

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Abstract

It is increasingly the norm to include coursework as part of the doctoral curriculum. In this paper, academics from six countries explore how structured coursework can enhance research preparation, build scholarly communities, and develop transferable professional skills, while raising concerns about maintaining flexibility and preserving research time. Every context brings its own histories, values, and norms and so comparing experiences runs the risk of ignoring national contexts and expectations; nonetheless, this international reflection can inform contextualised deliberations about the purpose and process of coursework. Importantly, we argue that reflections are needed about what the doctorate is for and how coursework might affect the achievement of these purposes. When implemented only with the aim of decreasing time-to-completion, coursework risks falling short of its transformative potential. For coursework to enhance doctoral education, it must attend to the fundamental purpose of contributing to the frontiers of knowledge and developing responsible, independent researchers.

Keywords: doctoral education, coursework, Higher Education Qualifications Sub-Framework postgraduate, research training,

Introduction

The doctoral curriculum is undergoing profound shifts globally as higher education institutions respond to changing employment landscapes, diversifying student populations, and evolving conceptions of advanced knowledge production (Nerad, 2020). South Africa's draft revised Higher Education Qualifications Sub-Framework (draft HEQSF) proposes that up to one-third of the doctoral credits (120 of 360) could be allocated to coursework. This proposal aligns South



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African doctoral education with doctoral curricula internationally, where structured coursework components are common (Carr, 2021; Kainz, et al., 2018). Whether this recommendation is included in the final version of the framework is yet to be seen, but it is important to note that since 2013, the HEQSF, indicates that it possible to include coursework either *not for credit* in the doctoral degree or to include it *for credit* in the professional doctorate (CHE, 2013). Despite this, very few programmes in South Africa include coursework within the doctorate.

The potential restructuring to make the inclusion of coursework for credit possible in all doctoral types raises important questions about the purpose, design, and impact of coursework within the doctoral journey. Questions must be asked about the kinds of coursework that best support doctoral candidate development, how coursework might enhance or detract from the research experience, and how coursework can be implemented in ways that take disciplinary differences and institutional contexts into account. These questions are particularly salient in South Africa's post-apartheid higher education landscape, characterised by ongoing efforts to transform historically unequal systems (Cloete, et al., 2015).

While there are pragmatic motivations for introducing coursework - such as improving completion rates - it is crucial to examine the proposed reform within the broader context of what doctoral education aims to achieve within the South African context. When coursework is implemented with primarily instrumentalist goals, such as decreasing time-to-completion or simply meeting regulatory requirements, it risks becoming a mechanical exercise that fails to enhance the quality of doctoral education and research. We argue that coursework needs to be conceived and designed with the core purpose of doctoral education that we as a country have set for ourselves in mind: advancing the frontiers of knowledge and developing responsible, ethical, and critical researchers capable of making contributions to their fields (CHE, 2018).

We, a group of academics with extensive experience in doctoral education across six countries and multiple disciplines, examined the potential benefits and challenges of incorporating coursework into doctoral programmes in our own contexts and report on our conclusions here. The discussion is framed within broader debates about doctoral purpose, structure, and outcomes, considering both the international research evidence and the specific context of South African higher education, and so we begin with a brief reflection on this.

Literature review of the changing landscape of doctoral education

Global trends in doctoral programme structure

Internationally, doctoral education has undergone significant transformation over the past few decades (Botha, et al., 2024; Nerad & Evans, 2014). The traditional apprenticeship model, characterised by independent research under supervisor guidance with minimal structured teaching, has given way to more formalised approaches that incorporate coursework, cohort-based learning, and explicit skills development (Green & Usher, 2003; Park, 2007). This evolution reflects changing expectations about the purpose of the doctorate and recognition of the diverse career paths that doctoral graduates pursue (Byrne, et al., 2013).

In the United States of America, coursework has long been an established component of doctoral education, with some of the literature referring to the inclusion of coursework as 'the American model' (Maloshonok & Terentev, 2019; Ngulube & Ukwoma, 2019). In the USA, doctoral programmes typically require two years of classes before advancing to dissertation research (Nerad, 2014). While European universities were historically more aligned with the apprenticeship model, they have increasingly adopted structured doctoral programmes shaped by the Bologna Process (European University Association, 2010). In the 2025 EUA-CDE report on doctoral education in Europe, it was reported that while 49% of universities offered coursework in 2005, this rose to 72% by 2009, and by 2025, 100% of the universities surveyed included coursework in the doctorate (Marti & Peneoasu, 2025).

Australian universities have similarly moved toward more structured approaches, often incorporating formal research training and professional skills development (McCallin & Nayar, 2012). In Kenya, a year of coursework has become the norm. While some researchers indicate that coursework is required (for example, Waruru, 2017), others indicate that the Kenyan Commission on University Education have recommended rather than imposed it to address slow time to completion (HSRC, 2022). Coursework is also common, though not compulsory, in doctoral programmes in Tanzania (Tanzanian Commission for Universities, 2023), Benin (Bancole-Minaflinou, 2024), Nigeria (Nwosu, 2024), Angola (Faria, 2024), and many other countries on the continent.

The extent to which the relatively recent move towards including coursework in the doctorate in many countries in Africa enables this highest qualification to meet local needs or is simply evidence of Global North emulation is yet to be seen (McKenna & Onyango, 2025; Omoya, et al., 2025; Pelser, 2024). Some researchers have raised concerns that shifts in higher education on the continent are often examples of coercive isomorphism rather than strategies to serve local needs (Charlier & Croché, 2012; Provini, et al., 2020). Reflecting on experiences across contexts, as this article attempts to do, needs to be engaged in with caution, given the colonial legacies that continue to shape problematic notions of 'best practice' (Charlier & Croché, 2012).

Nonetheless, this trend towards more structured doctoral curricula including coursework reflects growing recognition that effective researcher development sometimes requires more than immersion in a specific research project. Doctoral education increasingly aims to cultivate broad disciplinary knowledge, methodological versatility, and transferable professional competencies (Mowbray & Halse, 2010; Omoya, et al., 2025). However, it is essential to remember that these additional dimensions should support, not supplant, the primary goal of doctoral education: producing researchers capable of making original contributions to knowledge in their fields (CHE, 2018).

The South African context

South Africa's higher education system operates within a complex post-apartheid environment characterised by persistent inequalities, resource constraints, and competing demands for transformation, quality, and relevance (Cloete, et al., 2015). Doctoral education plays a crucial

role in this context, serving as a pipeline for future academics, researchers, and knowledge workers while addressing national priorities for social and economic development (National Planning Commission, 2012).

Historically, most South African doctoral programmes have followed the British tradition, emphasising independent research without any coursework (Herman, 2011; Pelser, 2024) or, indeed, without any other forms of support built into the curriculum (CHE, 2023). The Council on Higher Education's (2022) report on the review of the doctorate in South Africa noted significant challenges in this approach, including extended completion times, high attrition rates, and concerns about research quality and graduate preparedness for diverse careers.

The draft revised HEQSF (CHE, 2025) represents a potential shift, proposing that up to one-third of doctoral credits may be allocated to coursework. This aligns with international trends while responding to recognised shortcomings in the current system. However, the mere introduction of coursework will not address these challenges. If coursework is implemented with a narrow focus on accelerating completion or meeting regulatory requirements without due consideration for developing researchers who can advance knowledge frontiers, it may create additional burdens without delivering substantive benefits to the quality of doctoral education.

On a related note, it is important to recognise that concerns have been expressed about how, in South Africa, academic development initiatives at undergraduate level have served as 'gatekeeping initiatives' aimed at enculturating students into a narrow set of practices (Ntwasa, 2025). The extent to which changes in doctoral education might replicate such problematic remedial focused work is a significant worry. While educational structures must be locally embedded if they are to be successful, we need to consider that in South Africa, there has been a long history of educational initiatives premised on remediation rather than emancipation (Chiramba & Ndofirepi, 2023; Jacobs, 2014; Pineteh, 2019). If coursework is indeed implemented in any doctoral programme, consideration needs to be given as to its potential to be either a space of gatekeeping or empowerment.

Methods

The methodological approach we took in this article was a collective reflection approach, which combined an analysis of existing scholarship, some of which is briefly outlined above, with reflection on our varied contexts and experiences. Initially the first author, who is from South Africa where she has run a doctoral programme with coursework (not for credit) for over a decade, undertook a comprehensive literature review of doctoral education practices globally, with particular attention to the role of coursework in doctoral programmes (see, for example, Council on Higher Education, 2023; McKenna & Van Schalkwyk, 2023). Following the literature review, the first author organised a panel discussion involving all the authors to reflect on their experiences of designing, delivering, and evaluating doctoral coursework in multiple international contexts. The six authors bring perspectives from doctoral programmes in England, Ireland, Kenya, South Africa, the Netherlands, and the United States. Following the panel discussion, the

first author identified benefits, challenges, and contextual considerations that had emerged and drafted these for comment by the other authors.

The authors' experiences encompass a range of disciplinary perspectives, institutional types, and student populations, providing insights that extend beyond any single model of doctoral education. This diversity of experience proves particularly valuable in considering how coursework might be adapted to the heterogeneous South African higher education landscape. But to maximise our collective learning, we needed to be explicit in our deliberations that educational structures are never neutral. They always emerge from particular histories, and they frequently serve some while marginalising others.

In the sections that follow, we look at the benefits and challenges that we have experienced within each of our own contexts. While there was remarkable agreement among us, it would be naïve to think that these would play out in the same way in every South African university.

South Africa's higher education system is marked by historical and current inequalities. Others have expressed a concern that much of the literature on the sector fails to consider this reality and instead assumes that there is some one-size-fits-all 'best practice' that would work across contexts (Bozalek & Boughey, 2014; Heleta, 2016). Furthermore, there is a concern that when new initiatives are brought into the sector, without taking context into account, the extent to which the new initiative succeeds or not is seen to be a function of the quality of the institution or the efforts of the implementers, rather than a function of the suitability of the initiative for that context (Leibowitz, et al, 2015). It is with these provisos in place that we offer our reflections on experiences of offering coursework across varied national contexts.

Benefits of doctoral coursework

The insights offered by the six of us who have drafted this article hopefully provides valuable considerations for the South African context, however, careful attention needs to be paid to contextual issues which may differ from those of the authors from countries other than South Africa. We thus wanted to speak to each other from our own vantage points, acknowledging that not only were these vantage points historically imbued, but that we may at times have blind spots about how educational structures play out.

Developing a shared knowledge base

Coursework can provide doctoral students with a comprehensive foundation in the theories, methodologies, and current debates within their discipline. As emerged from our discussion, this shared knowledge base serves as crucial scaffolding for independent research. By ensuring that all doctoral candidates have exposure to key concepts and approaches in their field, coursework helps address knowledge gaps that might otherwise impede research progress (Maloshonok & Terentev, 2019).

This benefit may be particularly valuable in the South African context, where students enter doctoral programmes with diverse educational backgrounds and varying levels of preparedness for advanced research (Cloete, et al., 2015). Structured courses can help level the playing field,

ensuring that all candidates develop the disciplinary literacy necessary for successful doctoral work and come to understand broader debates in the field beyond the student's own topic.

For example, research methodology courses can provide systematic training in research design, data collection methods, and analytical techniques relevant to the discipline. Such courses can help students develop a more sophisticated understanding of methodological options and their epistemological underpinnings, potentially leading to more rigorous research designs (Coronel Llamas & Boza, 2011; Humphrey, et al., 2012).

Similarly, theory-focused courses can expose students to a broader range of perspectives than they might encounter through independent reading or in supervision meetings focused primarily on their specific research topic. Coursework can also work against problematic supervision relations that restrict the range of knowledge bases with which a student engages, in a form of 'gatekeeping' by which such supervisors guide their students to replicate their own research (Hakkarainen, et al., 2016). Coursework, and collaborative approaches to doctoral education more generally, can thus move students out from the 'watchful eye of the master' (Zeegers & Barron, 2012: 21) and into a wider conversation. The wider theoretical grounding of coursework can enrich analytical frameworks and connect individual research projects to broader scholarly conversations (Lesko, et al., 2008).

When these courses are designed with the explicit purpose of nurturing responsible researchers capable of extending the boundaries of knowledge, they move beyond mere transmission of information towards cultivating the critical thinking and intellectual independence essential for meaningful research. Conversely, when coursework is implemented without sufficient substance, it may fail to develop the intellectual dispositions necessary for truly original contributions.

Fostering community and collaboration

The isolation commonly experienced by doctoral candidates has been identified as a significant factor in attrition and delayed completion (Ali & Kohun, 2007; CHE, 2025). Coursework can help address this challenge by creating structured opportunities for interaction among doctoral students and experienced researchers.

A key issue that emerged was that bringing doctoral students together through required coursework helps build supportive communities and facilitates research collaborations that may extend beyond the programme. These connections can provide emotional support, intellectual stimulation, and opportunities for peer learning that complement the supervisor-student relationship.

In South Africa, where doctoral supervision resources are stretched thin and many students pursue their studies part-time while working (Mouton, et al., 2021), the community-building function of coursework could be especially valuable. Regular meetings can provide structure and accountability, helping to maintain momentum and engagement with research.

The benefit of the community-building function of coursework is also that students can collectively come to understand what it means to become a researcher. The value of criticality and deep intellectual engagement can be collectively nurtured.

Furthermore, coursework that intentionally brings together students from different backgrounds can contribute to transformation goals by fostering collaborative relationships across historical divides. These connections may yield long-term benefits for research networks and academic communities in South Africa.

Preparing for diverse career paths

Contemporary doctoral graduates pursue careers across a range of sectors, including academia, industry, government, and nonprofit organisations (Neumann & Tan, 2011). The panel discussion emphasised that coursework could help prepare doctoral students for this diversity of career paths by developing transferable or 'durable' skills such as critical thinking, problem solving, project management, and communication.

This function of coursework aligns with South Africa's need for highly skilled professionals in multiple sectors. The National Development Plan emphasises the importance of doctoral education not only for academic work but also for innovation, economic growth, and addressing societal challenges (National Planning Commission, 2012).

Since the current HEQSF was promulgated in 2013, there has been potential to offer professional doctorates 'designed around the development of high-level performance and innovation in a professional context' (CHE, 2013: 41). These have always been permitted to include coursework for credit. But there has been extremely little uptake of these programmes. The historical binary divide in status between vocational programmes on the one hand and professional and formative programmes on the other in the South African higher education system has arguably constrained the development of a diverse range of postgraduate programmes. This, coupled with the homogenising effect of the university ranking industry, has conditioned the lack of diversity in the doctoral curriculum in South Africa.

Coursework modules focused on professional development, such as research grant writing, academic publishing, teaching in higher education, or knowledge translation for non-academic audiences, can equip doctoral graduates with competencies valued across employment sectors. Similarly, coursework that provides opportunities to develop leadership, teamwork, and project management skills can enhance graduates' versatility in the job market. (Though the discussion below should be noted about how these should not be addressed through generic, 'skills' focused modules.)

As Muñoz, et al. (2019) note, entrepreneurial and practice-based modules can build creative problem-solving and leadership skills that extend beyond academic contexts. And Alkathiri and Olson (2019) observe that even in cases where the doctoral graduate remains in the academy, appropriate coursework can better prepare them for the full range of responsibilities they will encounter in academic roles, including teaching and community engagement functions that may receive limited attention in research-only doctoral programmes.

We agreed that the benefits listed above would not be achieved unless the coursework is carefully planned and intentionally implemented with these benefits in mind. In all cases, it was clear in our reflections that context matters. The nature of the institution, programme, students and supervisors should have significant bearing on the kinds of courses included and how they are implemented.

Challenges in implementing Doctoral Coursework

While coursework offers significant potential benefits, the implementation of coursework components in doctoral programmes raises challenges. Several issues emerged that must be addressed if coursework is to enhance rather than detract from doctoral education.

Balancing structure and flexibility

A central tension in doctoral programme design involves balancing structured requirements with flexibility to accommodate individual research interests and career goals. We emphasised the need to strike this balance effectively, avoiding one-size-fits-all approaches that may poorly serve the diverse doctoral student population.

In the South African context, this consideration is particularly important given the heterogeneity of doctoral candidates in terms of age, professional experience, educational background, and career aspirations (CHE, 2025; Cloete et al., 2015). Mature students returning to education after substantial professional experience may have different coursework needs than those proceeding directly from master's programmes.

Programme designers must consider how to provide sufficient structure to ensure core competencies while allowing for individual needs and interests to determine which coursework modules to include (or indeed, to determine whether it is needed at all). Options might include a combination of required core courses and electives, modular approaches that allow students to select relevant components, or individualised learning contracts that specify coursework tailored to identified gaps and goals.

The risk, as Malakyan (2019a, 2019b) observes, is that excessive coursework requirements can leave insufficient time and space for original research. In programmes where coursework dominates, the distinctive character of doctoral education as research training may be compromised. An instrumentalist approach that prioritises administrative efficiency or completion metrics over genuine intellectual development exacerbates this risk. When coursework is imposed primarily to address completion rates without careful consideration of how it contributes to developing researchers capable of advancing knowledge frontiers, it can become a bureaucratic obstacle rather than an enriching educational experience. For coursework to fulfil its potential, it must be designed explicitly to nurture the capacities needed for responsible, original research.

This concern also underscores the importance of thoughtful integration of coursework with the research component rather than treating them as separate or competing elements. Opportunities for progress presentations, peer-group seminars, and engagement with a range

of experienced researchers need to continue after the student has moved from completing coursework modules to undertaking independent research.

Addressing resource implications

Implementing high-quality coursework requires significant resources, including faculty time, expertise, and institutional infrastructure. In South Africa's resource-constrained higher education environment, these requirements present real challenges. Many South African universities already struggle with high student-to-supervisor ratios and limited research infrastructure (CHE, 2025). Adding substantial coursework components could strain these resources further unless accompanied by appropriate investment and planning. However, the one-on-one model has been found to be resource heavy too in that the individual supervisor is responsible for all their student's development opportunities and must create such opportunities for each student (Manabe, et al., 2018; Ngulube & Ukwoma, 2019).

Collaborative approaches may offer partial solutions to these challenges. Inter-institutional partnerships could allow for shared coursework offerings, particularly in specialised fields where some universities may lack critical mass. While credit transfer between South African universities has long been possible, it has had limited uptake. However, the draft HEQSF (2025) indicates a desire for credit transfer processes to be made simpler. This would allow the sector to work together and identify specific niche coursework modules which might be offered by one institution and recognised by another.

Online or blended learning approaches might be possible in some fields and could reduce some logistical barriers related to coursework, whether within one university or across institutions. The report on the draft HEQSF recommends abolishing the distinction distance and contact modes entirely, which would further facilitate developments of online materials and modules. It should be noted though, as Fiore, et al. (2019) and Woo, et al. (2019) caution, these modalities may limit opportunities for interaction and impede the transition to independent research if not carefully designed towards such ends.

Ensuring relevance and quality

Our shared reflections highlighted problems that arise when there is misalignment between the coursework content and research needs of the student and their field of study. Sin, et al. (2020) observe that compulsory modules sometimes seem disconnected from the student's research, potentially reducing their perceived value and student engagement.

When coursework is implemented primarily with instrumentalist aims like improving completion rates or standardising doctoral programs, this disconnection becomes more likely. To avoid this pitfall, coursework must be deliberately designed to connect directly to doctoral research processes and career requirements. This necessitates ongoing dialogue with current students, recent graduates, employers, and research communities about evolving needs and expectations. Coursework that genuinely develops researchers who are capable of advancing

knowledge cannot comprise generic skills training disconnected from the epistemological foundations of their fields.

Quality assurance mechanisms for doctoral coursework also require careful consideration. While South Africa has well-established quality assurance systems for undergraduate and taught postgraduate programmes, the evaluation of doctoral coursework may require distinct approaches that recognise its unique purpose and position within the research degree. Universities will need to make very clear how they quality assure the assessment of the doctoral modules. South African universities generally have strong examination processes at doctoral level (CHE, 2022), with external, international examination being the norm. But there is the risk of the coursework component being held to much lower levels of assessment validity.

Contextual considerations: Discipline, institution, and student population

A recurring theme that emerged from our reflections was the importance of contextual factors in shaping appropriate approaches to doctoral coursework. There was explicit recognition in both our reflections and in the literature that no "one-size-fits-all" solution exists, with disciplinary traditions, institutional environments, and student characteristics all influencing optimal programme design.

Disciplines differ substantially in their epistemological foundations, methodological approaches, and professional practices (Ashwin, 2020). These differences necessarily shape the role and nature of appropriate coursework in doctoral education. In laboratory-based sciences, for instance, technical skills training and research team integration may need to be prioritised in coursework. In humanities disciplines, theoretical frameworks and interpretive methodologies might receive greater emphasis. Professional doctorates in fields like education, business, or health sciences may require coursework that bridges academic and professional domains and includes opportunities for partnerships beyond the university.

The draft revised HEQSF's allowance for up to 120 credits of coursework provides flexibility for disciplinary customisation. If this is indeed included in the final version of the framework, rather than mandating identical coursework requirements across all fields, institutions and departments should be encouraged to develop approaches that respect disciplinary cultures while addressing identified needs.

South Africa's higher education landscape encompasses significant institutional diversity, from research-intensive universities with established doctoral programmes to emerging institutions building research capacity (Cloete, et al., 2015). These varying institutional contexts also influence the feasibility and focus of doctoral coursework. Institutional missions and strengths should inform coursework design. A university with expertise in community-engaged research might develop coursework that emphasises participatory methodologies and knowledge co-creation. An institution with strong industry partnerships might offer courses on commercialisation and knowledge transfer.

Similarly, universities with large doctoral cohorts in particular fields may have the critical mass to offer specialised, discipline-specific courses. Smaller institutions or departments might

need to emphasise interdisciplinary approaches or inter-institutional collaborations to provide comprehensive coursework options. The panel discussion noted the importance of tailoring doctoral education to the specific student population. South African doctoral students represent diverse backgrounds, with varying levels of academic preparation, professional experience, and research exposure (Academy of Science of South Africa, 2010). For students in institutions where the research culture is still developing, foundational coursework in research methodologies and coursework with an intentional writing-intensive approach may be particularly valuable. For mid-career professionals pursuing doctorates, coursework that helps translate professional experience into academic research frameworks might be more relevant. Part-time doctoral candidates, who make up 60% of South Africa's doctoral student population (Mouton, et al., 2021), face particular challenges in balancing study with employment and personal responsibilities. Coursework design must consider these constraints, potentially through flexible scheduling, modular offerings, or blended learning approaches that reduce the need for frequent campus presence.

Reimagining what it means to make an original contribution to knowledge

Perhaps the most important insight from our discussion is the suggestion to re-examine the traditional notion of the doctorate as solely focused on a monograph. This perspective invites consideration of more holistic, portfolio-based approaches to doctoral education and assessment.

The conventional doctoral model, centred on a single extended thesis or dissertation, has been increasingly questioned internationally (Lee & Danby, 2012). Alternative formats, such as publication-based dissertations (including a series of journal articles within the thesis) or project-based doctorates (combining a coherent set of smaller research outputs with creative or professional focused artifacts), have gained acceptance in many systems.

Coursework can play an important role in these evolving models by providing structured support for diverse research outputs and professional competencies. For example, courses on academic publishing could directly support students pursuing publication-based dissertations, while project management courses might benefit those undertaking complex, multi-component industry focused projects. The draft revised HEQSF's allowance for coursework credits creates space for South African institutions to experiment with these alternative models, potentially developing approaches that better serve both academic and broader societal needs.

However, these evolving models must remain anchored in the fundamental purpose of doctoral education: cultivating researchers capable of meaningful, original contributions to their fields. When coursework is introduced simply as a means to accelerate completion or standardise doctoral education without this deeper focus on nurturing responsible researchers, it risks becoming a series of mechanical exercises that fail to develop the intellectual independence and critical thinking essential for meaningful knowledge production.

Coursework can make diverse outcomes more explicit and intentional, providing structured opportunities to develop and demonstrate competencies that might otherwise remain implicit or underdeveloped. A portfolio approach to doctoral assessment, potentially incorporating

coursework alongside the dissertation, publications, creative outputs, and other research-based outputs, could provide a more comprehensive picture of the candidate's achievements, attributes, and contribution to the field. For South Africa, with its pressing needs for high-level skills across multiple sectors, this broader conception of doctoral outcomes holds particular promise. Doctoral graduates who are not only research specialists, but also effective teachers, communicators, collaborators, and leaders can contribute more fully to national development goals. Yet this broadened conception must not dilute the fundamental purpose of doctoral education as developing researchers capable of extending the frontiers of knowledge.

Recommendations for implementation

Our shared reflections and engagement with the literature enables us to tentatively offer the following recommendations for policymakers, universities, and supervisors.

Doctoral coursework represents a promising but complex innovation requiring thoughtful policy frameworks. While the allocation of credits to coursework creates important opportunities, national and institutional policymakers should avoid prescribing specific coursework models that might not fit all disciplinary or institutional contexts. Flexibility in implementation allows for experimentation and adaptation to diverse needs. Furthermore, high-quality doctoral coursework requires resources and expertise. There will be a need to provide targeted funding to support faculty development, infrastructure, and collaborative initiatives that enhance coursework capabilities across the higher education sector. This investment is crucial for ensuring that coursework implementation narrows rather than widens existing inequalities between institutions. Additionally, policy development should be informed by ongoing research.

Funding studies that evaluate the impact of different coursework models on completion rates, research quality, graduate employability, and the candidate and supervisors' experiences will enable evidence-based refinement of frameworks over time. Without such research, there is a risk of perpetuating assumptions about coursework benefits without confirming their realisation in practice.

Most critically, policymakers must resist the temptation to implement coursework with primarily instrumentalist aims, such as standardising doctoral education across the sector. Instead, policy frameworks should explicitly connect coursework requirements to the fundamental purpose of doctoral education: developing responsible researchers capable of advancing knowledge frontiers. This means evaluating coursework not just by efficiency metrics but by how effectively it cultivates the intellectual independence, methodological sophistication, and theoretical depth necessary for original research contributions.

Institutions bear significant responsibility for effective doctoral education. They should develop frameworks that allow for disciplinary variation by creating overarching principles and quality standards for doctoral coursework while encouraging departments to design discipline-appropriate implementations. Resource constraints can be addressed through exploring collaborative models, including inter-institutional partnerships that pool resources and expertise for doctoral coursework, particularly in specialised fields or at smaller institutions. These

collaborations may prove essential for ensuring equitable access to high-quality coursework across the system.

Supervisor preparation is another critical institutional responsibility (Motshoane, 2023). Institutions should invest in staff development to prepare academics to design and deliver doctoral-level coursework effectively, recognising that teaching at this level differs from teaching at other levels. Without such preparation, coursework may replicate undergraduate approaches that are inappropriate for doctoral education.

Finally, institutions must engage stakeholders in coursework design by involving current doctoral candidates, recent graduates, employers, and research communities in identifying key competencies and knowledge needs that coursework could address. This collaborative approach can help to ensure relevance and buy-in from all participants in the doctoral education system.

Supervisors play a crucial role in integrating coursework with research by helping students make meaningful connections between taught components and their dissertation projects. They should work to design coursework that directly supports the research process rather than treating taught components as separate from or preliminary to the dissertation. This integration helps students perceive coursework as valuable rather than as a distraction from their "real work."

Coursework also offers an opportunity for supervisors within a given program to come together to talk about the needs and goals of their students so that they can collectively identify appropriate approaches to both coursework and assessment. The coursework model, when carefully implemented, can thus nurture supervisory communities of practice. A culture of collegiality needs to be an explicit norm within such programmes to achieve this benefit.

The diverse backgrounds of doctoral candidates require supervisors to address student needs by considering the varied backgrounds, career aspirations, and study circumstances of doctoral candidates in coursework design, providing multiple pathways and support mechanisms. Recognising that mature students with significant professional experience may have different needs than those proceeding directly from master's studies helps create more inclusive doctoral education. Lastly, assessment approaches require careful consideration, with supervisors developing coursework assessments that authentically evaluate doctoral-level competencies and directly contribute to candidates' research development rather than adding disconnected requirements. Aligning coursework assessment with research progress helps students perceive value in both components.

Conclusion

The potential inclusion of substantial coursework in South African doctoral programmes, as envisioned in the draft revised Higher Education Qualifications Framework, represents both an opportunity and a challenge. International experience suggests that well-designed coursework can enhance doctoral education by developing shared knowledge bases, fostering scholarly communities, and preparing graduates for diverse careers.

However, our central argument emphasises that coursework in the doctorate is not a panacea for current challenges in doctoral education. While offering numerous potential benefits,

poorly implemented coursework can introduce more problems than it solves. If coursework becomes a bureaucratic hurdle disconnected from research needs, consumes excessive time without clear benefits, fails to accommodate student diversity, or strains limited institutional resources, it may exacerbate rather than alleviate existing challenges in doctoral completion and quality.

When coursework is implemented with a primarily instrumentalist understanding, focused narrowly on decreasing time to completion or standardising doctoral education across disciplines, it risks falling far short of its potential to enhance doctoral education. For coursework to genuinely strengthen doctoral programmes, it must be designed and implemented with a clear focus on the fundamental purpose of doctoral education: developing responsible researchers capable of making original contributions to knowledge in their fields. This means moving beyond viewing coursework as a technical solution to completion rates and instead seeing it as an integral part of a holistic approach to cultivating scholarly capabilities.

Realising the benefits of coursework requires thoughtful implementation that respects disciplinary differences, institutional contexts, and student needs. The insights we offer here from our experiences in doctoral education underscore the importance of balancing structure with flexibility, ensuring relevance, and reconsidering traditional notions of doctoral purpose and assessment.


For South Africa, with its distinctive higher education landscape and pressing development imperatives, doctoral coursework offers potential pathways to enhance quality, improve completion rates, and better prepare graduates for multiple roles in academia and beyond. South African institutions can develop distinctive approaches to doctoral coursework that strengthen research training while serving broader societal goals only if national and institutional context is taken seriously into account. Reflecting on our experiences enabled us to identify a great deal of common ground and useful lessons learned, but an area of commonality that was most evident was the call for adaptability. The idea that there is a generic 'best practice' in higher education is naively decontextualised and fails to recognise the implications of socio-political histories and current realities (Heleta, 2016; Bozalek & Boughey, 2014). While we hope the ideas shared here are of value, we urge readers to reflect on what aspects would be possible and valuable within their own contexts.


Declaration of Generative AI and AI-assisted technologies in the writing process


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