REIMAGINING DOCTORAL SUCCESS FOR "NON-TRADITIONAL STUDENTS": A PHENOMENOLOGICAL INQUIRY INTO THE EXPERIENCES OF EMERGING RESEARCHERS

Z. M. Mthombeni
Equitable Education and Economies
Human Sciences Research Council
Durban, South Africa.
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7940-7094

ABSTRACT

Against the backdrop of a transforming doctoral education landscape and the emergence of non-traditional doctoral students, this article investigates strategies to promote the success of students balancing academic studies and their careers. Prevailing discussions on doctoral success strategies have often centred on "traditional" doctoral students. This article examines the doctoral success challenges confronted by "non-traditional" doctoral candidates who pursue higher education at different stages of their lives, often juggling such with work and family or other responsibilities. The study was informed by Ward and Brennan's model to analyse the compatibility of student-doctoral education. This framework introduces the concept of student-doctoral fit that asserts that non-traditional students achieve optimal success when there is alignment between the student's values and those upheld by their organization and social structure. Therefore, doctoral success for non-traditional students lies in the alignment of three main spheres, namely, the 1) student-doctoral environment, 2) student vocation, and 3) the student-doctoral culture. In-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with 15 non-traditional doctoral students employed by a research organization. The findings underscore the intricacies of balancing academic and professional demands, shedding light on the challenges arising from the lack of integration between academic work and doctoral pursuits. They highlight the need to challenge the conventional separation of these facets. Notably, participants highlighted that they received more substantial academic training and support from the research organization and work mentors, emphasizing the variable nature of support by university supervisors. Given that the majority of challenges reported revolve around the fit between the student-doctoral culture and environment, it is recommended that research organizations and universities collaborate and establish robust support structures. This collaborative approach is essential to ensure academic success and facilitate non-traditional doctoral students' smoother transition into professional careers.[1]

Key words: doctoral education, fit analytical framework, phenomenology, academic work-life integration, academic careers

INTRODUCTION

South Africa has witnessed rapid growth in the enrolment of doctoral students in various

academic disciplines. This can be partly attributed to the country’s commitment to improving access to higher education since the advent of democracy in 1994 (Mkhize 2022). To support its quest to increase its share of global research output and meet its target of “100 PhD graduates per million per year by 2030” (National Planning Commission 2012, 274), the country has adopted several initiatives and policies to strengthen its doctoral education system. These include funding programs and scholarships specifically aimed at attracting and retaining talented individuals in the research field, thus encouraging more students to pursue doctoral studies. Whilst targeted interventions have been employed to increase access amongst doctoral students, there is room for improvement. Doctoral education is undergoing a transformational shift, fuelled by the increasing number of students pursuing advanced degrees while juggling diverse responsibilities. While there has been much debate on the most appropriate strategies to promote doctoral success, the primary focus has been on “traditional” doctoral students. These individuals typically follow a linear academic path, dedicating themselves solely to their studies.

The landscape of higher education is evolving, and a growing cohort of “non-traditional” doctoral candidates is emerging. These candidates embark on their doctoral journeys at varying stages of their lives, often balancing educational pursuits with work, family, and other commitments. They bring unique challenges that necessitate a re-evaluation of conventional perspectives on doctoral success (Mouton et al. 2021). This phenomenological inquiry explored the potential for collaboration between research organizations and universities to promote work-life integration during doctoral studies. In the context of such studies, work-life integration refers to striking a balance between the demands and responsibilities of academic work, such as conducting research, attending classes, and writing dissertations, and personal commitments and priorities (Wood et al. 2020). It involves recognizing the interplay between academic work and doctoral studies and seeking ways to integrate them harmoniously, rather than treating them as separate and competing spheres (Woolston 2019). Work-life integration emphasizes the importance of effective time management, setting boundaries, prioritizing self-care, and nurturing relationships, while making progress towards academic goals and requirements (Kee 2021). It recognizes that the pursuit of a doctoral degree can be demanding and time-consuming, but encourages individuals to maintain a healthy and fulfilling personal life alongside their academic pursuits.

This research contributes to the existing literature by proposing novel pathways for collaboration and integration to enhance the support systems available to emerging researchers during their doctoral studies. Its primary objective is to foster deeper comprehension of the challenges faced by these individuals while identifying opportunities for enhancement and the

formulation of more robust support structures.

The study explored a sample of doctoral students’ perceptions of their doctoral learning environment using Ward and Brennan’s (2020) student-doctoral education fit analytical model as a benchmark. Its objectives were to:

1. Explore the factors that influence successful doctoral education.
2. Determine the aspects of the student-environment fit that exert the most influence on timely doctoral completion.
3. Identify the aspects of the student-vocation fit that have the most adverse impact on timely doctoral completion.
4. Explore the impact of the student-culture fit on doctoral education.

The remainder of this article consists of a comprehensive review of pertinent literature, a theoretical discourse on the study’s analytical framework, an overview of the adopted research methods, the presentation of the findings, and a concluding section summarizing the outcomes and discussing their implications.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This review explores the evolving landscape of doctoral education, with a particular focus on the rise of non-traditional students and the challenges they face. It notes the global trend of increased enrolment of non-traditional students, highlighting the paucity of research on this type of student. The review observes that existing academic structures often cater to traditional students, neglecting the unique needs and experiences of their non-traditional counterparts. While the differences between these student groups are noted in the literature, with the non-traditional group characterized by part-time enrolment and off-campus attendance, the potential interplay of these characteristics remains understudied.

The review goes on to discuss the transformation of South African higher education post-apartheid and its implications for doctoral education. It suggests that increased visibility of non-traditional students within the scholarly community is crucial to their academic success and highlights the impact of institutional encounters on dropout rates among this cohort. Finally, it contextualizes the South African higher education landscape, emphasizing the significant reforms adopted to address historical injustices and promote inclusivity.

Massification of higher education: The increase in non-traditional doctoral students

While the global higher education landscape has witnessed an increasing number of non-

traditional students, most studies on doctoral education and attrition rates reflect the realities of traditional students (Servage 2009, as cited in Jamieson and Naidoo 2007). Research on time to degree among traditional doctoral students indicates that it is negatively associated with persistence; however, there is a lack of consideration of "non-traditional students" and academic structures continue to be based on their "traditional" counterparts (Bowen and Rudenstine 2014 Bair and Haworth 2004; Barron 2014; Graham and Massyn 2019). The existing body of literature draws a distinction between traditional and non-traditional students, with characteristic markers such as part-time enrolment and off-campus attendance offering insights into these student groups (Naidoo 2015; John and Denicolo 2013). However, the potential interplay of these characteristics remains unexplored due to national surveys' failure to consider non-traditional students as a separate category. The fact that doctoral programs predominantly cater for traditional students results in non-traditional doctoral candidates confronting challenges in relation to social integration. They thus experience marginalization, and face additional systemic challenges (Graham and Massyn 2019). Since these students often require more time to complete their studies, they might experience differential treatment and have more limited access to opportunities than their traditional counterparts.

Scholars note that such a scenario results in non-traditional students lacking access to social and cultural capital (Cotton, Nash, and Kneale 2017; Gilmore, Wofford, and Maher 2016; Pifer and Baker 2016; Weidman, Twale, and Stein 2001). The literature on doctoral attrition speaks of the importance of students becoming visible members of the scholarly community. However, non-traditional students are less in sync with organizational values and socialization to this community (Devos et al. 2017). The dropout rate among such students has been linked to their institutional encounters, such as limited engagement with faculty and peers, as well as challenges in achieving integration (Aljohani 2016; Cloete, Mouton, and Sheppard 2015).

Contextualizing doctoral education in the South African higher education landscape

The South African higher education landscape underwent significant transformation after 1994 as part of government reforms to address inequalities within the system. As highlighted by Reddy et al. (2018, 21), apartheid laws were dismantled, accompanied by a dedicated endeavour to create a post-school education and training system aimed at rectifying historical injustices. This led to the formulation of the National Plan for Higher Education (Department of Education 2001) shortly after the dawn of democracy.

South African universities have witnessed a substantial increase in the number of doctoral students, with about 40 per cent being international students. This aligns with the 2030 National

Development Plan’s goal of producing over “100 doctoral graduates per million of the population by 2030” (Department of Higher Education and Training 2016; 2017a; National Planning Commission 2012). However, the low graduation rate (around 13%) and high dropout rates (50% to 68%) at some South African universities highlight the need to improve success (Kritzinger and Loock 2012). Effective supervision is vital for postgraduate outcomes, and doctoral student attrition is influenced by various factors (Wildschut, Fongwa, and Mthombeni 2022; Delany 2009). According to Gardner (2009) and Lovitts (2001), students often attribute attrition to the institution, while faculty members tend to focus on students’ shortcomings.

The literature highlights the importance of regular communication and meaningful interaction between doctoral candidates and their advisors (Holmes, Trimble, and Morrison-Danner 2014; Holley and Caldwell 2012). Advisors’ availability for supervision and feedback is emphasized, as those who are focused on their own research agendas might neglect doctoral candidates (Herman 2011; Holmes et al. 2014). It is noted that students whose advisors initiate regular meetings tend to have higher completion rates (Stock and Siegfried 2014). Social isolation is identified as a significant factor linked to doctoral attrition, underscoring the need for positive social experiences and structures within doctoral programs (Jairam and Kahl 2012; West et al. 2011). Factors like advice on dissertation topics and writing style also influence attrition rates (West et al. 2011; Wao and Onwuegbuzie 2011).

The literature explores various aspects of doctoral education, including issues in relation to supervision, untimely completion, attrition, and new models of education (Mkhize 2022; Plumlee and Reckers 2014; Beattie and Smith 2012), with work-life integration among emerging researchers during doctoral studies also a topic of interest. Given the diverse challenges in doctoral training as well as a lack of capacity to train and produce doctoral graduates across African institutions, collaboration, internationalization, and harmonization to enhance capacity are required (Fongwa et al. 2022). However, before adopting such strategies, it is crucial to gain a clear understanding of existing structures and practices for doctoral training. Researchers have explored the experiences of doctoral students and identified opportunities for collaboration and synergy between universities and research organizations to enhance support systems (Castelló et al. 2017; Martinez et al. 2013).

Castelló et al. (2017) investigated the reasons why students contemplate dropping out of doctoral degrees, highlighting institutional factors such as inadequate supervision, a lack of support and resources, limited career development opportunities, and an unsatisfactory program structure. Martinez et al. (2013) explored the challenges faced by full-time doctoral students in achieving work-life balance, emphasizing the need for universities to provide resources and support services, and adopt more flexible policies. The literature identifies mental and physical

health as critical factors that impact work-life balance. Studies have shown that depression and anxiety are prevalent amongst students managing work and studies (Yusuf, Saitgalina, and Chapman 2020; Barry et al. 2019).

There is a dearth of studies on the experiences of students who work in academic settings in South Africa whilst pursuing their PhD studies. This study sought to fill this gap by exploring the experiences of students in a research organization. A tracer study on the career paths pursued by doctoral graduates found that most took up positions in academia, research institutions, industry, and government. Notably, approximately 4 per cent of the graduates were employed in various South African government departments, including national, provincial, and local entities. Furthermore, about 2.5 per cent found employment in the country’s science councils, such as the “SAMRC, WRC, Council for Geoscience, NRF, Agricultural Research Council, Council for Scientific and Industrial Research, and HSRC” (Mouton et al. 2021).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: STUDENT-DOCTORAL EDUCATION FIT FRAMEWORK

The theory of student-doctoral fit proposed by Ward and Brennan (2020) posits that an individual’s academic and work performance improves when there is alignment between his/her values and those of his/her organization and social structure. The theory of fit can be conceptualized in a multidimensional and fluid way, as it can be examined through dimensions such as job-person fit, and values fit (Kristof-Brown, Zimmerman, and Johnson 2005). In their updated theory, Ward, and Brennan (2020) make two significant contributions to the existing body of knowledge. First, they enhance the existing theoretical framework on fit, which was initially developed by Baker and Pifers (2015), by introducing additional sub-dimensions that allow for a more precise assessment of how well students align with doctoral education.

These sub-dimensions, including “student-private environment fit,” “student-(academic) writing fit,” and “student-personal characteristics fit” are based on insights from empirical studies on doctoral student performance (Ward and Brennan 2020, 1450). This modified framework can be adapted to various academic disciplines and is able to consider country-specific variations in doctoral education approaches. Secondly, Ward and Brennan (2020) applied their refined framework to part-time doctoral programs and international doctoral students. They analysed doctoral student performance in terms of time to completion or lack thereof. The authors’ analytical model covers a wide array of factors derived from the existing literature on doctoral education that could potentially hinder the performance of doctoral students.

The student-doctoral fit framework was appropriate for this study as it aligns with the diverse range of factors identified in the doctoral education literature. This theoretical

framework comprises three core dimensions: "student-doctoral environment fit, student vocation fit, and student-doctoral culture fit", which are examined in the following sub-sections.

Student-doctoral environment fit

Student-doctoral environment fit pertains to the alignment between an individual doctoral student's characteristics and his/her academic surroundings, encompassing the university, its departments, faculty members, and peers (Baker and Pifer 2015). In the context of person-environment fit, this notion extends to how well students harmonize with their academic setting (Ward and Brennan 2020). Given the blurred boundaries between work and home life in the flexible structure of doctoral education, Ward and Brennan (2020) suggest that this alignment should also consider students' external personal environment.

The literature recognizes that personal situations, outside commitments, and individual interests can pose challenges for doctoral students. Research on the factors contributing to untimely completion of doctoral programs has identified adverse influences stemming from a student's private circumstances (Thouaille 2017). To better understand the significant factors influencing timely completion of the doctoral process, Ward and Brennan (2020) introduced several key dimensions (see Figure 1).

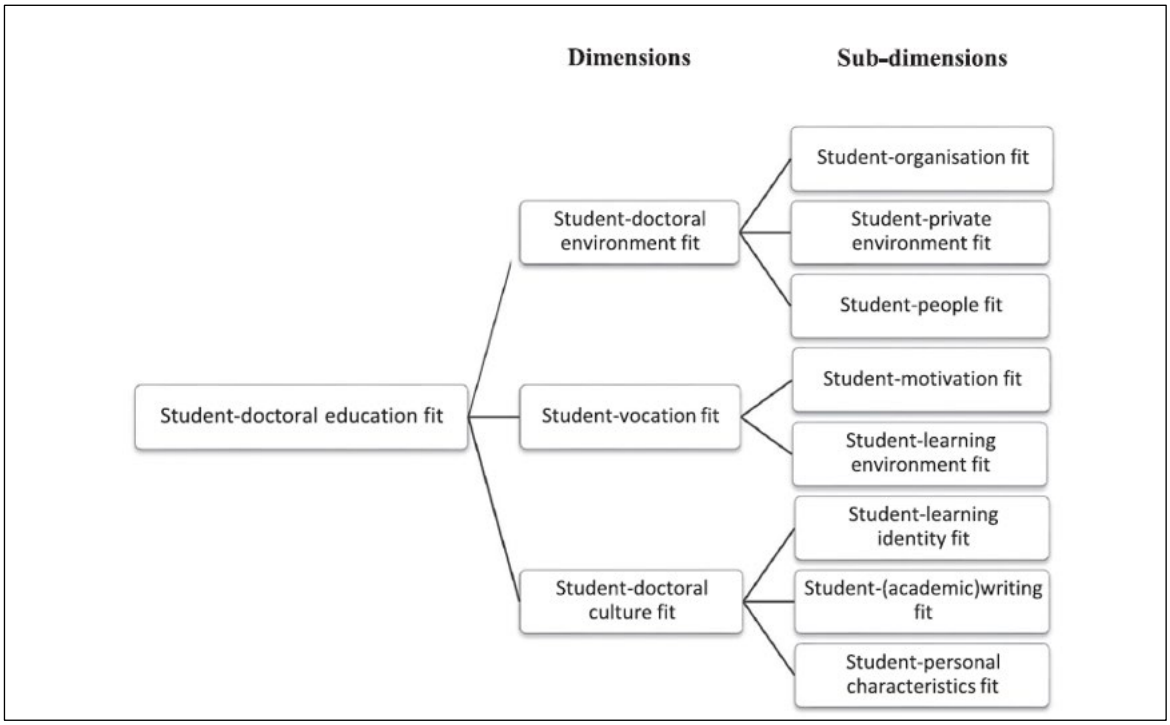

Figure 1: Student-doctoral fit analytical framework (Source: Ward and Brennan 2020)

The dimensions portrayed in Figure 1 encompass the alignment between students and the academic institution, the congruence between students' personal spaces and their study

environment, and the harmony between students and the individuals crucial to their academic journey, such as supervisors, faculty, and peers. The following subsections define these three dimensions of the analytical framework.

Student-vocation fit

Student-vocation fit refers to strong alignment between a person and their chosen career results in improved performance, satisfaction, persistence, and effectiveness within that profession (Ward and Brennan 2020). While a significant number of doctoral students begin their doctoral studies with the goal of entering academia, research indicates that some transition to roles outside the academic sphere (Hunter and Devine 2016). As doctoral students advance through their programs and gain a deeper understanding of the multifaceted nature of academia, including its rigorous standards and demanding feedback mechanisms, their perceived compatibility with an academic career might decline. In the realm of doctoral education, student-vocation fit, as conceptualized by Baker and Pifer (2015), encompasses the favourable feelings that students harbour toward their doctoral program, encompassing their overall experience within the curriculum and learning environment. If doctoral education does not adequately equip students for an academic career, a disconnect with their chosen vocation may arise as students navigate their doctoral journey.

Student-doctoral culture fit

Previous studies highlighted how culture can influence both attitudes and behaviours (O’Reilly and Chatman 1986). When an individual’s personal values align with those of their organization, a stronger sense of compatibility tends to emerge (O’Reilly and Chatman 1986). In the realm of student-doctoral education, cultural fit becomes apparent when students’ values resonate with the identity of their doctoral program and its curriculum (Ward and Brennan 2020). These values encompass various aspects, including productivity, professional behaviour, and the expected research culture. When values are in harmony, individuals typically adjust more smoothly to their new roles (Judge 1994; Vandenberghe 1999; Yamazaki and Kayes 2004). Consequently, challenges encountered during the transition to doctoral education might indicate potential misalignment between students and the existing doctoral culture.

Doctoral education exhibits a unique culture that is distinct from both undergraduate and other postgraduate programs. It places considerable emphasis on self-directed learning, as doctoral students take responsibility for shaping their own educational journey. The feedback they receive is often detailed and evaluative. Furthermore, the scope of the research project, the required knowledge, and the writing expectations at this level might differ from what students

initially anticipated. To pinpoint instances where there is a mismatch in student-doctoral culture fit, we consider three primary transitional challenges highlighted in the literature. These include a perceived transition from structured learning to self-directed learning related to academic writing, and perceived deficits relating to personal qualities (Rogers 2006), where students feel they don't possess the necessary traits to handle critique or meet the rigorous standards expected at this level of research.

METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

A qualitative phenomenological research approach was employed to investigate the educational experiences of PhD candidates employed as trainees in a research organization in South Africa. This was an appropriate methodology to explore doctoral students' perceptions of their educational experiences since phenomenology is concerned with understanding individual experiences (Kafle 2011; Kashef 2022). It is an inductive research method that gathers "deep" information and perceptions through interviews, discussions, and participant observation (Kafle 2011; Kashef 2022). Phenomenology focuses on studying experiences from the individual's perspective, setting aside assumptions and conventional ways of perceiving (Dörfler and Stierand 2021).

Classification of respondents

Fifteen (15) doctoral students were selected using purposive sampling. The participants are registered at different universities and work as PhD trainees in the selected research organization, the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC). They work in different HSRC units, were pursuing or had formerly undertaken their PhD traineeship and were still part of the organization. Semi-structured interviews were conducted using Microsoft Teams/Zoom. The interviews were recorded and lasted around 45 minutes. The advantage of using semi-structured interviews is the ability to establish reciprocity between the interviewer and participant, allowing for follow-up questions based on participants' responses (Galletta 2012).

Purposive sampling is used by researchers who aim to gain in-depth understanding of a phenomenon from the perspective of different people (Mason 2002; Robinson 2014; Trost 1986; Kelly 2010; Miles and Huberman 1994; Palinkas et al. 2015). The study's *inclusion criteria* were:

- A PhD intern at the HSRC (currently/formerly)
- Registered for a PhD at a South African university

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval for the study was granted by the HSRC Research Ethics Committee (Protocol No REC 2/29/03/23).

Data Analysis

A hybrid data analysis approach was employed, combining techniques from qualitative thematic analysis and the deductive a priori template of codes method suggested by Crabtree and Miller (1999), with the data-driven inductive approach proposed by Boyatzis (1998). The principles of social phenomenology served as a guiding framework for the deductive thematic analysis process, allowing themes to emerge naturally from the data through inductive coding; this approach aligned with the research questions (Bingham and Witkowsky 2022; Boyatzis 1998).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In addition to the three themes of the theoretical framework, the themes that emerged from the interviews are included in the analysis. The first theme from the interviews was doctoral education success.

Factors contributing to doctoral education success: Insights from participants

The participants were asked to reflect on the factors that they believe contribute to the success of doctoral education. This question aimed to unravel the intricate dynamics that contribute to such success by shedding light on the factors that play a role in shaping the outcomes of this scholarly endeavour. A participant reflected that:

> Participant A: “Internal drivers such as your drive and ambition. As the candidate you must want it. External factors which sometimes are beyond your measure such as luck; I am strong believer of luck. Also believe that the academic environment (supervisors, administrators) and environment you put yourself in (the company you keep).”
>
> Participant I commented: “Funding is very important because when people pursue their doctoral degrees they’re mostly in their adulthood and funding is not about your studies only, but it used as a means for your livelihood given our unemployment rate in South Africa. I was helping at home financially and I believe that your economic situation plays a crucial role in your success. You almost want to procrastinate between finding a job and pursuing a doctoral degree which is hard to choose.”
>
> Participant C remarked: “You need a good family structure because there will be times where you are away from the family engagements; you need them to understand and support you. You also need a supportive work structure ... they need to know that you are doing a PhD and they know what is required for a PhD which is time. There has to be understanding between you and your line managers at work.”

The insights from the participants reveal that factors beyond the university space impact doctoral success. Traditionally, the focus has been on factors such as supervision models and access to infrastructure as important drivers of doctoral education success (Yende 2021; Fongwa et al. 2022; Baker and Pifer 2015). This finding is consistent with Ward and Brennan’s (2020) analytical model which explores the blurred terrain between home and work and how the student’s private environments can challenge their doctoral education.

During the discussion on the success of doctoral education, the participants were prompted to reflect on their dual responsibilities as researchers and doctoral candidates. More specifically, I asked them to share their thoughts on how working in an academic environment impacted their productivity in pursuing the doctoral degree:

> Participant B felt that: “It is a blessing doing your PhD and working in the research environment because it gives you so much enlightenment when it comes to research. I feel like there are things I would not have known if I was not here. My research knowledge would have been theoretically based but now I know how to apply things, I know how to understand research in practice and know how to practically write a research piece intended for policy.”
>
> Similarly, Participant G remarked: “I am motivated to get my PhD. Being part of this research institution has helped me see the importance of having a PhD because in our society they regard you as someone who is overqualified and unemployable. But seeing my peers finish and some doing the PhD has given access to peer support.”
>
> In contrast, Participant K felt that: “There is competing interests in time between doctoral time and project time within the research organization. There is delay I had faced because if I was not working, I would have finished my doctorate last year because I would have been a full-time student.”

The participants highlight a range of experiences regarding the extent to which working in a research organization facilitated their studies. While some found it beneficial and used their time within the organization to advance their educational endeavours and seek assistance, others felt that their organizational commitments prevented them from dedicating sufficient time to their studies.

Student-doctoral environment fit: Blurred lines between research work and doctoral education

The analytical framework posits that students’ personal environment has a direct impact on their doctoral journey; therefore, the environment fit should encompass not only the academic environment but also the students’ personal environment.

The academic environment encompasses access to resources, adequate supervision and the alignment between students’ doctoral studies and research work in the research organization.

> Participant D reflected: “The research themes I am working on at work are aligned to that of my PhD and I do feel like the expertise I receive from the project work gets transferred to my PhD work. You must bear in mind that the people I work with already have their PhDs and are experts in the field, so I get more assistance on my PhD at work.”
>
> Similarly, Participant H stated: “My supervisor at the university tries their level best but I feel my research organization does a better job in terms of giving me the expertise I need. Especially with publications. I am doing my PhD through publication, and I get more insight from my mentor.”

These perspectives highlight challenges in relation to academic supervisors’ skills. While there is a rich body of work on student-supervisor relationships, an emerging concern is the shortage of supervisors and their lack of expertise in their respective fields (Mkhize 2022; Yende 2021). It is for this reason that some scholars have called for PhD programs that offer collaborative supervision, ensuring that students benefit from a diverse range of skill sets (Castelló et al. 2017; Fongwa et al. 2022).

Student-doctoral culture fit: Challenges and expectations in relation to academic writing

The questions posed under the theme of student culture aimed to shed light on various aspects of the student’s journey and experiences, focusing on their independent work, academic writing skills, publication journey, and time management. Exploring these factors offers insights into a student’s ability to thrive in a PhD program and their compatibility with the demands of research and academic life. Many of the participants alluded to the challenge of the expectation that they will publish.

> Participant F said: “Publishing is hard; I will not lie. Currently I have one paper that I have published for my PhD and I am doing my PhD by publication. At work also there is a target to publish one article and I find that it is quite difficult because although I write so well the publishing standards are high. I also find that how we write for thesis is quite different for what is expected for paper. I am work in progress in academic writing.”
>
> In contrast, Participant K remarked: “Publishing I will not say it is easy, but I find myself progressing in the journey. I currently have 14 publications and I am still trying to finish my PhD. But if I was asked this question a couple of years ago ... the answer will certainly be different. I think one is getting extra training at the research council as we are expected to publish. It’s like doing a postdoc before you even have a PhD and sometimes, I really see no need to go back and do a postdoc after this trainee program.”

It became evident that the participants’ research experience, age, and the universities they attended had a significant impact on their overall doctoral experience. Those who attended highly-ranked universities generally expressed satisfaction with their supervisors, both at the

university and research organization. For example, participants A and D, who both attended the same leading university in South Africa, had similar experiences regarding funding and supervision. However, most of the participants registered at historically disadvantaged universities highlighted issues such as inadequate supervision, and a lack of funding and overall support. This was attributed to supervisors in these universities being expected to supervise too many students.

Student-vocation fit and preparedness in doctoral programs

This sub-section reports on the findings on students’ perceptions of how the doctoral program prepared them for their intended vocation. The questions posed aimed to establish whether the program equipped them for an academic career, including teaching and research roles, upon completing their studies. I also inquired whether they intended to continue to conduct research in the same field as their PhD study. Furthermore, I delved into their challenges during their research journey such as funding, data collection, administrative tasks, and ethical considerations. Lastly, I explored the factors that fuelled their motivation and commitment to pursue a doctoral degree, whether it be through self-motivation, support from work, mentors, or their academic supervisor.

There was consensus amongst the participants that the doctoral program partially prepared them for their vocation. However, most felt that the trainee position contributed more on-the-job training that the doctoral program. For instance, Participant E said:

> “I see myself contributing towards reducing poverty and inequality I see my PhD work providing the conceptual work around that. However, what gives me practical experience is what I do at work.”
>
> Similarly, Participant F noted that: “My research is a neat fit to the research work I currently do at the research organization. I am in agricultural economics; there is a project on innovation in South African agricultural businesses. I believe that I cannot separate my research work in the organization with that of my PhD work. There is an ecosystem with all the work I do and that’s why I feel comfortable with my work at the research council.”

Regarding their interest in their PhD work (discipline, topic), all the participants indicated that they remained enthusiastic about their research. Participant A was building on a master’s study, indicating strong interest in a particular field, especially given the connection between the participant’s work within the HSRC and the PhD study. Similarly, Participant B stated that being in a research organization enhances one’s passion for the work and provides valuable concurrent experience.

In addition to institutional support from their universities and research organization, many

participants exhibited remarkable resilience, self-motivation, and a clear vision that served as driving forces. Participant C, who fulfils roles as both a mother and a wife, shared her experience: “My son fuelled me and kept me going. I know that many times children are seen as barriers and sometimes a challenge in the educational journey, but mine was a source of inspiration.” Her determination and her son’s support served as powerful motivators, enabling her to overcome obstacles and remain committed to her academic pursuits.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

While the findings of this qualitative phenomenological study provide rich insights into the experiences of participants within a specific research organization, like all research, it suffers from some limitations. The nature of qualitative research, with its focus on in-depth understanding of individual experiences, inherently limits the generalizability of the results. The study’s scope was confined to the unique context of one research organization and as such caution should be exercised when extrapolating these findings to different settings. The specific characteristics of the participants, the organizational culture and other contextual factors may limit the transferability of the results to diverse contexts. However, despite these limitations, the study contributes valuable insights into the nuanced and context-specific aspects of the participants’ experiences within the given research organization. The depth of understanding gained through qualitative phenomenological methods enhanced the richness of the data and lays a foundation for further exploration and discussion within similar organizational contexts.

LESSONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Collaboration between research organizations and universities would promote seamless integration of academic and professional demands. Mentorship programs within research organizations are also recommended, as mentors play a pivotal role in the success of non-traditional doctoral candidates. Flexible academic structures that accommodate diverse needs, coupled with enhanced supervision training for university mentors, are imperative. Cross-disciplinary collaboration and support structures should be promoted within universities to address challenges related to the fit between academic work and doctoral studies. Increased awareness among academic institutions, research organizations, and employers of the unique challenges faced by non-traditional doctoral students is essential to foster a more understanding and supportive academic culture. Policy advocacy for inclusivity and accommodating diverse paths in doctoral education is key. Research-practice integration within organizations could enhance the interconnectedness between academic findings and professional practice. Continuous feedback mechanisms between students, universities, and research organizations

are necessary for ongoing improvement, and acknowledgement of the importance of work-life integration in doctoral education is vital for a holistic approach to the success of non-traditional doctoral candidates.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

The theory of fit proposed by Ward and Brennan (2020) served as a critical theoretical framework for this study on emerging researchers’ experiences during their doctoral studies in South Africa. The theory suggests that individuals’ performance improves when there is alignment between their values and those of their organization, task, or social structure. This theory was relevant in the context of doctoral studies as the participants identified the factors that contribute to successful doctoral education. Applying the student-doctoral education fit framework in the context of emerging researchers enabled the researcher to identify the alignment or lack thereof between the participants’ values and expectations and their academic and personal commitments. This analysis facilitated deeper understanding of the experiences and challenges faced by emerging researchers, shedding light on the interplay between their academic pursuits and personal lives. The study found that there is potential for collaboration between research organizations and universities to support emerging researchers in achieving harmonious work-life integration during their doctoral studies. The findings revealed that the participants benefitted from skills and resources at the research organization whilst also alluding to their need for their university supervisors to be present. This offers potential for collaboration and integration to share resources and mentorship, and craft tailored policies to address the unique needs of emerging researchers. The article contributes to the existing literature by highlighting avenues for collaboration that enhance support systems for emerging researchers during their doctoral studies. It provides valuable insights and identifies strategies to create more effective support structures that foster a supportive and conducive environment for emerging researchers in their academic and personal pursuits during their doctoral journey.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I acknowledge the Human Sciences Research Council for granting ethical approval for this study and allowing its employees to participate. I thank the participants for their participation.

DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

FUNDING

This work was not financially supported.

NOTE

1. This abstract was originally presented by the author at CHE Promoting Access to, and Success in Postgraduate Studies, (2023).

REFERENCES

Aljohani, Othman. 2016. "A comprehensive review of the major studies and theoretical models of student retention in higher education." *Higher Education Studies* 6(2): 1–18.

Bair, Carolyn Richert and Jennifer Grant Haworth. 2004. "Doctoral student attrition and persistence: A meta-synthesis of research." In *Higher education: Handbook of theory and research,* 481–534. Dordrecht: Springer Netherlands.

Baker, Vicki L. and Meghan J. Pifer. 2015. "Antecedents and Outcomes: Theories of Fit and the Study of Doctoral Education." *Studies in Higher Education* 40(2): 296–310.

Barron, Caulyne N. 2014. "Engagement of non-traditional adult learners in distance education." *International HETL Review* 4(March): 1–10. https://www.hetl.org/engagement-of-non-traditional-adult-learners-in-distance-education/.

Barry, Karen May, Megan Woods, Angela Martin, Christine Stirling, and Emma Warnecke. 2019. "A randomized controlled trial of the effects of mindfulness practice on doctoral candidate psychological status." *Journal of American College Health* 67(4): 299–307.

Beattie, Vivien and Sarah Jane Smith. 2012. *Today's PhD Students – Is There a Future Generation of Accounting Academics or are They a Dying Breed? A UK Perspective*. Edinburgh: Institute of Chartered Accountants of Scotland.

Bingham, Andrea J. and Patricia Witkowsky. 2022. "Deductive and inductive approaches to qualitative data analysis." In *Analyzing and interpreting qualitative data: After the interview,* ed. C. Vanover, P. Mihas, and J. Saldaña, 133–146. SAGE Publications.

Bowen, William G. and Neil L. Rudenstine. 2014. *In pursuit of the PhD.* Vol. 75. Princeton University Press.

Boyatzis, Richard. 1998. *Transforming qualitative information: Thematic analysis and code development*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Castelló, Montserrat, Marta Pardo, Anna Sala-Bubaré, and Núria Suñé-Soler. 2017. "Why do students consider dropping out of doctoral degrees? Institutional and personal factors." *Higher Education* 74: 1053–1068.

Cloete, Nico, Johann, Mouton, and Charles Sheppard. 2015. "Doctoral education in South Africa – Policy, discourse and data." Cape Town, South Africa: Africa Minds.

Cotton, Debby R. E., Tricia Nash, and Pauline Kneale. 2017. "Supporting the retention of non-traditional students in Higher Education using a resilience framework." *European Educational Research Journal* 16(1): 62–79.

Crabtree, Benjamin F. and William F. Miller. 1999. "A template approach to text analysis: Developing and using codebooks." In *Doing qualitative research,* ed. B. Crabtree and W. Miller, 163–177. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

Delany, David. 2009. *A Review of the Literature on Effective PhD Supervision*. Dublin: Center for Academic Practice and Student Learning, Trinity College.

Department of Higher Education and Training. 2017a. *University Capacity Development Plan*. Pretoria: DHET.

Department of Education. 2001. "National Plan for higher education." https://www.justice.gov.za/commissions/feeshet/docs/2001NationalPlanForHigherEducation.pdf.

Department of Higher Education and Training. 2016. *Statistics on Post-School Education and Training in South Africa: 2016*. Pretoria: Department of Higher Education and Training.

Devos, Christelle, Gentiane Boudrenghien, Nicolas Van der Linden, Assaad Azzi, Mariane Frenay, Benoit Galand, and Olivier Klein. 2017. "Doctoral students' experiences leading to completion or attrition: A matter of sense, progress and distress." *European journal of psychology of education* 32: 61–77.

Dörfler, Viktor and Marc Stierand. 2021. "Bracketing: A phenomenological theory applied through transpersonal reflexivity." *Journal of Organizational Change Management* 34(4): 778–793.

Fongwa, Samuel, Angelique Wildschut, Thierry Luescher, and Zama M. Mthombeni. 2022. "Towards African Collaborative Doctoral Programmes: Synthesis Report." https://arua.org.za/wp-content/uploads/ARUA-Synthesis-December-2022_.pdf.

Galletta, Anne. 2012. *Mastering the Semi-Structured Interview and Beyond: From Research Design to Analysis and Publication*. New York: New York University Press.

Gardner, Susan K. 2009. "Student and faculty attributions of attrition in high- and low-completing doctoral programme in the United States." *Higher Education* 58: 97–112.

Gilmore, Joanna, Annie M. Wofford, and Michelle A. Maher. 2016. "The flip side of the attrition coin: Faculty perceptions of factors supporting graduate student success." *International Journal of Doctoral Studies* 11(1): 419–439.

Graham, Constance D. and Liezel Massyn. 2019 "Interaction equivalency theorem: Towards interaction support of non-traditional doctoral students." *International Journal of Doctoral Studies* 14: 187.

Herman, Chaya. 2011. "Obstacles to success – Doctoral student attrition in South Africa." *Perspectives in Education* 29(3): 40–52. http://www.perspectives-in-education.com/Default.aspx.

Holley, Karri A. and Mary Lee Caldwell. 2012. "The challenges of designing and implementing a doctoral student mentoring program." *Innovative Higher Education* 37: 243–253. http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/s10755-011-0203-y.

Holmes, Barbara, Meridee Trimble, and Dietrich Morrison-Danner. 2014. "Advancing scholarship, team building, and collaboration in a hybrid doctoral program in educational leadership." *Journal of College Teaching & Learning* 11: 175–180. http://www.cluteinstitute.com/ojs/index.php/TLC/article/view/8855/8834.

Hunter, Karen H. and Kay Devine. 2016. "Doctoral Students' Emotional Exhaustion and Intentions to Leave Academia." *International Journal of Doctoral Studies* 11(2): 35–61.

Jairam, Dharmananda and David H. Kahl Jr. 2012. "Navigating the doctoral experience: The role of social support in successful degree completion." *International Journal of Doctoral Students* 7: 311–329. http://www.informingscience.org/Jour-nals/IJDS/Overview.

Jamieson, I. A. N. and Rajani Naidoo. 2007. "University positioning and changing patterns of doctoral study: The case of the University of Bath." *European Journal of Education* 42(3): 363–373.

John, Tomasz and Pam Denicolo. 2013 "Doctoral education: A review of the literature monitoring the doctoral student experience in selected OECD countries (mainly UK)." *Springer Science Reviews* 1: 41–49.

Judge Timothy A. 1994. "Person-Organization Fit and the Theory of Work Adjustment: Implications for Satisfaction, Tenure, and Career Success." *Journal of Vocational Behavior* 44(1): 32–54.

Kafle, Narayan P. 2011. "Hermeneutic phenomenological research method simplified." *Bodhi: An interdisciplinary journal* 5(1): 181–200.

Kashef, Esmaeil. 2022. "Applied study of phenomenological research method in education." https://scholar.google.com/scholar?hl=en&as_sdt=0%2C5&q=Applied+study+of+phenomenological+research+method+in+education+Esmail+Kashif&btnG=#d=gs_cit&t=1676882933818&u=%2Fscholar%3Fq%3Dinfo%3AXO1VY0i9-acJ%3Ascholar.google.com%2F%26output%3Dcite%26scirp%3D0%26hl%3Den.

Kee, Chad E. 2021. "The impact of COVID-19: Graduate students' emotional and psychological experiences." *Journal of Human Behavior in the Social Environment* 31(1–4): 476–488.

Kelly, Susan. 2010. Qualitative interviewing techniques and styles. In *The Sage Handbook of Qualitative*

Methods in Health Research, ed. I. Bourgeault, R. Dingwall, and R. de Vries. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications.

Kristof-Brown, Amy L., Ryan D. Zimmerman, and Erin C. Johnson. 2005. "Consequences of Individual's Fit at Work: A Meta-Analysis of Person-Job, Person-Organization, Person-Group, and Person-Supervisor Fit." *Personnel Psychology* 58(2): 281–342.

Kritzinger, E. and M. Loock. 2012. "A Critical Investigation into the Current Shortage of Information Technology Postgraduates, Unisa." http://uir.unisa.ac.za/bitstream/handle/10500/8500/Final_Kritzinger%20E%20Loock%20M%20ODL-031-2012.pdf?sequence=1. (Accessed 1 October 2019).

Lovitts, Barabra E. 2001. *Leaving the ivory tower: The causes and consequences of departure from doctoral study*. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield.

Martinez, Edna, Chinasa Ordu, Matthew R. Della Sala, and Adam McFarlane. 2013. "Striving to obtain a school-work-life balance: The full-time doctoral student." *International Journal of Doctoral Studies* 8: 39.

Mason, Jennifer. 2002. *Qualitative researching*. 2nd Edition. London: Sage.

Miles, Matthew B. and A. Michael Huberman A. 1994. *An expanded sourcebook: Qualitative data analysis*. 2nd Edition. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications.

Mkhize, Nhlanhla. 2022. *The state of doctoral training in South Africa: Current and emerging practices in Doctoral Training and Higher Education in Africa*, 36–60. Routledge.

Mouton, Johann, Milandré van Lill, Heidi Prozesky, Tracy Bailey, Michelle Duncan, Nelius Boshoff, Charl Albertyn, and Rein Treptow. 2021. A national tracer study of doctoral graduates in South Africa. https://scholar.google.com/scholar?hl=en&as_sdt=0%2C5&q=SciSTIP+hosted+by+Stellenbosch+University+Mouton&btnG=.

Naidoo, Devika. 2015. "Understanding non-traditional PhD students' habitus: Implications for PhD programmes." *Teaching in Higher Education* 20(3): 340–351. https://doi.org/10.1080/13562517.2015.1017.

National Planning Commission. 2012. National Development Plan 2030: Our future-make it work. https://www.nationalplanningcommission.org.za/assets/Documents/ndp-2030-our-future-make-it-work.pdf.

O'Reilly, Charles and Jennifer Chatman. 1986. "Organizational Commitment and Psychological Attachment: The Effects of Compliance Identification, and Internationalization on Prosocial Behavior." *Journal of Applied Psychology* 71(3): 492–499.

Palinkas, Lawrence A., Sarah M. Horwitz, Carla A. Green, Jennifer P. Wisdom, Naihua Duan, and Kimberly Hoagwood. 2015. "Purposeful sampling for qualitative data collection and analysis in mixed method implementation research." *Administration and Policy in Mental Health and Mental Health Services Research* 42(5): 533–544.

Pifer, Meghan J. and Vicki L. Baker. 2016. "Stage-based challenges and strategies for support in doctoral education: A practical guide for students, faculty members, and program administrators." *International Journal of Doctoral Studies* 11: 15.

Plumlee, R. David and Philip M. J. Reckers. 2014. "Lessons not learned: Why is there still a crisis-level shortage of accounting Ph.Ds?" *Accounting Horizons* 28(2): 313–330.

Reddy, Vijay, Angelique Wildschut, Thierry Luescher, Il-haam Petersen, and Jennifer Rust. 2018. "Skills development legislation as a lever of change to reduce poverty, inequality and unemployment." https://repository.hsrc.ac.za/bitstream/handle/20.500.11910/11895/10291.pdf?sequence=1.

Robinson, Oliver C. 2014. "Sampling in interview-based qualitative research: A theoretical and practical guide." *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 11(1): 25–41.

Rogers, Alan. 2006. "Escaping the Slums or Changing the Slums? Lifelong Learning and Social Transformation." *International Journal of Lifelong Education* 23(2): 123–137.

Servage, Laura. 2009. "Alternative and professional doctoral programs: What is driving the demand?"

Studies in Higher Education 34(7): 765–779.

Stock, Wendy A. and John J. Siegfried. 2014. "Fifteen years of research on graduate education in economics: What have we learned?" *Journal of Economic Education* 45: 287–303. http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00220485.2014.942410.

Thouaille, M.-A. 2017. "One Size does Not Fit All: Arts and Humanities Doctoral and Early Career Researchers' Professional Development Survey." Vital, The Careers Research and Advisory Centre (CRAC) Limited, CHASE Consortium for the Humanities and the Arts South East England. https://www.vitae.ac.uk/vitaepublications/reports/One%20size%20does%20not%20fit%20all%20-%20report%202017.

Trost, Jan A. 1986. "Statistically non-representative stratified sampling: A sampling technique for qualitative studies." *Qualitative Sociology* 9(1): 54–57.

Vandenberghe, Christian. 1999. "Organizational Culture, Person-Culture fit, and Turnover: A Replication in the Health Care Industry." *Journal of Organizational Behavior* 20(2): 175–184.

Wao, Hesborn O. and Anthony J. Onwuegbuzie. 2011. "A mixed research investigation of factors related to time to the doctorate in education." *International Journal of Doctoral Studies* 6: 115–134. http://ijds.org/Volume6/IJDSv6p115-134Wao320.pdf.

Ward, Anne Marie and Niamh M. Brennan. 2020. "Developing a student-doctoral education fit analytical model to assess performance." *Studies in Higher Education* 45(7): 1448–1460.

Weidman, John C., Darla J. Twale, and E. L. Stein. 2001. "Socialization of graduate and professional students in higher education: A perilous passage?" *Jossey-Bass Higher and Adult Education Series* 28(3).

West, I. J., Gokce Gokalp, Edlyn Vallejo Pena, Linda Fischer, and Jarrett Gupton. 2011. "Exploring effective support practices for doctoral students' degree completion." *College Student Journal* 45: 310–323. http://works.bepress.com/cgi/viewcon-tent.cgi?article=1011&context=edlyn_pena.

Wildschut, Angelique, Samuel Fongwa, and Zama M. Mthombeni. 2022. "Towards developing a collaborative PhD programme across ARUA member universities: Experiences from South African universities." A research report produced for ARUA by the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC). https://arua.org.za/wp-content/uploads/South-African-Report.pdf.

Wood, Jacob, Jihye Oh, Jiwon Park, and Woocheol Kim. 2020. "The relationship between work engagement and work-life balance in organizations: A review of the empirical research." *Human Resource Development Review* 19(3): 240–262.

Woolston, Chris. 2019. "PhDs: The tortuous truth." *Nature* 575(7782): 403–407.

Yamazaki, Yoshitaka and D. Christopher Kayes. 2004. "An Experiential Approach to Cross-Cultural Learning: A Review and Integration of Competencies for Successful Expatriate Adaptation." *Academy of Management Learning & Education* 3(4): 362–379.

Yende, Sakhiseni J. 2021. "Factors of effective postgraduate student-supervisor relationships at selected universities in South Africa." *Journal of African Education* 2(2): 135.

Yusuf, Juita-Elena Wie, Marina Saitgalina, and David W. Chapman. 2020. "Work-life balance and well-being of graduate students." In *Work-Life Balance in Higher Education*, 63–88. Routledge.