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## Postgraduate study and the relationship supervisor-student in West Africa: Dealing with suffering and achievement in Benin.

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### Abstract

*In the context of an increasing number of doctoral studies on the African continent, there is a paucity of research examining the daily relationship between supervisors and doctoral students in Francophone sub-Saharan Africa. Consequently, the experience of doctoral students in this field is under-debated, under-questioned, under-analysed and under-taken into account. This is despite the fact that it is central to the success or failure of the thesis process. This paper aims to reflect on postgraduate study conditions in the context of the relationship between supervisor and candidate in francophone West Africa. A qualitative study based on conversational interviews with PhD students and supervisors, was conducted at the University of Abomey-Calavi, the main public university in Benin, with 58 doctoral programmes, and statistical data issued by the university analyzed. The paper examines the conditions of suffering at various levels for PhD candidates, the asymmetrical power relation between supervisors and candidates and silo's logics which driven them. The paper demonstrates how the thesis process is complex as asymmetrical, power and conflict-prone. It also point that de the nature of doctoral work, doctoral students are exposes to various psychological, psychic and mental pressures that supervisors have to manage.*

**Keywords:** Postgraduate student, doctoral journey, suffering, supervision relationship, Africa

### Introduction

The upsurge in thesis enrolment is not sparing the African continent. Since the adoption of the Bologna Reform as part of a globalisation process that has forced the West African higher education area to align it with the European model (Eyebiyi 2011), itself inspired by the Anglo-Saxon system, the supply of doctoral training has increased and diversified significantly. It is encouraging to note that a number of doctoral programmes have been established within universities, or in the form of co-supervision, co-direction or even programmes involving several universities. However, it is apparent that West Africa is not yet fully integrating its universities into these processes. Indeed, the vast majority of

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doctoral training continues to follow its old internal production channels. In 2010, Bon (2010:43) diagnosed that “In Sub-Saharan Africa, most institutions face a shortage of doctoral teachers. In most countries for which statistics are available, less than 50 percent of the teaching staff hold a doctorate. While the innate talent of teacher-researchers is not in question, the lack of training is a serious obstacle to the implementation of a specific training project. This kind of training project is necessary for students who wish to go on to a master's or doctoral degree”<sup>1</sup>.

In addition to the structural and conjunctural dimensions typically considered (equipment, teaching staff, bibliographical resources, etc.), the status of postgraduate students is rarely analysed in depth. Rather than representing a straightforward linear progression in knowledge production and the production of a new PhD holder, the completion of the thesis is perceived as a pivotal relational moment, placing the postgraduate student and their supervisor in a state of tension through a series of challenges.

This paper proposes a reflection on the postgraduate student conditions within the framework of the thesis relationship. It should therefore be considered as a preliminary study for further work. The main objective of this study is to examine the student status of postgraduate students in Francophone West Africa, particularly in the context of their relations with supervisors. This paper proposes a reflection on the postgraduate student conditions within the framework of the thesis relationship. It should therefore be considered as a preliminary study for further, more elaborate work. The main objective of this study is to examine the student status of postgraduate students in Francophone West Africa, particularly in the context of their relations with supervisors. This paper will focus on the case of French-speaking public universities in Benin, where a significant number of unfunded postgraduate students embark on a doctoral programme that can prove to be a perilous adventure. This exploratory study thus questions, on the one hand, the student status of the postgraduate student and, on the other hand, the relations between postgraduate students and supervisors. The study aims to understand the experience of postgraduate students in order to draw some avenues to improve supervision methods and to influence the quality of the PhD holders produced by the public university system.

## 1. Methodology

This paper is based on a documentary study, the reflexive analysis of experiences and some preliminary interviews conducted with postgraduate students and their supervisors in Francophone West Africa, particularly in Benin. The documentary study consisted of a review of available literature on doctoral training experiences and an

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<sup>1</sup> The original version in french : « En Afrique subsaharienne, la plupart des institutions sont confrontées à une pénurie d'enseignants doctorants. Dans la plupart des pays pour lesquels on dispose de statistiques, moins de 50 % des enseignants sont titulaires d'un doctorat. Si le talent inné des enseignants-chercheurs n'est pas remis en cause, le manque de formation constitue un sérieux obstacle à la mise en place d'un projet de formation spécifique nécessaire aux étudiants qui souhaitent s'orienter vers un master ou un doctorat ».

examination of how they influenced doctoral programmes and, above all, the relations between postgraduate students and thesis supervisors. I also analyse figures produced by the university under study. Qualitative interviews I conducted consisted of discussing with ten doctoral candidates, - three enrolled in the first year, three in the second year and four in the third year at the University of Abomey-Calavi (Benin) in the social sciences (sociology, geography and history) -, and two supervisors with extensive experience in supervising theses for at least five years. The interviews were conducted as free, unstructured conversations, with an average duration of approximately 30 minutes. The longest interview lasted approximately 60 minutes, while the shortest lasted 20 minutes. At the outset of the interview, respondents were informed of the purpose of the research and their anonymity was guaranteed. No recording was made of the interviews, which were conducted in a notebook.

The respondents were identified using the snowball method. The entry criterion for the sample was that the respondents were doctoral students at the university or that they had supervised at least one doctoral student, in the case of teachers. All interviews were conducted outside the offices, either in the restaurant or in the campus garden. The identity of the respondents was not essential and they were clearly informed of the aims of my research and could withdraw at any time. In addition, my interviews were facilitated by the fact that I had no relationship of authority, subjection or collaboration with my respondents at the time of my survey. The study is qualitative and deeply based on small sample to guarantee deep analysis. The aim of this qualitative exercise is not to generalise but to highlight some artefacts of the production or manufacturing processes of the mythical figure of the "Doctor" through an analysis of the doctoral candidate's status as a postgraduate student in Francophone West Africa.

However, statistical data produced by the University of Abomey-Calavi in Benin, on which the paper is focusing, allow us to situate the context. All the statistics used in this work come from the "Yearbook of Statistics for the Academic Year 2017-2018"

<sup>1</sup> of the University of Abomey-Calavi (Kpenavoun Chogou 2020). The objective of this study is to identify the characteristics of doctoral studies conducted in public universities in Francophone West Africa. To achieve this, a qualitative approach is employed, allowing for a more nuanced understanding of the perceptions, representations, and specificities of the PhD candidate's experience in these institutions.

In terms of limitations, this reflection would later merit a more in-depth statistical analysis and a broadening of the base of interviewees. All verbatim are translated from French to English by myself. The study specifically and deliberately focused on a sample of unfunded postgraduate students doing their thesis practically alone and without support. It would have been more beneficial to extend the study to encompass all cases, including those of funded doctoral students, doctoral students enrolled in structured research programmes, civil servant enrolled as doctoral students, and so forth.

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<sup>11</sup> In French: « Annuaire des statistiques de l'année académique 2017-2018 » elaborated by Kpenavoun Chogou (2019)

Additionally, the sample was limited to the social sciences and humanities sector, and it would be advantageous to consider other departments and educational fields, such as the hard sciences, biology, and medicine, in order to achieve a more representative sample.

## 2. Literature Study

There is a paucity of social science literature that addresses the experiences of postgraduate students, particularly in their relations with their supervisors. This is the case in Africa as much as in the West or elsewhere in the world. Existing works include Frick and Pyhältö (2020), which offers a comparative perspective between South Africa and Finland to demonstrate that the experiences of postgraduate students are shaped by individual factors as well as socio-cultural contexts. Some papers examine the relations between supervisors and doctoral students in a fairly functional way (Lee 2008), yet fail to provide a voice for the actors. The doctoral requirements contained in thesis charters (where they exist) or the general principles proposed by various institutions are sometimes highly bureaucratic and not particularly operational reference frameworks, despite the ongoing diversification of doctoral offerings for almost two decades now. The increasing complexity of doctoral studies in terms of linking them to market requirements, or the impact of the commodification of higher education (Eyebiyi 2011) through various reforms concomitant with the adoption of the Bologna model, contribute significantly to the interest in the experiences of doctoral students and their supervisors. The subject is a taboo topic, in both the West and Africa, despite the fact that it is a topic of intense debate among Anglophone postgraduate students on various blogs, Facebook and other social networks. Thesis candidates express their difficulties when they can, and this is a topic that is rarely discussed in French-speaking Africa, and even less so on social networks.

The study by Pyhältö, Vekkaile & Keskinen (2015) at the University of Helsinki states that « the fit between the students' and supervisors' perceptions of the supervisory activities in different faculties was related to the students' satisfaction with their studies and the supervisory relationship. ». They also explore "how this perceived fit contributes to students' satisfaction and resilience in their studies". Lee (2008) also notes the functional bias of the scientific literature on the subject, and proposes to examine through a few key concepts the way postgraduate students are supervised. Pyhältö, Vekkaile & Keskinen (2015) point out that « The study focuses on exploring the fit between doctoral students' and supervisors' perceptions of who are involved in supervision, the frequency of supervision and the main task of the supervisor, and further, how the perceived fit contributes to students' satisfaction and resilience in studies». In addition, Mori, Inman & Caskie (2009) provide a cultural analysis of the supervision of international postgraduate students. It should be stressed that international student mobility has created a particularly lucrative market for the economies of host countries thanks to the movement of knowledge but also of students. Many international universities are thus enormously indebted to what Jessop (2008) calls the "knowledge economy", on the one

hand, but also to the monetary economy driven by foreign postgraduate students. However, universities in francophone Africa are far from fully subscribing to this model, which is in force in several Anglophone universities on the continent. By examining the Belgian university landscape, Nizeyimana (2020) seeks to "understand the doctoral experience of assistants and thesis fellows in order to better understand their relationship to work and employment and to examine the issue of suffering at work among postgraduate students".

Larissa Kojoué's collective book entitled "Tu seras docteur.e mon enfant!", is an interesting exception on the African continent. The book shows that African postgraduate students generally engage in doctoral training "without any reference points, no deadlines, no library, no funding, no computers, no effective supervision, no monitoring and above all no means other than the will to get there" (Kojoué 2017). It should be noted that in French-speaking Africa, there is still little freedom of speech, including scientific speech, on the actual training conditions of doctoral students, on negative experiences, and on the obstacle course that postgraduate students may sometimes face. Some doctoral students have expressed concern that they are reluctant to speak out for fear of reprisals. This is because they believe that academic elders and seniority issues can be overwhelming.

The absence of research articles or even reflexive texts on these issues in the Francophone space raises broader concerns about the freedom of academic speech. This aspect of things is not dealt with in this paper. However, it is crucial to comprehend not only the objective of a thesis and the rationale behind a doctoral candidate's pursuit, but also, and most importantly, to grasp how the doctoral programme is conceptualized, constructed, and experienced. This ultimately facilitates a more comprehensive understanding of the underlying logic and practices that punctuate the doctoral program and to situate the balance of power that can emerge.

### **3. The case study: Postgraduate studies at UAC**

This section presents some statistical data to establish the framework for doctoral studies in Benin. The first observation is the non-existence of figures going back further than the year 2011. Secondly, the portfolio of doctoral studies has increased notably.

#### **3.1 Brief presentation of the UAC**

The University of Abomey-Calavi (UAC), previously known as the National University of Benin, was established in 1970. It is the principal public university in Benin. The University has experienced an average annual increase in student enrolment of 6.5 % over the past decade, with 74,987 enrolments in 2017-2018 compared with 30,414 students enrolled in 2002-2003. A third of the students enrolled are female (30%), with a parity index is 0.43 in 2017-18. According to data from the yearbook of statistics for the 2017-2018 academic year, the University of Abomey-Calavi has six university centres

comprising 42 training and research entities and offers 363 training courses, including 58 doctoral-level courses. In the 2017-2018 academic year, the UAC has trained 300 PhD holders including 191 university doctoral graduates and 109 graduates of specialised medical studies (DES) in 2017-2018 (p. iv) Of the 865 statutory teachers, 131 are full professors and 213 are lecturers, the two degrees that allow the supervision of these according to the rules of CAMES. This represents 39.76% of the teaching staff.

### 3.2 The demand for doctoral training

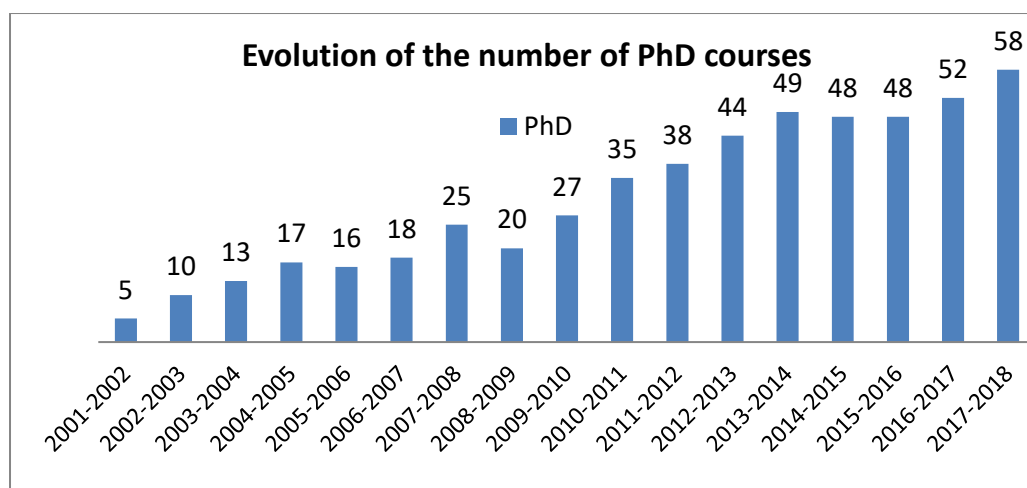


Figure 1 : Evolution of the number of PhD courses offered at UAC

Source : Adapted from *Annuaire des statistiques de l'année académique 2017-2018 de l'UAC* p.8

The portfolio of doctoral courses at the University of Abomey-Calavi has expanded significantly over the past two decades. In the 2001-2002 academic year, there were only five doctoral programmes, but by 2017-2018, this had increased to 58. This growth in demand for PhDs has led the university to develop a wide range of doctoral programmes in response. This illustrates the global trend of increasing doctoral training opportunities, which is also evident at the local level. Figure 1 illustrates the evolution of the number of doctoral programs at UAC from 2001 to 2018. This number has increased by a factor of eleven, from 5 to 58 programmes, in less than two decades.

### 3.3 Postgraduate students enrolment and trends in doctoral graduates at UAC

A review of the distribution of UAC student enrolment by year and gender in 2017-2018 reveals that the ratio of students enrolled per year of study in doctoral theses is 5.57. This ratio is 5.45 in the first year of the thesis, 5 in the second year and 6.28 in the third year. In other words, 20% of those enrolled are women. Furthermore, an analysis of the total number of students enrolled in 2017-2018 reveals that out of 74,987 students enrolled in 2017-2018 (30.4% of whom are women), only a total of 1,316 students are enrolled in doctoral programmes, representing 1.75% of the year. Of these, 387 are in their first year, 288 in their second year and 641 in their third year.

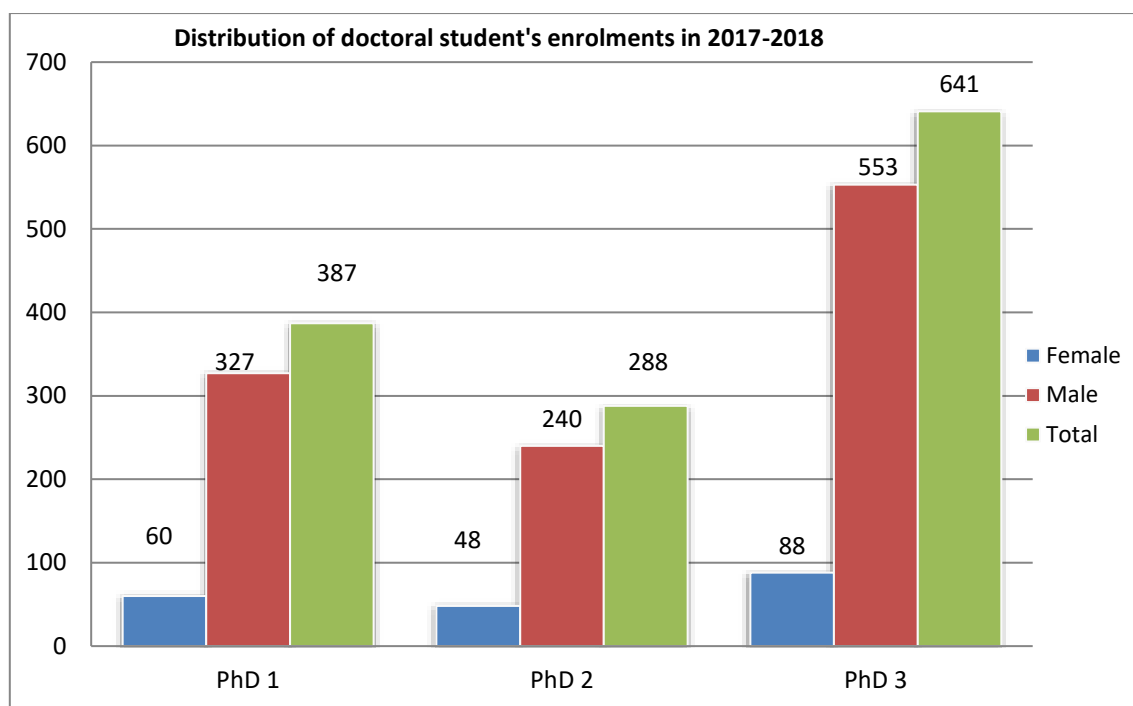


Figure 2 : Distribution of UAC postgraduate students' enrolment by year and gender in 2017-2018

The PhD graduates are divided into various fields of study, which are embedded into seven doctoral schools. These include the Doctoral School of Physical Education (EDEPSDH), the Doctoral School of Sport and Human Development (EDEPSDH); and the Multidisciplinary Doctoral School "Spaces, Cultures and Development" (EDPECD). All PhD students in social sciences and humanities are involved in this school. The others schools are: the Doctoral school of Agronomic Sciences (EDSA); the Doctoral School of Engineering Sciences (EDSI), the Doctoral School of Hard and Applied Sciences (EDSEA), the Doctoral School of Health Sciences (EDSS) and the Doctoral School of Life and Earth Sciences (EDSVT)<sup>2</sup>.

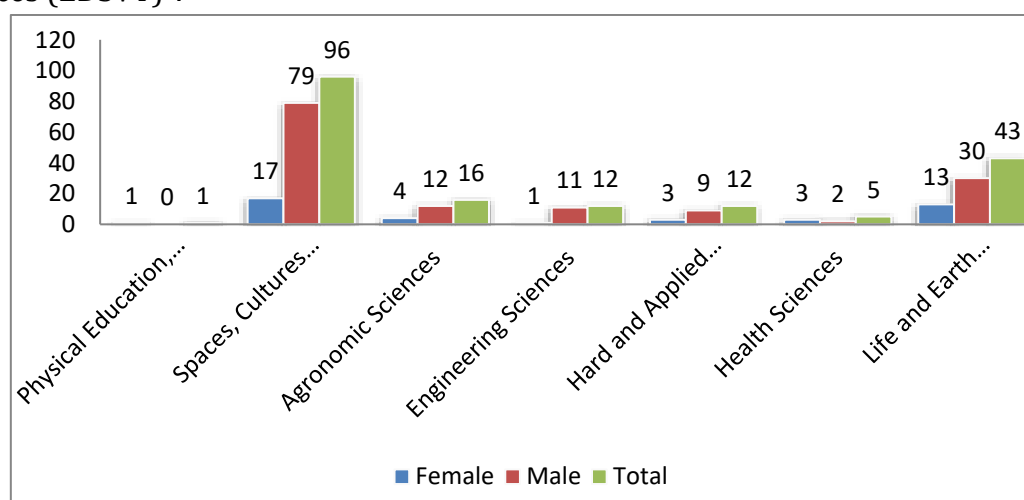


Figure 3 : Gender distribution of PhD students by doctoral schools at UAC in 2017-2018

<sup>2</sup> All translations from French are made by the author.

The data from Kpenavoun Chogou (2019), is presented in Figure 3, which shows the gender breakdown of the number of students enrolled in each of the seven doctoral schools at this public university. In the agronomic sciences, engineering sciences, hard and applied sciences, and health sciences, there is a near-equality in the number of male and female students enrolled at the doctoral level. The greatest discrepancies are observed in the Social Sciences and Humanities, as well as in Life and Earth Sciences, where men are more strongly represented at the doctoral level than women.

Figure 4 illustrates that between the 2011-2012 and 2017-2018 academic years, a total of 1804 doctoral degrees (including university doctorates and specialized medical degrees) were conferred on an average of 257 doctors per year. The 2013-2014 academic year saw the highest number of PhD graduates from the oldest and largest university in Benin, with 312 diplomas awarded.

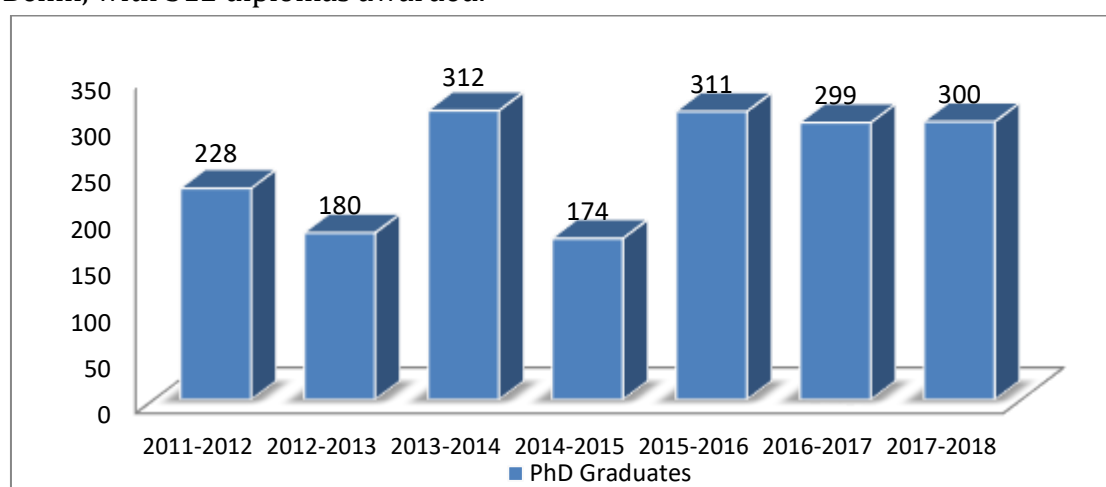


Figure 4 : Evolution of number of PhD graduates

Source : Adapted from *Annuaire des statistiques de l'année académique 2017-2018 de l'UAC* (p113)

#### 4. The PhD candidate condition in public universities

The condition of PhD candidates in public universities is an important variable in understanding not only the production modalities of the intellectual elites that are supposed to be the PhD holders, teachers and researchers in particular. This understanding is becoming increasingly important as the number of PhD holders who have converted to other sectors, such as consultancy or work in international organisations, increases. The doctorate is rooted in a set of perceptions that maintain a myth around this highly valued degree, which is paradoxically problematic in terms of production conditions. This examination will focus on the perception of the work of postgraduate students, particularly in the humanities and social sciences. It will also consider the perception of the thesis process in the context of an initiatory test and suffering at work, as well as perceptions linked to the rite of public defence.

##### 4.1 Perceptions of the work of doctoral candidates in the social sciences and humanities



The doctorate is typically regarded as a pinnacle of academic achievement, a completion of the academic career path for candidates. However, it is important to recognise that this is merely the beginning of the academic journey, as it equips students with the skills and knowledge required to engage in various academic activities, including teaching, research, and consulting. As evidenced by Biggs's (1982) work, understanding the motivations of starting the doctoral journey is necessary to appreciate how postgraduate students thrive into academy. When questioning my interlocutors, I quickly realised that the reasons why the members of my sample start a PhD are varied and sometimes very contradictory: to finish the university cycle, to obtain the highest possible degree, to achieve a certain social consideration, to prepare to become a teacher at the university or a researcher in a laboratory. For those already working as civil servants, obtaining a doctorate is a way of preparing a transition from the administrative civil service to the university. This occurs because generally, in French-speaking countries, the public service does not recruit graduates with a doctorate except at university.

For all, obtaining a doctorate is a matter of prestige. It goes without saying that for a civil servant, obtaining a doctorate while already in office appears to be a way of leaving the administration and entering the university. It is also possible for a civil servant with an acquired doctorate to be eligible for several appointment positions because of the prestige that a doctorate confers, even if it is not recognized and valued in its basic salary. As a transition to a higher prestigious stratum, the doctorate obtained under these conditions remains essentially little devoted to research and teaching.

#### **4.2 The doctoral journey as an initiation test and the suffering of postgraduate students**

Perceived as a completion, doctoral journey can then be endured more easily despite the difficulties; the student develops a kind of resilience, even though the price to pay is often very high. It exposes postgraduate students constantly to the regard of seniors and broadly the academic arena. The feeling of enduring an initiation test or even a permanent ordeal due to the glance of others, the university community, parents, society, reinforces this state of things.

" When the defense is over and you are wearing the toga, you are transported, you forget all the suffering you have lived until D-day, until that very moment... The thesis is a very difficult journey, a struggle " (Interview, UAC, October 2020).

The PhD journey is considered by some postgraduate students (in social sciences, in the case of the people I interviewed) as a battle, an obstacle course. The idea of suffering came back during my fieldwork at several moments as a main characteristic of this path, for most early career PhD holders. This suffering takes place on at least three levels: pedagogical suffering, moral suffering, and financial suffering.

#### **4.3 The suffering of postgraduate students**

##### **4.3.1 Pedagogical suffering, suffering at work**

The undertaking of a thesis requires significant cognitive and conceptual resources, and their corollary is access to bibliographical resources. In the context of universities without up-to-date or well-stocked libraries, access to books is a significant challenge. Furthermore, the majority of respondents do not have an institutional e-mail address in West Africa, which greatly reduces their chances of accessing paid databases and journal sites where they could consult and download electronic resources. Conducting a thesis under these circumstances, with the exception of rare cases, is a significant pain. Accessing books and articles from reputable journals is a significant hurdle for the majority of postgraduate students in Francophone universities in general on the continent. According to one thesis supervisor we met, very few candidates have "actually read the books they cited". This is a serious concern indeed. According to him, many only mention fragments of citations or mobilise sources cited by others, ignoring the context of these secondary citations. The phenomenon of pedagogical suffering, or more broadly, suffering at work in the context of postgraduate student status, encompasses several forms. These include mental fatigue and tear, work overload, which are linked to the numerous activities specific to the thesis. These activities include, but are not limited to, bibliography, field surveys, seminars, laboratory work, private teaching to meet needs, assistance from one's supervisor in some cases, participation in the administrative tasks of the training unit, supervision of examinations, correction of papers, and so forth. In addition, various jobs are required to support oneself and one's family, which can also contribute to stress.

Consequently, many postgraduate students are thus subjected to burnout syndrome, depressive symptoms, overwork and other processes of psychic degeneration, which are not yet fully understood. All of my interlocutors expressed their desire to benefit from the services of psychologists (which is still largely frowned upon from a cultural point of view), or people who can provide moral support during the most challenging phases of the thesis process.

" The mental, psychological and psychic condition of students, especially at the doctoral level, should be examined and taken care of", says one of our respondents, a thesis supervisor with some 20 years of experience " (Interview, UAC, October 2020).

It is also important to consider the mental health (Vinet et al, 2003; Morin and Forest, 2007) of postgraduate students. Research indicates that feelings of shame of "not making enough progress" or fear of failing to complete the thesis are processual events that can contribute to the isolation of some postgraduate students, which in turn makes thesis work more challenging.

#### **4.3.2 The rite of public defense and moral suffering**

The completion and crowning achievement of the doctoral programme is the thesis defence. As outlined by by Everett Hughes, this is as a "rite of passage during which an individual transitions from the status of an apprentice researcher to that of a fully-fledged

colleague" (Hughes 1995:95). Indeed, this rite of passage symbolizes not only the crowning of a long journey, with its joys and often especially its sorrows, but also the announcement of a supposedly better tomorrow. With the title of Doctor, wearing the toga in universities where this is more and more common, the new doctor enters a body that is symbolically very hierarchical and overvalued. At the same time, however, the defence is a great step into the unknown for most of the people we interviewed. The uncertain nature of the labour market, particularly in the human and social sciences, has led to universities, and thus the civil service in West Africa, becoming the primary destination for PhD holders seeking a stable position..

“ The composition of the jury was not very complicated; my thesis supervisor took care of it. The members of the jury quickly gave their agreement. The most complicated was to get the evaluation reports ” (Interview, UAC, October 2020).

Obtaining evaluation reports can be challenging due to communication errors, slow response times from evaluators, and other factors. However, despite these difficulties, the defence is an important milestone in the thesis process. Its organisation and preparation often involve activities that are stressful, rushed, and increasingly complex. It is evident that negative stress (Pépin 2000) represents a significant challenge for the thesis process, and culminates at the eve of the defence. This stress is often perceived as a crucial factor in determining the outcome of the defence, despite the fact that a thesis is rarely rejected when it has been authorised for public defense. This is a part of a psychological success/failure mechanism. By opening the doors to uncertainty, the rite of passage of the thesis defence paradoxically prolongs the moral suffering that is inherent to the doctoral process.

#### **4.3.3 Postgraduate students and financial suffering**

The undertaking of a dissertation is frequently a significant financial challenge for postgraduate students. The majority of doctoral students are reliant on personal funding, which is often unavailable at the outset. Consequently, postgraduate students frequently have to work in other sectors in order to accumulate the necessary funds to pay for their doctoral school fees, finance their fieldwork, purchase books when possible, and finally realise their ambition of becoming a "doctor".. The high symbolic value of the doctorate in Benin justifies for many important sacrifices. These doctoral students spend money either on projects unrelated to their research or on consulting, which has the effect of distracting them from their research and lengthening the time it takes to complete the thesis. These situations are exacerbated by the fact that public funding for research is almost non-existent, particularly with respect to local funding for theses. The few students who are able to benefit from programmes that fund their theses often owe this to their supervisor's personal involvement in international research programmes. Once again, the lack of transparency in recruitment forces them to be very loyal, and to

maintain their embedding into the camps of their supervisors, which can often degenerate into a master-slave relationship between the supervisor and the doctoral student, in order to guarantee that they will receive funding.

It is rare indeed that thesis grant competitions are launched with a wide communication that would have allowed students not inserted in academic networks to apply. Financial hardship thus remains a major parameter of the thesis process. A final category of postgraduate students is that of civil servants; often wishing to obtain a degree as an honorary title or to change departments and reorient their careers, they are among those who suffer little from the financial difficulties inherent in the thesis process. As illustration, they are able to finance their work and sometimes obtain, for some of them, the condescension of certain supervisors in order to complete their degree. This state of things is a cause for concern because the frantic quest for a title can fundamentally vitiate the quality of the thesis by compromising the time devoted to the work to be submitted to evaluation.

## **5. Relations between doctoral candidates and supervisors**

The relationship between postgraduate students and supervisors, which I refer to as the thesis relationship or supervision relationship (Grant & Manathunga 2011), is another crucial aspect of the doctoral journey. Despite its limited discussion in both academic literature and among the individuals involved, it appears to play a pivotal role in the successful completion of the thesis by the postgraduate student, as well as in the supervision provided by the supervisor.. The relationship between postgraduate students and supervisors are subject to numerous dysfunctions. These include an asymmetrical power dynamic, which can manifest as an authoritative stance on the part of the supervisor, and a conflictual dynamic, which can arise from the unequal distribution of power in the academic field..

### **5.1 An asymmetrical and authoritative relationship**

The thesis relationship is by nature supposed to be a two-way relationship. The postgraduate student is required to complete work under the supervision of the supervisor, who is responsible for supervising, orienting, and guiding the postgraduate student along the paths of knowledge production. In essence, it is a collaborative effort between two actors situated on different scales, with the goal of producing a new PhD holder. The thesis relationship is inherently very asymmetrical from the outset, and it is the responsibility of the supervisor to strive for equilibrium in the development of the postgraduate student. Indeed, the postgraduate student - supervisor relationship is typically characterised by an asymmetry of positions, knowledge, and affects. This asymmetry is reinforced by the tradition of training and the highly hierarchical nature of the academic world, particularly the French-speaking world, and integrates diverse cultural and sociological variables depending on the environment.

It is uncommon for postgraduate students to present their relationship with their supervisor as a collaborative one. In practice, the relationship often appears as one of authority and subordination, with the supervisor, who is typically the doctoral candidate's supervisor, occupying the position of authority and the doctoral candidate in a subordinate role. Consequently, this relationship becomes a power relationship, involving various strategies for controlling the academic disciplinary space or the field of research. This is achieved by promoting the supervisor from the driving forces that their postgraduate students constitute, and by negotiating a personal space for the postgraduate student in the academic community.

"As a PhD student in the lab, I was co-opted as an assistant to the professor, so for several years I gave classes in place of the professor. Sometimes he'd come for the first lesson of the semester and then only come back for the last lesson. Sometimes not at all. I've given entire classes without him being there. Of course it's his class and I'm doing it for him. I don't think I had a choice. It's difficult without any remuneration. In any case, we weren't paid at the time. So I had to try and make a living, continue the thesis and at the same time teach in place of someone who was simply pocketing his salary. " (Interview, UAC, October 2020).

Consequently, affiliations in laboratories may be perceived as a factor of advanced individuation, with the intention of reinforcing the authority of a supervisor's areopagus, rather than as a space of intellectual life. A supervisor elucidates: "A few years ago, there were like camps. You can't be with one teacher [supervisor] and another; everyone was in a kind of camp. With the functioning of the multidisciplinary doctoral school, the professors are brought to interact more and more, so this has erased the camp logic that we were attending" (Interview, UAC, October 2020).

The dissolution of camp logics within the academic community facilitates the integration of postgraduate students into the academic sphere, despite the persistence of encamping or symbolic segregation. From this perspective, the interdisciplinary nature of doctoral schools can facilitate the collaborative construction of the thesis relationship by the various stakeholders.

## **5.2 A potentially conflictual relationship**

The relationship between supervisors and postgraduate students is also a very fragile relationship, unstable and capable of generating constant conflict. Nelson and Friedlander (2001) propose an analysis from the point of view of supervisors. The conflict dimension can be explained by the very nature of the academic field, full of power issues, symbolic struggles, and so forth. In his article on the knowledge production and power issues, Frederic Lesemann states:

" The academic universe, contrary to most dominant representations, is extremely competitive (see Lesemann 2003), structured by complex relations

between professors and students that can be dynamic relations favouring learning as well as relations of domination and moral and material pressures, to which students motivated by a strong aspiration to access the 'academic world' accept to submit. The power relationship intrinsic to being a thesis student is structurally asymmetrical and can often be very unbalanced, opening the door to multiple forms of abuse "<sup>3</sup> (Lesemann, 2015:2).

It is rare for conflicts to be openly discussed and resolved collectively. A colleague recounted the experience of a postgraduate student who had made some missteps in his relationship with his supervisor. The supervisor was displeased to find that his advice was not being heeded and decided to withdraw his support. When the postgraduate student submitted his chapters, the supervisor did not review them. The situation persisted for almost two years, during which time the postgraduate student was already four years into a relationship that had become irreparably damaged. Dysfunctions in the thesis relationship may also arise due to the general absence of a contractual framework. While a written contract is not typically employed, which may appear overly bureaucratic and tedious, the rules of collaboration are seldom defined at the outset. While there is a thesis charter in place at some universities, few postgraduate students are aware of it, and even fewer have ever had a discussion session with their potential supervisor to agree on the mechanisms of interaction, the frequency of submission of texts or the modalities of meeting, etc. The idea of issuing a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) is therefore a promising solution to prevent misunderstandings on the way to work. The MoU shall be a truly compass for supervisors at the beginning of their relationship with the PhD candidates, delineating responsibilities, expectations, and other procedures. It will also serves as a memento for PhD candidates.

The majority of postgraduate students embark on the PhD journey with the intention of defending a doctoral thesis at the conclusion, yet often lack a clear understanding of the implications of this process in terms of human and professional relations with their supervisor. These include question such as: what is the mode of collaboration? How often should working sessions be held? Should papers be sent in advance? Do we have to finish writing the thesis block before submitting it to the supervisor? Or should each chapter be submitted to him/her?

Normally, doctoral candidates will limit themselves to contacting a potential supervisor, who will issue them with a letter of agreement. They will then submit their file and that will be the end of it. However, difficulties can arise along the way.

" In my case, I was lucky that my supervisor had made it clear that he didn't have the time to read me too frequently, so I had to send in my theoretical and methodological part first, and then the chapters when they were ready. That's what we did, that's how we worked " (Interview, UAC, October 2020).

For another PhD candidate :

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<sup>3</sup> This is my translation. The original version is in French.

" My supervisor required me to read my dissertation, chapter by chapter, so... when I finish writing a chapter I send it to him. Sometimes he reacts quickly, sometimes he doesn't react at all, but I send it to him; later he downloaded everything and we had a session before I finished the draft of the dissertation to submit to him " (Interview, UAC, October 2020).

Furthermore, there are various methods of interacting with supervisors. According to numerous interviewees, there is a set of attitudes to adopt, characterised by a sense of submission and availability at all times. For instance, the postgraduate student may in fact appear to be an assistant in the service of his supervisor :

" I corrected the copies of the lower classes for my supervisor; I also helped him to do his lectures, I was always present when he taught; then I did him favours when he asked... and in all this I had to find the time to work for myself " (Interview, UAC, October 2020).

According to some interviewees, the thesis relationship is effectively based on relational, subjective, and submissive aspects. This meant that postgraduate students and supervisors cannot guarantee that the thesis will take place in a secure relational context. The prevalence of power relationships, structural and symbolic asymmetry, then contributes to distorting in some cases the collaborative relationship that should exist and very frequently turns into a relationship of subordination.

While there are undoubtedly cases in which the relationship between postgraduate students and supervisors seems to work marvellously, but they are not legion. In these cases, several scenarios exist. Firstly, the postgraduate student has a good prior relationship with their supervisor. Secondly, the postgraduate student has personal or family relationships with the supervisor, which acts as a counterbalance when necessary. Thirdly, the postgraduate student is enrolled in a funded research programme which obliges both parties (the postgraduate student and the supervisor) to complete the work within a certain period of time. The existence of an external factor that constrains the relationship between the postgraduate student and supervisor serves to compensate for the absence of clearly established and agreed rules between them. This factor helps to consolidate the thesis relationship for a successful outcome.

## **Conclusion**

This study demonstrated that the thesis process is complex from a relational perspective. The relationship between the doctoral student and their supervisor is crucial to the success of the endeavour. The example of a French-speaking African university illustrates the growth of doctoral training and the sustained increase in the number of graduates, while highlighting the existence of relational difficulties. The thesis relationship is presented as asymmetrical, power and conflict-prone by default. It is therefore necessary for supervisors to rebalance the relationship, particularly in the absence of a memorandum of understanding that allows for a challenging framework for collaboration at the outset. Furthermore, the status of postgraduate students should not

lead us to overlook the mental health dimension of PhD candidates. The nature of their work exposes them to various psychological, psychic and even mental pressures that supervisors are sometimes obliged to manage. These issues deserve further consideration in the future.

This paper demonstrates that postgraduate students generally require accompaniment. This should not be limited to academic support. They may also require mental health support. On the one hand, it appears that supporting doctoral students could preserve their mental health. Strengthening the presence of postgraduate students in activities designed to break the natural isolation to which thesis research and the writing phase can confine a doctoral student is also a need. This study also asserts that encouraging doctoral students to engage in social activities, both professional and non-academic, is a responsibility of supervisors. Conversely, enhancing the training of supervisors will facilitate the development of greater empathy in their interactions with graduate students. Furthermore, it is recommended that academic authorities encourage the establishment of a memorandum of understanding (MoU) to facilitate the relationship between students and supervisors by providing a general framework for interaction from the beginning of the thesis.

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