An examination of supporting structures for postgraduate students’ completion of research projects at one of the universities in South Africa

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Received 17 August 2023
Received in rev. form 22 Sept. 2023
Accepted 26 Sept. 2023

Keywords:
Dissertations; Theses; Postgraduate students; Supervisors; Supporting structures.

JEL Classification:
I23

ABSTRACT

The Council on Higher Education (CHE)’s report on the doctoral programme review states that offering postgraduate programmes seems to be a challenge to some South African universities. Amongst others, the report expresses that postgraduate supervision at universities suffers from many challenges, some of which result in students being delayed or not completing their studies. Underpinned by Archer’s (1998) theory of the interplay between structure, culture, and agency (support programmes), the study seeks to examine factors that hinder postgraduate students’ completion of their dissertations and theses. The study adopted narrative research where the qualitative design was used. Postgraduate students (Master and Doctoral) who have registered for these programmes repeatedly in the university served as participants in the study. The purposive sample was used to sample eight postgraduate students who have frequently registered for more than the required residency period. Semi-structured questions were formulated to guide data collection. Data was collected through a focus group of eight Master and Doctoral students. Collected data were analysed using the content analysis method. The study found that the university does not have adequate (or weak) supporting structures for students to complete their degrees in record time.

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Introduction

In 2020, the Council on Higher Education (CHE) conducted an evaluation of the state of Doctoral qualifications offered by South African universities. The core responsibility of the review was to evaluate the offering of Doctoral degrees according to the National Standard to make an informed judgment in terms of the provisions of the Higher Education Qualifications Sub-Framework (HEQSF). The review was based on both the fitness-for-purpose of the offering(s) and the national and institutional context for Doctoral studies (CHE Report, 2021).

The review panel made commendations, recommendations, and concerns in its reports. In the university where this study is undertaken, besides one commendation, there were three concerns and twelve recommendations raised by the review panel. The recommendations and concerns pointed out that there should be an improvement plan for each recommendation and concern. These concerns and recommendations evoked the desire of researchers to examine the supporting structures for postgraduate students, in this case, Master and Doctoral programmes in the institution.

In South Africa, the National Development Plan (2011) states that universities are the dominant producers of knowledge. In the quest for knowledge production through research, universities should put together supporting structures for postgraduate students to

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minimise or limit long residency and attrition in the programmes. In this study, supporting structures are supervision, cognitive, affective, and systemic.

With the availability or non-availability of supporting structures, supervisors are the main supporters (support structures) for postgraduate students. Supervisors play a crucial role in the production of knowledge. Their role is to see postgraduate students to completion. Abbidin, Hassan, and Ahmad (2009, p. 11) state that many researchers and authors point out that there is a high proportion of postgraduate students who fail to complete their studies. The most frequently cited reasons are problems with supervision. Student supervision contributes towards the completion or non-completion of a postgraduate degree. Supervision is influenced by factors such as structure, culture, and agency in the institution.

Literature Review

Universities, the world over, invest in the core business of teaching and learning, research and innovation, and community engagement. Teaching and learning and research are combined in postgraduate research supervision. However, there are studies that show the challenge of students’ delay/s and non-completion of research projects (Abidin & West (2007, p. 34). Such a challenge results in low graduation rates for postgraduate programmes in universities. Failure by students to complete their dissertations and theses on time suggests problems regarding the support structures such as supervision processes, the overall organisation of postgraduate research programmes, resources, and the way students undertake their studies, ranging from commitment, organisation, and personal factors. The study seeks to establish from students’ and supervisors’ points of view, factors that promote or hinder students’ completion of research projects where the study takes place.

Theoretical Framework

The study is underpinned by Archer’s (1996) socialist realist theory on morphogenetic/morphostatic methodology which provides the lens with which to view the interplay between structure, culture and agency insofar as they promote and hinder postgraduate students’ completion of research projects. In terms of ‘structures,’ Archer takes them as literal structures that include Faculties, Departments as well as policies (in the university set-up), and these determine, constrain, and oppress activities (O’Neill, 1999). Cultural issues include ideas, beliefs, ideologies, values, and theories held by different people in the university and agency has to do with the role players themselves. The three concepts of structure, culture, and agency as propounded by Archer (1998) shall provide the analytical lens for the study.

Supporting Structures

In the following discussion, student supervision supersedes other supporting structures, and as mentioned before, that will be discussed. Supervisors play a major role in the success of their students. Schulze (2011) outlines the roles that supervisors play in the supervision of postgraduate students: they provide functional support with an emphasis on practical advice, assure quality, mentor, facilitate enculturation into the academy, critical-thinking facilitators, and in some cases, provide emotional support. Other supporting structures are cognitive, affective, and systemic. The last three support structures (cognitive, affective, and systemic) have been identified by Tait (2003:5) in his article, “Reflections on student support in open and distance learning.”

The framework that is used to develop support structures for students needs to consider seven elements that were proposed by Tait (2002, p. 11) and Fynn and van Vuuren (2017, p. 190) which are student cohort characteristics, the technological infrastructure, the demands of the programme, the scale of the course, the management systems employed and the geographical situation and requirements of both the student and the institution.

Supervision Support

Researchers have defined the process of postgraduate supervision in different ways. Pearson and Brew (2002) define supervision as a process of enabling the student to become an independent professional researcher and scholar in the field of their choice, thereby becoming Cryer and Mertens (2003) define postgraduate supervision as a process that involves complex, academic, and interpersonal skills.

According to Abidden, Hassan and Ahmad (2009, p. 11), supervision is widely recognised as being intricate and multidimensional. The relationship between the supervisor and the student is multi-layered. If the relationship is not effective or efficient, this may result in negative consequences, like academic failure, if it is effective and efficient it results in good results (Prazers, 2017). Research supervision for students is one important area in that university lecturers are engaged. According to Van Rensburg, Mayers and Roets (2016, p. 1) university postgraduate students’ supervision is the core responsibility of academics and is considered a measure of academic output. Supervision does not only transfer research and research-related skills, but it is also an intensive and interconnected form of educator-student engagement. The role of the supervisor is to provide supportive, constructive, and engaged supervision. Supportive, constructive, and engaged supervision is important in the development of future academics who have the correct education and skills mix to fulfill the future needs of the profession.

Van Rensburg et al. (2016, p. 2) went on to state that the requirement of supervision is professional commitment. Professional commitment is an intensive form of educator-student engagement. The multiple layers of the supervisor-student relationship need to be recognised and engaged with for achieving a successful outcome.
Mentoring as Supervision: Mentoring is the act of providing guidance, wisdom, knowledge, and supporting a way a protege can receive it and benefit from it. Manathunga (2007, p. 207) states that many prominent authors argue that effective supervision is a form of mentoring. According to this understanding of supervision pedagogy, postgraduate supervisors guide and facilitate their students’ gradual development into independent researchers through empathetic dialogue and by modelling appropriate disciplinary-based research behaviour. They socialise students into disciplinary research cultures, provide emotional support, and assist with broader career development. In these ways, Manathunga suggests that positioning supervision as mentoring removes the hierarchical, problematic aspects of traditional forms of postgraduate supervision where the supervisor was seen as the omnipresent master or guru and the student was a compliant and devoted apprentice or protégé. Manathunga appears to suggest that being a student’s research mentor removes the operations of power from the supervision relationship.

To explore how effective postgraduate supervision has come to be described as mentoring in government and some educational research discourses, it is necessary first to define the purpose and philosophy underpinning mentoring generally. Mentoring is represented as a productive form of professional development and pedagogy in the literature. It is often selected as a form of professional development. The philosophy and rationale behind mentoring are that the mentor is wiser and more experienced than those they mentor and can share this knowledge with their mentees. Even this assumption, while it may be true in some cases, hints at some of the power dynamics, desired subjectivities and risks associated with this professional development strategy. In supervision as mentoring, it is generally assumed that the supervisor is wiser about research and is able to share their experience with their students. They may not necessarily be wiser about other areas of life and yet, as supervisors, they are helping students to develop disciplinary-based and other self-regulatory behaviours (Manathunga, 2007, p. 209).

Student Supervision: Abiddin (2008, p. 281) states that the examination of supervision has the potential to make an important contribution to the quality of postgraduate research. Therefore, supervision is concerned with the mechanics of ensuring that the student makes good progress toward completion. Therefore, both on a departmental and individual basis, the supervisor must be diligent about explicitly working with students to establish mutual expectations, responsibilities, and benefits for working together and with other interested parties.

Ballard and Clanchy (1993) (in Abiddin, 2008, p. 281) describe research student supervision as a blend of academic expertise and the skillful management of personal and professional relations. On the other hand, the Council of Graduate Schools (1990) suggests that there are two major aspects to the supervision of graduate research students: The first and most important has to do with creativity and involves the ability to select problems, stimulate and enthuse students, and to provide a steady stream of ideas. The second aspect is concerned with the mechanics of ensuring that the student makes good progress.

Students Expectations: According to Abiddin and West (2007, p. 34) many students are unsure as to what to expect from supervision meetings. Much depends on the stage of the research and the discipline. However, after the stage of getting to know you, the following agenda would generally follow administration matters, review of progress, goal setting, discussion, and exchange of ideas. Generally, a meeting would be somewhere between 30 minutes and two hours. Once again, students would generally have a meeting every one or two weeks. This is likely to change over time. The student would probably meet his/her supervisor(s) frequently when first putting together their proposal and again towards the end when they are writing up.

Midway, when he/she is likely to be doing fieldwork or research, the need to see the supervisor(s) will be much lesser. However, during this time it is probably a good idea to send a few quick emails quite regularly to update the progress. This is an issue that should be decided with the supervisor(s). Some supervisors and students prefer unstructured informal meetings, whereas others like to stick to a pre-arranged format. The student should send the supervisor some sort of agenda well before the meeting, including any drafts or readings that the student would like to be discussed. Also, it is good to take notes during the meeting and send ‘minutes’ to the supervisor(s) after the meeting as a follow up and verification of any decisions made during the meeting.

Importance of Communication in Supervision: Meetings are an important vehicle for human communication. They are so common and pervasive in organisations, however, many take them for granted and forget, unless properly planned and executed, meetings could be a terrible waste of precious resources. They are similar in graduate research student supervision. Students and supervisors have certain objectives to fulfill, therefore effective meetings could make students work quickly and they can move to another stage of doing research effectively. In general, meetings fall into three categories: (1) status meetings, generally leader-led, which is about reporting through one-way communication; (2) work meetings, which produce a product or intangible result such as a decision; and (3) meetings which never should have happened. In graduate research student supervision, work meeting is appropriate as student reports his/her research progress to his/her supervisor, (Abiddin & West 2007, p. 29).

Cognitive Support (supporting and developing learning)

Duckwortha, Quirka, Gallopa, Hoyleb, Kelly and Matthews (2019, p. 23499) define cognitive as the “ability to reason, plan, solve problems, think abstractly, comprehend complex ideas, learn quickly, and learn from experience. These are the skills that supervisors think students have. Students need to be nurtured to have such skills. Tait (2003, p. 6) refers to cognitive support as services that concern course outline material and formal learning support resources and learning through the mediation of the standard and uniform elements for individual students.
Cognitive support may be tutorial classes and other academic support initiatives. Within the postgraduate supervision space, this would primarily refer to the supervisor as the source of support in mediating the learning between the student and knowledge repositories within the discipline (Fynn & van Vuuren, 2017, p. 189).

**Affective Support (that is related to the emotions that support learning and success)**

Affective support is the improvement of the study environment. The improvement of the study environment assists in improving student commitment and self-esteem (Tait, 2003, p. 7). In addition, Fynn and van Vuuren (2017, p. 190) conclude that affective support may also include the students’ emotional or social environment and the possible barriers that these could form during their development.

Deal (2002) as cited by Haskins, Hermann-Turner, Pignato, Moses and Olds (2020, p. 6) is of the opinion that it is often that students have developmental encounters regarding achieving a sense of balance, managing difficult client relationships, dealing with silence, managing anxiety, understanding professional limitations, and setting boundaries. As a result, students depend on supervisors for more emotional support. Students prefer concrete answers to questions and instructions and rely on supervisors to provide client case conceptualisation. For the provision of support, supervisors should possess supervision-related skills such as empathy, flexibility, tolerance for ambiguity, and awareness of student shortcomings.

**Systemic Support (helping students to manage rules and systems of the institution in ways that support persistence)**

Systemic support is concerned with the establishment of effective administration and information management services that are transparent and student friendly. The purpose of systemic support is to assist students in dealing with institutional systems in such a way that persistent use of the systems is supported (Tait, 2003, p. 7).

Hammond, Thorogood, Jenkins and Faaiuas (2013) in Paideya and Bengesai (2017, p. 56) state that systemic support enhances the diversity of students. This requires that institutional aspects such as philosophies, strategies and structures, policies, processes, and practices, are integrated, coordinated and related to support delivery with the intention to assist the learning of students, engagement, and success.

**Research Methodology**

This paragraph will discuss research orientation, design and methods.

**Research Orientation**

The study adopted a qualitative method research orientation (Onwuegbuzi & Teddlie, 2003; Cresswell, 2008). According to Creswell and Creswell (2018) qualitative research is an approach to exploring and understanding the meaning of individuals or groups ascribed to social or human problems. The research seeks to collect qualitative data from participants.

**Research Design and Methods**

This study followed narrative design as it explored and described postgraduate students and research supervisors’ views on support structures, cultural and agential factors promoting or hindering the completion of dissertations and theses. A narrative design was typified by a collection of data from a population, or some sample drawn from it, which enables the assessment of the relative incidence, distribution, and interrelationships of naturally occurring phenomena (Schulze, 2003).

**Population and sampling**

The population was composed of postgraduate (Masters and Doctorate) students who have registered for these degrees for the past five years. A stratified random sample was utilised to select postgraduate doing Masters and PhD in this university’s faculty. A stratified random sample was considered in order to select a representative sample that would make the results generalisable.

**Data collection instruments**

**Focus group interviews**

In-depth interviews were based on an interview schedule, consisting of open-ended questions. The interviews were conducted based on a structured interview schedule and notes were recorded to ensure accuracy. The objective was to obtain information in relation to the research question. One of the data sources for qualitative research is the direct speech of the people (informants) about their experiences, opinions, feelings and knowledge. Therefore, the interviews were managed to obtain the real views of the interviewees.

**Data Analysis**

**Qualitative data:** The collected data were analysed according to Creswell’s qualitative process of data analysis (Creswell, 2005, p. 231) and Henning, Van Rensburg, and Smit (2004, p. 104). Data were transcribed and coded. Content analysis, by way of emerging themes, aided analysis. The data were categorised into four themes which cover support structure, which are: supervision, cognitive, affective, and systemic which are support programmes, and these are related to student supervision at the university.
Findings and Discussion

Support Structure and Agency

Effective supervision

Participant 2: I do not want to tell you how long I have been in the programme as I have already spent a few years doing Masters which takes a minimum of 1 year and maximum of four years. Participant 6: Our supervisors leave us unattended, maybe they think that we know what we are supposed to. That is why we spend a few years in the programme. When students spend more than the required duration in the programme, the university loses a lot of funds from the Department of Higher Education, Science and Technology.

Participant 8: Our supervisors isolate us from them, it is like them and our situation. This makes us be so vulnerable (sic) as far as our studies are concerned. It is a little bit difficult to form a student-supervisor relationship with my supervisor. He is always serious and not considering my feelings as a student. I understand that we both have responsibilities as students and supervisors, but it should be a mutual relationship where all of us benefit. Participant 7: Research work needs training. I believe that we get training if we are taken care of. Besides training, I believe that supervisors have several roles to play in order for us to complete our degrees in time. Participant 1: Supervisors should find out our needs as we are novices in this research.

In support of the students’ outcry, Cryer (2000) emphasises that a research degree is about research training, and this training contributes to knowledge development. It cannot be possible to find ways of training oneself, the whole training process is in a way to be guided by a supervisor. Effective supervision of research students is acknowledged to be a crucial factor in the latter’s successful completion of their degree (Abiddin, Hassan & Ahmad, 2009).

Participant 5: For us to be effective we need time and help from our supervisors. Sometimes it is so frustrating when you call your supervisor and find that he/she is not taking your call and does not bother to come back to you.

Participant 7: Remember, we are paying for the registration fee and all fees needed by the university. When there is no effective supervision, we tend to lose a lot of money.

Participant 3: I think these people do not think that some of us have chosen to do Masters and Doctorate because we want to become academics.

Cognitive support

Participant 2: I do not think these supervisors have formal training in supervision. If they were having formal training I do not think they will treat their students the way they do to us.

Affective (emotional) support

Batchelor and Di Napoli (2006) as quoted by Ismail, Majid, and Ismail (2013) are of the view that like other learning experiences, a research journey itself is never linear. It is a journey of vulnerability where research students often experience ‘stuckness’ and it is acknowledged as being part of students’ process of “exploration and experimentation”.

Participant 3: The research journey is not easy. I need emotional support. Imagine with no effective supervision, you do not know what to do and you become frustrated. Participant 8: remember you have registered for two years and there is no progress, no way forward. You do not see any progress. At home, your relatives and friends ask you about the progress you have made so far in your studies. It becomes so emotional because I do not have any qualifying answer to give to these people.

Participant 4: One day I attended a postgraduate workshop from another university, the presenter was talking about the duration of study according to SAQA credits. He went farther and said that students should work very hard as it is not nice to tell people every year that you are doing Masters or Doctorate without completing it. I became so emotional when he was saying that. Drops of tears just rolled down my cheeks.

Participant 8: As my colleague has said before, this journey is so emotional. You have little support from your supervisor, you do not know what to do further. You end up overwhelmed by frustration. I do believe that if there was effective supervision, there would be emotional support. This is where one could confide in his supervisor. I am saying this because I am a parent, worker and student and I am also a member of my community.

According to Baptista (2014) emotional and cognitive processes are deeply embedded in the learning and research processes, which inevitably overlap each other. Sometimes emotions are not considerate of age and maturity, they just creep in life. Emotions play a role in the completion or termination of studies. In supporting students, supervisors must consider and demonstrate genuine concern for and care about their students, respect, desire to understand students’ feelings and points of views, and dependability (Ruzek, Hafen, Allen, Gregory, Mikami & Pianta, 2016).

Participant 5: I believe that a positive and effective interpersonal relationship with my supervisor might contribute towards completing my studies. This is emphasised by Qureshi and Vazir (2016) when they state that relationship blends the personal with
professional expectations and becomes one of the key factors in determining the kind of teaching and learning experiences both parties will have. Supervisors need to create a relationship with their students. Participant 5 went further to state that with minimum contacts, it is difficult to build this kind of relationship. I am not sure whether my supervisor thinks that I am a quality student or not. In my opinion and ability, I am a quality student, as far as I am concerned.

Participant 8: Sometimes my supervisor is too busy to attend to me. I do understand it as he is teaching hundreds of undergraduate students. But I am also a student who needs attention just like undergraduate students. Remember, education is expensive, and I do not have external funding as some students might have.

Participant 1: I do not want to create tension even though I have already spent some years in this programme.

Tension might exist between the supportive helping role of the supervisor and the requirements of the role to warrant dissertation quality (Mainhard, van der Rijst, van Tartwijk & Wubbel, 2009). According to Mainhard et al. (2009), tension is also caused by the supervision style preferred by the supervisor and the evaluation of supervisory experience which most institutions do not discuss.

Systemic support

Participant 7: I have never asked about any policy in the faculty. I do not even know whether there is any policy. I am in the dark about that. I am just told that there is a Higher Degrees Committee, I have never seen a policy that regulates this committee. You are reminding me, I was told that my research proposal is not yet at the stage in which it can be taken to Higher Degrees Committee. Just imagine, for more than three years, I am told that it is not yet at that stage. At least I discovered the school librarian by myself.

At the time of data collection, the university did not have a policy on postgraduate studies. Other structures such as Higher Degrees Committee were there from then Schools to the University. The schools used to have dedicated librarians.

As far as analysed data is concerned, the university does not have supporting structures for postgraduate students, if they are there, they are not functional and/or are very weak. There is weak supervision support which translates to a lack of support in cognitive, affective, and systemic to postgraduate students as indicated by the participants. Lack of support structures affects student residency in the programmes. Students stay in the programmes longer than the required period. Staying on the programme longer affects funding for the university.

Archer’s socialist realist theory comes into play in this study when we observe three concepts which are structure, culture, and agency. The institution might find that the challenges which students are facing are normal and do not require any attention or intervention as the three concepts mentioned before are barometers to measure postgraduate programmes (supervisors and students support) that should be always observed. Weak or lack of support structures was not supposed to be there as the university has a Centre for Higher Education Teaching and Learning (CHETL) which has Units that can cater to some of the needs of postgraduate students. It is not surprising that supervisors do not inform students about the Centre for Higher Education Teaching and Learning which is responsible for enhancing teaching and learning through Academic Division Unit.

The Centre does not cater for postgraduate students, this is one of the concerns that the CHE panel review raised. The Centre concentrates on undergraduate students, where it creates space for tutors and mentors who help those who are not active and not performing well (students at risk) in their studies.

CHETL has Units that can support postgraduate students and supervisors. This Centre is comprised of four discrete but interconnected Units; The Academic Development Unit (ADU), the Student Counseling and Career Development Unit (SCCDU), E-learning, and the Disability Unit (DU).

The Academic Development Unit provides the following support:

i. Academic support
ii. Student support
iii. Academic Literacies
iv. Time Management

The Student Counseling and Career Development Unit, provides the following support:

i. Personal counselling/therapy on personal issues such as Loneliness, stress and depression;
ii. Trauma and grief/bereavement;
iii. Relationship problems; and
iv. Anger management issues & family problems.

E-Learning provides the following:

i. Use of Learning Management System (LMS) Technology for teaching and learning;
ii. Course Development and Baseline Provision;

iii. Keeping abreast of new technological developments and new government initiatives in ICT in teaching and learning in higher education;

iv. Raising the level of competence in the use of ICT’s for teaching and learning among staff and students;

v. Identifying and developing appropriate opportunities across the curriculum where ICT can enrich teaching and learning;

vi. Use of ICT tools to collect relevant data to support decision-making for online teaching and learning purposes;

vii. Automated student support system; and

viii. E-Learning strategy and governance.

ix. Provision of E-Learning helpdesk, user system administration and support

Disability Unit offers the following support:

i. Orientation and mobility training to familiarise students with their surroundings;

ii. Computer training to develop essential skills for the use of adaptive advanced technology;

iii. Technical support for visually impaired students with brailing and scanning of learning materials;

iv. Train students on how to use assistive devices, and

v. Facilitate tests and examination writing centres.

CHETL has got all Units, as we have indicated above that can support students to complete their studies on time. It was painful listening to the students’ lament during interviews regarding the lack of support from their supervisors. Education is a very expensive commodity, and the majority of students do not have external funding, they pay tuition fees from their own pockets. When they receive little or no attention from their supervisors, they lose a lot in terms of money and time.

According to Van Rensburg, Mayers and Roets (2016, p. 1) university postgraduate students’ supervision is the core responsibility of academics and is considered a measure of academic output. Supervision does not only transfer research and research-related skills, but it is also an intensive and interconnected form of educator-student engagement. It is surprising that supervision is not taking place the way it should with the students we interviewed.

Capacity development for supervisors is essential in this regard. CHETL should call for supervision workshops, where supervisors are continuously capacitated. The Academic Division Unit should lead in this regard. To improve student supervision, Manathunga (2007, p. 207) states that many prominent authors argue that effective supervision is a form of mentoring. According to this understanding of supervision pedagogy, postgraduate supervisors guide and facilitate their students’ gradual development into independent researchers through empathetic dialogue and by modelling appropriate disciplinary-based research behaviour.

Students come from diverse backgrounds, therefore orientation or induction should consider the following: student cohort characteristics, the technological infrastructure, the demands of the programme, the scale of the course, the management systems employed and the geographical situation.

Conclusions

Postgraduate students need support for them to complete their studies on record time. The university should create enabling structures for students to complete their studies in the stipulated time. The university must intensify postgraduate student support as they come from diverse backgrounds with different aptitudes. Supervisors should be capacitated in order for them to have a clear understanding of their roles. If supervisors understand their roles, it becomes easier for them to state the roles of the students in this emotional research journey. The support such as cognitive, affective, and systemic that students require should be led by the supervisors.

Crane, Kinash, Hamlin, Eckersley, Partridge, and Bannatyne (2016, p. 17) in their study of good practice guide to support the postgraduate student experience have made the following recommendations which we find relevant to this study:

i. Students, before they have enrolled should ensure that they are aware of the preferred methods of communication of the institution, which are frequently the institution’s website and the institution’s email system. There is no value in missing important opportunities because you are only monitoring your personal preferred methods of electronic communication.

ii. There should be the facilitation of informative induction programmes for postgraduate students. The programmes should be conducted regularly to develop professional activities that enhance the transition, learning and engagement experiences. On induction, students should be made aware of the support structures which CHETL has.

Acknowledgment

All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.
Author Contributions: Prof Takalani Samuel Mashau conceptualised the paper. Dr Fhatuwani Ravhuhal interviewed participants and analysed data.

Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

Data Availability Statement: The data presented in this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to restrictions.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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