REVIEW REPORT ON FORD FOUNDATION'S PROGRAMME: NEXT GENERATION OF ACADEMICS

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1 INTRODUCTION TO THE REVIEW AND THIS REPORT

This report provides key findings, conclusions and recommendations arising out of the commissioned review of the Ford Foundation's Next Generation of Academics (NGA) Programme. Over the past five years, the Ford Foundation's Office for Southern Africa has made grants totalling over $ 5 million in support of some 17 projects that aim to promote the emergence of the next generation of academics and to create greater equity in the composition of academic staff in South African universities. While the Ford Foundation supports a diverse spectrum of projects, the vast majority are to be found in the Humanities and Social Sciences.

While the review included the collection of both quantitative and qualitative data, the former indicated that it is premature to draw final conclusions based on the numbers of students that have been enrolled or who have graduated, let alone those who have been employed in higher education institutions in South Africa or other African countries[1].

There are several reasons why it is premature to use statistical data. First, many projects are still underway and since post-graduate study is a medium to long-term process (with some students having to interrupt their studies before graduating), sufficient numbers of graduates for this kind of analysis will only be available in another three to five years. Secondly, quantification is not a straight-forward process when analyzing enrolment and / or graduation rates associated with some of these projects. The ways in which funds from multiple sources are used to support a range of activities makes it difficult to differentiate between those students who are supported only by the Ford Foundation and those supported through multiple grantmakers, including the Ford Foundation. Thirdly, the employment of graduates in higher education institutions is complex and not necessarily the inevitable outcome of graduation. Very few of the institutions included in the sample were able to guarantee their graduates positions after completing their qualifications.

1.1 The focus of the review

Given the limitations of the current quantitative data, the review focused on the more qualitative aspects, particularly the approaches to postgraduate support offered in the universities, including the funding approaches.

1.1.1 The approaches[2] to postgraduate support identified in this review

The review focused on providing a more nuanced understanding of postgraduate support used in the various projects, comparing the elements within these to "an ideal model" as suggested by the Ford Foundation in its document entitled *Proposed Review of the Ford Foundation Office for Southern Africa's Grants in the Arena of the Next Generation of Academics*. This document makes reference to the following critical elements in the "ideal model":

- A well-respected intellectual leader who is also a good and empathetic supervisor

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1 Summaries of the individual interviews conducted are provided in a separate document. A number of these indicate that funding boundaries are not clear-cut, i.e. it is not always possible to identify specific students who have been funded wholly by the Ford Foundation.

2 The term "approach" rather than "model" is used in this report. The latter term suggests greater levels of systematization, organisation and institutionalization of support features than was found in the sample of projects in this study.

- A small group of M and PhD students to work with the leader. Each student has his / her specific research topic which falls within a well-defined thematic area.
- The funds provide students with fees, comprehensive support and some research monies.
- The students are provided with space in which to work in the department / unit and they are encouraged to work there so as to be included as part of a broader intellectual and social community – in casual conversations, informal seminars etc.
- Professional training includes hard and soft elements: the hard skills include research methods, writing for publication, presenting papers etc; while the soft skills include working with fellow academics, teaching, supervision etc.

The "ideal model" outlined above is thought to provide optimum opportunities for students to learn, be intellectually developed and have training and experience in what it means to be a successful academic.

This report describes the ways in which the elements listed above have been used or interpreted in the various NGA projects. The importance of providing field-specific research training (as opposed to more generic training), a community of peers to enhance knowledge of the broader field of study and opportunities for interaction with institutional staff and in networks beyond the institution are highlighted.

In summary, while all the projects included in the review may be broadly described as "thick" rather than "thin"[3] approaches to postgraduate support, the findings indicate that these elements are "put together" in different ways. Key differences between "thin" and "thick" models of postgraduate support are described along with the three approaches identified by the reviewers in this study. The latter reflect the diverse higher education landscape in South Africa (i.e. different institutional contexts), the multiple roles of universities (and, therefore, of academics themselves) as well as the need for good PhD graduates for employment in various sectors of the economy.

It is hoped that the categorization outlined in this report will be useful to the Ford Foundation in making decisions about its focus for funding in future.

1.1.2   Funding practices

In addition to describing the similarities and differences in each of these approaches, this report gives attention to the ways in which "thick" approaches of postgraduate support are funded. In summary, moving from a "thin" approach to a "thick" approach requires the establishment of a more complex support system and this, in turn, requires a significantly increased funding pool.

As already indicated, the reviewers found that project leaders often drew on funds from different sources, "mixing and matching" these as required in their departments /units or disciplinary specialisations. The review also found considerable differences in the amounts of funding afforded to students at the same level at different universities.

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3   The terms "thin" and "thick" models of postgraduate support were shared with the reviewers by Professor Johann Mouton, University of Stellenbosch. Some of the key features of these models differ. For example, "thin" models of postgraduate support are those where the supervisor and student focus primarily on the individual student's research topic, whereas "thicker" models of support involve students working beyond their own topics within a broader theme alongside other students. The latter also draw on a broader range of support activities than found in "thin" models of support.

It is suggested that Ford may want to "map" current funding programmes aimed at supporting projects that promote the next generation of academics at the national level in order to better identify gaps in provision, i.e. the areas that are not receiving funding or not receiving sufficient funding.

2 THREE APPROACHES TO POSTGRADUATE SUPPORT IDENTIFIED

As indicated in the introduction to this report, the concepts of "thin" and "thick" models of postgraduate support were shared with the reviewers by one of the interviewees. The former rely largely on the traditional student-supervisor relationship with intermittent contact, while the latter extends this support base.

The three approaches to postgraduate support identified in this review may be best conceptualized as being located broadly on the "thick" side of the postgraduate support continuum, some being "thicker" than others and more in line with the "ideal model" articulated by the Ford Foundation.

The three approaches identified in this review are:

- the approach located in traditional university settings where a strong research culture prevails;
- the approach located in ex-technikons or new comprehensive universities where a research culture is still being built; and
- the approach located in a department where the main function is to develop professionals for a specific sector (as opposed to academics who undertake cutting edge research).

It is important to note that the three approaches are not exclusive. For example, it is possible that one approach could produce both professional researchers (e.g. journalists and lawyers), while also producing scholarly researchers for the academy. In addition, it is possible that one approach could produce graduates who will focus on teaching in the academy as well as those who will undertake cutting edge research.

2.1 The support base of the different approaches to postgraduate support

This section of the report examines key elements of the "ideal model" identified by the Ford Foundation and considers the differences in interpretation and / or use within the three approaches identified above.

Research training

One of the most frequently found elements of additional support across the three approaches was that related to research training. This was a consequence of one of the key challenges faced by project leaders – selecting students with the requisite skills to embark on a postgraduate qualification and /

or "converting students' skills sets" before the real research work can begin[4].

Interviewees described these skills as including critical reading and writing skills, language and translation skills, the ability to "make connections" and "discern levels of subtlety". Without sufficient mastery of the basics, students are unlikely to be able to make their own decisions about their work – to take 'ownership' of their projects – and to develop confidence as researchers.

A closer analysis of this element of support, however, reveals differences in approach. For example, the two comprehensive universities employ a university-wide approach to research training workshops, often making use of outsiders to provide generic training coordinated by the newly established Postgraduate Centres[5]. While serving as useful introductory sessions to research, it is important that these Centres not be viewed as a substitute for the student-supervisor relationship. A variety of research approaches and methods are usually covered in these workshops along with topics related to good planning and time management.

On the other hand, the traditional universities tend to provide research training within the department / unit and pertinent to the particular discipline under study. One interviewee argued that differences in field-specific research training are important – for example, collecting data in rural environments requires a different skills-set to translating historical documents.

In a couple of cases, research training in traditional universities was provided for by allowing a potential student to work in the unit / department as a "research assistant" before registering for study. It was explained that this "a conservative approach" provides the opportunity for students, some of whom do not have "a strong undergraduate degree" to enjoy "a preparatory period" during which he / she can work under the supervision of other researchers and acquire the necessary research skills. It also provides students with the opportunity to test whether they indeed wish to pursue careers in academia.

It is likely that the differences in provision described above reflect the relative strength of research cultures in different faculty and institutional contexts. Given that some departments within comprehensive universities are still developing research identities, the more generic, stand-alone training workshops offer a platform for university-wide training.

It is also likely that these approaches will, in broad terms, produce different graduates: those who see their future engaging in cutting edge research within the academy, those whose work will focus primarily on teaching in the academy and those who will work outside of the university using skills honed through their research activities.

Interestingly, these organisational and cultural differences in research training are also reflected in the ways in which the Ford Foundation research grants were provided: in the case of traditional

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4   The interrupted nature of many students' studies (from B degree to Ph.D. and even within the Ph.D. qualification itself) was thought to have implications for their learning. For example, methodology learned at the undergraduate level would need to be repeated at the postgraduate level. As suggested by one interviewee,"remedial methodology" lessons and other forms of "accumulative learning" need to be factored in to programmes. In addition, as many students change disciplines or move towards interdisciplinary studies at the postgraduate level, new concepts – even new discourses – need to be learned.

5   It was suggested by one interviewee that the recent establishment of Centres for Postgraduate Research in many higher education institutions could be viewed as a somewhat uncritical response to recommendations in HEQC Audit Reports. These reports highlighted the often poor support for postgraduate students (with the universities' emphasis being on undergraduate students) and prompted universities to set up "one-stop postgraduate offices", largely administrative rather than academic centres. While the Centres for Postgraduate Research have benefits (e.g. providing generic courses on proposal writing, quantitative methods, etc), their effectiveness depends on the presenters (a number of whom are not fulltime members of staff as this work is often outsourced) and their embeddedness within not only the university but also the students' own disciplines.

universities, research grants were with the individual project leaders, while, at the comprehensive universities, the grants were to the broader institution.

Another difference noted in the limited sample used in this review was that while a number of the students at the traditional universities had been recruited from outside of South Africa, greater numbers of students at the comprehensive universities were South Africans. International students contribute to the diversity of experience and perspectives within the programme. In some cases, diversity in language (e.g. Arabic, Spanish) enhanced students' ability to work with original texts.

A number of project leaders referred to the difficulties of recruiting good black South African candidates on their programmes. The reasons for this need further examination.

Engagement in the development of knowledge within a thematic area

While traditional "thin" models of postgraduate supervision tend to focus on the students' topic / research question, the "thick" approach requires that students attend regular seminars within the unit / department and engage with other students as well as staff members on associated research topics / questions. This requires that students move beyond their own research interests and learn about associated areas in the subfield and / or discipline. In this approach, the development of scholarly knowledge in a subfield is viewed as being as important as the completion of the individual projects.

The development of scholarly knowledge in a broad thematic area – as opposed to the completion of an individual project – broadens the scope of students' activities as they engage in various forms of group work. In one case, a project leader described the "reading groups" held for postgraduate students as being a way to develop knowledge of a broad theoretical landscape. She argued that "everyone should read Foucault and Derrida".

In addition to broadening content knowledge, engaging with the work of others in seminars was thought to provide students with opportunities to learn how to interrogate others without being "gladiatorial", to present areas of their own research, respond appropriately to criticisms and then adapt and refine their ideas. One interviewee explained that "thinking happens through writing" and the preparation done for presentations was vital in moving individual projects forward.

Broadening students' knowledge through engagement with others in regular seminars also provides a context for their understanding of the processes through which scholarly knowledge develops and the role of universities in this.

Building a community of emerging scholars

One of the key elements identified by the Ford Foundation when conceptualizing the NGA programme was that of a small group of students working together with a project leader. This element was particularly highlighted in the traditional universities where students were well integrated within units / schools / departments. One of the project leaders interviewed described her project as having a "flat structure" where students, postdocs and senior professors work "alongside each other".

In some universities, students were allocated work spaces / offices (sometimes shared spaces) and were encouraged to meet staff in the tearoom daily where the exchange of information and

the provision of assistance could occur informally. As one interviewee said, this helps students become better integrated in the department – "they need to breathe it, live it". Students interviewed confirmed the importance of their integration in the department / school. Some explained that meeting staff during tea-time provided them with opportunities for "natural interactions" which broke down barriers. Others said that the "atmosphere" in the School was such that they "wanted to be a part of it". This atmosphere was as a result of "the collegiality" experienced, "the helpful discussions" enjoyed and the "advice" received.

In the comprehensive universities, students were located in a range of departments and tended to work in greater isolation from each other. While staff in the Postgraduate Centres highlighted plans to make these areas more attractive to students, these are located away from the 'home' department.

Seminars for postgraduate students within a 'home' department / school / unit contribute to both the building of a peer network or community of emerging scholars as well as a 'research identity' as, for example, an historian or an anthropologist. As mentioned earlier, these seminars focus on thematic areas and highlight discipline specific approaches.

In some cases, usually in those projects located in traditional universities, students were encouraged to develop broader networks with their peers.

Immersion in research activities and areas of knowledge over time

The time it takes to develop an individual scholar was a critical issue raised in several interviews. As one interviewee said, the development of a new generation of academics will require a generation to effect!

Another interviewee highlighted the difference in time required for PhD students in the Natural Sciences and in Humanities to graduate. While three years may be sufficient in the former where a student can "lever off existing knowledge" and where roles in researching particular topics are more likely to be clearly demarcated, this is rarely the case in the Humanities. It was argued that in the latter case, students often need "a long period of incubation" at the beginning (in some cases, two years to identify a research question / topic), and then a period in which to "close down" in order to reach completion.

In this case, the project leader had originally received funding for three years in 2004. Supplemental support for one year was requested in 2007. It was argued that the doctoral fellows would benefit from a further year to complete their theses, extend their publications and conference submissions and participate in major international conferences and local public events. In addition, it was thought that while all theses were in full draft format, they would benefit from "a further period of incubation".

Without the necessary funding to support this period of study, PhD's are more likely to be "churned out" and the chances of producing a graduate with "powerful intellectual capacity" is lowered.

International exchange

Only one of the projects included in the review included international exchange for students as

an intrinsic part of the project, i.e. where students studied abroad for a period of time. This was the feature funded by the Ford Foundation and described by staff as "crucial" in assisting students to "build confidence", "make contacts" and "build a CV". All of these students were registered for coursework Master's degrees through the partner institutions. The students communicate with each other and the staff at the home institution via email.

Teaching / tutoring

Although all students had some exposure to teaching and / or tutoring activities or were involved in editing, marking of scripts etc, few project leaders encouraged too much of this work. One said it would be "unfair" to impose too much teaching while students are engaged in research, and another reported that all such work first needs to be "cleared" with the project leader.

A different approach was taken by staff in one of the projects included in this review. In this departmental situation, tutoring was the first activity that all students engaged in for between 9 – 18 months, depending on when the student left to go to the international partner. It was reported that the tutoring experience assists students to "learn about teaching" and "develop teaching skills". Students were paid approximately R 100 000 p. a. for this work.

The two approaches to teaching / tutoring described above might be best explained by the matching them with the first and third approaches to postgraduate training identified earlier. While the first focuses on the development of researchers, the third focuses on the development of professionals for a sector. Included in the latter is the development of lecturers for this particular faculty, one of the few projects in this sample that guaranteed its NGA graduates employment if they obtained 70% or more.

Given the multiple purposes of academic institutions, both researchers and teachers are required; however, the Ford Foundation may want to give greater consideration to these categories of projects in future in order to make explicit and promote its own target areas as distinct from those supported by other funders working in the area of the next generation of academics. (See Conclusion and Recommendations for further suggestions in this regard.)

Publication and conferences

It was reported that while all students are encouraged to publish their work and to attend local conferences, not all are able to achieve this outcome. One project leader suggested that some were tired after completing their PhDs and could not undertake the work necessary for publication, while others may have moved on to other things and lost interest after graduation. It is also possible that many of the projects had not yet reached the point where students are able to report on substantive findings.

More successful reports were received of annual student conferences which are less formal in nature and where presentations could focus on the research process rather than findings and conclusions. The Ford Foundation might be interested in funding a national event for the NGA students and so build on institutional efforts here.

Potential posts in the university

Only one project leader reported that her faculty guaranteed students who achieved 70% or more a lectureship. This was described as "a big financial commitment", but one that this faculty would be able to absorb if all five students were to qualify. Few other project leaders were in positions to offer anything similar. One other reported losing their graduates to another university because they did not have posts to offer. It was recognised, however, that this was not necessarily a bad option since the graduates would gain important experience at another institution before, hopefully, returning in the future.

It is useful to note that there are currently proposals being developed (e.g. by HESA) to address ways in which universities might plan to employ their own graduates in future.

Support for existing staff members

One or two of the projects reviewed used the Ford Foundation grant to support existing staff members obtain postgraduate qualifications. One of the difficulties mentioned by some of these staff members related to the difficulties encountered regarding leave. Releasing these staff members from their teaching duties for a period of time would greatly assist them to complete their qualifications.

The role of the project leader

Although it is one of the last critical elements of the "ideal model" to be described in this report, the value of the project leader should not be underestimated. In the traditional universities, in particular, it was the project leader who 'held' the group of students together and developed the overall programme for the thematic area. These project leaders tended to be located in departments that did not have large numbers of undergraduate students enabling them to devote their time to research. One of the key benefits of working in small groups with the project leader across a thematic area was the breadth of knowledge achieved by students; it was not just their own project they learned about but a field / sub-field of knowledge, an important base for the next generation of academics.

In the comprehensive universities, the work of supervision and support was more often split between the supervisor and the Postgraduate Centres. Here, individual supervisors worked with the students on their specific projects, while the Centres supported the more generic training. In these contexts, the breadth of knowledge enjoyed in the traditional universities was less likely to emerge; rather, supervisors were primarily involved in getting a single research project off the ground and then completing it.

One project leader mentioned the "hours and hours of reading and feedback" involved in supervision – even in co-supervision. For another, the role of the supervisor was broader in that he acted as "mediator" between the students' own contexts and the sometimes unfamiliar world of the university. This, together with the increase in student numbers at the postgraduate level, means that supervision is an extremely time-consuming process. Interestingly, one project leader pointed out that time for supervision is further constrained by the effects of success where this means that she also needs to cater for the increased publicity that success brings.

Finally, no project leaders reported bringing any pressure to bear on their students to become academics: it is clear that this is a decision left to the students and to the process they undergo as NGA participants. Several project leaders anticipated that their graduates would take up positions in the broader society as researchers in research-type and / or non-governmental organisations. One spoke of the ways in which students were sometimes made attractive offers of work even before graduation – partly as a result of the invaluable skills they had gained as research assistants. At present, few post-doctoral grants are sufficiently generous so as to compete with offers from the broader market. Despite this, the reviewers noted that some students remained in the university environment simply because of their passion for their area of work.

2.2 Resourcing "thick" and "ideal" models of postgraduate supervision

Funding from multiple sources

Moving from a "thin" model of postgraduate support to a "thick" one requires what one interviewee called "an exponential increase in funding". He explained that new models of postgraduate training often involve the "establishment of new institutions within the universities". In other words, the establishment of new structures with staff to deal with the increased numbers of students can be an expensive exercise. It was not surprising, therefore, to find that many, but not all, project leaders made use of funds from different sources to support their students. The following grantmakers were identified during interviews: Mellon, Carnegie, Sanpad, SA Research Chairs, and Atlantic Philanthropies.

In some cases, funds from specific grantmakers were used for specific activities, e.g. the international exchange programme mentioned earlier. In other cases, the same activity was supported through the use of funds from different grantmakers. For example, one project leader said a student was able to conduct fieldwork in a different country in successive years as a result of using both Ford and Mellon funds.

Amounts of money for individual students

It became clear in interviews that the amounts of money made available to individual students varied considerably from one project or university to the next – e.g. in one project, students received only R 60 000, while in another institution students received over R 200 000.

Supervision and the quality / quantity debate

The time-consuming nature of supervision has been mentioned above. Given the critical benefits of having a supervisor who is also the project leader of a broad thematic area, it was concerning to note an interviewee's references to some institutions hiring external supervisors in order to ensure good throughput rates for their postgraduate students. While this practice was not found in the sample of projects selected for this review, the references to encouraging quantity over quality need to be taken seriously by universities and grantmakers alike. Quantity should not be achieved at the expense of the quality.

2.3   Graduates who remain in academia

Although the quantitative data regarding graduates is limited, it is useful to consider two of the earliest projects one at the University of the Witwatersrand and the other at the University of KwaZulu-Natal.

The first of these was initially funded in 2004. In this year, five PhD students were registered. One is currently a visiting fellow at the University of Michigan and holds a post-doctoral fellowship at UCT. The second holds a permanent position in the Philosophy Department, Chancellor College, Malawi, and has been acting HOD for the last year. A third student has recently been promoted to Associate Professor in the Journalism Department, Rhodes University. A fourth student, who resumed his thesis work following a break after a personal tragedy, holds a position as lecturer in History of Art at Wits. The fifth and last student in this cohort emigrated in 2008 and is currently registered at the University of London.

The second of these projects was funded for two years from 2008. Four M students and two PhD students registered in either 2007 or 2008. It was reported that of these six, five work in universities, three as lecturers, one as a researcher and one as a Quality Assurance Officer.

3   CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Diverse outputs from three approaches to postgraduate support

Two of the first tentative conclusions that may be drawn from this limited review is that the Ford Foundation currently funds at least three approaches to postgraduate support in traditional universities – both historically advantaged and disadvantaged – and comprehensive universities, and that these are likely to produce a range of graduates: those who will fulfill the scholarly research functions of the academy, those who will focus on the teaching role required of these institutions and those who will use their research skills in employment outside the academy.

- It is recommended that a further study be conducted in 3 – 5 years to ascertain the destinations and trajectories of current students after graduation.
- In order to provide a good platform for this work, it is recommended that the Ford Foundation requests all grantees to establish and maintain a database of those students receiving Ford Foundation support and to commit to tracking their graduates. This might be made a condition of the grant.
- In addition, developments within the three approaches, themselves, could be tracked over the next 3 – 5 years.

Given the alignment found between certain projects included in this review and the Ford Foundation's "ideal model", it is possible that the Foundation may want to consider a more focused or targeted utilisation of its resources and invest in those projects that best fit this model. Targeted support will be important if the Foundation wants to consolidate its niche in providing support for the Humanities and to distinguish itself from other funders supporting the next generation of academics.

Resourcing

Another tentative conclusion that might be made is that "thick" models of and approaches to postgraduate support require substantial funding and that resources will need to be drawn from multiple funding sources. While some of these grantmakers have been identified in this review report, this is not necessarily a full picture.

- It is recommended that a study be undertaken to "map" funding aimed at supporting the next generation of academics at the national level in order to better identify current gaps in provision and that the Ford Foundation considers its future plans and direction in relation to this map.
- In the interim, it is recommended that the Ford Foundation continues to allow for the flexible use of funding from multiple sources within projects.
- In addition, it is recommended that the period of funding for fulltime PhD students in the Humanities be reconsidered and that this be extended beyond three years where progress is demonstrated.
- In the case of existing staff members, it is recommended that grants be made conditional on the university releasing staff from teaching duties for a period of time so that they can complete their qualifications.
- It is also recommended that the Ford Foundation considers including an agreement on minimum levels of financial support for M and PhD students in future contracts with institutions.

Finally, while graduates remaining in the universities in order to become the next generation of academics might be understood as the outputs of the Ford Foundation's programme, data collected in this review points to a variety of outcomes. Through this programme, the Ford Foundation has contributed to:

- strengthening intellectual and scholarly projects in participating universities
- strengthening a graduate culture in units / centres / schools in these institutions
- developing a culture of research in the comprehensive universities
- growing a pool of competent supervisors and co-supervisors with support networks
- growing a cohort of citizens who will become "readers in society more broadly"
- developing a pool of confident researchers for employment in research organisations as well as in the private sector in South Africa and other African countries
- reaching out to untapped areas (e.g. "the discovery of a world of libraries in Africa").