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Administering postgraduate education for success: the necessity for postgraduate orientation

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Abstract
The call by the government of South Africa for an improved postgraduate throughput and pass rate is yet to meet with commensurate attention from researchers. To date, not much empirical studies have been undertaken in this regard. This knowledge gap is dire especially in light of the essential role of postgraduate education in national government's strategy for improved employment statistics and of the emphasis on access to much more meaningful work. Postgraduate education is commonly perceived to be a lonely journey because students are considered mature at the level of postgraduate studies. Despite the assumption that postgraduate students have somewhat mastered the art of academic writing, they confront certain challenges associated with postgraduate study. In South Africa, postgraduate students have often complained about lack of guidance regarding administrative processes and procedures associated with research. One of the approaches to clarifying the roles and responsibilities of the postgraduate student is orientation. Specifically, with respect to postgraduate research, orientation programmes offer students the opportunity to familiarise themselves with administrative procedures regarding research ethics, data collection, submission of chapters, analysis of data and writing up the research report. Data for this study was collected during a two-day orientation programme at a South African university of technology. The faculty of business and management sciences organised the two-day event so that the faculty's new postgraduate students could be made aware of the steps they are required to follow during their studies. The results suggest an overwhelming approval of postgraduate orientation. This paper provides an ideal opportunity to further examine poor postgraduate throughput and pass rates in South African universities but, more importantly, it is hoped that the paper advances new ways of looking at the management and administration of postgraduate students as well as postgraduate orientation at higher education institutions.

Keywords
Postgraduate education; postgraduate supervision; throughput rate; pass rate; academic success; South Africa; postgraduate orientation.

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Περίληψη
Η έκκληση της κυβέρνησης της Νότιας Αφρικής για βελτίωσης του χρόνου ολοκλήρωσης και του ποσοστού επιτυχίας στις μεταπτυχιακές σπουδές δεν έχει ακόμη τύχη της δέουσας προσοχής από τους ερευνητές. Μέχρι σήμερα δεν έχουν γίνει πολλές εμπειρικές μελέτες σχετικά με αυτό το θέμα. Αυτό το χάσμα γνώσεων είναι κακό, ιδίως υπό το πρίσμα του ουσιαστικού ρόλου των μεταπτυχιακών σπουδών στη στρατηγική της εθνικής κυβέρνησης για βελτίωση των στατιστικών απασχόλησης και της έμφασης στην πρόσβαση σε πολύ πιο σημαντικές εργασίες. Οι μεταπτυχιακές σπουδές θεωρούνται συνήθως ως ένα μοναχικό ταξίδι, επειδή οι φοιτητές θεωρούνται ώριμοι σε αυτό το επίπεδο. Παρά την υπόθεση ότι οι μεταπτυχιακοί φοιτητές έχουν μάθει κάπως την τέχνη της ακαδημαϊκής γραφής, αντιμετωπίζουν ορισμένες προκλήσεις που συνδέονται με τη μεταπτυχιακή μελέτη. Στη Νότια Αφρική, οι μεταπτυχιακοί φοιτητές συχνά διαμαρτύρονται για την έλλειψη καθοδήγησης όσον αφορά τις διοικητικές διαδικασίες και τις διαδικασίες που σχετίζονται με την έρευνα. Μια από τις προσεγγίσεις για τη διευκρίνιση των ρόλων και των ευθυνών του μεταπτυχιακού φοιτητή είναι ο προσανατολισμός. Συγκεκριμένα, όσον αφορά τη μεταπτυχιακή έρευνα, τα προγράμματα προσανατολισμού προσφέρουν στους φοιτητές την ευκαιρία να εξοικειωθούν με τις διοικητικές διαδικασίες σχετικά με την ηθική της έρευνας, τη συλλογή δεδομένων, την υποβολή κεφαλαίων, την ανάλυση δεδομένων και τη σύνταξη της έκθεσης έρευνας. Τα στοιχεία που παρουσιάζονται εδώ συλλέχθηκαν κατά τη διάρκεια μιας διήμερης εκδήλωσης σε τεχνολογικό πανεπιστήμιο της Νότιας Αφρικής. Η σχολή διοίκησης επιχειρήσεων και διοίκησης διοργάνωσε τη διημερίδα έτσι ώστε οι νέοι μεταπτυχιακοί φοιτητές της σχολής να μπορούν να γνωρίζουν τα βήματα που πρέπει να ακολουθήσουν κατά τη διάρκεια των σπουδών τους. Τα αποτελέσματα υποδηλώνουν μια συντριπτική έγκριση του μεταπτυχιακού προσανατολισμού. Το παρόν κείμενο παρέχει μια ιδανική ευκαιρία για περαιτέρω εξέταση της κακής μεταπτυχιακής φοίτησης και των ποσοστών επιτυχίας στα πανεπιστήμια της Νότιας Αφρικής, αλλά, κυρίως, ελπίζεται ότι η εργασία προωθεί νέους τρόπους εξέτασης της διαχείρισης και διοίκησης των μεταπτυχιακών φοιτητών καθώς και του μεταπτυχιακό προσανατολισμό σε ανώτατα εκπαιδευτικά ιδρύματα.

Λέξεις-κλειδί
Μεταπτυχιακές σπουδές, μεταπτυχιακή επίβλεψη, χρόνος ολοκλήρωσης, ποσοστό επιτυχίας, ακαδημαϊκή επιτυχία, Νότια Αφρική, μεταπτυχιακός προσανατολισμός.

Introduction

Around the world, higher education institutions (HEIs) are acknowledged as creators of knowledge through their teaching and learning activities, research and innovation and community engagement (Brennan, King, & Lebeau, 2004; Mutwiri, 2014; Kavulya, 2004; Okonofua, 2008). In South Africa, the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET), emphasizes the need for HEIs, particularly universities, to produce postgraduates not only for knowledge dissemination but to also improve viability and sustainability of communities. Interestingly, postgraduate students in South African universities often complain about lack of guidance regarding administrative processes and procedures associated with research (Hoffman & Julie, 2012; Dlungwane & Knight, 2016; Offord, 2016; Taylor & Naidu, 2013). In the workplace, one of the ways of addressing new employees' unfamiliarity with work processes and procedures is through induction or orientation, which helps to clarify roles and responsibilities. Basically, orientation programmes help to inform new employees about the values and

culture of an organisation. In the academic environment, orientation reveals universities' rules and regulations and research-specific information to students. Specifically, with respect to postgraduate research, orientation programmes offer students the opportunity to familiarise themselves with administrative procedures regarding ethical protocols, data collection, submission of chapters, analysis of data and writing up the research report. With postgraduate research commonly seen as an independent study project, many students find it difficult to cope with the amount of work they are required to do. In fact, the idea of independent work stems from the fact that postgraduate students are allocated to academic supervisors who have other commitments and can hardly consult with them on a regular basis.

Higher education in South Africa is in a state of flux. Several commentators such as Jonathan Jansen, Adam Habib, Naledi Pandor, and Blade Nzimande have put the blame on a number of factors, namely: Apartheid, affirmative action and broad-based black economic empowerment (BBBEE). The unequal education system of the apartheid era differentiated along racial and gender lines, thus adding to the poor quality of education that is experienced in today's higher education. Pre higher education schooling structure is replete with negligence and dysfunction (Pretorius, 2014; Alston, 2018) to the extent that only a small pool of high school graduates has the necessary grades and subjects to access higher education, not to mention the so-called scarce skills. Recently, admission requirements into higher education was lowered so as to further access. Does this not suggest that with the lowering of pass mark, that South Africa's higher education is on a slippery slope?

The frustration within higher education in South Africa was captured by a speaker at a higher education conference in Cape Town in 2018 thus: "Imagine how deeply disturbing it is to read an essay written by a postgraduate student at a university. The essay, usually riddled with grammatical errors, lacks both syntax and semantics." So basically, the government of today systematically continues to produce graduates who do not sufficiently add value to the economy.

It is not unusual to assume, considering the above, that South Africa's postgraduate students struggle to adapt to 'real academic writing standards'.

In the context of the university where this study was carried out, postgraduate students are supervised by academics who carry teaching loads that leave them with little time to work effectively with students. Closely linked to the teaching loads are other challenges, chief among them being shortage of supervisors, in general, and a dearth of

experienced supervisors, in particular; lack of incentives for successful supervision of postgraduate students; weak or no support systems for supervisors and inadequate preparation of students for postgraduate studies resulting from a lack of basic training in research at the undergraduate level and poor academic writing skills. The overall effect of these challenges is low postgraduate throughput, as illustrated in Table 1.

Table 1. Cohort statistics for a single base year: 2012

Tracking Year	Students	Graduates	Throughput Rate	Retained Students	Dropout Rate*
2012	122	0	0.0%	100.0%	0.0%
2013	79	2	1.6%	64.8%	33.6%
2014	70	4	4.9%	57.4%	37.7%
2015	43	9	12.3%	35.2%	52.5%
2016	25	8	18.9%	20.5%	60.7%
2017	23	7	24.6%	18.9%	56.6%
2018	17	0	24.6%	13.9%	61.5%

Source: Obtained with authorization from the Office of the Director of Academic Planning of the university in question

The table above depicts cohort statistics of postgraduate students for a single base year, 2012. The total number of masters' students admitted in 2012 was 122. Only two graduated within two years for whom the DHET would have paid an incentive subsidy to the university, while 33.6% dropped out. In the third year of registration, four graduated, but an additional 4.3% dropped out. Moving forward to 2017, six years after first registration, 30 students had graduated while 56.6% had dropped out. In 2018, seven years after first registration, 17 of them still remained in the system, while 61.5% of the initial number had dropped out. Overall, the statistics clearly indicate that the faculty is heavily losing the DHET incentive subsidy, while keeping students beyond their 'sell by' date.

These statistics point to the need for, among others, ways to sufficiently manage postgraduate student retention and, in this case, maintain sustained postgraduate orientation programmes that explain the various processes and protocols associated with postgraduate research administration at the university. In our view, it is important to understand postgraduate student retention, throughput and pass rate matters and

emphasis should also be placed on how postgraduate students are integrated into the academic world of higher education. Heussi (2012), Tobbel and O'Donnell (2013) and Hoffman and Julie (2012) argue that postgraduate education signals a major transition from what was an almost fully-supported social and academic world (undergraduate study) to a highly independent study programme (postgraduate study). This means that "providing primarily instrumental, informational and appraisive support" (Wilcox, Winn, & Fyvie-Gauld, 2005) to postgraduate students should also be one of the main focus areas of an institution of higher learning. One way of doing this successfully is through well-planned and organised postgraduate orientation workshops (Wozniak, Pizzica, & Mahony, 2012). While some studies have been carried out to gauge how well postgraduate orientation workshops serve HEIs in the Western world, research is significantly lacking in this regard in South Africa. What is known is that some authors (for example Dlungwane & Knight, 2016; Offord, 2016; Taylor & Naidu, 2013; Letseka & Maile, 2008) focus on what makes a successful transition and student experience in balancing study and adjusting academically, but pay very little attention to postgraduate integration in the form of orientation. This paper examines the perceptions of postgraduate students regarding the significance of postgraduate orientation using a faculty at a South African university of technology as a case example. The outcry by the government of South Africa for an improved postgraduate throughput and pass rate has only barely attracted the attention of few researchers who have sought to identify what they regard as the necessary factors for successful transition from undergraduate to postgraduate study without a commensurate attention to postgraduate orientation, which has been hailed as a critical factor for successful postgraduate studies.

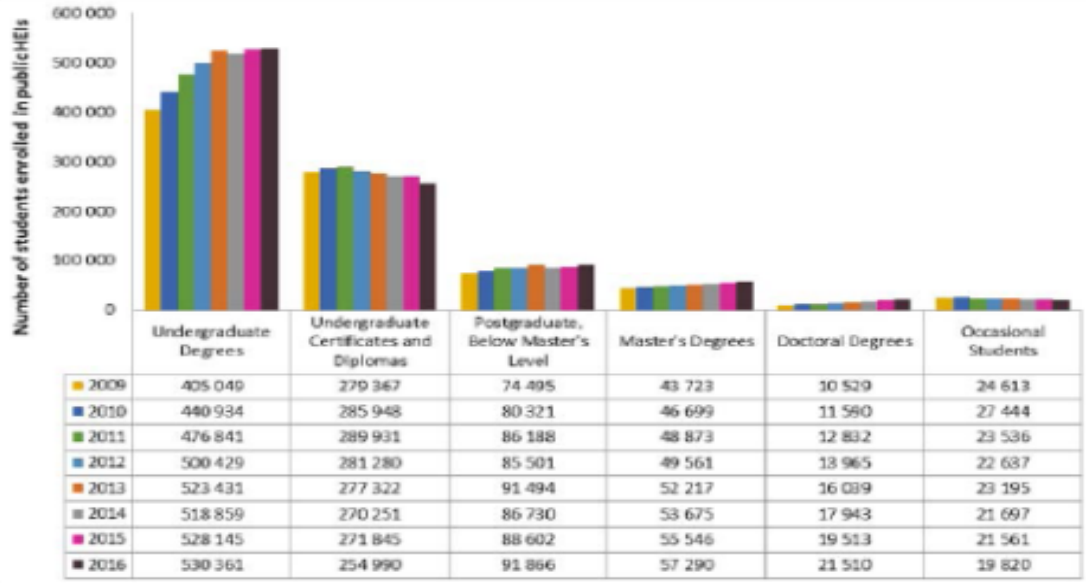
As little empirical studies have been carried out on the critical role of postgraduate orientation in assisting students navigate postgraduate studies, this paper offers an opportunity to examine the issue of poor postgraduate throughput and pass rates in South African universities but, more importantly, advance new ways of looking at postgraduate orientation at HEIs. Drawing from Letseka and Maile (2008), Wozniak, Pizzica and Mahony (2012), Sondlo (2013) and Tshitake (2016), the paper argues that postgraduate orientation may be the ignored approach to improving postgraduate throughput and pass rate. Essentially, perhaps the silence surrounding postgraduate orientation in the academic literature in South Africa could be broken through this study.

1. Background of Study Locale

Broadly, three terminologies are used to describe the 26 universities in South Africa. These are (1) universities of technology, (2) traditional universities and (3) comprehensive universities. The university where this study was undertaken is one of the eight universities of technology which focus on vocationally oriented education; six universities are regarded as comprehensive universities offering a combination of academic and vocational diplomas and degrees; and 12 traditional universities offering theoretically oriented university degrees.

Following the White Paper on the Transformation of Higher Education (South Africa, DoE, 1997), universities of technology (UoTs) came into existence through the merging of Technikons[5]. Before this time, Technikons were renown for (1) applied research, (2) robust partnership with industry to guarantee that curricula was relevant, and (3) preparing work-ready graduates through work-integrated-learning (Du Pré, 2010). Technikons were also known go offer qualifications such as National Diploma, Baccalaureus Technologiae (BTech), Magister Technologiae (MTech) and Doctor Technologiae (DTech).

Figure 1: Number of students enrolled in public HEIs by qualification type, 2009 – 2016



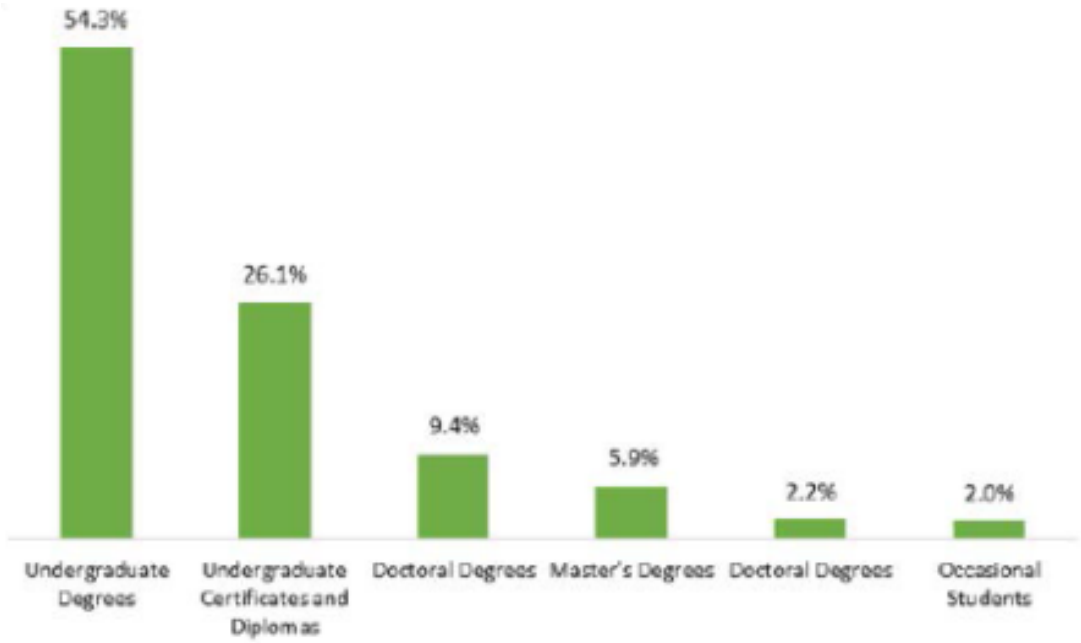
	Undergraduate Degrees	Undergraduate Certificates and Diplomas	Postgraduate, Below Master's Level	Master's Degrees	Doctoral Degrees	Occasional Students
2009	405 049	279 367	74 495	43 723	10 529	24 613
2010	440 934	285 948	80 321	46 699	11 590	27 444
2011	476 841	289 931	86 188	48 873	12 832	23 536
2012	500 429	281 280	85 501	49 561	13 965	22 637
2013	523 431	277 322	91 494	52 217	16 039	23 195
2014	518 859	270 251	86 730	53 675	17 943	21 697
2015	528 145	271 845	88 602	55 546	19 513	21 561
2016	530 361	254 990	91 866	57 290	21 510	19 820

Sources: Statistics on Post-School Education and Training in South Africa, 2015; 2016 HEMIS database, data extracted in October 2017 (The figures can be considered to be fairly reliable since external auditors

[5] In South Africa, a Technikon is an institution offering technical and vocational education at tertiary level. 2003 was officially the last year of the existence of the Technikons in South Africa.

appointed by the HEIs audited the data prior to it being submitted to the Department of Higher Education & Training. DHET, 2018, p.11)

Figure 2: Proportion of students enrolled in public HEIS by qualification type, 2016



Source: 2016 HEMIS database, data extracted in October 2017 (The figures can be considered to be fairly reliable since external auditors appointed by the HEIs audited the data prior to it being submitted to the Department of Higher Education & Training. DHET, 2018, p.11)

Overall, there are approximately 170, 666 postgraduate students in South Africa who are registered for a variety of postgraduate programmes, which include postgraduate diploma, coursework masters, research-based masters and doctoral programmes (DHET, 2018). The duration for the completion of each of these programmes differ ranging from two to six years. Students are selected using various criteria. In some universities, selection criteria include the submission of a proposal which is assessed by a panel of both internal and external experts. This will be followed by the defense of a proposal whereby experts within the field in the university and or outside the university are invited to serve as adjudicators. In the university where this study was carried out, candidates for postgraduate study apply to the departments of their choice if they meet the initial screening criteria of possessing 65% average in the qualifying qualification or equivalent. The application is normally accompanied by a research proposal. Those whose proposals are considered suitable for the study are then invited to a defense.

At the university where this study was conducted, there are various steps (about 13 of them) postgraduate students must go through in order to complete the administrative

requirements of postgraduate education. Among others, these steps range from submission of a research topic, writing of a research proposal, approval of the research proposal by the ethics committee of the faculty, approval by the institutional higher degrees committee to final submission of the dissertation for examination and approval of the examination results by faculty higher degrees committee and the institutional higher degrees committee. Each of these steps is overseen by various departments, faculties, faculty committees and finalised by the senate higher degrees committee. While these steps are institutionalised for quality assurance purposes, both students and academics tend to view these steps negatively. Many of the concerns raised by both postgraduate students and academics range from their repetitive nature to the length of time it takes to obtain feedback. On the institution's side, it is argued that if students and academics familiarise themselves with the processes delays will be avoided.

The faculty of business and management sciences of the university in question is the largest faculty. With a student population of more than 11000 students, the postgraduate student population is approximately 750. There are about 400 lecturers in the faculty. The number of lecturers with postgraduate qualification is less than 51%, out of which only 29% hold doctoral qualifications. The rest hold masters and undergraduate qualifications. It should be noted that majority of the postgraduate students are studying part-time owing to holding full-time employment. What this means is that they have to find ways to balance both work and academic requirements.

The university in question is the product of a merger between two technikons, which focused mostly on teaching and learning. With the university embracing research and innovation, many academics are not sufficiently oriented to understanding the value of research and not skilled in it. Moreover, the culture of conducting research, publishing research papers and postgraduate supervision are not yet critical aspects of performance management. As a result, very few academics take on postgraduate supervision. Only staff with master's degrees and higher, who are willing and have requisite expertise, supervise postgraduate students. Invariably, this means only a few academics are involved in postgraduate supervision. Additionally, these academics also carry teaching loads. The implication of this is that postgraduate students mostly work independently and would have to be thoroughly familiar with the administrative processes of the higher degrees committee to expedite their studies.

The university's postgraduate policy requires postgraduate students to complete their studies in specific time frames, which is one year for a full-time masters student and three years for a full- time doctoral candidate.

2. Literature review

In the light of the scope and dimension of the subject matter of this study – postgraduate education – we deploy and clarify some of the operational terms commonly associated with it in this section.

2.1 Necessity for Orientation

Induction, more commonly referred to as orientation in HEIs, is an activity or process aimed at introducing students to a new academic environment and its expectations. According to Thomas (2013), postgraduate orientation programmes should be informative and assist students to make a transition from an undergraduate to a postgraduate status. Postgraduate orientation programmes are used to bridge the gap between undergraduate and postgraduate education leading to Thomas' (2013) contention that successful orientation programmes should enable socialisation and formation of friendships among students, clearly communicating expectations and procedures and providing clarity on available support systems.

Kane, Chalcraft and Volpe (2014) posit that new postgraduate students find it difficult to develop a sense of belonging at HEI, influenced by their varying backgrounds. Orientation could be used as a catalyst to fast-track postgraduate students' acquaintance with an institution's environment. Moreover, Prowse (2016) highlights that postgraduate education carries with it a different learning culture and, thus poses new challenges owing to the significant difference between it and undergraduate education. Wozniak, Pizzica and Mahony (2012) state that an orientation programme is recognised and recommended as a necessity for new students in HEIs. It ensures a smooth transition from non-research focused studies to a research-oriented environment and helps students with ideas of how to manage a work-research study-life balance (Hamlin, Kinash, Crane, Bannatyne, & Judd, 2016).

2.2 Higher Education throughput Rate

Sondlo (2013) describes throughput rate as the number of students who enrol for a degree programme and complete within the set time period for the specific programme. Throughput rates of students across South African universities are far lower than other countries (Letseka & Maile, 2008). Thirty-five percent (35%) of students drop out within their first year of study. Only 15% of students complete their programmes within the set time period (Tshitake, 2016). Interestingly, since the dawn of democracy, and with an improved access to education in 1994, the number of graduates has been on the rise.

Throughput is one of the indicators government uses to determine its allocation of the annual higher education budget to each university (Wilcox, Winn, & Fyvie-Gauld, 2005). Therefore, Letseka and Maile (2008) argue that continuous decline in throughput suggests that there is very little gain for the government considering its high financial investments in the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS) as well as in public universities and colleges.

Several reasons have been adduced for low throughput rates in South Africa. They include failure rates, high dropout rates and poor career guidance, lack of financial support from the family, age, learning preferences, class attendance, and entry qualifications (Tshitake, 2016). Sibanda, (2015) found that insufficient effort, lack of dedication and commitment were also responsible for poor pass and throughput rates. With respect to postgraduate studies, the arguments put forward by Letseka and Maile (2008), Wozniak, Pizzica and Mahony (2012), Sondlo (2013), and Tshitake (2016), suggest that one of the ways to curb low throughput rate and improve pass rates is to engage in a well-thought postgraduate orientation programme which sets out from the onset of the journey, the basics for achieving success at postgraduate level.

2.3 Selection Criteria for Postgraduate Education vs. On-Time Completion (Minimum Duration)

According to van Rensburg, Mayers and Roets (2016), pre-selection of postgraduate students is important and this process should be guided by the HEI's policies and procedures. Potential candidates should be informed about the commitment that their chosen degrees require, time frames and intellectual autonomy. Postgraduate admission

requirements vary from one HEI to the other. To be admitted into a postgraduate programme, for instance, a candidate ought to have completed a three- or four-year undergraduate degree with the minimum pass mark or higher required for a postgraduate diploma or a master's programme. Admission into a doctoral programme also varies. To screen applicants, some universities first offer provisional acceptance to candidates who meet the minimum entry requirement to afford them the opportunity to prepare for a defence of their research proposals after which they might be deemed fit or otherwise for postgraduate studies. In this regard, supervisors play a pivotal role in ensuring that the student meets the set standards for putting together an acceptable proposal. Mastery of academic writing skills take time; they are usually acquired through consistent practice of reading and writing, without which the student will not be able to progress with the research.

2.4 Supervision Capacity at Higher Education Institutions

Chireshe (2012:229), citing Laske and Zuber-Skerritt (1996), defines research supervision "as a process of fostering and enhancing learning, research and communication at the highest level". Supervisors act as facilitators helping students adapt to their research study. The process should be characterized by "supportive, constructive and engaged supervision" (van Rensburg, Mayers & Roets (2016: 1).

Supervision of postgraduate students is at the core of their ability to complete their theses successfully. Postgraduate research supervision is regarded as the most advanced form of education (Nulty, Kiley & Meyers, 2008). Supervisors are regarded as experts who guide novice researchers through their entire research journey, enabling postgraduate students to master systematic research processes and become independent researchers (Waghid, 2006). This means that the supervisor-student relationship is important for the completion of the study (Crawford & Probert, 2017). The relationship has to be close, but kept professional. Waghid (2006) points out that supervision can be both an enjoyable and also a daunting task. For it to be enjoyable, the student-supervisor relationship should be cemented.

2.5 Writing and Reading Challenges of Students in General

Students from varied cultural and academic backgrounds are enrolled yearly in HEIs to undertake postgraduate studies. Most of these students lack relevant skills to enable them complete their research. HEIs have a task to turn these novice researchers into

knowledge creators (Crawford & Probert, 2017). Mutula (2011) asserts that the main purposes of postgraduate research are to, first, test hypothesis; secondly, show understanding of what has earlier been reported by other scholars before; thirdly, create new knowledge and; finally, share and/or apply the results of their research study activity. However, most postgraduate students have difficulties with their research projects, some of the main challenges being difficulty in comprehending new concepts and ideas, inability to paraphrase what they read and difficulties with framing their own conceptual or theoretical framework.

Some postgraduate students previously attended schools where the medium of instruction was their home language or mother tongue, whether Afrikaans, IsiZulu, IsiXhosa or any of the eleven official languages of South Africa, or a foreign language, if they are not South African citizens, and did not attend schools in South Africa. Such students struggle to grasp the material taught at university since the medium of instruction in South African universities is English. Some of those who struggle with English make use of interpreters, which could create a feeling of isolation in the students, if they have to be taught separately or assisted by an interpreter to understand the material presented by a lecturer.

3. Materials and methods

3.1 Data Collection Instrument

Data was collected during a two-day orientation programme at the university in question. There were a total of 147 postgraduate students in attendance. Of this number, 81 were first time registrants, while 66 had been on their respective programmes for more than one year. Out of the 81 attendees that were registering for the first time, 16 were doctoral students while there were 11 doctoral students among those who had been on the programme for more than one year. The faculty of business and management sciences staged the two-day event two weeks after registration had closed so that the faculty's postgraduate students could be made aware of the steps they are required to follow during their studies. During the orientation programme, presentations were made by relevant institutional, faculty, committee or unit representatives. Following the counsel of Barnum (2010), a one-page two-part feedback questionnaire was designed for data collection allowing for frank comments and rich insights into their experience. In the first part of the questionnaire, each day's presentations were listed and students

were requested to indicate which presentations they found informative or useful. The second part of the questionnaire was an open-ended section requesting participants to (1) state the challenges they experience with regard to postgraduate administration systems and processes, and (2) suggest how the faculty could better serve them. The open-ended section in each questionnaire remained the same for each day. To meet research ethics requirements, the questionnaire was designed in such a way that participants' identities such as names, student numbers, departments, programmes of study and other personal information, were not required. This approach is consistent with the suggestions of Creswell (2013) who argues that anonymizing and keeping participant information confidential is one way of protecting participants from harm. However, for proper distinction, the questionnaire required them to indicate whether they were new or returning students.

Convinced that no study of this kind existed in South Africa, meaning that there was no prior instrument to adopt, the researchers had to develop a data collection instrument based on anecdotally expressed concerns of programme coordinators, supervisors and students (Wozniak, Mahony, Lever, & Pizzica, 2009). This instrument was shared among some members of faculty including returning students in the form of a pilot study. This strategy is consistent with the approach suggested by Creswell (2013), who argues for the use of participants with similar characteristics as those of prospective participants. The overall goal of the pilot study was to pilot study were to appraise the quality of the items as well as to identify potential challenges that may hinder the attainment of useful responses during the exercise (Majid, Mohamad, Lim, & Othman, 2018).

3.2 Questionnaire Administration

On the first day of the orientation programme, participants were informed that a questionnaire would be handed to them at the end of each day of the orientation. A major selling point was that their responses would enable the faculty to serve them better. They were also advised of their right not to participate in the study if they did not wish to. The questionnaire was distributed to participants by a National Research Foundation (NRF) intern during the orientation. Students were requested to put the completed questionnaires in a designated box in the venue. The box was collected by the intern at the end of each day.

4. Results

Figures 1 and 2 show data collected on the first day of orientation, which focused on four elements that closely relate to postgraduate studies, namely: strategic initiatives, research funding, library support and postgraduate rules and guidelines. Representatives from the relevant university entity, faculty, committee or unit were invited to make presentations on their respective areas, which were done in four sessions.

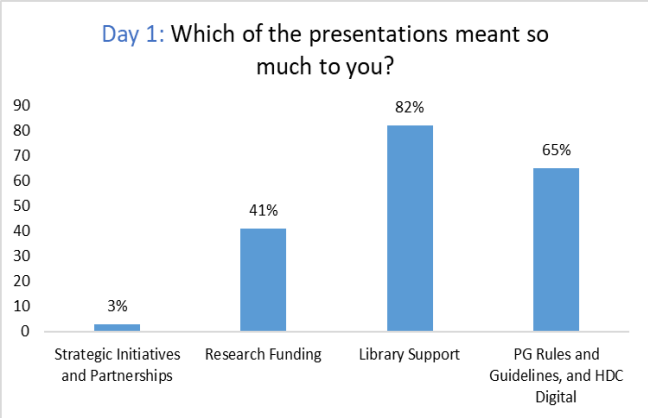


Figure 1. Perceptions of presentations on Day 1.

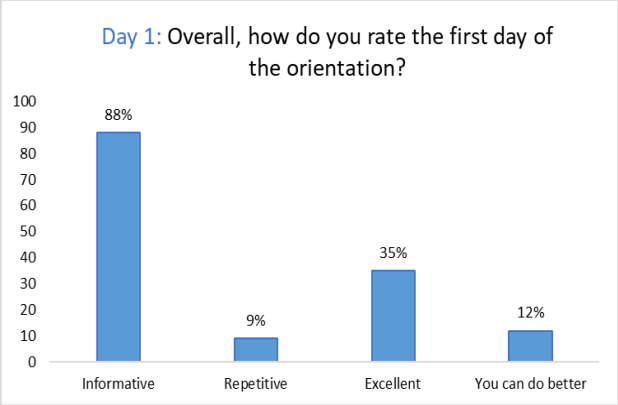


Figure 2. Overall perceptions of Day 1.

As shown in Figure 1, of the four sessions, the majority of postgraduate students (82%) indicated Library Support as the most valuable session, followed by PG (postgraduate) Rules and Guidelines, and HDC Digital. Research Funding was cited as the third most valuable, while Strategic Initiatives and Partnerships session received the least rating by participants at the orientation. Overall, 88% of the participants indicated that the orientation programme was very informative, with only 9% indicating it was repetitive,

as depicted in Figure 2. Participants were also requested to suggest ways of improving future orientation programmes. Some of the participants responded that they were satisfied with the sessions, while others identified the need to have more orientation sessions during the year. The important finding here is that "research and the library are interrelated and are not mutually exclusive" (Nwabueze, Anyira, Ivwighreghweta, & Onoriode, 2010) and more so, libraries should provide instructional programmes for researchers, create awareness of their presence both within and outside the library (Reitz, 2005).

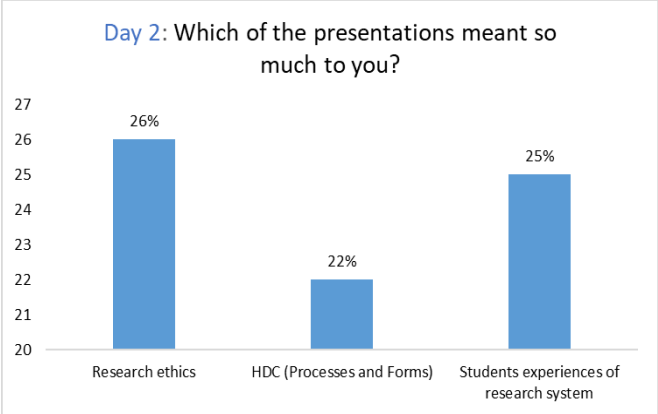


Figure 3. Perceptions of Day 2 presentations.

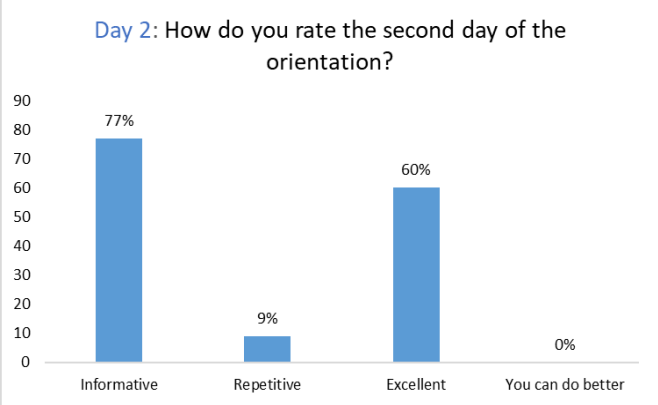


Figure 4. Overall perceptions of Day 2.

Figures 3 and 4 show the results of data collected on Day 2 of the orientation, which focused on informing participants about research ethics, HDC (higher degrees' committee's processes and forms), and Student experiences of the research system at the university. Although the orientation programme was designed for new postgraduate students, it was thought wise to invite senior postgraduate students (those who had passed through the system and were either in their third year of master's study or at

doctoral level) to share their experience on how they managed the initial challenges of postgraduate education with the freshmen.

On Day 2 of the programme, the results show moderate preference for Research ethics (26%), HDC (Processes and Forms) (22%) and Student experiences with the research system (25%). Once again, the majority of students (77%) highlighted that the orientation session was very informative, while 60% of students indicated it was excellent. Suggestions for improvement arising from the presentations varied. Judging from the comments, there were indications of angst, which were linked to the stories shared by the senior students. For instance, concerns were raised by a good number of the students regarding the digital process of the higher degree's committee. It was noted by some of the students that continuous learning was important for them to master the system so as to avoid delays in their submissions. In fact, a striking comment was "for us to do well, we need to be coached on how to manoeuvre the system. This one-day lesson is not enough."

Research ethics also received some criticism. Concerns were also raised by some of the students who thought of the ethics clearance process as 'demonic'. Taking cognisance of the significance of ethics during postgraduate research, the senior students emphasised that each new postgraduate student must take the process seriously as it is one of the reasons why students do not make the necessary progress.

While researchers agree that there is need for ethical practice of research, yet they are in disagreement over what ethical research really is. For instance, there is a "perceived lack of clear methodological guidance for practising ethics" in research (Burls, Caron, Cleret de Langavant, Dondorp, et al. 2011; Hofmann, 2014; Ashcroft, 1999), while the ability to address ethical issues may be hampered (Makondo, 2014). As a result of diversity of views on research ethics, there is confusion among postgraduate students, who try to find ways to circumvent the necessary ethical steps. Koçak and Özbek (2016) also noted in their paper on views of postgraduate students regarding research ethics in Turkey that there are various meanings attached to the term research ethics, which lead to some tension among postgraduate students. In fact, in the United Kingdom, Lotto (2018) highlighted the necessity for support in the application of the principles of research ethics because "…there are a number of tensions, including a sense of frustration… (p.30)" regarding research ethics.

5. Analysis

Having roundly articulated (in the literature review section), the thoughts of researchers on the commonly associated operational terms, we found it fit to undertake a descriptive and expository approach in our analysis by revisiting these terms essentially because they are closely related to the feedback received from the participants. The analysis here also relates to the feedback received from the open-ended section in questionnaire.

5.1 Supervision/Supervisor Incentive

Supervisors are often overwhelmed with the responsibility of supervising postgraduate students, while also lecturing and attending to other administrative tasks. Moreover, due to shortage of experienced supervising lecturers, some supervisors end up with more students than they are capable of handling often leading to delays in the provision of feedback to students as some participants noted: "my supervisor is forever unavailable"; "I get the feeling I am a nuisance sometimes"; "feedback sometimes takes close to a month" These statements are consistent with those found in Lotto (2018) who noted that because some supervisors lacked the necessary skills or are busy with other engagements, support was often difficult to access, and as a result, it took time to receive feedback from them.

This no doubt affects the throughput rate and as well as the supervisors' effectiveness. Mutula (2011: 187) reveals that "some of the challenges in postgraduate supervision include delays in topic approvals; delays in feedback to students; unavailability of supervisors; difficulties in balancing work and school; intimidations by supervisors; difficulty in accessing relevant sources; and delays from external examiners". These challenges contribute to the slow completion of postgraduate degrees and thus, low throughput. Students are unable to compete their degrees on time when there is a lack of supervisors with expertise in specific fields of research; infrequent meetings between supervisors and students to guide the research and a lack of facilities, equipment, software or access to research tools (Mutula, 2011; Ngibe & Lekhanya (2016).

5.2 Cumbersome process of the Higher Degree's Digital (HDC) System

The HDC digital system could make submission of documents by students and approval of topics and proposals by relevant individuals and committees easier. However, the

digital system is a complex one. This is illustrated by the responses of the attendees. In fact, one attended said "at each point of any submission, you are asked to submit documents that you had already uploaded to the system, for instance proof of registration, etc.". Another participant noted: There are numerous fields that are not clear what is expected. For example, saved academic record, current ethics form, current review form and so on". The digital approval system is equally fraught with problems. For example, the approval of a topic goes through six 'unnecessary' stages: supervisor, departmental research committee, head of department, faculty postgraduate officer, faculty research committee and higher degrees committee. Another issue is that although the university is in possession of all postgraduate students' records, these records are not linked to the digital system to facilitate importation. Consequently, students have to upload vital documents every time they interact with the system. Further, the processes and number of steps students must go through from registration to graduation are too many and need to be streamlined. A student stated as follows: "Why should I seek another level of approval for my proposal when the faculty research ethics committee would have approved all of the submissions? Why does it still have to go the chair of the Faculty Research Committee for signature?" Another participant said: "Why should I be required to edit certain information yet the system is unable to allow me access to make the necessary changes rather I am asked to consult with the supervisor?".

5.3 Selection Criteria for Postgraduate Students

The feedback from the participants suggest that information regarding qualifying criteria was not well communicated. A participant said: "The information regarding admissions was inconsistent because I was not informed about the submission of a proposal before my application could be considered"; "… as a foreign student, I need to know exactly what is required for admission"; "I was unsure whether my application will be processed at all because it took too long for me to hear from the university".

Considering the responses above, it can be said that the selection criteria posted on the university website was either unclear or incomplete. Overall, selection guidelines ensure that HEIs do not only focus on quantity, but on the quality of students they enrol, which improves throughput rates after all On-time completion of postgraduate students is something every institution wishes to experience.

5.4 Throughput, Pass rate

As noted in the literature review, postgraduate students encounter myriad challenges which prevent them from completing their studies in record time and as a result some are opting out (Cireshe, 2012; van Rensburg, Mayers, & Roets, 2016; Crawford, & Probert, 2017; Mutula, 2011). As our results show, most students strongly agreed that the orientation programme was informative. The findings suggest that many of these hindrances to postgraduate studies are a result of misinformation or lack of information about university services that can assist them to overcome these challenges. Libraries for instance came tops as one of the most valuable resources postgraduate students need. Libraries are resource centres where students have access to vast academic resources for robust research. Postgraduate orientation acquaints the student with knowledge on how to effectively use the library.

As researchers, we assumed that research funding was another challenge that affects students' ability to complete their studies on time since 41% of the students identified it as one of the most valuable items on the agenda on the first day of the programme. In fact, comments from some postgraduate students at the orientation programme suggest that (1) postgraduate funding is important to them, (2) all information about postgraduate funding should be made available to students, and (3) the information should be made available to students on time so that they are able to meet the deadlines. This is not surprising as majority of the students in the university where this study was conducted were South African blacks. According to Letseka and Maile (2008), majority of higher education dropouts in South Africa are black students who are domiciled in the poverty-stricken townships and communities where access to quality education is minimal or non-existent in most cases. In many cases as Letseka and Maile further note, the struggle to cope with higher education and the difficulty to sustain oneself with little pocket money are some of the factors that push many indigent students out of the university system. Therefore, access to funding information is necessary to support those students who do not come from affluent homes. Students should also be encouraged to source funding externally from various organisations that support postgraduate research and this is where postgraduate orientation workshops also have relevance.

6. Discussion and suggestions for improved postgraduate experience

Lack of adequate student supervision has a negative impact on the number of graduates produced. A full-time master's degree is intended to take a minimum of 24 months to complete, but due to the nature of South Africa's education system in the context of the country's history and the need for redistribution and equal access, many students face financial and social challenges that result in low throughput as discussed earlier.

The status of research at universities of technology is very low compared to well-established traditional universities owing to inadequacy of research know-how, or supervisors who are either inexperienced or working in fields they do not have sufficient knowledge in (Crawford & Probert, 2017; Nulty, Kiley, & Meyers, 2008; Mutula, 2011). The research process is constrained by three main challenges in South African universities: capacity, productivity and utility. Capacity refers to the availability of facilities and skilled researchers; productivity refers to the maximum use of available resources to improve the quality of research produced and utility refers to the relevance of research outputs in relation to the National Development Goals (NDG) or priorities (Mutula, 2011).

Academics who have not been exposed to postgraduate supervision should be trained and also encouraged to take up co-supervision. They should also be encouraged to publish and attend academic conferences to improve their research acumen, while incentives for published papers should continue to be used as a motivation tool. Additionally, experienced supervisors should also be incentivised as this influences their eagerness to supervise. The incentives could range from cash money, smaller teaching loads and possibly time-off. The incentive can also be linked to performance management. With regard to workload issues and unavailability of supervisors, a framework should be developed which determines postgraduate student-supervisor ratio in relation to lecturers' teaching workload and supervising experience.

It seems from participant feedback that a good chunk of concerns relates to supervision. To resolve this, and drawing from Chireshe (2012), we suggest that supervisors should only accept a manageable number of students to supervise. Additionally, HEIs should provide supervision guidelines that offer clarity on the respective roles of supervisors and students. HEIs should also provide training to novice supervisors in order to build supervision capacity (Waghid, 2006). A similar sentiment was expressed by Lotto

(2018: 30) who stated that "access to knowledgeable supervisory support was key. Where supervisors were inexperienced, or out of date with the fast moving changes to process, students were left frustrated and at a loss." Chireshe (2012) also posits that students should be given the liberty to choose their preferred supervisors and supervisors should supervise studies only in their area of expertise. Nulty, Kiley and Meyers (2008) describe a supervisor as a mentor who is passionate, enthusiastic, sensitive, respectful, unselfish and able to balance direction and self-direction. Additionally, allowing students to choose their own supervisors will help to offset some student-perceived challenges such as ineffective supervisors, poor supervisors' commitment, supervisors' inability to provide constructive and clear feedback, supervisors' lack of or limited knowledge in the field and supervisors' inability to balance their workload, resulting in their inability to give research students enough attention (Ngibe & Lekhanya, 2016).

It was obvious that the intention of the university to digitise its higher degree processes has not sufficiently obliterated the challenges the students go through with submitting documents. The purpose of the HDC digital system is to streamline processes – registration, approval methods - so as to make it easier for submissions and updates to take place. Perhaps, more training needs to take place so that students become familiar with the system.

The criteria used in selecting postgraduate students determine the quality of students enrolled each year. HEIs enrolment policies should clearly provide selection guidelines. The screening process should include interviews with potential students in order to evaluate their capability of carrying out a research focussed study. During interviews, students should be informed about the demands of a postgraduate research degree. Funding has been cited as one of the reasons for high student drop-out rates. In order to avoid this, selection criteria should determine whether students have enough funds for their studies.

Conclusion

The purpose of the study was to ascertain the perceptions of postgraduate students in relation to the relevance of postgraduate orientation program at a university of technology in South Africa. In order to achieve this, data was collected during a two-day orientation programme using a questionnaire with both closed and open ended questions as a feedback form at the end of each day's session. The study revealed that

an overwhelming majority of students see orientation as an indispensable tool for supporting new postgraduate students. Respectively, on Day 1 and Day 2 of the orientation, 88% and 77% indicated that the orientation was informative. Many of the problems that prevent postgraduate students from completing their studies on time or drop-out are addressed during orientation. Moreover, other relevant information such as funding opportunities, library usage and how to use the university's higher degrees' digital system is shared during the different orientation sessions. Do these results provide a strong case for enforcing orientation annually at the beginning of the academic year during the start of the postgraduate programme? If so, in what ways should orientation be enforced? Must every new postgraduate student attend? If some fail to attend, what remedies are there? Considering the need for high throughput and pass rates at postgraduate level, it is necessary for university authorities to engage these questions as they have a bearing on how to go about orientation programmes. After all, orientation programmes generally serve as information opportunities and should, therefore, be seen as avenues to offer all the necessary materials that facilitate hassle-free academic exercise to the new postgraduate students.

As stated earlier, this study should trigger much more attention to postgraduate orientation research in South Africa, but more importantly research that applies the mixed method so as to obtain deeper insight into the challenges that postgraduate students face. Having said that, we are equally of the view that this study may lack broader appeal in the sense that each university has its own processes and as such, the results of this study cannot be generalised.

We argue that in order to make the postgraduate journey a lot less tiresome, postgraduate orientation should be seen as one of the most important deliverables of any higher education institution. Postgraduate students must be encouraged to attend orientation sessions for guidance, assistance, and assurance that they are not alone on their journey. Consequently, they should have the support of their supervisors, library staff and other university stakeholders to assist them in finding research material, administrative staff to assist them with some of the challenges of postgraduate study. Finally, although this report is about a South African HEIs, it nonetheless resonates with many HEIs around the world that expect postgraduate students to "hit the ground running" (Wozniak, Darwin, & Mohony, 2009: 221). Thus, the work reported here does not only fit the South African context, but also has international appeal as it reflects a phenomenon among HEIs as reported in several empirical studies.

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