

REFLECTIONS ON THE SUPERVISION OF POSTGRADUATE RESEARCH: THE STUDENTS' VOICES IN AN OPEN DISTANCE LEARNING (ODL) CONTEXT

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ABSTRACT

Since the dawn of democracy in 1994 there has been a proliferation of postgraduate programmes aimed at responding to the social, economic and political needs of the country. This has led to an increase in the number of students enrolling for postgraduate programmes in South Africa. Some students successfully complete their studies, while others eventually drop out without attaining their chosen qualifications owing to various factors they encounter on their research journey. This study sought to determine postgraduate students' experiences in terms of the educational and research experience at Unisa; the support services and funding; quality of access to facilities; and initiation into the community of researchers. Theoretically, the study was underpinned by ergonomics theory. To answer the research questions, the study followed a concurrent mixed method design. The study's participants were 78 postgraduate students at Unisa who had volunteered to be part of the study. A self-constructed questionnaire and semi-structured interviews were used to collect data. Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistics while qualitative data used inductive thematic analysis. The findings indicate that students have a variety of experiences, both negative and positive, in their postgraduate studies.

Keywords: distance learning; dropout causes; open distance learning (ODL); postgraduate studies; research supervisions; scholarship

BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

The purpose of this mixed method study is to examine the nature of postgraduate supervision in higher education distance learning. A report by the Higher Education

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Monitor (2009) asserts that the production of university graduates, particularly with postgraduate degrees, is an essential component of the national system of innovation in modern industrialised societies. Such graduates have acquired the necessary knowledge and skills underpinning the modern knowledge economy and are able to produce new knowledge. The report further argues that it is generally recognised that South Africa does not have sufficient numbers of highly skilled people in most professions, hence the priority given to a host of initiatives by state departments focused on fast-tracking skills development. The greatest shortage is experienced at the postgraduate level and recent initiatives, such as those found in the Department of Science and Technology (DST) and the National Research Foundation (NRF) to accelerate the production of PhDs in the system. These groups are addressing this reality (Higher Education Monitor 2009) to improve the situation. Universities have the immense responsibility of producing cutting-edge research, generating knowledge, producing high-calibre leaders and critical thinkers for the future, and reaching out to the communities in which they are located (University of Witwatersrand 2006).

The Council on Higher Education (CHE) (2003, 72) concurs that postgraduate supervision and research training are core academic activities for most higher education institutions worldwide and are distinctive in the sense that they provide the link between research, teaching and learning. Lessing and Schulze (2004) observe that in emphasising the importance of research, budget allocations to higher education institutions are weighted in favour of postgraduate throughput. Since the dawn of democracy in 1994, there has been a proliferation of postgraduate programmes aimed at responding to the social, economic and political needs of the country. This has led to an increase in the number of students enrolling for postgraduate programmes in South Africa.

The Higher Education Monitor (2009) observes that the huge international demand for South African graduates, together with the continuing brain drain of professionals, indicates an urgent imperative to increase the production of postgraduate students in order for the country to remain competitive and to be able to generate knowledge that is responsive to a wide range of societal needs. The Department of Education (cited in Hoffman 2009) reveals a concern that research conducted among postgraduate students at South African universities clearly shows that although enrolments are steadily increasing, the graduation rates do not correlate with the increase in enrolment. What this means is that most of the students who enrol in postgraduate studies do not complete their studies. Researchers such as Murphy, Bain and Conrad (2007) highlight this trend in results from poor postgraduate supervision models. Similar sentiments are echoed by Albertyn, Kapp and Bitzer (2008) who found that the quality of supervision in postgraduate studies was a strong determinant of success in South African universities. Despite its importance, within the South African context, there is a paucity of studies that focus on postgraduate supervision in an ODL context, as the literature review below will highlight.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The reviewed literature is drawn from multiple studies that problematised postgraduate studies from an array of avenues such as throughput, retention, attrition support challenges, successes and statistics. The trajectory taken by different studies that were reviewed interfaces with the present study that sought to examine the nature of postgraduate supervision in higher education distance learning. Universities are faced with a challenge of increasing the throughput rate as it is linked to subsidy by the Department of Higher Education. Lessing and Schulze, (2003) Lessing and Lessing (2004) indicate that the subsidy formulas for funding Higher Education institutions in South Africa have changed to place more emphasis on the throughput rates of students. The Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET, 2012) aims to increase master's and doctoral graduates in order to improve the country's economic competitiveness. Mouton (2011) cited by Manyike (2017) argues that South Africa has one of the lowest graduation rates at master's and doctoral levels, a rate of less than 15% a year, compared to most developed countries, for example, the USA produces 288 doctoral students a year and Britain produces 395 students for every million of the total population. The National Development Plan in South Africa targets to produce 5 000 doctoral graduates per year by 2030, universities therefore have a responsibility of producing proficient postgraduate candidates. In order to produce postgraduates of high calibre the quality of postgraduate students' research supervision therefore needs to improve through institutionalised support. Manyike (2017) citing Bitzer (2011), Koen (2007), Lessing (2011) and Yeatman, (1995) indicates that one of the key factors that determines the success of postgraduate supervision is a sound relationship between supervisors and supervisees. Manyike (2017) notes that in a distance learning environment the challenges related to postgraduate supervision are compounded by the fact that postgraduate supervision often involves the geographical distance between students and supervisors. Nasiri and Mafakheri (2014) concur that the challenges in distance postgraduate supervision originate from the spatial and temporal distance and disconnection between the supervisor and supervisee. Wisker, Robinson, Trafford, Creighton and Warner (2003) regard distance education as a kind of education being offered to students who do not attend classes daily, and as a result do not have face-to-face contact with their supervisors.

Furthermore, Sussex (2008) argues that the challenge of distance can be mitigated through the use of a variety of technologies which includes fax, email, recorded audio/video, audio/video conferencing, live chat, live streaming and virtual learning environments. Nasiri and Mafakheri (2014) caution that as universities are trying to keep up with technological change, the means of communication in distance supervision is changing. This is the result of the significant time in such long-distance discussions that might be spent on exploring and talking about new technology or software instead of a clear focus on research issues. While Alam, Alam and Rasul (2013, 875) found in the context of Australia that previous studies about postgraduate students come from

“various ethnic, cultural, political, economic, linguistic and educational backgrounds and their attraction and retention are paramount for educational institutions” but most universities were not deliberately focusing on this area. Actually, Mouton (2011) noted with concern that postgraduate studies in any university in South Africa were suffering from too much focus on administration and managerial processes instead of exploring the quality of the students.

Interestingly, as is common with studies in higher education, the methodological paradigms that have been employed in previous studies to understand postgraduate studies are many. For example, in South Africa, Mouton (2011) analysed policy document and statistics to understand the challenges of doctoral production. Contrastingly, Albertyn, *et al.* (2008) used a qualitative descriptive study to profile the exiting postgraduate students’ performance and experiences. Heeralal (2015) used a qualitative study to explore the postgraduate supervision in an open and distance learning environment. However, in reflecting on this trend, Mouton (2011, 27) indicates that for too long research in postgraduate studies have focused too much “on the quantitative goals of doctoral production – how to increase the number of doctoral graduates and to reduce time to degree and attrition rates”. Mouton’s (2011) call for a hybrid methodological trajectory is addressed in this mixed method study.

It may seem from the above review that there are still knowledge and methodological gaps in understanding the supervision of postgraduate studies. First, studies that have been carried out to understand postgraduate studies in South Africa are focused on the traditional system of learning, and not distance education. Second, Heeralal’s (2015) study focused on postgraduate supervision in distance education that is qualitative and lacks the quantitative examination of the phenomena. Thus to address the highlighted knowledge gaps and respond to Mouton (2011, 28), who points out that this study wants us to “...apply our minds equally to concerns of quality in doctoral training” by examining the nature of supervision in distance learning higher education using Unisa as the research site.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

From the literature, there is relatively little research on the nature of supervision in postgraduate studies in distance education. Most studies have focused on the quantity of postgraduate students by highlighting the enrolment, withdrawal, suspension and completion statistics, challenges and successes (Heeralal 2015; Mouton 2011; Albertyn, *et al.* 2008). Most of these studies have been carried out at traditional universities without seeking to understand student experiences in international ODL environments. The success of any postgraduate research student, despite the mode of learning, lies in the cooperation between the student and the supervisor, as well as various support systems in the university (Alam *et al.* 2013). From this understanding, this article explores the experiences of postgraduate students in their studies at the University of South Africa

(Unisa). This study sought to answer the following critical research questions: What are postgraduate students' experiences regarding the following:

- a. educational and research set-up at Unisa?
- b. support services and funding?
- c. quality of and access to facilities?
- d. initiation into the community of researchers?

CONTEXT OF POSTGRADUATE RESEARCH STUDIES AT UNISA

The College of Graduate Studies (CGS) was formed in 2011 to provide a central hub for Master's and Doctoral support at Unisa. One of its tasks is to nurture a research community whose primary purpose is to sustain master's and doctoral researchers in a supportive academic environment; to create a vibrant intellectual space for research innovation, debate and creative thinking; to produce research; and to help Master's and Doctoral candidates to publish (CGS 2017).

A central platform of the CGS is research methodology. The Department of Interdisciplinary Research has developed a series of training programmes that include workshops, colloquia, video conferences and virtual research environments. It reaches out to candidates in Unisa's regional centres, from Gauteng to Akaki in Ethiopia. Many of the offerings are general, but some are tailor-made to fit the precise demands of specific fields of research. The CGS works with other Colleges as well as in partnership with other universities. Various policies on master's and doctoral application, admission, registration, procedures, student funding, assessment and ethics are in place to ensure quality in the supervision of postgraduate students.

After all due procedures for admission have been finalised, a supervisor who has shown demonstrable research achievement/output in the subject, such as journal publications, books, chapters in books and an NRF rating, is appointed to guide each student. The institution also makes arrangements, where necessary, for a supervisory team to ensure that the student has an identifiable point of contact at all times during the period of study. Such a team may include co-supervisors (particularly for internal students), mentors and tutors. Unisa, as an open and distance learning (ODL) institution, puts in place suitable ODL arrangements for mentorship and guidance, which may include adjunct lecturers, tutors, mentors and postdoctoral fellows, either at Unisa or by means of collaborative arrangements with other institutions. To ensure that one supervisor is not overloaded with too many master's and doctoral students, the various Colleges are expected to take into account the experience and workload of a supervisor before allocating students to him or her for supervision.

Once a supervisor has been appointed, Unisa contracts successful candidates by means of a formal letter that is specific to each applicant. The terms of the letter are

binding on the institution and, upon acceptance, on the student. The letter refers to or encloses other information such as references to institutional web pages and myUnisa, supplemented by any necessary information. The letter and enclosures include the following: the requirements which the institution places on the student (e.g. attendance of induction and orientation workshops, progress reports and contact with supervisors) and arrangements for enrolment and registration; and references to the institution's regulations, sources of funding and other relevant information for a research degree programme, all of which will normally be available via the institutional webpage or in printed documents/DVDs.

Unisa expects students and supervisors to adhere to a supervision agreement/code of conduct, which must be signed by both parties as soon as a supervisor has been appointed for a master's (through research) or a doctoral programme. This code is Unisa's assurance that quality relationships will be upheld by both supervisors and students for the entire period of registration for the degree. An example of such a code of conduct can be found in Unisa's Procedures for Studies for Masters and Doctoral Degrees.

The registration of master's and doctoral degrees is divided into two phases. Firstly, students are required to register and complete the research proposal module before they are admitted to their chosen postgraduate research programmes (dissertation of limited scope, full dissertation or thesis). This module focuses on research methodologies to equip students with the necessary skills to embark on their research journey. Secondly, the outcome of the module in research methodology will be an acceptable research proposal and the student will then be allowed to register for a dissertation at master's level or a thesis at doctoral level.

ERGONOMICS AS THE THEORETICAL LENS FOR EXPLORING SUPERVISION OF POSTGRADUATE RESEARCH

The purpose of this mixed method study is to examine the nature of postgraduate supervision in higher education distance learning. Specifically, the study sought to examine the students' experiences regarding the educational and research set-up at Unisa; support services and funding; quality of and access to facilities and initiation into the community of researchers. Therefore, this study required a theoretical orientation that provides a worldview to understand the integration of human processes and information to reach a target. In this regard, ergonomics is used in this study as the theoretical lens that guides the exploration of postgraduate students' research and supervisory experiences in ODL. Although usually used in business and health research, ergonomics has gained prominence as a theoretical foundation in exploring distance education learning and service delivery (Dzakiria and Mohamad 2014; Finch and Jacobs 2012; Smith 2007). According to Sanders and McCormick (1993, 451), ergonomics is

“discovering and applying information about human behaviour, abilities, limitations, and other characteristics to the design of tools, machines, systems, tasks, jobs, and environments for productive, safe, comfortable, and effective human use”. In addition, Budnick and Michael (2001, 1) describe ergonomics as “fitting the system to the human”, meaning that through informed decisions, equipment, tools, environments and tasks can be selected and designed to fit unique human abilities and limitations”. From the definition above, ergonomics is concerned with cognitive, physical and organisational structures that support human performance within the lifecycle of a system, product or service.

In fact, Karwowski (2005) mentions that ergonomics is made up of three interrelated areas, namely, physical, cognitive and organisational. Physical ergonomics refers to the physiological support that individuals need in order to “reduc[e] unnecessary tasks and movements to increase production or reduce errors and waste” (Budnick and Michael 2001, 1). According to Budnick and Michael (2001, 1), cognitive ergonomics involves the mental processes that provide a “fit between human cognitive abilities and limitations and the machine, task, environment”. Lastly, organisational ergonomics focuses on the optimisation of sociotechnical systems such as policies, processes, practices and others that support individuals as they set out to achieve the desired goals of a programme (Sanders and McCormick 1993, 451).

This study made use of only the cognitive and organisational aspects of ergonomics, since its purpose was to examine the experiences of postgraduate students in terms of the educational and research set-up at Unisa; the support services and funding; the quality of and access to facilities; and initiation into the community of researchers. By embracing cognitive ergonomics we sought to explore the experiences of postgraduate students as they used different interventions that support their cognitive engagement. One such intervention, according to the Unisa Open Distance Learning Policy (2008), is the use of information technology systems to support the cognitive activities (knowledge construction and skills) that postgraduate students are required to carry out in order to achieve the set goal of the programme. The Unisa Procedures for Master’s and Doctoral Degrees (2015, 11) indicates that “the candidate must undertake research with commitment; develop initiative and independence and keep thorough records of all data, research findings and relevant research meetings/discussions”. This suggests that information technology assists students to conduct their research studies independently by giving them “flexibility and choice over what, when, where, at what pace and how they learn” (UNISA Open Distance Learning Policy 2008, 2). From an understanding of cognitive ergonomics support, attention was paid to postgraduate students’ perceptions of the ease of use of, quality of and access to the information technology systems they need to complete their research work.

Organisational ergonomics focuses on the complete optimisation of a system in order to produce individuals’ best possible performance (Smith 2007). By using the theoretical lens of organisational ergonomics, we sought to highlight the quality of

management support in terms of processes, practices and policies that are geared to postgraduate students' access and development as researchers, academic citizens and subject specialists. According to the Unisa Open Distance Learning Policy (2008, 2), such organisational support refers to "a range of services that are developed by UNISA to assist students to meet their learning objectives and to gain the knowledge and skills to be successful in their studies". From this understanding, in this study we paid attention to postgraduate students' experiences in accessing quality organisational support such as supervisory, tuition, administrative and peer institutionally arranged support.

To summarise the discussion above, ergonomics is used in the context of this study to explore how the ODL system works to fit postgraduate students' needs. Therefore, by choosing to use ergonomics, we sought to understand the interaction between postgraduate students and other elements of the ODL system (Dzakiria and Mohamad 2014; Finch and Jacobs 2012; Smith 2007). This means we explored the experiences of postgraduate students to ascertain how various tasks, jobs, the environment and social resources integrate to motivate and guide them toward the completion of their studies.

CONCURRENT MIXED METHOD RESEARCH APPROACH

As already alluded to under the literature review and methodological sections, this study sought to understand human behaviour and mechanical systems that enable the postgraduate students to complete their tasks. To be able to capture the postgraduate students' numerical responses and explanations, this study followed a mixed method study. This methodological paradigm attempts to understand the demographic characteristics of the participants and at the same time highlights the interpretation they attach to their supervisory experiences at Unisa. Thus this study follows a mixed methods research design because of its ability to incorporate both quantitative and qualitative data collection techniques. Specifically, a concurrent mixed methods design was used in this study which means we collected data concurrently in order to corroborate the findings (Creswell and Plano Clark 2011).

SAMPLING: VOLUNTARY PARTICIPATION

This study targeted postgraduate students who were registered at Unisa. The postgraduate students included those who were doing the following: a research dissertation as part of a coursework master's, a master's degree by means of research, or a traditional research doctorate. The questionnaire and interviews were used in the process of data collection. The CGS holds Master's and Doctoral research writing workshops countrywide to teach students writing skills for their dissertations or theses. Students were asked to fill in the research questionnaire during these workshops on a voluntary basis. In addition to the questionnaire, one-on-one interviews were conducted with students to gather more

qualitative data on their postgraduate experiences. A total of 78 students completed the questionnaires, while interviews were conducted with seven students (five master's and two doctoral students).

INSTRUMENTATION

We followed a mixed-method approach to holistically answer the research questions we raised in the study. This means it was decided to use both quantitative and qualitative data through multiple methodological angles, which were critical in broadening our understanding of ODL systems and how postgraduate students at Unisa experience them. Harris and Brown (2010) point out that structured questionnaires and semi-structured interviews are often used in mixed method studies to generate confirmatory results, despite differences in methods of data collection, analysis and interpretation. The questionnaires provided evidence of descriptive statistical patterns for the postgraduate students, while data from the interviews highlighted in-depth insights into participants' experiences in the ODL postgraduate programme. Thus, in this study, these methods were used together to complement each other rather than being used sequentially.

Self-Constructed Questionnaire

Data to determine the students' experiences were collected using a five-point Likert scale (1 = strongly agree and 5 = strongly disagree). The questionnaire contained closed-ended questions and was used to determine students' experiences with various aspects of their postgraduate research studies. The following four broad dimensions of students' experiences were targeted:

- educational and research experience (the quality of research guidance, supervisor availability and regularity of feedback);
- support services and funding (administrative services, financial aid and scholarships to support postgraduate students);
- quality of an access to facilities (suitable, adequate and current library resources and infrastructure available for students to succeed in their studies);
- initiation into the community of researchers (development of professional networks, seminar programme for postgraduate students, knowledge generation and publication in areas of study).

The reliability of the self-constructed question was high, as indicated by the Cronbach's alpha coefficient of $\alpha=0.8$. According to Lance, Butts and Michels (2006), a Cronbach's alpha of 0.8 is considered very good when determining the consistency of the measurement. The data from the questionnaire were analysed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) 17.0. Descriptive statistics that described the basic features of the data such as percentages, means and standard deviations were used. According to Vogt

(2007), this means we did not extend the meaning of data beyond itself – the data were described according to what they show without inferences being made.

Semi-Structured Interviews

The follow-up interviews were conducted with seven postgraduate students to collect more qualitative data. Consent to tape record the interview was obtained from the participants. The interview schedule also covered in detail four broad dimensions of students' experiences similar to those in the questionnaire. Direct citations from the semi-structured interview responses were linked to particular themes in the quantitative analysis to augment the trends. Data from the semi-structured interviews were documented in transcripts and field notes. Qualitative data were analysed using inductive thematic analysis in line with Creswell's (2012) data analysis framework. Trustworthiness with regard to qualitative data was achieved using member checking, peer verification and an audit trail.

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Ethical approval for this study was obtained from the Unisa Ethics Committee. Permission was also given by the Director of the Postgraduate College to engage the postgraduate students during their support research workshop. The participants signed letters of consent to confirm voluntary participation and the right to withdraw from the study at any time. As researchers, we guaranteed the participants' anonymity, confidentiality and privacy, which we achieved by using pseudonyms in data presentation.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

From the analysis of both the quantitative and qualitative data, the participants highlighted aspects of their cognitive and organisational ergonomics experiences in the Unisa postgraduate studies programme. The findings that are discussed below were obtained from both the quantitative and qualitative data in line with the concurrent mixed method design embraced in this study.

Participants in Terms of Unisa Colleges

The majority of participants in this survey were from the College of Education (36%), while the Colleges of Human Sciences and Economic and Management Sciences followed closely with 27% and 17% respectively. The participants from Agriculture and Environmental Sciences constituted 12%. The lowest number of participants that took part in the study came from the Colleges of Law (5%), and Science, Engineering and Technology (3%). According to the descriptive statistics that were used for analysis, the

study found no correlation between the Colleges in which the student was studying and his or her experiences of postgraduate studies.

Reasons for Pursuing a Research Degree

The participants stated the reasons for pursuing postgraduate studies as follows: to enhance their career prospects in their job (67%); to gain a higher qualification (16%); to become an academic at a university (14%); and to work as a consultant or writer (3%). It is interesting to note that the majority of students felt that doing a postgraduate research degree would enhance their career prospects. Universities therefore need to take into consideration the students' aspirations when designing their programmes so that they respond to the needs of the students.

The Careers Research Advisory Centre (CRAC 2006) concurs that to best support postgraduate researchers one needs to be able to understand their longer-term career intentions. They therefore need information, advice and guidance to help them think about both academic and non-academic career opportunities. They also need to be able to understand their own preferences about style of workplace, management, culture, and so on, as well as those of potential employers, in order to make decisions based on values and motivations.

Time Spent on Research Activities

In terms of time spent on research activities, the study revealed that 34% of the students spend five or fewer hours a week on their research, 41% spend between six and ten hours, 18% spend between 11 and 15 hours and 7% spend more than 15 hours a week on their research. The study did not find any correlation between time spent on research activities and students' experiences in their postgraduate studies.

Educational and Research Experience

The educational and research experience items on the questionnaire and questions in the interview schedule referred to the postgraduate students' perception of the quality of research guidance, supervisor availability and regularity of feedback by their supervisors. The majority of students (69%) were satisfied with the research guidance they receive from their supervisors, while 31% of the participants expressed dissatisfaction. However, more than half of the students (56%) were dissatisfied with the regularity of feedback from the supervisors. This is consistent with slightly more than half of the respondents (52%) who were not satisfied with the availability of opportunities for informal discussion with their supervisors, compared with 48% who were satisfied. Students felt that regular contact and feedback with the supervisor play a vital role in the success of postgraduate supervision. One student in the College of Human Sciences stated the following:

Our supervisors are not always available to support us and we are not even sure of procedures that we need to follow when we are not happy about the progress in our studies due to unavailability of lecturers or due to delayed feedback.

In a study conducted by Wadesango and Machingambi (2011), delayed and infrequent feedback from the supervisor was cited by 15% of the postgraduate students as taking a huge toll on their progress towards completing their thesis as well as on the quality of the research. Studies across the world reveal that more frequent supervisor meetings or interaction are associated with students' perceptions of a more supportive research environment (Lubbe, Worrel and Klopper 2005; Brew and Peseta 2004; Caffarella and Barnett 2000).

The study also reveals that co-supervision was one of the sources of students' dissatisfaction with their postgraduate studies. Co-supervision is a common practice in the supervision of students at most universities and it is not a bad practice. However, if it is not well managed and properly coordinated it can hinder students' progress and eventually result in students dropping out. Students' complaints stem from the conflicting and inconsistent feedback from co-supervisors. The following drawback of co-supervision was identified by one student in the College of Education:

I personally have a problem with having more than one supervisor, whilst it may work for others it does not work for me. The difficulty starts when you receive feedback from both supervisors which is at odds with each other and the dilemma I face is whose advice I should follow. Sometime feedback from the same would contradict the previous feedback.

Research, by its very nature, can generate much debate, and one would therefore expect co-supervisors from time to time to have differences of opinion on certain aspects of research. The bright side of co-supervision, however, is that a student's research is enriched by diverse input from more than one supervisor, and if the main supervisor leaves the institution, the other supervisor can take over which ensures continuity in the student's work. Wadesango and Machingambi (2011) concur that more supervisors mean a wider range of opinions, which adds value to the research process.

Support Services and Funding

Support services and funding refer to the services available on campus to facilitate learning, such as administrative services, financial aid and scholarships to support postgraduate students. The postgraduate students in this study were dissatisfied (58%) with the quality of administrative services they were receiving, with only 42% being satisfied with the services. One College of Education student had the following to say in this regard:

I feel let down by the University. I am saying this because the frustrations that I came with to this workshop could have been addressed early in the year as we have been trying to get into contact with university but could not find help up to this far. As I speak I have a contact person the one

that I was given by Dr X, couldn't be reached. I have been trying since the beginning of April to get hold of him/her but with no success as he/she did not pick up his phone neither responding to my emails. I came here being highly confused as to who my supervisor is and who to send my research proposal to...

There were low levels of satisfaction about the availability of scholarships for supporting postgraduate students (39%) against a high level of dissatisfaction (61%) regarding this matter. Unisa's Directorate of Student Funding administers donor funds, in the form of study loans and bursaries, according to donors' criteria. It mainly assists financially needy and academically deserving students. Based on these criteria, it is unclear whether all the students would benefit from these funds.

According to Moses (1984), various factors contribute to dissatisfaction with the system of higher degree studies. These include inadequate support for postgraduate students through scholarships, grants and facilities. She further argues that more funds would make it possible to establish more viable research projects, purchase equipment and involve more postgraduate students in projects. This kind of support would actually contribute to students' success.

Quality of and Access to Facilities

Quality of and access to facilities refer to suitable, sufficient and current library resources and ICT infrastructure being available for students to succeed in their studies. Students were satisfied with the library services, and many of them agreed (88%) that the library facilities support their research endeavours and they also have access to a range of database and electronic resources. Many of the participants (76%) were satisfied with the helpfulness of library staff, while 24% of them expressed dissatisfaction. One student in the College of Agriculture and Environmental Sciences stated the following:

During master's and doctoral research writing workshops the library staff trained us on how to access electronic resources from the comfort of our own homes. Now I have access to a variety of material to help me with my studies.

Unisa as an ODL institution has invested a lot of money in electronic resources to create an enabling learning environment for master's and doctoral students. The University acknowledges the fact that a key component of successful completion of a postgraduate degree is access to relevant literature sources. Postgraduate students therefore have access to the most valuable resources in the library, namely, books, e-books, e-journal references and special collection archives and materials for students with disabilities. Students have a personal librarian allocated to their department, whom they can contact via email or telephone, and with whom they can even make appointments for one-on-one meetings.

In the library on the Muckleneuk campus, an enabling environment has been created for postgraduate students in the form of library research space, which is reserved for

master's and doctoral students. Facilities include a quiet location for research and study, desktop computers, library database access and wireless internet connectivity.

Initiation into the Community of Researchers

This factor probes the extent to which students are integrated into the community of researchers and the research culture of the university. The majority of students (67%) were satisfied with the platforms created by their institution to meet with fellow students. A student in the College of Human Sciences stated the following:

The postgraduate research writing workshops organised by Unisa for postgraduate students are valuable as they provide us with opportunities to interact with other postgraduate students and one feels less isolated. They really build our confidence in research writing.

The development of professional networks and the provision of seminar programmes for postgraduate students are critical in developing a culture of research among postgraduate researchers. As one student in the College of Economic and Management Sciences explained:

Here in Durban in particular students formed an association of postgraduate students to foster interaction and the research culture amongst ourselves and to support each other through our studies.

The study also reveals that students wish to become involved in the broader research culture of the institution by being encouraged to present conference papers and publish their work with their supervisors and present their work to their peers at research seminars.

Overall Postgraduate Experience

In the questionnaire, students were asked about their overall satisfaction with the quality of their higher degree research experience. The study reports relatively high satisfaction ratings (64%) by postgraduate students, with the library services in particular, followed by the quality of supervision they receive from the lecturers.

CONCLUSION

From the analysis of the data, it can be concluded that the majority of postgraduate students are reasonably satisfied with the educational and research experience, the quality of and access to facilities, and initiation into the community of researchers. However, relatively high levels of dissatisfaction were indicated in areas such as support services and funding and promptness of feedback. It is therefore critical for higher education institutions to determine and deliver what is important to students in terms of their postgraduate studies. Studies such as this one aimed at determining

students' experiences about their postgraduate studies should be conducted on a regular basis in order to improve the quality of service provided to postgraduate students by higher education institutions.

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