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THE BENEFITS OF BEING PART OF A PROJECT TEAM: A POSTGRADUATE STUDENT PERSPECTIVE

Puleng Motshoane

INTRODUCTION

There are a number of policies, both nationally and internationally, that argue for increased postgraduate outputs. The Academy of Science of South Africa's (ASSAf) report on postgraduate education concluded that "there is a broad consensus in the science community in South Africa that not enough high-quality PhDs are being produced in relation to the developmental needs of the country" (ASSAf 2010:15). The National Development Plan (NDP 2011) suggests that the number of PhD graduates per year, which was 1 421 in 2010 and 1 872 in 2013, be increased to 5 000 by 2030 in order for South Africa to be competitive with other developing countries such as Brazil and Ireland. Like South Africa, these two countries have developed ten-year plans for doubling the number of academic staff who hold doctoral degrees in all fields (ASSAf 2010:99). The challenge in South Africa is how the outputs can be escalated as the students are mostly part-time students of mature age with full-time jobs.

The ASSAf Report (2010) furthermore indicates a need to develop a comprehensive understanding of the dynamics of postgraduate education in South Africa. Mouton (as cited in Dell 2010) claims that about 80% of South African doctoral students are part-time and generally take longer to complete their degrees than their European or American counterparts. The reality is that with reduced access to the university facilities and staff, distractions from work, and so many years in which to lose motivation and direction, most part-time students give up after a lot of time invested in the study and never obtain their PhDs. The age of the student at time of enrolment, coupled with professional and family commitments are among the reasons for doctoral candidates' attrition (ASSAf 2010).

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In order to address this challenge, the Centre for Higher Education Research, Teaching and Learning (CHERTL) at Rhodes University is offering a structured postgraduate programme. The draws scholars from different parts of South Africa and Africa with the aim of escalating doctoral production and create a cohort structure within which such production can be supported. I form part of this initiative as a doctoral student investigating the differentiated nature of 22 public universities in South Africa¹. This chapter elucidates my postgraduate experience so far, even though I am still on the journey to complete my own study. It foregrounds my own experiences as a postgraduate student studying both part-time and at a distance, and highlights the importance and benefits of being part of a project team and the networking opportunities it affords.

STARTING THE DOCTORAL JOURNEY AS A TEAM MEMBER

My doctoral journey had a somewhat difficult start. I did not have a clear topic when I joined the project, but being part of the programme helped me to structure my thoughts from the beginning. During the first year of my study, I aimed to study a topic that was part of a project already underway in my department, but unfortunately this did not crystallise. I had to start all over again. It took me two years to come up with a feasible proposal. Being part of a team that encouraged me, kept me going as I searched for a new research topic. The team encouraged me to read more and think of other possibilities for research. The academic conversations helped me to identify a possible research project. Discussions I had with other postgraduate students who were already on the scholarly journey also helped a lot as they often asked questions which I found difficult then, but appreciate today. The questions helped me to structure my thoughts and develop a clear focus. Eventually, I found that being excited about your study topic is the main ingredient to success, and working within a team helps to build and retain such interest. As a student, you need the support from your team members and networks throughout the journey.

WORKING IN A COHORT PROJECT TEAM

There are a number of benefits to working in a project team. In my case, we are seven postgraduate students studying an overarching question focussed on the differentiated nature of the higher education institutions in South Africa. The cohort programme is designed to draw on students and staff from multiple paradigmatic perspectives, with multiple orientations and methodological perspectives to educational research (Samuel & Vithal 2014). The individual studies focus on a

¹ The other three public institutions are excluded as they are fairly new and small. Mangosuthu University is not new but does not offer postgraduate studies.

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number of different issues within the scope of the broad research question and we as students develop our own research questions within the broader project. The overall project aims to identify the structures and mechanisms from which events and experiences related to teaching and learning emerge in order to enable or constrain social inclusion in higher education. For instance, the topics range from supervision development, curriculum, policy studies, plagiarism to eLearning. This is just one example of what a project team of this nature might look like.

The project team is part of the bigger postgraduate programme, which is structured to support the students regardless of where they are in their candidacy. I have been in the team a year longer than the rest of the members and learned a lot in terms of higher education issues as I was fairly new in the higher education sector. The project team allowed us to undertake research into various aspects of differentiation within the South African higher education sector. Some scholars in the team are academics and some are non-academics from different higher education institutions in South Africa. Phillips and Pugh (2005) argue that it is unusual in the Humanities and Social Sciences for scholars to use a shared framework, which tends to be more common in the Natural Sciences. However, they also highlight that “there are [natural] scientists who give an individual service to their postgraduate students and social scientists who build up a team of students all working on related aspects of the same topic” (Phillips & Pugh 2005:4). This is where my project team is located. The peer support that is provided is highly valued.

Being part of a project team gives you a chance to present your initial thoughts and draft writing to your team members. Team members can provide valuable feedback that you would never have thought of as an individual. The support of more advanced scholars is also necessary as they can help steer the person or group in the right direction. A team offers you the space to explain a concept and your understanding thereof. As scholarly readings are often difficult to understand, it helped me to hear and comprehend how others articulate concepts related to my study focus, especially the theory part as it is the golden thread for the entire study. I also found myself in a position to explain the theoretical concept to the team and indicate how they could implement it in their own studies, whereas the other team members could eventually provide me with their insights on the concepts in return. Such discussions helped me to make sense of complex concepts within my own study. Team members who are ahead of you in the process and managed to cross conceptual thresholds (Wisker 2015) in their own studies are invaluable resources for advancing your own learning².

2 Also see the chapter by Sherran Clarence (Chapter 11) that focusses specifically on threshold concepts.

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DIFFERENT FORMS OF SUPPORT

Team members may support each other in different ways. Modern technology allows us to communicate with people without the constraints of time and distance. We use online seminar sessions once every six weeks or sooner, depending on the needs and commitments of the individuals within the team. You can organise online sessions in which you present your progress and frustrations to each other, and someone who just completed their studies (in my case, the main supervisor) would give the necessary guidance and support. It is during these online seminar sessions that concepts are clarified through presentations from team members. Our sessions started with small assignments that addressed the common issues, like the differentiation of South African higher education institutions. Everyone in our team comes from different parts of South Africa, which bring different experiences to the team as a whole. It is also possible to create a mobile group which would enable you to pose questions whenever you get stuck or confused, or provide moral support when needed. Posing questions to the group is also helpful if you are behind schedule on your reading and need to catch up with the rest of the team.

Though online seminar opportunities are undoubtedly valuable, the significance of face-to-face contact should not be underestimated. Our team only gets the opportunity to meet face-to-face during postgraduate weeks when we come together with other students who are part of the bigger cohort project. Such meetings create safe spaces within which you can bounce your ideas off each other and get constructive feedback. Such feedback does not mean that you will always get the right answers to the questions you have posed, as you are all still learning. It also does not mean that the feedback you receive will be correct in every respect. But using your team as a sounding board may give you input on further readings or on key issues you did not understand before and that might add value to your study. Team work is reiterative as you return to follow-up meetings to discuss your understandings and get further clarification while giving feedback to others.

The students in a team might be either at a Master's or a doctoral level, but the ensuing discussions and feedback may be useful to both study levels. I once attended such a meeting as I considered the supervisor as a potential study leader. What I learned from the meeting was the importance of sharing your work in progress in an informal way. Such informal discussions assist students in understanding particular methodologies or epistemological opinions that they would like to follow (Samuel & Vithal 2011).

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NETWORKING BEYOND THE FORMAL STUDY COHORT: THE VALUE OF CLOSED NETWORKS

Supervisors cannot necessarily provide students with all the support they need, hence the need for networks. Whereas the previous team I mentioned is focussed on a doctoral project, consisting of both male and female students, I also belong to a closed network that consists of women only. We are eight enthusiastic and determined women pursuing doctoral studies at various institutions. We are at different levels in terms of our postgraduate journeys. We have formed social learning spaces that allow collaboration and accomplishment of work related to our studies (as proposed by Brown & Lippincott 2003). We share readings and decide on a reading for discussion at each meeting. We meet at six- or eight-week intervals (depending on our availability), and present our work in progress to each other. During these meetings we engage in discussions that inform major concepts in your studies. It is during such meetings that the group creativity is unleashed and new ideas are generated. This group is influential in my learning and progress as they understand the journey and the challenges I am facing. This network helped me in knowledge construction beyond which I was capable of on my own. I struggled to make sense of theory and I had to seek the support from my team members. They have helped me to understand theory as I listened to how they applied theory in their own studies. Each meeting has its own aha moments whereby imperative concepts are clarified. Meetings like these helped me to cross conceptual thresholds throughout my postgraduate journey. Difficult concepts and challenges can be discussed to clear the ground for a successful study. Student and supervisor relationships are discussed, as well as sharing the feedback that you receive. You may find that within the group only one person is a good writer, as is the case in our team. Sharing the feedback helps us learn from each other's mistakes and avoid repeating the same mistakes in the future.

Although each person's study is different, the nature of postgraduate study is the same one way or the other. During closed network meetings, team members share their challenges and what they have been battling with since the last meeting. Such meetings help those who have been stuck, as the sharing and support give them the courage and the momentum to pick up from where they got stuck. A network increases the chances of staying on track as you always know that someone else has the same challenges you have. You can even agree on teaming up with another network member to meet in-between to discuss your progress or difficulties. In addition, the group provides me with a network of people who will be there when I need someone who better understands the journey and who will also understand

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what I am going through. This helps to release stress and discuss study-related matters your family and community support systems might not understand.

The focus of the closed network group is to constructively critique each other's work and offer constructive feedback, even though this might be difficult initially. It is therefore important that networks operate in a fluid manner, so that there are others who can acquaint you with this process. Such networks need to offer a safe space, unlike some formal groupings where you may feel silenced by those who are already ahead of you on their scholarly journey. The hallmark of constructive feedback is that it comes with uncomfortable questions that you might not welcome at first, but that is necessary to improve your study in general and your writing in particular. Feedback is not meant to be positive at all times and that is where we draw support from each other to better understand the feedback in a way that is not disheartening. Closed networks helped me refocus when my study got confusing or outside its intended scope. At some point I was not sure whether I was looking at supervision "development" or "support" and the discussion with my network helped as we unpacked the concepts, and decided that "development" was the best term to use. As such, the closed network has helped to strengthen my confidence and reminded me to not be too hard on myself.

The success of closed networks depends on someone from the group taking the lead in organising the structure of the meetings. Such a network can help you accelerate your progress as you are held accountable to each other. It helps to identify a knowledgeable other to help you along. In turn, network members build their own (informal) supervision profile through the support and guidance they provide to the other members. You might also find it easier to join other networks through getting to know the members of an established network.

THE BENEFITS OF NETWORKING BEYOND YOUR ESTABLISHED NETWORKS

Not everyone has the opportunity to belong to a project team, but students can form collaborative groups and build networks themselves. Networking, in addition to being part of a project team, can be really useful. The isolation of studying both part-time and at a distance can be both depressing and discouraging. The feeling of isolation can be attributed to confusion about the programme or the requirements of the programme which quickly grow into a feeling of being overwhelmed and left behind (Ali & Kohun 2006). My experience is that a lack of support can have a negative influence on academic progress. Building a supportive scholarly network might help to counteract isolation. However, building networks is your individual responsibility and it will not happen by itself.

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You can form network groups by meeting other postgraduate students in institutional workshops, seminars or conferences. Postgraduate centres at universities often offer a range of workshops or seminars to help students navigate the postgraduate journey. Such opportunities are useful as you meet other postgraduate students registered within the same institution. The feeling of isolation occurs at different stages in the doctoral programme (Ali & Kohun 2006), and these networks will be helpful during such times. I build networks whenever an opportunity avails itself. I then exchange contact details and follow up immediately before my new contacts forget who I am. One of my network contacts recently got feedback from the external examiner, which she shared with me without me asking for it. She knew that it would benefit me later on, and I am grateful for her generosity of spirit and insight.

Scholarly conferences where you present your study ideas are especially good networking opportunities. The feedback you get may help you to narrow your study focus, choose the most appropriate theoretical or analytical frameworks, or interpret your data. This does not imply that you should incorporate every piece of feedback that you receive, but getting as much feedback as possible may help to refine your study. Feedback helped me identify the gaps that I could not recognise when working in isolation or only with my supervisor.

I met people at conferences who have been through the postgraduate journey and they were very helpful. They were willing to provide advice based on their experiences. However, choose conferences that are related to your study topic. I was fortunate enough to find a conference that is related to my study. When I got there, I was the only student on the programme and had to present my work to mostly established scholars. The conference participants were my whole list of references that I had at that time. I was nervous and delighted at the same time to see them all there – I could put the faces to the names, engage with them and was able to network with most of them. I found that these scholars were eager to answer my questions and willing to converse with me as a student. However, you need to be careful of scholars who cannot see beyond their own research agendas, especially if your study is still in its initial stages. Knowing your study well will help you answer their questions without derailing your focus³.

3 Also see the chapter by Soraya Abdulatief (Chapter 6) where she, as a first-generation student, explores how she had to learn how to ask and answer questions in a scholarly conversation.

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FINAL THOUGHTS

In this chapter I explored the value of postgraduate cohorts and networks as a means to facilitate postgraduate learning and development. The cohort team project model of doctoral education was explored, whereby students share a common research question with each student having a different focus. Networks offer more informal ways of supporting the postgraduate endeavour. The chapter also highlighted the benefits of networking beyond your team or closed networks with the hope of avoiding the feeling of isolation that comes at different stages during the postgraduate journey. Support can thus take on different forms and can be structured in both formal and informal ways. Finding the kind of support suitable to individual needs may help in surviving and succeeding at the postgraduate level. Constructive and positive feedback from a cohort team or network can be a motivator for postgraduate students, if it is offered in a collaborative and positive spirit.

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