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Enhancing completion rates of mini-dissertations for a professional master's degree: An integrated approach



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ABSTRACT

Due to various forces of change, namely globalisation, funding, the shift to lifelong learning and the need for highly skilled employees, there is pressure on higher education institutions to produce more postgraduate students. Constraints in the higher education sector, among others a lack of sufficient and experienced supervisors and a more diverse student population, have led to concerns related to the completion rates of research projects. The higher education literature identifies various strategies to tackle the challenges associated with the failure to complete postgraduate programmes on time. The article argues that an integrated approach should be used to reduce the completion times of dissertations. It uses a case study as an exemplar of how challenges could be dealt with in an integrated way. The case, an MBA programme, consists of a coursework component and mini-dissertation (compulsory research project). Many students successfully complete the coursework component but struggle to complete the mini-dissertation. It is recommended that specific problem areas be addressed by layering support at various levels of a programme. Consideration should also be given to the most appropriate time to introduce support mechanisms without overburdening already overworked supervisors and students.

1. Introduction

The knowledge economy has led to a huge demand for higher-level skills and an emphasis on lifelong learning. Postgraduate education, especially doctorates, is seen as a way to address the need (McCallin & Nayar, 2012; Parker-Jenkins, 2016). It is evident in the increase in the growth of doctoral output. Statistics from 1998 to 2006 indicated that developed countries with an already high PhD output grew on average by 5%, while developing countries had a growth rate of 7% (Cloete, Mouton, & Sheppard, 2015). Cyranoski, Gilbert, Ledford, Nayar and Yahlia (in Cloete et al., 2015) indicate that between 1998 and 2006, the growth in doctoral output in China was 40%, Mexico 17%, India 8.5%, South Africa 6.4%, the UK 5.2% and the USA 2.5%. Although the number of doctorates in the South African context has increased in the past decade, the National Development Plan has a target of 5000 doctorates by 2030. However, in 2013, only 2051 doctorates had been delivered (Mouton, Boshoff, & James, 2015; National Planning Commission, 2012).

The increase in the number of postgraduate students has led to various challenges in the higher education sector. Internationally, higher education institutions experience insufficient resources to deal with the continuous increase in students. Political pressure and the resulting policy documents are requiring higher education institutions to be more accountable in the production of quality research outputs and to do more with less funding (McCallin & Nayar, 2012). Because student success is tied to funding from governments and external sources, this causes further tension that affects the delivery of postgraduates in higher education institutions (McCallin & Nayar, 2012; Swanepoel, 2010; Van Biljon & De Villiers, 2013).

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Globalisation has increased the mobility of students and therefore the student population at institutions has become more diverse. Apart from traditional factors like culture, diversity now extends to the students' academic background, their readiness for postgraduate studies and their personal and professional identities (Parker-Jenkins, 2016).

All of these challenges have culminated in an increase in the time it takes students to complete master's and doctoral programmes (Cohen & Greenberg, 2011; Donnelly & Fitzmaurice, 2013; Mouton et al., 2015; Wright, 2003). The massive growth in postgraduate student numbers has challenged higher education institutions in more than one respect and governments have concerns regarding the quality of the graduates that are delivered (McCallin & Nayar, 2012).

Some of the support mechanisms suggested in the literature on postgraduate supervision include alternative supervision models and strategies to meet the rising demand for supervision. However, little research on structured master's and professional programmes has been documented (Cohen, 2012). The article focuses on programme management, supervision and student engagement. It uses a case to illustrate the challenges and how they were dealt with through an integrated approach in a professional master's degree (MBA). In this particular case, implementing the strategies has enabled more students to complete their mini-dissertations (compulsory research projects) within the allocated time. The study has indicated that the challenges associated with completion times should be addressed from the various role players' perspective to achieve the desired change. It provides an overview of the obstacles to completion rates and strategies that the postgraduate supervision literature proposes to enhance timely completion. Lastly, the integrated approach followed in the specific programme is explained.

2. Challenges and strategies associated with completion rates

The higher education literature indicates that students' inability to complete programmes within set timelines is a complex issue. To obtain a more holistic picture, the challenges associated with timely completion will be discussed from the perspective of each role player, namely the student, the supervisor and the administrator (who is responsible for managing the programme). The discussion is followed by an outline of the strategies identified in the higher education literature to address the challenges. The student perspective is analysed first, providing more background about the changing student profile. It is followed by an analysis of the changing supervisory role and lastly the management of the postgraduate programme is scrutinised.

2.1. From a student perspective

Most of the students enrolled in a professional degree are working adults. Roets and Botma (2012) indicate that completion rates usually decline the older the student gets. As working adults, students do not only have their studies to focus on but are expected to juggle various other responsibilities (Alam, Alam, & Rasul, 2013). Mouton (2011) confirms the pressure on students. In this study, 39% of master's students indicated that they experienced challenges associated with personal, social and family life, while almost half (49%) of these students indicated that time constraints – balancing work and studies – contributed to their decision to discontinue their studies.

The struggle to balance conflicting responsibilities and roles puts students at risk. Studying part-time also means that there is less time for social interaction with fellow students, which may limit the support that they could provide each other. It could also mean limited time to attend additional non-course-related activities (Alam et al., 2013). Student support mechanisms should therefore be sensitive to the unique situation of adults.

Due to the lack of exposure to research in most undergraduate courses, students often have an unrealistic idea of what the postgraduate research process entails. They regard it as just another big assignment, like the structured modules that they are used to, therefore underestimating the time and commitment needed to complete a dissertation. The resultant insufficient planning makes them feel overwhelmed (Lambert, 2012; Lee, 2008). To assist with the timely completion of mini-dissertations, Lambert (2012) suggests imposing deadlines for various milestones of the research process. Students are used to deadlines and the pressure of the coursework components and this could assist students to complete their research projects.

A further challenge is the diverse academic background of students, which implies an enormous variance in students' readiness to conduct research and write academically. Zhoa (2001) proposes seminars, workshops and full-time courses to acquire basic research skills or to update research skills. Research training for students refers not only to the specific information included in traditional research methodology courses but also generic workshops on the literature review, research design, data analysis techniques and writing up of the research (McCallin & Nayar, 2012). Supervision should focus on both structure (aspects related to the management of the mini-dissertation) and support, and must be flexible enough to be individualised according to the needs of the student population (McCallin & Nayar, 2012; Zeegers & Barron, 2012). This implies analysing and meeting the needs of individual students (Zhoa, 2001).

The changing student profile demands that traditional supervision methods should be reconsidered. The following section focuses on the challenges that supervisors face.

2.2. From a supervisor perspective

The student's relationship with the supervisor is one of the most important aspects of successfully completing a research project (McCallin & Nayar, 2012). The nature of the supervisory relationship has changed over the years. Supervisors now have to play different roles (McCallin & Nayar, 2012; Parker-Jenkins, 2016), because the traditional supervisory role no longer meets the expectations of students. Students expect supervisors to be advisers, coaches, mentors, guides and quality controllers. These

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