

LEAVING NO ONE BEHIND: LEVERAGING SUPPORT TO PROMOTE ACCESS WITH SUCCESS IN POST-GRADUATE STUDIES

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ABSTRACT

Postgraduate student enrolment at South African universities has increased significantly. While this is commendable, it has raised concerns about low success rates. Various scholars have identified under-preparedness, supervision challenges, mental health issues and funding, among other factors, that contribute to the post-graduate success crisis. We believe that post-graduate support services have a significant role to play in dealing with this success crisis. Therefore, in this article, we present a two-fold argument about post-graduate support in South African universities. Firstly, we argue that universities have prioritised support services aimed primarily at undergraduate students, with insufficient support at the post-graduate level, and this has negative implications for post-graduate students' well-being, success and, ultimately, the knowledge-creating project in the South African higher education context. In so doing, we also highlight some of the gaps as potential areas of improvement in existing postgraduate support services. Secondly, we argue that improved support for postgraduate students requires well-coordinated and collaborative efforts between multiple stakeholders: supervisors, students and university support services, among others. In this way, this article contributes to the body of knowledge on access with success, illuminating the value of support in, and the intricacies of, post-graduate studies.

Keywords: higher education, postgraduate, support services, access, success

INTRODUCTION

The literature suggests a positive correlation between a country's graduate outputs and economic growth. Therefore, various scholars argue that increasing the number of postgraduates could help meet the need for highly skilled workers capable of competing in today's global economy, meet the needs of the current higher education system and improve research output (Massyn 2018; Sonn, 2016; The National Planning Commission 2012; Zewotir, North, and Murray 2015). For example, according to Zewotir et al. (2015, 1), "the growth of a

country is largely dependent on graduates with the necessary skills and knowledge to compete globally". For this reason, expanding postgraduate student intake has become critical for universities to develop skilled labour while contributing to knowledge production (Sonn 2016), and postgraduates, particularly at the doctoral level, contribute significantly to universities' knowledge production capacities (Zewotir et al. 2015). This view and the quest to increase postgraduates and knowledge production are also evident in South African higher education.

The South African government aims to increase the number of postgraduate students by 2030 (The National Planning Commission 2012). The goal is for South Africa to have grown its master's and doctoral student population by 25 per cent by 2030, which means that by 2030, South Africa must generate 5 000 doctoral graduates each year (Maluleka and Ngoepe 2019; Wingfield 2019). This translates to more than 100 doctorates being awarded per million persons annually by 2030. The government's efforts to achieve its target can be observed in the financial programmes granted to universities. For example, Zewotir et al. (2015) indicate that the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) has set a goal of rewarding universities that graduate PhD students. Furthermore, the government has made efforts in terms of funding through the National Research Fund (NRF), National Institute of Human and Social Sciences (NIHSS) and New Generation of Academics Programme (nGaP) to ensure that students are adequately sponsored to complete their studies on time. As a result, universities are focusing more on postgraduate enrolment. The country can meet its economic expectations regarding skills and solve the needs of qualified academic personnel in universities by focusing on postgraduate students, particularly master's and doctorate degrees (Sonn 2016). Given the abovementioned discussion, universities must align their postgraduate agenda and strategies with the country's vision (Van Rensburg, Mayers, and Roets 2016).

However, given the current low throughput and poor retention situation, South Africa is falling short of the 2030 target (Maluleka and Ngoepe 2019). According to the National Research Foundation's 2019 report on the "State of the South African Research Enterprise," South Africa produced 46 PhDs per million people. This number is considerably lower than countries such as Slovenia, which leads with a production of 485 PhDs per million people, Switzerland with 468 and the United Kingdom with 406 PhDs (Mouton et al. 2019). Furthermore, even within the African continent, South Africa trails behind countries like Tunisia, which produced 118 PhDs per million people, and Egypt, which achieved a total of 78 (Mouton et al. 2019). Even though there has been a significant rise in the number of doctorates awarded, South Africa still has quite a journey ahead to match the top-ranking countries globally and within Africa. Our argument in this article is that one contributing factor to why the enrolment numbers at the postgraduate level are not translating into success lies in the

inadequacies of support structures available to postgraduate students. This issue bears implications not only for universities but also for the overall economy of the country.

INCREASED ENROLMENT AT THE POSTGRADUATE LEVEL

The country has made remarkable progress in increasing postgraduate education opportunities within its universities following the democratic transition in 1994 (CHE 2022; DHET 2023; Essop 2020). A recent examination of the 2009 to 2021 enrolment statistics in public higher education institutions found a significant increase in enrolment by qualification types at the postgraduate level (DHET 2023). Within this period, the number of students enrolled at a postgraduate level below the master's level decreased by about 5.9 per cent, from 74 495 to 70 110. Enrolment at the master's level increased by about 27.8 per cent, from 43 723 to 60 524 and at the PhD level, it increased by about 57.4 per cent, from 10 529 to 24 725. These numbers indicate a significant increase in enrolment, particularly at master's and doctoral levels, which is highly commendable.

The racial composition of student enrolment has shifted significantly. The growth rates of black and white enrolments differ across all levels of study. Between 2005 and 2017, black postgraduate student enrolments (including those from the rest of Africa) increased by 78.4 per cent, from 75 560 to 134 783 (Essop 2020). This equates to a 4.9 per cent yearly growth rate. This increase was mostly driven by an upsurge in PhD enrolments which increased from 4 601 to 15 960 in the same period. The average annual growth rate for doctorate enrolments was 10.9 per cent, compared to 4.3 per cent for master's enrolments and 4.6 per cent for postgraduate diploma/honours enrolments. The increase in doctoral enrolment is also reported by CHE (CHE 2022), showing that 20 per cent of the enrolment is from the white population. Further examination of the data by gender found that female enrolment was much higher in postgraduate programmes below the master's level, master's degree programmes, advanced diplomas, and postgraduate certificates in teaching. However, a gender disparity in PhD enrolment was observed, with male students outnumbering female students by a margin of 978 (DHET 2023).

Despite the commendable increases in post-graduate enrolment over the years, as Essop (2020) explains, the proportion of South African postgraduate students fell from 89.1 per cent to 85.1 per cent. Similarly, South African doctorate students fell from 76.9 per cent to 56.9 per cent. Enrolment of international students, on the other hand, grew from 23.1 per cent to 39.6 per cent. the DHET (2023) also affirms Essop's (2020) analysis, stating that the drastic increase in post-graduate student enrolment was primarily due to an increase in international post-graduate students at South African universities.

POST-GRADUATE SUCCESS CRISIS

Graduation rates, which serve as a proxy for success for various levels of postgraduate degrees varied in 2018 (DHET 2020). Postgraduate degrees below the master's level had the highest graduation rate (46.8%). Doctoral degrees, on the other hand, had the lowest graduation rate of 14.1 per cent. This trend persisted in 2020, with postgraduate degrees below the master's level having the highest graduation rate (52.0%) and doctoral degrees having the lowest (15.1%). Moreover, there were notable gender disparities in the distribution of graduates. A higher number of female students graduated with postgraduate degrees below and at the master's level, while a more significant number of male students graduated with doctoral degrees. Specifically, there were 462 more male graduates than female graduates at the doctoral level. In terms of specific numbers, the total number of PhD graduates in 2020 amounted to 3 552, representing a 3.1 per cent increase (107 individuals) compared to the previous year's total of 3 445. In addition, the number of master's degree graduates experienced substantial growth, with a significant increase of 59.3 per cent, amounting to 4 810 individuals.

These figures highlight the expansion of postgraduate education at South African universities, reflecting the growing emphasis on advanced degrees and specialised knowledge in higher education. These statistics also highlight the variations in graduation rates across different levels of postgraduate degrees and shed light on the gender differences in graduation patterns. They present a concerning picture of success rates amid drastically increasing enrolment rates. This is a complex issue and a cause for concern, given the country's vision for 2030. The complexity of the issue of postgraduate student success is demonstrated by Essop's (2020) findings from a study on the size and shape of higher education in South Africa.

In his analysis of trends in graduation rates and throughput in South African higher education institutions, Essop (2020) found an overall improvement in graduation rates at various levels of postgraduate education. For example, at the honours level, the proportion of students who graduated within the specified time frame increased from 29 per cent to 36 per cent. However, the percentage of students who took longer, finishing their honours degrees in six years, jumped from 65 per cent to 69 per cent. This shows that while more students complete their honours degrees on time, a considerable percentage are taking longer. Similar patterns were observed at the master's level, both in coursework-based and research-based programmes (Essop 2020). For example, graduation rates for coursework-based master's degrees improved slightly, rising from 7 per cent to 9 per cent. Graduation rates for research-based master's programmes increased from 36 per cent to 39 per cent. These statistics indicate that more students, regardless of programme type, are effectively finishing their degrees. In addition, the

data revealed the percentage of students who completed their master's degrees by coursework after six years increased from 50 per cent to 58 per cent and from 54 per cent to 59 per cent for research-based programmes (Essop 2020).

According to Massyn (2018), it has been challenging to address issues related to low graduation rates at the post-graduate level because there are not enough resources to accommodate the high number of students enrolling. Despite an overall increase in enrolment and graduation rates, a sizeable percentage of students pursuing postgraduate courses at various levels either drop out or take longer than expected to complete their studies. This matter has garnered increasing attention, as evidenced by multiple scholarly works in literature (Botha 2018; Massyn 2018; Nouri, Larsson, and Saqr 2019; Schulze 2016; Zewotir et al. 2015). This literature suggests the low throughput level has several adverse effects at various levels. For example, Nouri et al. (2019) and Botha (2018) contend that when students fail to complete or drop out of their studies, this wastes money, time and energy and has a detrimental impact on the workforce.

This impacts subsidies that higher education institutions in South Africa receive from the state for every student who graduates, an essential component of higher education funding (Zewotir et al. 2015). Zewotir et al. (2015) contend that the existing method for allocating funds strongly favours universities based on their capacity to produce highly successful PhD graduates. Therefore, PhD student enrolment and progress rates have significantly increased in importance as a crucial area of focus for higher education institutions nationwide. This is because PhD and master's by dissertation students whose studies are solely research-based attract substantial funding from the state (Zewotir et al. 2015). Besides funding, the success of postgraduate students, particularly those whose studies are research-focused, means they will contribute to their institutions' research outputs. They contribute to knowledge production and innovative ideas that boost the country's economy.

In addition to having financial repercussions for the university, students who fail to finish their studies within the allotted timeframe also impact the future of academia. This is because they affect the future of the university in terms of academics who have PhDs, which South Africa's government is trying to push to replace the current aged academic staff. This is a beneficial insight, especially for South Africa, which relies on postgraduate degrees such as master's and PhDs because they contribute to university staff and the country's knowledge economy. As the number of students enrolled at post-graduate levels continues to increase, universities need academics qualified to supervise post-graduate research studies, producing graduates who can contribute to knowledge projection (Zewotir et al. 2015).

This is supported by the 2015 South Africa Higher Education Management Information

System (HEMIS), cited in Iwara et al. (2018), which shows that only 1.7 per cent of PhD students and 7 per cent of master's students graduated in record time in 2013. The Ph.D. declined by 0.4 per cent in 2014 but rose to 3.3 per cent in 2015, while the master's contributed only 7.3 per cent and 14.2 per cent in the same years. Such statistics have implications for the university that relies on doctoral graduates to produce research and supervise students at the postgraduate level. The recent National Report on Doctoral Degrees published by the Council on Higher Education (CHE 2022) indicates a significant challenge facing South African institutions: a scarcity of academically qualified staff holding doctoral degrees which stands as a barrier to adequate supervision of PhD students. The report emphasises that institutions must be staffed with qualified supervisors for effective training of doctoral students. These supervisors, equipped with doctoral degrees themselves, are best suited to guide and mentor students pursuing their PhDs. Thus, the lack of trained supervisors has led to an increased student-to-supervisor ratio, which has implications because it affects the supervisor's workload (CHE 2022).

The above discussion speaks to the increasing demand for more academics with doctoral degrees and capacity for supervision. This is because PhD-holding academics are crucial in student development and broader academic progress. They bring concentrated expertise imparted by extensive research in their field. As alluded to earlier, this experience, coupled with their qualifications, equips them to mentor students at the postgraduate level, fostering a robust academic environment. Furthermore, these individuals contribute to knowledge advancement through novel research and participation in peer-reviewed publications. Hence, the push by South Africa's government to staff universities with academically qualified personnel is critical for enhancing the nation's knowledge economy.

FACTORS THAT CONTRIBUTE TO THE SUCCESS CRISIS

According to Mphekgwana et al. (2020) institutions of higher learning in South Africa are struggling to increase post-graduate student throughput and reduce dropout rates to achieve the 80 per cent success rate target stipulated by the Department of Higher Education and Training. This is highly concerning, not only because of its potential impact on the higher education system's ability to produce the number of postgraduates necessary for the country's economic development. It is also concerning because low success rates potentially negatively impact the number of qualified individuals who can be recruited as part of the academic staff of universities to replace ageing academics. Moreover, as the number of students enrolling at the post-graduate level continues to increase, higher education institutions desperately need qualified academics to provide postgraduate research supervision and produce post-graduates who are well-

equipped to contribute to knowledge production (Zewotir et al. 2015). These concerns bring to question the country's higher education systems' capacity to meet the government's aspirations concerning post-graduate studies as stipulated in the country's national development plan.

The factors that contribute to postgraduate students not finishing their degrees on time or abandoning their studies altogether have been the subject of much research and discussion in recent years (Cekiso et al. 2019; Fynn and Van Vuuren 2017; Massyn 2018; Mphekgwana et al. 2020). What is evident in this literature is that at the heart of this post-graduate success crisis lies the issue of inadequate support for postgraduate students, i.e., financial, academic and otherwise. Other factors identified in the literature include students' under-preparedness for postgraduate studies, poor academic writing skills, family responsibilities and emotional challenges (Iwara et al. 2018; Massyn 2018).

Under-preparedness

Many scholars assert that part-time students take notably longer than full-time students to complete their post-graduate studies (Cloete, Mouton, and Sheppard 2016; Essop 2020; Massyn 2018). This is particularly a challenge at PhD level because most students who register for a PhD are older, working and have other responsibilities that take up their time (Massyn 2018). Studying while working is another contributing factor to the late completion of many students in South African postgraduate programmes, which may account for the poor graduation rates (Massyn 2018). This signals a lack of time-management skills, an aspect of under-preparedness identified in the literature (Khauoe and Fore 2020).

The under-preparedness of postgraduate students, especially in the areas of academic writing and the research process, is another factor that contributes to low completion and dropout rates (Kisansa and Lubinga 2020; Massyn 2018). A lack of academic writing and research skills substantially hampers students' progress. Many students are exposed to research methodology for the first time at the postgraduate level (Massyn 2018). Therefore, students' limited understanding of the complexities involved in conducting research makes it more difficult for them to successfully handle the obligations and expectations of postgraduate study, which affects their completion time. Over and above the under-preparedness of students for post-graduate studies, the literature also indicates that there are challenges associated with the provision of research supervision that may contribute to the success crisis at the post-graduate level (Cekiso et al. 2019; Fynn and Van Vuuren 2017; Van Rensburg et al. 2016). While there seems to be an emphasis on the unpreparedness of students in the literature, we argue that there is also a problem of under-preparedness of research supervisors to provide adequate and quality supervision to post-graduate students.

Supervision challenges

Challenges around supervision cannot and should not be ignored in discussions about post-graduate students' success. According to Van Rensburg et al. (2016), supervision plays an important role in knowledge, research and related skills, which are important for students' successful completion of post-graduate studies. They argue that it is an intensive form of engagement between the educator (an experienced supervisor) and the student (the novice researcher), which requires professional commitment to achieve the desired outcome. In further describing the role of supervision, they argue that:

“Supervision requires a concern that extends beyond the academic. The supervisor needs to show concern and commitment not only to the student’s intellectual development and discovery of their academic potential, but also to the development of an understanding of the student as a whole person with other roles and responsibilities, which may include family, work, and other non-academic activities. This understanding will enable the supervisor to assist the student in maintaining a balance, as it is often the demands of a non-academic nature that will influence the successful completion of the degree” (Van Rensburg et al. 2016, 4).

Here, Van Rensburg et al. (2016) suggest that supervisors ought to provide a wide range of support, including academic, writing, emotional and structural support, among other things. However, a body of literature suggests that poor quality supervision is a contributing factor to the post-graduate success crisis in the South African context. For example, in a study that explored challenges that limit post-graduate success at one South African university, Cekiso et al. (2019) found that challenges related to the supervision relationship, including communication breakdown, poor feedback, non-availability of some supervisors and lack of ethical consideration, were among the significant contributors to the post-graduate success crisis.

It seems that the literature places great responsibility and high expectations on the supervisory role; however, as Fynn and Van Vuuren (2017, 186) suggest, the diverse and multifaceted needs of post-graduate students are well beyond the capacities of individual supervisors:

“Given the growing number of students entering South African higher education, the traditional model of supervision is unlikely to meet the complex set of needs of master’s students fully and due to insufficient support, the likelihood of dropout or prolonged time to completion increases.”

For this reason, like Fynn and Van Vuuren (2017), we argue that the successful completion of graduate studies requires a network of support to facilitate learning.

Mental health challenges

Mental health problems pose a significant concern for universities as students grapple with intense pressure and high academic demands (Milicev et al. 2023; Mutinta 2022; Ndlovu 2022). The global COVID-19 pandemic also intensified pre-existing mental health issues among university students (Ndlovu 2022). According to Mutinta (2022), more than one-third of university students in South Africa are affected by mental distress at least once during their university life, and mental health has been one of the most lacking health programmes in higher education institutions. This issue becomes amplified for postgraduate students, as the intensity of research, the academic workload and the potential for isolation can exacerbate stress levels, depression, and anxiety. A study by Milicev et al. (2023) investigated the prevalence and contributing factors of mental health problems among postgraduate researchers including anxiety, depression, sleep problems, subjective mental well-being and suicide behaviours. The results of the study revealed a high prevalence of mental ill-health and low levels of well-being among postgraduate researchers, indicating a compelling need for enhanced mental health support and well-being measures.

These mental health issues are further compounded by the rigorous academic workload, future career anxieties and students' financial worries. Lacking adequate support, students are susceptible to increased levels of stress, anxiety, and depression. Prevalently, there is a high occurrence of impostor syndrome among postgraduate students, characterised by persistent self-doubt and the fear of being perceived as a fraud. The aforementioned mental health challenges act as obstacles for postgraduate students, often leading to extended study duration or even dropouts (Khauoe and Fore 2020). These challenges affect individual students and implicate higher education's overall quality and efficiency. This is particularly alarming when one considers that these services are provided mainly by fellow students who may not have the necessary training or experience to offer adequate support. Walker's (2022) study surveyed 29 000 students from 26 publicly funded universities in South Africa and found that 20 per cent of students need mental health support. Shockingly, more than 70 per cent of these students do not get the help they need. The survey was conducted by Universities South Africa in 2022.

Funding

The other major challenge facing postgraduate students is the issue of funding. Lack of funding often leads to dropouts (Khauoe and Fore 2020). The issue of student funding for higher education is at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels in South Africa (Jacobs, Moolman, and De Beer 2019; Khuluvhe and Netshifhefhe 2021; Wangenge-Ouma, Cloete, and Cloete

2009). It was one of the core issues that led to the nationwide student protests under the banner of #FeesMustFall between 2015 and 2017 (Jacobs et al. 2019; Langa 2017). This challenge is not unique to South Africa; it is a global phenomenon (Mitchell, Leachman, and Masterson 2016; Nganga 2021; Oketch 2016).

Nevertheless, funding for post-graduate studies is more challenging for students to find than to get funding for undergraduate studies. Numerous studies have indicated that lack of funding is one of the main factors affecting the progress of post-graduate students in South African universities (Cloete et al. 2016; Manyike 2017; Mouton 2008). What makes this an even bigger challenge for South African higher education institutions is that when universities lose postgraduate students who drop out, they also lose the state subsidy they receive when they graduate (Cloete et al. 2016; Manyike 2017; Mouton 2008). As Manyike (2017) argues, the state's funding for higher education institutions now depends on throughput.

SUPPORT GAPS AT THE POSTGRADUATE LEVEL

All these factors discussed above are indicative of inadequate support for postgraduate students. Much of the support services universities provide are tailored for undergraduate students.

Some gaps in support services

1. Post-graduate support is understudied – the focus is on supervision, while the needs of post-graduate students go beyond what individual supervisors can provide. The transition from undergraduate to post-graduate studies is inadequately studied compared to the transition from high school to university.
2. Disintegrated efforts aimed at supporting students – a need for coordinated efforts between the various stakeholders involved in post-graduate education. Improved support for post-graduate students requires well-coordinated and collaborative efforts between their supervisors, students themselves, and the university support services.
3. Information dissemination about available support and opportunities affects the uptake of these services.
4. The lack of support for students on a personal level. This often falls on the supervisor.
5. Under-preparedness of students; supervisors may also not be prepared for supervision, which does not often feature in the literature.
6. The lack of support structures such as a writing centre that specialises for postgraduate students, particularly doctoral students (CHE 2022).

Available support beyond supervision

1. Supervision

2. Post-graduate support offices
3. Writing Centres – even though they have their own challenges.
4. Writing intensive courses

Universities do have postgraduate support offices; however, these offices are sometimes not visible, leading to underuse by post-graduate students. The CHE (CHE 2022) report recognises these existing support structures but highlights a significant oversight in the capacity of many academic support and development programmes. The same report notes a challenge in assessing the effectiveness of the available academic support services. Therefore, the report promotes the need to assess these academic support programmes' efficacy, effectiveness and success provided to doctoral and other postgraduate students, as such evaluations may yield valuable insights.

RECOMMENDATIONS

While these issues are significant, we argue in this article that they can be addressed through all stakeholders' concerted efforts. For example, there is a pressing need to orient postgraduate students and supervisors about the availability of different support services and what role each of these services offers students. This is important to ensure effective and comprehensive dissemination of critical information about available on-campus support and opportunities. This helps students to know about each service's benefits and enables them to leverage such services. We also recommend a systemic change that promotes collaboration and coordination between support services available to university students, rather than the support services working in silos, making the services offered holistic. This will enable students to leverage these available support services to their benefit.

It is also important to provide specialised support services that cater specifically to postgraduates – such as dedicated writing centres – which would further scaffold student success. This support should be tailored to postgraduate students' needs. For instance, we recommend universities provide students with more intensive research and writing courses to equip students with vital skills. This targeted support should be offered by people who are conversant in not only research but also the specific discipline. Again, universities should prioritise developing and implementing evidence-based interventions to address students' high prevalence of common mental health problems.

These interventions should be tailored to the specific needs of students from different backgrounds that address the social determinants of mental health, such as poverty and discrimination. Lastly, we also recommend that the available support services offered to

students should be reviewed and evaluated regularly to ascertain their effectiveness in meeting students' needs. Providing a rigorous, systematic assessment of academic support services can help confirm their efficacy and bolster their impact on postgraduate student outcomes. Overall, through these multifaceted, collaborative efforts, the landscape of postgraduate education in South Africa can be positively transformed towards a more supportive, conducive environment for academic achievement.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, South Africa's push to increase postgraduate enrolment faces significant challenges in ensuring successful graduates. These challenges, as indicated in the article, include but are not limited to under-preparedness, insufficient supervisor support, inadequate funding and mental health challenges. We have argued that these challenges, coupled with the lack of tailored support structures, impede the academic progression of many postgraduate students affecting completion rates, and ultimately interfering with the knowledge production potential of our universities. Tackling these multifaceted challenges necessitates tailored support structures, interventions, initiatives and collaborative efforts among all stakeholders involved in postgraduate studies. We believe achieving access with success for postgraduate students demands strategic support structures and interventions that align with South Africa's vision for academic and knowledge advancement to ensure equitable access and success for these students.

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