

Student Support Services in Postgraduate Education: Reflecting on My Personal Experience in My Doctoral Studies Journey

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ABSTRACT

Student support services are critical to academic achievement, research competency, and prompt completion of postgraduate education, especially at the Ph.D. level. The degree of assistance provided by supervisors to Ph.D. candidates, as well as the support services provided by the faculty and institutional research office, are important elements determining the successful completion of doctorate studies within a specified timeframe. Effective student support services along the Ph.D. journey help candidates overcome emotional and psychological problems while achieving their academic goals. This autoethnographic reflexivity study argues that the retention of doctoral candidates in South Africa's higher education system hinges on the support provided to postgraduate students. To reflect on my personal experience and assess the support I received from my supervisor during my doctoral studies, which enabled me to meet my deadline at a South African institution of higher learning, the persistence that I had demonstrated during my doctoral studies, and effective strategies of supporting PhD students based on my personal experience, this study employs an autoethnographic reflexivity approach. Thanks to my supervisor's assistance during my Ph.D., I was exposed to a broader research environment, enabling me to expand beyond my thesis and complete my work on time. To aid Ph.D. candidates in their studies, I present practical solutions based on my own personal experience in the concluding section of this study.

KEYWORDS

Students support services; postgraduate studies; reflection; personal experience; doctoral studies.

INTRODUCTION

Embarking on doctoral studies is evidently a demanding academic journey and an isolating endeavour for PhD candidates. However, in the end, rewards surpass imagination (Hunma & Sibomana, 2014). Lake et al. (2018) described a rigorous and demanding doctoral journey that may provide PhD candidates with lifetime opportunities to meet and start new friendships. Moreover, between 2000 and 2018, the number of PhD candidates has doubled in the United States. This indicates a desire to obtain a terminal degree (United States Census Bureau, 2019). In South Africa, the Department of Higher Education and Training (2020) showed that in 2020, a discernible proportion of students had registered for doctoral studies, most of whom were from the fields of science, technology, engineering, and mathematics. Holmes et al. (2016) argued that the process of completing a PhD program is long; therefore, it is crucial for PhD candidates to trust the process and devote their time to it.

A PhD candidate may be assigned both a supervisor and a co-supervisor at an institution of higher learning. This initiative may result in a variety of academic challenges, especially if the duties of supervisor and co-supervisor are not clearly defined from the start of the research project (Niyibizi, 2018). To overcome some of the challenges that PhD candidates face, institutions of higher learning must create transformative student support services (Terrell et al., 2012). According to Shikulo and Lekhetho (2020), transformative student support for PhD candidates is critical in helping them deal with and navigate academic, social, and personal stresses.

According to Hammond et al. (2013), sustainable student support services in higher education require a unified approach across all institutional dimensions, including philosophies, tactics, structures, and policies. According to Shabani and Maboe (2021), these amenities should promote active intellectual and professional involvement among higher education students, as well as knowledge of varied values and appreciation for ethnic and racial distinctions. Through the student support service, supervisors should encourage critical thinking among postgraduate students (Chauke et al., 2024). According to Fragouli (2021), effective assistance for doctorate students starts with the supervisor acknowledging the student's position as someone who requires education, direction, and support, rather than just a research assistant or secretary. Baseer et al. (2020) argued that supervisors should receive student support training to improve their effectiveness in aiding PhD students. Mentorship for PhD candidates is seen as a crucial component of the student support system because it teaches them how to socialize with their peers and supervisors throughout their studies (Caliskan & Holley, 2017). Mantai (2019) highlights the critically important role of social support for doctorate candidates, emphasizing its importance in improving academic performance, as well as developing a sense of belonging and identity creation during their doctoral studies.

In the wider context of this study, "student support services" encompasses the help I received from my supervisor during my PhD studies, which was critical in completing my program on time. These offerings include both academic and non-academic assistance.

According to Abiddin and Ismail (2014), effective support services, during postgraduate study, are crucial for excellent higher education in creating outstanding graduates capable of driving national transformation. Aithal and Kumar (2016) emphasize the necessity of institutions to provide postgraduate student support, such as transferable skills training and research technique assistance, including academic seminars and training sessions for optimal retention and progression, especially for doctorate candidates.

Mantai (2017) emphasizes the essential role performed in helping PhD candidates through their research development during doctoral studies by prominent personalities in a formal environment, frequently, those who have successfully navigated the obstacles of a Ph.D. Other researchers propose non-academic aid in the form of financial assistance, psychological and social assistance, and socio-emotional skills to hasten the completion of postgraduate studies (Moyano et al., 2020; Douglas, 2020).

According to Sverdlik et al. (2018), supervisors should provide doctorate candidates with the necessary abilities, such as academic writing and autonomy. Higher education institutions should provide additional support, such as efficient communication, accessibility, constructive feedback, fostering confidence, a sense of humour, capacity-building, and widespread use of online resources, library facilities, and research software (Lim et al, 2019). According to Hill and Conceição (2020), professors in higher education must be aware of the problems that doctorate students encounter and actively assist their professional development, while balancing their many obligations.

Reflecting on one's own experiences, while pursuing a doctorate, has emerged as a subject of academic interest in education. Previous research has mostly concentrated on the difficulties encountered during PhD studies and the dynamics of supervisor and student relationships. As a result, by using an autoethnographic reflective method, to investigate student support services in PhD studies, this study adds to the current body of information. Throughout my PhD path, I have learned not only academic but also life lessons. I have learned that no one can complete a doctoral degree in isolation. PhD candidates require the assistance of their supervisors. The level of assistance that supervisors provide to their students is vital, not only for academic performance but also for job progression. As a result, it is critical that supervisors recognize that helping PhD candidates entails more than just academic support.

PhD candidates must also acknowledge and respect their supervisors because the student and supervisor relationship can remain forever and open doors for future PhD candidates (Adedokun & Oyetunde-Joshua, 2024). I shall be eternally grateful to my supervisor for his unwavering support. My doctorate supervisor supported me in joining academia as a post-doctoral research fellow under his guidance because of the relationship we shared. In this study, I expand on the perseverance I displayed during my doctoral studies. Based on my personal experience, I have completed this paper by emphasizing effective strategies for assisting PhD students.

Conceptualization of student support in the Doctoral Program

Some universities in developed countries, such as the United States, have implemented cohort models as part of their support services for PhD students. The goal of the cohort model is to foster positive relationships between PhD students and their peers (Hutchings, 2017). Providing students with constructive motivation and encouragement is also important in reducing student attrition (Khadijah, 2017). Some universities also support doctoral students by organizing writing retreats (Gokalp & West, 2011). In addition to the aforementioned benefits, writing retreats can boost doctoral students' confidence in their academic writing skills. This is essential for preparing PhD candidates for the working world, where they will be expected to regularly produce high-quality written work. Some universities in the UK offer social science PhD candidate internships to prepare students for the job market. These internships provide students with valuable experience in their field and help them develop the skills they need to gain employment after they graduate (Konstantina & Willmott, 2023).

According to Lee et al (2023), doctoral students require any form of financial assistance in order for them to complete their studies in record time. In addition, due to this financial need, universities with adequate resources support doctoral students financially by covering their expenses, including purchasing working tools, such as computers and cover their research conference expenses. Other studies, conducted by Horta et al. (2018), have emphasised the importance of financial support for doctoral students and they argue that doctoral students, who were granted scholarships by external funders, or their universities, perform much better academically and complete their doctoral studies in record time, compared to those who do not have scholarships but rely on self-funding.

According to a study conducted by Waight and Giordano (2018), at a British university, there is a need for universities to take an active role in providing doctoral students with mental health assistance. In addition, the study further states that in the digital age, universities need to provide postgraduate online self-support. Doctoral students, during their studies, experience some mental health related issues. In order to address this issue, it is important that the supervisor-student relationship should be improved (Marais et al., 2018).

Problem statement

Previous studies conducted by Evans et al. (2018), Levecque et al. (2017), and Barry et al. (2018) demonstrate that PhD candidates frequently struggle with psychological issues, particularly those who fail to meet their supervisors' expectations. Jones (2013) discovered troubling figures about PhD candidate attrition in his study, revealing that 70% of PhD candidates fail to complete their studies. According to Santicola and Morris (2013), a range of variables lead to PhD candidate attrition, including poor time management skills and the absence of a supportive system at home, from supervisors, and from the faculty. Many higher education institutions, throughout the world, have been financially strained because of PhD candidate attrition. This is a result of PhD candidates' research outputs, which assist institutions in generating revenue on

a huge scale (Horta et al.,2018). According to Santicola and Morris (2013), reflective practice is required for PhD candidates to deal with the obstacles they encounter along their academic journey.

Research Questions

- What are the supervisory practices as part of student support that most assisted me in my personal doctoral journey to complete my studies in time?
- What factors contributed to my persistence during the doctoral journey in a South African higher education?
- What are the effective strategies for supporting PhD students, based on my personal experiences as a doctoral candidate?

MATERIALS AND METHODS

According to Pascu et al. (2021) the autoethnographic reflexivity approach is an important approach that is used in qualitative research methods, which argue that knowledge is shaped by beliefs, norms, values, individual lived experience, and perspectives. In addition to that, the autoethnographic reflexivity approach is used in qualitative research, wherein the researcher is actively involved in the research process and aims to provide details based on their own lived or personal experiences. Similar to Pascu et al (2021), Koopman et al. (2020) state that the autoethnographic reflexivity approach is important, particularly in social science, since it empowers the researcher to direct their study by telling their own personal story, based on their lived experience and perspectives. As an emerging researcher, who has witnessed the essential of student support services during my doctoral studies, I opted to the autoethnographic reflexivity approach in this study with the aim of narrating my personal experience. The autoethnographic reflexivity approach in this chapter, helped me to tell a story based on the support that I received from my supervisor, my persistence, and effective strategies for student support during my doctoral studies at the Tshwane University of Technology. I narrated my lived experience by focusing on the level and different types of support that my doctoral studies supervisor gave me, which I strongly believe played an important role in my doctoral studies journey. This encouragement, which I greatly value, not only impacted my academic journey but also highlighted the importance of respect and devotion in building one's profession. As a result, the autoethnographic reflexivity approach was the best fit for me because it facilitated the construction of trustworthiness and authenticity in relaying my personal experience with my supervisor's assistance. In conducting data analysis, I employed an iterative process in which I consistently reflected on my personal experiences. As I engaged in this reflection, new insights and patterns emerged, which I documented in a diary. This process involved reading and re-reading my notes, engaging in further reflection, refining my observations, and ultimately concluding by writing a comprehensive report. To ensure validity and reliability in this autoethnographic reflexivity study, I employed triangulation by comparing my personal experiences with the literature that detailed the experiences of other doctoral candidates. This

approach allowed me to identify similarities between my experiences and those of others. Additionally, I maintained transparency in the data analysis by selecting only those personal experiences that were directly related to student support services, thereby aligning with the study's objectives. Furthermore, I shared my findings with former doctoral candidates to verify whether my conclusions resonated with their experiences of student support services.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

Personal experience in student support service that I received during my doctoral study journey.

In this section, I will describe my personal journey throughout my PhD studies, emphasizing the critical assistance offered by my supervisor, which was important in allowing me to successfully complete my doctoral studies within the specified time frame. The autoethnographic accounts, which are described in this section, are the result of my supervisor's excellent supervision and support. These narratives widen debates about the support services offered to postgraduate students, with a particular emphasis on the PhD level. The subsections, that follow, will discuss specific situations from my personal experiences, many of which are based on the support I received from my supervisor during my PhD studies.

Dissemination of Research-related Resources

According to Orellana et al. (2016), a doctoral supervisor is responsible for providing a PhD candidate with access to necessary resources, allowing them to properly organize their doctoral thesis. Having a supervisor who understands the candidate's research proficiency and can offer direction toward honing essential research abilities, is critical during the PhD path. I was lucky to have a very helpful supervisor who understood the value of having access to research resources, including other PhD theses, to comprehend their structure. I rapidly became acquainted with my supervisor's supervisory technique, since he shared completed theses from his previous successful PhD students, before beginning the PhD project. A postgraduate student must engage with various academic works, such as published books, essays, and book chapters, to generate high-quality academic output (Lim et al., 2019). My supervisor's academic assistance was crucial in helping me understand the proper form of a PhD thesis and the standard rules of academic writing. A supervisor can help a candidate's research skills grow faster by providing them with the tools and resources they need to comprehend dissertation organization (Almusaed & Almusaed, 2020).

Efficient Communication

Nyamubi (2021) emphasizes the critical role of effective communication between supervisors and students in the PhD journey, as it allows timely program completion. This is congruent with my personal experience because my supervisor communicated consistently and constructively. The positive feedback and constructive criticism I received fuelled my drive to complete my doctoral studies. I recall my supervisor providing regular inputs on my drafts, seldom going more than two weeks without sharing insights. Whenever I needed support, my supervisor actively

engaged with me, assisting me in clarifying the essence of my study topic. This assistance was critical in reaching my doctoral completion deadline, as it significantly improved my research competency, within the broader academic community. Supervisors' support, particularly through good communication and constructive criticism, serves as an important motivator for students to complete their studies on time (Moskvichevaa et al., 2015).

During my PhD studies, I had difficulties with academic writing, battling what I call an "informal" style characterized by extended sentences, devoid of adequate proof, and in-text references. My supervisor, while disapproving of this technique, always delivered his criticism well. He never made me doubt my writing ability, always highlighting areas for constructive development. This criticism boosted my confidence in my writing abilities and emphasized the significance of academic writing. According to Baseer et al. (2017), supervisors should be flexible, adaptable, and provide positive feedback as effective strategies, to support doctoral students.

My mentor, in addition to being a supervisor, developed an open communication approach, treating me as a brother and friend. I recall a specific incident that occurred in December 2019, when most educational institutions were closed. Regardless, I emailed him a chapter of my manuscript, expecting a response after the New Year. To my amazement, he responded quickly, promising me feedback. He maintained his commitment and supplied useful information after the Christmas break. Such assistance throughout the holidays is rare, showcasing his great dedication. Feedback is critical in doctoral studies, and my supervisor's advice has helped me greatly improve my research skills (Dshpande, 2017). The introduction of technology has transformed our communication practices. For critical concerns, my supervisor used digital platforms such as WhatsApp, demonstrating how technology may facilitate effective communication in the modern day. SMS and email are also useful tools for supervisors in their communications with postgraduate students (Cekiso et al., 2019).

Ethics of Care

The Ethics of Care is important in higher education because it promotes an environment of openness and empathy for all individuals, especially students, regardless of differences (Fataar & Subreendith, 2015). To lead PhD students toward a healthy viewpoint in their doctorate journey, Löfström and Pyhältö (2014) emphasized that supervisors should have attributes, such as humour, empathy, authenticity, openness, and flexibility. My supervisor demonstrated the ethics of care, drawing on my own doctoral experience, and played a critical role in strengthening my academic and research abilities and, ultimately, facilitating the timely completion of my studies. My supervisor showed concern for my success from the beginning of the registration procedure. This was especially comforting at a time when I had doubts about furthering my doctoral studies at the Tshwane University of Technology. I recall encountering a bug in the registration system that incorrectly reported non-payment of fees. My supervisor took the initiative to contact the college administration and finance department to resolve the matter. This degree of focus was outstanding and gave me confidence that I would complete

my doctoral studies on schedule. According to Löfström and Pyhältö (2012), ethical considerations are critical during PhD studies, requiring a supervisor's unflinching regard for the candidate's human dignity and autonomy. My supervisor gave good career advice, in addition to academic assistance, which was very helpful as I moved from a government position to academia. He continuously emphasized the value of hard work, assuring me that a teaching job at the university would be available once I finished my doctorate. This support was a great motivation for me to devote everything I had to the pursuit of my doctorate, in the hopes of earning a tenure-track position at the institution. According to Shabani and Maboe (2021), student support services should go beyond academic counselling and include career counselling, to aid students in establishing their professional goals and researching options for further study or employment. Another aspect of non-academic assistance provided by my supervisor, during my doctorate journey, was his essential guidance on how to effectively balance my PhD ambitions with my job responsibilities. I worked on my PhD, while also supervising the coordination of the National Youth Service Programme in the Western Cape, South Africa, which is an extremely demanding position. This means giving up many social and academic pursuits. When faced with a vital appointment with Premiere's Office and a research seminar, I confided in my supervisor about my predicament. "Thulani, you need your job as much as you need your PhD," he said, understandingly and pragmatically, "Strive to achieve a balance between the two." My supervisor continually advocated for the seamless integration of my professional and academic responsibilities. My personal experience confirms Hill and Conceição's (2020) results, emphasizing the critical role of supervisors in providing students with the tools they need to negotiate their different obligations, thereby, facilitating timely completion of their PhD studies.

Being perceived as a collaborator rather than a student.

A doctorate candidate must build a personal relationship with his/her supervisor to have a fulfilling doctoral journey. This rapport results in fruitful teamwork (Burton, 2020). My supervisor, with his loving demeanour and captivating charisma, made me feel more like a collaborator, than a PhD candidate throughout my doctorate studies. The robustness of this supervisor– PhD candidate link generates a sense of belonging, driving applicants to finish their degrees on schedule (Rooij et al., 2021). While I was immersed in my studies, my supervisor actively encouraged me to draft articles for peer review and attend conferences to interact with other researchers in my field. My supervisor always made time to provide feedback on my work when I was preparing conference presentations. According to Janta et al., (2014), social networking is critical in PhD studies for research progress. It also permits candidates to develop peer contacts within the academic community.

My supervisor's helpful criticism considerably increased my appreciation of the academic arena and my ability to review the literature in my subject, thereby, having a significant impact on my PhD studies. This amount of help from my supervisor was very beneficial to my academic performance. Sibimana (2021) emphasizes the necessity of supervisors in assisting their PhD candidates with the preparation of conference papers and manuscripts for publication.

Sibimana (2021) also gives personal experiences that demonstrate how interactions with supervisors, who take the time to review draft research articles, aided her growth as a researcher.

Identifying a niche subject can be extremely difficult for new scholars, especially in academic fields with a small local readership. In my case, my study focuses on youth development, specifically youth work practice. Fellow scholars in my subject frequently urged me to change my focus because of its limited public appeal within the academic community. My boss, however, never forced me to change my field of study. Instead, he continually reassured me, asking me to embrace youth development and become involved in it. This type of academic assistance during my PhD studies was critical in defining my position as an academic in the discipline of youth development. Supervisors are academically responsible for guiding their PhD students in becoming integral members of a scholarly community and developing a distinct intellectual identity (Manyike, 2017).

Persistence During my Doctoral Journey

Seeking help from others

As much as PhD candidates require support from their supervisor and faculty, it is also crucial that candidates seek assistance from others, including faculty members and fellow PhD candidates, on their own time. Throughout my doctoral career, I have maintained tenacity in many ways. To address the rate of attrition among PhD applicants, persistence is required (Council of Graduate Schools, 2019). I did not hesitate to seek assistance from other PhD candidates, and teachers from various universities, on how to refine my research question and express the significance of the study. Jairam and Kahl (2012) emphasize the importance of PhD students developing networks outside of academia during their studies, as this will aid in alleviating some of the challenges they face in their daily life.

Furthermore, by doing so, I realized that I needed to take complete ownership of my work and make my supervisor's job easier. Blanchard (2018) stated that obtaining a doctoral degree requires a PhD candidate to persevere with some ongoing problems. Technology, on the other hand, has completely transformed how PhD candidates seek support. I recall that I and a group of PhD candidates from the University of Western Cape, were able to join a WhatsApp group where we supported each other with research-related matters. This aided my understanding of the research. I believe that the work I put in also helped my supervisor in supervising me.

According to Rockinson-Szapkiw et al. (2014), cultivating a deep sense of collegiality among PhD candidates and faculty members plays a critical role in fostering inclusion and togetherness. This, in turn, considerably contributes to the completion of the PhD degree in a shorter time. Faculty members' assertive motivation of doctoral candidates, to take an active part in social media platforms, is illustrated by the establishment of entirely dedicated forums, such as a Facebook group, where academic discourse and the exchanging of thoughts are encouraged. Additionally, the academic discourse articulated by Sverdlik et al. (2018)

emphasizes the critical relevance of social networks in increasing PhD student retention rates. According to their research, these networks act as conduits for the formation of critical support systems and intellectual communities, which, in turn, build an atmosphere conducive to sustained academic advancement and completion.

Sverdlik et al. (2018) present a complementary perspective to Rockinson-Szapkiw et al. (2014) declaration by revealing the instrumental role of social networks, further emphasizing the importance of interpersonal interactions and collaborative networks within the academic setting. Rockinson-Szapkiw et al. (2014) and Sverdlik et al. (2018) emphasize the importance of collegiality and social networks in advancing and completing PhD studies. This collection of research demonstrates the complex nature of academic advancement, in which human interactions and collaborative networks work in concert to foster an environment conducive to faster intellectual success.

Long-term commitment

Starting a doctoral program necessitates a longer-than-usual and sustained involvement within studies, in which the PhD candidate must demonstrate a wholehearted commitment to ensure the successful completion of the PhD endeavour, thereby, reducing the likelihood of becoming a statistic in the realm of doctoral attrition. Furthermore, within the context of my own doctoral pursuits, this required commitment was stimulated by an inherent intense and passionate interest in my chosen research subject, which was reinforced by the invaluable guidance and support provided by my doctoral studies supervisor, thereby, ensuring the continuation and eventual completion of my PhD journey. According to Martinsuo and Turkulainen (2011), to complete their doctoral studies in record time, doctoral candidates must create a personal commitment and request help from their academic advisors.

Time management

According to Nasrullah and Khan (2015), time management is critical for students because it is linked to academic success. During my PhD studies, I learned an important lesson: success in doctoral studies requires the ability to coordinate competing tasks within time constraints. This entailed a daily practice of defining personal goals upon awakening, while keeping doctorate studies and professional obligations in mind. Given my dual positions, as a doctorate candidate and a working professional, the need for a balance between both domains became clear. As a result, I set aside 30 minutes during my noon break to painstakingly inspect my work, verifying its conformance with exacting academic standards before submitting it for examination by my supervisor. According to Kader and Eissa (2015), time management is critical for promoting student self-efficacy. Furthermore, I used my post-work hours wisely to immerse myself in research projects before sleeping. Even on weekends, I consciously avoided certain social activities to devote more time to my studies. This point was undoubtedly difficult, necessitating tenacity from my side. Nonetheless, through meticulous time management, I completed my doctoral studies.

Effective strategies for supporting PhD students based on my personal experience.

It is critical to build excellent student support services to increase the retention of PhD candidates in the South African higher education system. In this chapter, I argue that supervisors should offer doctorate candidates emotional assistance. Based on my own experience, I believe that the emotional support I received from my supervisor was critical in completing my PhD studies on schedule. Devine and Hunter (2016) found that supportive supervision significantly reduced emotional weariness among doctorate candidates.

Therefore, supervisors must be emotionally accessible to their doctorate candidates, lending a sympathetic ear when necessary. An open-door policy that allows doctoral candidates to seek guidance, not only during regular work hours, but also on weekends and holidays can facilitate this accessibility. A practice like this would demonstrate to PhD candidates that their supervisors actually care about their well-being and future. While I constantly respected my supervisor's right to privacy, we kept in touch regarding my research even during the holidays. According to Baptista (2013), throughout doctoral studies, supervisors have an academic obligation to inspire and assist students, particularly on an emotional level, which is critical for developing student competency.

Completing a PhD degree normally takes three to five years, depending on the amount of support provided by the supervisor, family, and the student's devotion. As a result, it is critical for the supervisor to engage in a conversation with the student and clarify their expectations and supervisory strategy from the start of the doctoral journey. This ensures that the student understands what is expected of him/her before beginning collaborative work. Supervisors should engage in a power bargaining process to effectively assist students during their PhD studies. They should assist candidates in gradually exerting their own authority, creating empowerment, and a sense of worth. I hope to contribute to exceptional supervising practices in doctorate studies by drawing on my personal experiences.

According to Litalien (2015), PhD candidates, who maintain interactive ties with their supervisors, are more likely to finish their studies on time. In supervisory practices, open communication should be a basic component of student support. Supervisors should foster an open communication climate with their candidates, which includes active listening and a thorough grasp of their problems. These occasions also provide supervisors with the opportunity to motivate and inspire their students to devote themselves to their PhD studies.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study provides an important contribution to the field of doctoral student support services by compiling the support I received as a previous doctoral candidate throughout my doctorate studies. This support was critical in allowing me to complete my doctoral degree in a timely and effective manner. This study specifically enlightens supervisors, in higher education institutions,

on academic and non-academic support services that improve candidate retention and timely completion of PhD studies.

Reflecting on my experience, I can certainly state that if I were to do a PhD again, I would happily choose my old doctoral studies supervisor (Prof Khashane Stephen Malatji). His assistance, which included both academic and non-academic components, not only aided my academic path but also significantly accelerated my advancement. I am confident that if higher education supervisors provide the same degree of assistance to their doctoral candidates as mine did, we may expect a significant drop in PhD student attrition in South African higher education. This, in turn, would make a substantial contribution to our country's pursuit of the National Development 2030 goals, particularly in terms of cultivating a cohort of South African youth and women with PhD credentials.

My supervisor was instrumental in my PhD studies, showing a keen interest, not only in the quality of my doctoral thesis but also in my development as an independent researcher in my field of study. As a result, I recommend that supervisors, particularly those who are new to supervising doctorate candidates and are emerging researchers, prioritize the development of independent research abilities in their students over thesis writing. This goal can be met by encouraging students to attend conferences where they can gain crucial research insights from their peers. South African institutions of higher learning, similar to those in other countries, frequently hold workshops at the start of the academic year, for both master's and doctorate students. These workshops are critical for preparing students for their unique advanced education journeys. Supervisors should design their own orientations after the allocation of PhD applicants. This phase is critical for familiarizing students with their supervisor's supervisory styles and expectations.

Finally, this study emphasizes the importance of South African institutions of higher learning in developing an academic socialization framework based on PhD student training and mobility. Throughout the doctoral journey, such a framework should define the roles of both supervisors and PhD applicants. It should also emphasize the need for emotional support from supervisors during the PhD process and connect PhD students with scholars in the international research community. After completing their studies, PhD students will be able to collaborate with worldwide experts in their particular fields thanks to this strategy.

I recognize the limitations of this study, which is based mostly on my personal experience. The sample size was particularly small. To alleviate this constraint, future studies should attempt to include a more diverse pool of individuals who completed their PhDs at various South African institutions of higher learning. This increase in sample size would provide a more comprehensive picture of the level of support provided by PhD supervisors and their influence on the successful completion of doctoral programs.

Declarations

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