4

GETTING STARTED: SURVIVING AND SUCCEEDING DURING THE PRE-DOCTORAL STAGE

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INTRODUCTION

Taking the decision to pursue postgraduate studies sets in motion a long-term process and requires a number of important considerations. Registration for postgraduate studies happens quite late in the process, and the application process for further studies may be daunting. This chapter outlines the application stage which is often not covered in literature on postgraduate study. It draws on my first-hand experience of early considerations such as identifying a supervisor, drafting a mini-proposal and securing funding. This chapter also emphasises the importance of having an adequate support structure during these initial stages of one's studies, which is critical especially when dealing with difficulties that may arise during the postgraduate journey.

Pursuing postgraduate studies was a lifelong dream and personal goal to empower myself while contributing to a better South Africa. When first applying for postgraduate studies, I had sleepless nights about how I would afford tuition fees and living expenses, and how I would support my family. It is almost five years later, and despite the lack of funding in the beginning, I continued the journey from an Honour's level all the way to doing a PhD. In this chapter, I reflect on how to deal with the challenges I encountered at the onset of my studies. I argue that it is normal to feel overwhelmed and experience mixed emotions, as well as as to question your decision to pursue further studies but, at the same time, be excited at the prospect of graduation and the benefits which may follow.

POSTGRADUATE STUDY IN SOUTH AFRICA

FULL-TIME VERSUS PART-TIME STUDY

Pursuing a postgraduate degree is a major decision. Time and funding are important factors that influence the decision to undertake either part-time or full-time studies. There are advantages and disadvantages to both these approaches.

Doing full-time studies can mean that you have fewer competing demands compared to a part-time student who may also be employed. I am based at a grant-funded unit where no salary or benefits apply. Even though I work on projects I am considered to be a full-time student, with only bursaries as a source of income. However, being in a research environment which recognises the importance of advanced study has allowed me some flexibility and I have been able to dedicate a large amount of time to completing coursework and research. A recent report on doctoral studies in South Africa found that in comparison to part-time students, full-time students are able to complete their studies in a shorter period of time (ASSAf 2010). Full-time studies allow for engagement with supervisors, and the attendance of relevant seminars and courses. Another benefit of full-time study is that you are able to interact with other students on a regular basis. It allowed me to draw on the knowledge and experience of my peers, and they assisted in reviewing my work, discussing challenges and brainstorming ideas. A disadvantage of full-time studies is that future employers may argue that you do not have sufficient work experience. I dealt with this constraint by assisting with projects at the unit where I am based and taking on short-term contracts. Full-time studies have also allowed me to be involved in student societies which future employers may consider positively when looking at my overall job application.

A real challenge when deciding to pursue full-time study is the need to secure funding. Funding is considered to be one of the main factors for non-completion of postgraduate studies (ASSAf 2010; Letseka 2008). Financial demands can include tuition fees, living expenses and funds to conduct your research. The financial aid office at a university often lists all the relevant scholarships and bursaries for which a student may be eligible. Specific departments may also offer financial support. It is also a good idea to keep up with funding calls and deadlines. Even if you have funding, I found that the funding is paid out quite late in the year, which means that there can be long periods during your studies in which you don't have funding and this can be quite stressful.

However, the reality is that full-time study is not always an option, especially in the South African context where a high number of prospective students cannot afford steep university fees (Letseka 2008). Pursuing part-time studies is an option to keep a steady income or a job that you do not want to leave, although time availability

CHAPTER 4 • GETTING STARTED: SURVIVING AND SUCCEEDING DURING THE PRE-DOCTORAL STAGE

for postgraduate studies is one of the biggest challenges facing part-time students (MacCann 2012). Many of the part-time students I have spoken to say balancing work and studies is challenging – they find it next to impossible to do study-related tasks and they take much longer to complete their degree¹. Work demands often keep them from attending a lot of postgraduate activities, including frequent workshops that are offered to students who are on campus. Such students are also more isolated from other students. Some universities do cater for part-time students by posting seminars online or as podcasts.

THE APPLICATION PROCESS

The application stage is often overlooked as an important component of pursuing postgraduate studies. A number of prospective postgraduate students do not expect to face any challenges or difficulties during this stage. The application stage, I found, was crucial to commencing my studies. Being well prepared for this stage proved to be essential. Application processes can be highly bureaucratic and have a number of requirements. My PhD application process was not well defined or outlined on the relevant university's website. I had to complete a separate process to the specific faculty, and then to the university. The entire process took almost six months. When applying for postgraduate studies, look through application forms and requirements well in advance. Doing this allows you to think through the degree you would like to pursue, identifying a potential supervisor and drafting a clear and concise mini-proposal. The application process is quite daunting and there is no guarantee that you will be accepted for postgraduate studies. However, being prepared and informed helped me overcome these challenges.

Selecting a university

South Africa offers a range of universities across all provinces, including both urban and rural universities. Urban universities may be better developed and offer a wider range of courses and degrees. However, universities in these areas tend to be more expensive. These universities can be large, and it may be difficult to interact with lecturers or supervisors. Universities in rural areas are often smaller and offer a fewer number of degrees. However, a rural area is often a more relaxed environment with a smaller student-supervisor ratio, allowing individual attention and interaction with other students, lecturers and supervisors. Your selection of a university will ultimately

¹ Also see Chapter 7 by Andre van der Bijl that addresses the issues of being caught between work and studies, as well as Chapter 10 by Delia Layton that focusses on achieving a balance between studies and other life responsibilities.

POSTGRADUATE STUDY IN SOUTH AFRICA

depend on the type of degree you would like to pursue and what university best meets your needs.

South African universities also have multiple links to international institutions. An option that is not often considered is to pursue a joint degree, where you are linked to more than one university. A joint degree allows you to be registered at a South African institution and one of its partner universities in another country. The process is slightly more complicated as you need to apply to both institutions. However, the advantage of a joint degree is that there is an opportunity to extend your research to other countries. Pursuing a joint degree may offer the best of both worlds. There are potentially more opportunities, supervision, resources and extensive networks, particularly in terms of possible employers. As part of joint programmes, students spend time at both universities during their studies, giving them the opportunity to gain access to experiences and research at another university. Supervisors are also able to offer different perspectives based on a specific country context. In addition, there are opportunities for teaching and attending conferences at both universities which allow students to gain experience in both settings. Connecting with other students, especially internationally, allows for further learning and collaboration opportunities in the future.

Application processes

Selecting a university is followed by becoming familiar with the specific university's application processes. Obtain the necessary application forms and guidelines as early as possible. Application forms and procedures differ across universities and faculties in South Africa. Having application forms and deadlines will also give you a goal to work towards, keeping you on track to register for your postgraduate degree.

Brief proposal

During the application stage, a brief proposal is needed which usually covers the proposed topic, justification, problem statement, and a brief literature and methodology section. Before I applied for my doctoral studies, it took me close to a year to prepare my proposal. The process involved an intense review of the literature and finding a novel question to address. The problem statement, or research problem, is quite important as it outlines where the study fits into your subject, and the contribution that the topic will have on the existing body of knowledge. At Honour's and Master's levels the intended topic and research proposal can be relatively straightforward, as it is not yet required to make a substantial contribution to the knowledge field. However, as a doctoral candidate, your proposal would need to

CHAPTER 4 • GETTING STARTED: SURVIVING AND SUCCEEDING DURING THE PRE-DOCTORAL STAGE

indicate that you are contributing something new to the existing body of knowledge. Your topic will need to indicate what you envision your original contribution to be.

Identifying a supervisor

The majority of postgraduate applications require supervisors. I found that a well-thought-out mini-proposal could assist with identifying a potential supervisor. If you are already a student at a university or part of an existing department, it may be quite easy to identify a supervisor. If you are based outside the university or a foreign student, it might be difficult to make contact with a potential supervisor. You can, however, search for supervisors on departmental websites. Supervisors can be quite busy and may not have the time to take on additional students. At Honour's and Master's levels, I was allocated a supervisor. This worked really well, as I did not have to identify a supervisor and merely set up a working relationship with this person. Some students do, however, prefer to select or identify their own supervisor. Should you need to identify a supervisor, it is advisable that you identify more than one supervisor to begin with, contact them as early as possible and have a well-structured idea of your proposed topic. This will enable the supervisor to see if the topic is in line with their work or that of their department and decide whether to take you on.

Identifying a supervisor may be even more difficult if you decide to pursue a joint degree as you will require supervisors from two institutions who have the same interest towards your proposed study. Always bear in mind that co-supervision has its own challenges as the two supervisors might not have the same working habits (see for example Pole 1998 and Wadesango & Machingambi 2011). This process works better when the main supervisor helps select the co-supervisor so that you do not receive contradicting feedback or input. Another option is to have two supervisors that can offer complimentary skills, one with strengths towards your topic and the other with strengths in the methodology or the theoretical framework that you might be using. At the doctoral level, I was fortunate to have my PhD nested within a broader project in which I was involved. When I decided to pursue a PhD, the project heads agreed to serve as my supervisors. Additionally, I have a third supervisor who is based in Canada half of the time and in South Africa the other half of the time. Having three supervisors has certainly been advantageous: each supervisor brings his or her own experience and perspective. I must admit that there are times when the lines of accountability are blurred (with regard to who the main supervisor is) and I often have to deal with conflicting advice. There are even times when I feel I am receiving too much input, which leaves me feeling overwhelmed and wondering

POSTGRADUATE STUDY IN SOUTH AFRICA

whose input to consider. To avoid conflicting advice or input, my supervisors first meet and discuss their input and then provide me with joint feedback, although there are times when this is not always possible. International and local literature emphasise the importance of good student-supervisor relationships for the timely completion of postgraduate studies (ASSAf 2010; Jones 2013; Wadesango & Machingambi 2011). It is vital to have good relationships with your supervisors from the start. The support, advice and input will be invaluable for your postgraduate studies. In reality, good relationships are not always possible. We are often subject to power dynamics where students are required to be submissive, or find it difficult to voice their concerns. When relationships broke down during my postgraduate studies, I felt isolated and found it difficult to keep motivated. In such cases drawing on other support structures (family and peers) definitely makes all the difference.

Funding constraints

Perhaps the most important factor in choosing to pursue postgraduate study is securing funding. I was fortunate to be a recipient of a number of scholarships and bursaries that enabled me to continue with full-time postgraduate studies. Yet when I first came to university, I did not have funds to apply for a degree or pay registration. After I eventually got financial assistance, I still had to take on numerous part-time jobs to supplement my bursary income. Part-time income was imperative to support my family, fund living expenses and pay off my undergraduate student loan. Finding adequate funding has been a challenge for me. Most funding sources only paid out in August, leaving me year after year without any funding for close to eight months in the year². This made pursuing part-time work opportunities all the more important.

An advantage of pursuing postgraduate study in South Africa is that there are a number of scholarships which fund living expenses. A well-thought-out proposal, as discussed earlier, can also assist in identifying relevant funding. Most funding applications are time-consuming, requiring at least a week or two to complete. To have funding when you commence your studies, you would need to apply for funding at least six months to a year prior to commencing your studies.

Further considerations for international students

Foreign students hoping to pursue postgraduate studies in South Africa are likely to face numerous challenges. There are the logistics of organising travel arrangements, accommodation and securing a study permit. The permit process can be lengthy and

2 Also see Chapter 6 by Soraya Abdulatief that addresses issues around funding.

CHAPTER 4 • GETTING STARTED: SURVIVING AND SUCCEEDING DURING THE PRE-DOCTORAL STAGE

marred by bureaucracy. For more information on applying for study permits in South Africa, go to <http://www.home-affairs.gov.za/index.php/types-of-temp-res-permits> (the website of the South African Department of Home Affairs). It is important to resolve these practical issues before arriving in South Africa.

Additionally, fees for international students are higher at most South African universities. Most universities in South Africa have a dedicated International Student's Office which offers support during the application process and throughout their postgraduate studies. These offices are easily accessible via university websites and would be able to provide the necessary information. Many prospective international students also experience language barriers or difficulties. English is the standard medium of communication and teaching across the majority of universities in the country. There is minimal language support provided to students as universities expect students to be proficient in English. Speaking to peers may help to gain insights into the student experience at a particular institution.

SUPPORT STRUCTURES

Jones (2013) indicate that during the postgraduate journey, it is critical for students to draw on a range of support structures including family, employers, supervisors and peers³. Having friends, family and a supportive work environment can help you to deal with any difficulties which may arise. It is important to be upfront with those around you about the demands of your study. Be honest with friends and family about what you may need from them during this journey. There was a period of four months in the initial stages of my doctoral studies when funding was delayed. My family as well as and the department which hosted me provided financial assistance during this period.

About halfway into my doctoral studies, I experienced the unpredictability of life first-hand when I was diagnosed with arthralgia, causing debilitating pain in my fingers that made it impossible to use a keyboard or a mouse. The stigma and emotional difficulties associated with being disabled added a further toll. The university's disability unit, my peers and family were extremely supportive and helped me to find solutions. I am typing this chapter using voice recognition software (Dragon) which will undoubtedly assist me with writing my thesis as well. Every person will have their own challenges while pursuing postgraduate studies, but having a good support structure will make all the difference and facilitate progress.

³ Also see the related chapters by Guin Lourens, Puleng Motshoane and Liz Wolvaardt, Hannelie Untiedt, Mariana Pietersen and Karien Mostert-Wentzel in this book.

POSTGRADUATE STUDY IN SOUTH AFRICA

IN CONCLUSION

Looking back, my postgraduate journey was anything but easy. There were challenges from the very start, especially during the application stage. I am now in my final year, juggling fieldwork, analysis and writing, as well as inclusion in a broader project. Despite the difficulties, it has been a very rewarding experience. I've presented my research at a number of conferences and gained invaluable work and research experience. Connecting and working with people across the globe have also been very exciting.

Any postgraduate student will face a number of challenges. It is important to keep the end result in mind; the eventual opportunities and rewards. It is not possible to be fully prepared for everything, though having the right attitude and being as prepared as you can from the outset will certainly get you off to a good start and help you to succeed.

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