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## Dimensions of The Lived Experiences of Doctoral Students In South Africa

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### ABSTRACT

Students engage in their postgraduate studies with an accumulation of experience and knowledge. The autonomy and independence that postgraduate studies call for represent a drastic shift from the norms that students are accustomed to. This study examined the dimensions of the lived experiences of doctoral students in South Africa which influence their independence and autonomy. The importance of this study resides in its examination of the multiplicity of challenges that doctoral students experience throughout their journey, as identified through the various dimensions of their lived experiences. The contribution of this study is relevant to the reflection on extant practices of postgraduate engagement at universities in S.A. The participants in this study comprised a convenience sample of seven postgraduate students currently registered for their PhD qualification. Data was gathered using an open-ended self-reporting questionnaire. Through a content analysis, several themes emerged such as personal development, group engagement, and the role of the supervisor. The study's findings underscore the need for a more comprehensive and supportive approach towards doctoral students in South Africa. It is recommended that whilst doctoral students engage independently in their studies, there is need for the institution to provide scaffolding support across the dimensions this study identified.

**Keywords:** Lived Experience, Peer Support, Personal Issues, Phenomenological Study, Postgraduate, Supervisor Support.

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### 1 INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Students who embark on their postgraduate studies begin with a range of prior experience, knowledge, cultural norms and learning styles (Brown & Holloway, 2008; Smith & Khawaja, 2011), yet the transition demands that students adapt to a very different environment from their undergraduate experience. Many postgraduate students struggle to complete their degrees on time due to a range of issues, including personal, administrative, peer and supervisory support. The autonomy and independence that postgraduate studies call for is a drastic shift from the norms to which students are accustomed. These norms include learning

styles, planned lectures and dependency on the lecturer for guidance, where frequent consultations occur. However, the postgraduate experience differs in many ways. Kinash and Crane (2016) report barriers to transition similar to those commonly reported by first-year undergraduates. Despite these transitional barriers being reported, institutions fail to provide specific support to enable postgraduates to resolve these issues, resulting in both student and staff dissatisfaction. Coneyworth, Jessop, Maden and White (2020) conducted a study that looked at improving the experience of postgraduate students that followed a structured doctoral program in higher education. Self-reported challenges faced by postgraduate students included more

than 50% of respondents identifying difficulties associated with adapting to new learning styles and a new learning environment.

The overall postgraduate student experience requires research that examines the dimensions that include, but are not limited to, personal issues/experiences; funding; administrative issues; peer support and supervisory support. The South African context of the study will highlight the lived experiences of postgraduate students in order to better understand student experiences. Evans, Nyguyen, Richardson and Scott (2018) advise that there is a need to look beyond the ability of students to cope with educational anxieties and the role of institutional staff in this process, towards also considering the wider constrictive influences at play for postgraduate students, such as home life. The study focuses on five dimensions of the lived experiences of postgraduate students in order to understand the notion of the disparity between received and perceived support (Cohen & McKay, 1984). Sitch and Lowry's (2019) study examining the social influence on students' experiences of transition into postgraduate study found that students do experience a within-education transition from undergraduate to Master's level study, and that this transition may be stressful for some and may be a period of uncertainty for students, thus impacting on their personal and academic lives. Mouton (2001) points out that personal problems can be the difference between failure and success at the postgraduate level. In another study by Ali, Ullah and Snauddin (2019) which looked at postgraduate research supervision, students were normally not satisfied with the research supervision they received and labelled it 'bad' due to various reasons, such as a lack of supervisors' interest in the students' work poor commitment to pre-arranged meetings; and inactiveness in providing timely constructive feedback.

Challenges experienced by postgraduate students in South Africa are not unique to those experienced by students from other countries. However, the use of phenomenology provides a useful framework for examining the lived experiences of postgraduate students in South Africa. It can help to explore the subjective meanings that students attach to their academic experiences, including the quality of supervision, the availability of resources and the demands of the qualification. Husserl's concept of the "lifeworld" (Husserl, 1962) is useful to examine the ways in which postgraduate students experience their environment and the structures of their experiences. Heidegger's notion of the "being-in-the-world" (Heidegger, 1962) can assist researchers to explore the ways in which postgraduate students engage with their studies and the meaning that they attach to their experiences. Merleau-Ponty's notion of the "lived body" (Merleau-Ponty, 1962) emphasizes how the embodied experiences of postgraduate students and the ways in which their physical and emotional experiences are intertwined (Higgs & Titchen, 2014). Local scholars like Koopman and Koopman (2018) have also made important contributions to phenomenology. In particular, their argument is that education should focus on lived experience and the body in dialogue with the world which aligns with the phenomenological and existential philosophies of Husserl, Heidegger, and Merleau-Ponty. It challenges the Western framework of thinking that separates the body and mind that emphasizes a consumerist market-driven approach to education.

This study aims to shed light on these issues and provide valuable insights into the lived experiences of doctoral students in South Africa. The main aim of this study is therefore to determine how the dimensions of their lived experiences influence doctoral students in South Africa.

To this end, the following objectives are considered:

- To determine the challenges experienced by doctoral students in South Africa; and
- To ascertain how doctoral students achieve autonomy, competence and relatedness through the dimensions of their lived experience.

## 2 LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature examines the dimensions of Personal Issues, Funding, Administrative Support, Peer Support and Supervisory Support experienced by doctoral students. These dimensions are supported by other researchers' investigations into the postgraduate student experience and have found personal, financial, institutional, supervisor related, non-academic, and other factors to be connected to research skills and academic performance (De Zoysa, 2007; Grant, 2005; Meerah, 2010; Wareing, 2009). Personal issues are considered to be one of the most significant factors affecting postgraduate students' success. Several studies (Boado & Richards, 2020; Al-Saggaf & MacCorron, 2017; Robertson & Smith, 2015) identify that personal issues such as time management, stress and isolation, and family responsibilities can have a detrimental effect on postgraduate students' success. Boado and Richards (2020) argue that postgraduate students who experience personal issues may have a lower motivation to complete their studies, leading to delays in graduating or higher attrition rates.

A lack of funding can prevent students from pursuing postgraduate studies or force them to drop out if they cannot afford to pay for their studies. The cost of postgraduate studies in South Africa is high, and most students rely on bursaries or scholarships to fund their studies (Mayekiso & Mtsweni, 2019). The authors argue that the lack of funding can lead to high levels of stress and anxiety, affecting

students' well-being and academic performance. Other studies carried out by De Zoysa (2007) and Meerah (2010) found that the availability of funds affected student performance. Higher funding in private schools leads to efficient management, highly motivated teachers, and access to resources. Those are the key factors to positively affect postgraduate students' performance. In South Africa, the National Research Foundation (USAF, 2021), recently reported on a shortage of funding to support postgraduate students. Regarding extensions for the completion of Masters degrees, of 1 555 applications, 848 (54%) were approved. At doctoral level, 239 (67%) of the 356 applications received were approved. (USAF, 2021). However, the demand for extension support for Masters and Doctoral students seems to be on the rise. This could be attributed to a combination of factors addressed in this study. The lack of funding can affect the progress of a postgraduate student in several ways which may include delayed completion (Cloete, 2017), reduced quality of research (DeVilliers, 2016), limited opportunities (Naidoo, 2019), as well as mental and emotional issues (Strydom, 2018).

Administrative support is critical, particularly for those students who are new to the postgraduate environment. This includes access to resources, timely feedback and clear communication channels (Crossouard & Pryor, 2017). The authors argue that postgraduate students who do not receive adequate administrative support may experience a lack of clarity in their studies, leading to stress and anxiety. A study by Johnson and Huwe (2013) found that postgraduate students who perceived inadequate administrative support reported lower levels of progress towards completion. In a separate study by Ngaruiya, Ngaruiya and Wambugu (2018), postgraduate students reported frustration with the lack of administrative support in accessing resources such as funding and

library facilities. These challenges hindered their research progress, leading to delayed completion of their programs. A research paper by Kopp and Zinn (2019) examined the impact of administrative support on postgraduate students' satisfaction with their academic experience. The authors found that students who perceived inadequate support were less satisfied with their programs.

Peer support refers to the social and academic interactions between students who are studying in a similar program or research area. This includes mentorship, networking opportunities, and academic support from fellow postgraduate students (Delange-Ros and De Waal, 2020). The authors argue that postgraduate students who do not have adequate peer support may experience a lack of belonging, leading to a lower motivation to succeed. In a study conducted by Andrews and Clark (2011), postgraduate students who reported higher levels of peer support also reported higher levels of academic achievement. Zahn, Perry, Hesse and Foster (2017) found that peer support can reduce stress and increase well-being. Moreover, the postgraduate experience is stressful and challenging, and having a supportive network of peers can provide emotional support and reduce feelings of isolation and anxiety. Vajoczki, Savage, Vujovic and Budreau (2016) maintain that peer support can improve research productivity as postgraduate students are often engaged in research projects, working with peers, which can help them develop research skills. Conversely, Andrews and Clark (2011) state that the lack of peer support can hinder postgraduate student progress as students may feel isolated and struggle to understand course materials or even make progress with their studies.

In studies conducted by Chireshe (2017) and Grant, Hackney, and Edgar (2014), the researchers argue that an effective learning experience depends on the regularity of meetings between

supervisors and students, guidance, an encouraging attitude of supervisors and a friendly mentoring relationship. Gill and Bernard (2008), Sally (2008) as well as Zhao, Golde and McCormick (2007) concur that an effective supervisor/student relationship is essential towards the success of postgraduate students. In a study conducted by Ali, Ullah and Sanauddin (2019), they found that supervisors carry heavy workloads, which often meant supervisors were too busy to engage with their students in a meaningful way. Moreover, Kimani (2014) argues that the busy schedule of the supervisor compromises quality research which reflects a lack of commitment and shows non-professionalism in academics. A study by Hutchinson and Lawrence (2019) identified several factors that contribute to postgraduate student success, including access to support and resources, clear expectations and guidance from supervisors and a positive academic culture. Research has shown that the relationship between supervisor and student can impact students' motivation and persistence (Peters & Pascarella, 2001). More importantly, scholars have highlighted the importance of supervisors having the necessary skills and knowledge to effectively support postgraduate students (Mainhard, et al., 2018).

### 3 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The Self-Determination Theory is applied as the theoretical lens through which the five dimensions identified in this study are perceived. This is a theory of human motivation where individuals are viewed as being proactive (Ryan & Deci, 2017). According to Deci and Ryan (1985), the Self-Determination theory focuses on the basic human needs of autonomy, competence and relatedness. The theory proposes that individuals are most motivated and engaged in activities when they feel a sense of control over their actions (autonomy); when they perceive that they can achieve their goals

(competence); and when they feel a sense of connection to others (relatedness). Intrinsic motivation is autonomous and refers to performing an activity for its own sake, for the pleasure and satisfaction it provides (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Extrinsic motivation refers to performing an activity for instrumental reasons rather than for its intrinsic qualities. According to SDT, various types of extrinsic motivation exist and they differ in their degree of self-determination or autonomy (Ryan & Deci, 2000). The findings of a study by Howard, Bureau, Guay, Chong and Ryan (2021) highlight that intrinsic motivation is related to student success and well-being.

In the context of postgraduate studies, SDT can be applied to understand how personal issues, funding, administrative support, peer support and supervisory support affect postgraduate students' motivation, engagement and academic performance. Personal issues such as time management, stress, isolation and family responsibilities can affect postgraduate students' autonomy, competence and relatedness. Students who struggle with personal issues may have lower motivation to complete their studies, leading to delays in graduating or higher attrition rates. Funding also affects postgraduate students' autonomy and competence. Without sufficient financial support, students may struggle to pay for tuition fees, books, accommodation, and other necessary expenses. Administrative support is important for postgraduate students to feel competent and supported in their studies. Moreover, peer support is essential for postgraduate students to feel related and connected to their academic community. Students who do not have adequate peer support may experience a lack of belonging, leading to lower motivation to succeed. Finally, supervisory support is important for postgraduate students to feel competent and autonomous in their research.

## 4 METHODOLOGY

### 4.1 Research Design

The nature of the main aim of the study led to the selection of a qualitative approach that is informed by the Interpretative Phenomenological Approach (IPA). According to Smith and Osborn (2015), IPA is a qualitative approach that seeks to provide detailed examinations of personal lived experiences. The primary goal of IPA is to investigate how individuals make sense of their experiences (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2012). Moreover, IPA researchers attempt to understand what it is like to stand in the shoes of the subject and, through interpretative activity, make meaning comprehensible by translating it. The importance of IPA as a qualitative research approach is its ability to examine and interpret the 'lived experiences' of research participants (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009). The study aims to first describe the poorly understood aspects of experiences (following Husserl's approach) and thereafter examine the contextual features such as the broader situational factors of the experience in relation to other influences (Matua & Van Der Wal, 2015) by interpreting the lived experiences of postgraduate students in South Africa. This will allow for a deeper understanding of the lived experiences to extract the requisite knowledge to address the aim of this study.

### 4.2 Rigor and Trustworthiness

To prevent research bias in the phenomenological study, the researcher ensured that her own views, experiences and opinions were bracketed. This also prevented any influence on the participants' lived experiences. The researcher remained attentive and open to the experience of the participants and described the phenomenon in detail as it was experienced. Chan, Fung and Chien (2013) recommend putting aside all the researcher's own knowledge and adopting this attitude throughout the research.

In order to circumvent the issue of bias and to enhance credibility and

trustworthiness, the researcher applied reflexivity, which is a self-reflective process, alongside bracketing that enabled the researcher to critically examine her own assumptions, interpretations and experience in relation to the current study. By using reflexivity, the researcher was able to make a conscious effort to minimize her influence on the research process and outcomes. This approach helped to enhance the rigor and trustworthiness of the findings by promoting a more objective and transparent research process.

### 4.3 The Measuring Instrument

The research instrument employed an open-ended self-reporting questionnaire. Whilst phenomenological studies primarily use interviews, focus groups and observation as a means of collecting data, the researcher opted to implement the use of a self-report questionnaire. Studies conducted by Baran and Ozogul (2021) that focused on the metaphorical perceptions of active tourist guides implemented a semi-structured questionnaire, as did a study by Orenge, Holanda and Goto (2020) whose objective was to evaluate the understanding

of Brazilian psychologists on Phenomenology. With self-reporting questionnaires, the participants retrospectively evaluate aspects of their subjective experiences in general, or the quality of a given experience in particular. This captures their experiences and the phenomenon (Pekala & Levine, 1982).

The questionnaire comprised the five dimensions, with broad open-ended questions aligned to the respective dimensions to maximize the coverage of specific aspects of the lived experience. The objective in applying this approach was to elicit the specifics of the lived experiences of the postgraduate students.

### 4.4 Participants and sampling strategy

Ethical clearance was obtained prior to the recruitment of participants. Participants were selected using a non-probability convenience sampling strategy. They were first contacted via an email informing them of the study, seeking their written permission to participate. Seven postgraduate students who are in various stages of their Doctoral studies agreed to participate

**Table 1: Participant details**

Participant	Gender	Qualification	Current Status
1.	F	Masters in Commerce	PhD – year 1
2.	F	Masters in Retail Management	PhD- year 2
3.	F	Masters in Marketing Management	PhD- year 3
4.	F	Masters in Commerce	PhD – year 2
5.	F	Masters in Communications	PhD – year 1
6.	M	Masters in Marketing Management	PhD- year 4
7.	M	Masters in Marketing Management	PhD- year 4

### 4.5 Data Collection and Analysis

The self-report open-ended questionnaire was emailed to participants once they were briefed on the study and granted permission for their participation. Participants were given two weeks within which to provide their responses.

The data was analysed using Colaizzi’s (1978) seven-step approach, used in phenomenological studies. These steps were adapted to cater for the current study. The choice of using Colaizzi’s method seemed appropriate as the research focused on understanding the meaning of

the experience as it is lived by the participants. This is because Colaizzi's method emphasizes a systematic approach to extracting and organizing meaning from the data, which may be well-suited for the research questions that required a detailed examination of the participants' experience. The researcher examined participants' responses to understand the experience of each participant with the various dimensions outlined. This entailed reading and re-reading each script to acquire a sense of the participant's experience. Thereafter, significant statements made by each participant were extracted to contribute towards a sense of meaning. Meaning was then attributed to the extracted data. The purpose here was to gain an understanding of the subjective meaning of the participant's everyday lived experience as a postgraduate student within the dimensions outlined. This was aided by providing a textural description of the participant's experience, as well as a structural description that included the context in which these experiences were lived. Although the dimensions separated each aspect of the individual's lived experience, the themes generated within these dimensions depicted their interrelationship. The data was coded using the various dimensions addressed in the study to form categories for the themes. Thereafter, common words used by participants were codified and emergent themes were elicited from the common words. This led to the identification of the fundamental phenomena experienced by participants. The common words did not reduce the individual lived experiences of the participants. Instead, they showed commonalities that exist in the experiences of postgraduate students. These are discussed in the results below.

## 5 RESULTS AND INTERPRETATION

The dimensions used in the self-report were to enable participants to respond to the objectives of the study. Five themes emerged from the responses of the

individual experience of the postgraduate students. It is important to note that whilst all of the participants are currently busy with their Doctoral studies, the study also considers their experience during their Masters studies.

### Theme 1: Personal Development

Personal Development emerged as a composite theme from the sub-themes derived from the responses to questions regarding the personal challenges that postgraduate students faced. These are identified as: Growing pains; Adapting to Change; Negotiated Compromise; Requesting Support; Need for Developed Independence and Managing the transitioning Process.

*Growing pains* appeared as a sub-theme from responses to the question on the personal challenges experienced during postgraduate studies. The participants reported mental health challenges; difficulties in finding a balance between work and home; lack of support; funding issues and feeling inadequate. The coping mechanisms used by the participants included allocating dedicated time to research; planning; prioritizing and making sacrifices.

*Adapting to change* was also identified as a sub-theme, which helped participants overcome the challenges they faced. This theme aligned itself with students achieving autonomy and competence by enabling change in their circumstances.

The sub-theme of *Negotiated Compromise* emerged from the responses to the question on how participants coped with their responsibilities at home, work and as students. Participants reported seeking assistance from friends in academia; attending workshops; struggling to keep their heads above water and introducing activities such as going to the gym.

The sub-theme of *Requesting Support* emerged from responses to the

question on seeking assistance from the university's student counsellor, with some participants reporting not being aware that support was available.

The *Need for Developed Independence* emerged from responses on how students managed the shift to studying independently. Participants reported feeling challenged, needing motivation, and being comfortable working on their own. *Managing the transitioning process* was identified as a sub-theme from responses on how the shift to studying independently made participants feel, with some reporting feeling proud, frustrated or anxious.

The findings indicate that postgraduate students experienced challenges. However, they adapted, negotiated, sought support, and developed independence to overcome the challenges to achieve personal growth, which speaks to the psychological need for autonomy.

### **Theme 2: Self-Sufficiency**

The responses indicate that students tended towards being self-sufficient and managing their expenses within their allotted funding. It was observed that postgraduate students require financial support to cover their research expenses, which may vary depending on the nature of their studies. Some of the funding sources mentioned included scholarships; bursaries; financial support from parents and extra jobs. However, the question of whether the funding was sufficient or not depended on the costs associated with the specific study. International students faced severe constraints and had limited options when it came to funding, which often drove them to take on additional jobs to finance their studies. These findings highlight the importance of financial support for postgraduate students and the need for more options and resources to help international students overcome funding challenges. Providing adequate financial support can promote students' autonomy and

competence, enabling them to focus on their studies and achieve their goals.

### **Theme 3: Delayed Progress**

The theme, *delayed progress*, was identified under the Administrative Issues dimension and was attributed to difficulties experienced during registration and the proposal review process. Responses indicated that delays outside of the students' control created disruptions and frustrations in their progress. Some universities offer proposal development workshops to assist students, but responses to a related question indicated that participants did not find these workshops helpful, with some experiencing confusion due to varying levels of understanding of research methodology concepts. To determine where the bottleneck exists for postgraduate students, participants were asked which area caused them the longest delay. Responses included research methodology, topic development, proposal development, and registration. Identifying problematic areas can lead to providing necessary assistance to students. Participants were also asked to suggest ways to facilitate administrative processes related to postgraduate studies. Responses included providing support, carefully timed orientation, more faculty staff, defined structures and procedures for students to follow, and a more interactive proposal development workshop.

### **Theme 4: Group Engagement**

The Peer Support dimension emerged as one of the most impactful dimensions in the study. Participants expressed a strong need for peer support, with group engagement emerging as an important theme from their responses to the question: "Please explain if you think joining a peer support group would have made your Masters/Doctoral experience more pleasant?". All participants indicated that joining a peer support group would make their journey more enduring, provides a sense of solidarity, enables them to learn



from others, and helps them manage feelings of being overwhelmed. The SDT suggests that relatedness is essential to promoting motivation and well-being. Peer support can fulfil this need, just like supervisory support. By engaging with like-minded individuals, students can address various matters that may hinder their progress. Participants response to how joining a peer support group would help them, were similar, indicating that peer support would help them feel motivated, less lonely, and less isolated. Participants who were not part of a support group indicated that they improvised by seeking help from friends or networking with academics and others ahead of them. By fostering peer support groups, universities can help students fulfil their relatedness needs and promote their motivation and well-being in line with the Self-Determination Theory.

### **Theme 5: The Important Role of Supervisors**

Supervisors play a critical role in supporting postgraduate students in their academic journey and their impact on student success cannot be overstated. The responses to the question, “What was your overall experience with your supervisor?” were mixed, with some students reporting positive experiences, while others felt unsupported and treated unprofessionally. Supervisors’ behaviour and support can have a significant impact on students’ motivation, engagement, and satisfaction with their studies. The responses to “What challenges did you experience with your supervisor?” revealed communication, workload and support were significant challenges for some students. It is essential for supervisors to understand the challenges students face and be equipped with the necessary knowledge and expertise to guide them through their academic journey. Students need to feel supported and heard by their supervisors and supervisors must provide timely and constructive feedback to help students progress. To understand the

level of relationship between students and their supervisors, the participants were asked if supervisors were made aware of the challenges they faced. The responses varied, with some supervisors showing indifference or lacking understanding of the issues students faced. To be effective, supervisors must be aware of the challenges their students face and work to support them in addressing these challenges. The last question was based on whether students sought assistance from their supervisors regarding personal issues or challenges. The responses indicated that some supervisors were unapproachable, while others provided the necessary support and much needed guidance.

## **6 DISCUSSION**

Themes generated from the responses to the five dimensions identified in the study provide an overview of the challenges that doctoral students face. Through the application of the SDT that focuses on the psychological skills of the individual, doctoral students were able to apply themselves towards achieving autonomy, competence and relatedness. The study makes an important connection between these dimensions and the emergent themes using the SDT. Personal development highlights the complexities of postgraduate studies which are unique to each participant. Postgraduate studies can be a highly demanding and stressful experience that can negatively impact mental health and cause fatigue. Sharma, Mor, Gard, Chhikara, Pal and Narula (2021) suggest that individual, family-related and job profile-related factors can affect the work-life-study balance. Doctoral students can create a sense of autonomy over their study schedules, which may help them feel more motivated, engaged and in control of their academic progress. They can set their own goals and seek support to manage the challenges that may hinder their personal development. This includes taking charge over financial issues by seeking out alternative sources of funding towards

becoming self-sufficient. Denying funding to research students in particular areas can limit the development of research capacity and produce a shortage of skilled, qualified individuals. Students also face challenges with navigating complex administrative processes, accessing resources and communicating effectively with staff members. Additionally, bureaucratic challenges, inadequate resources, communication breakdowns and lengthy proposal reviews lead to unprecedented delays and disillusionment for doctoral students. Students may feel isolated or disconnected from their peers, which can impact their motivation and well-being. The motivating factors for peer support or group engagement are the opportunities to share and improve knowledge and expertise (Bugaj, Blohm, Schmid, Koehl, Huber & Huhn, 2019). Peer support can provide writing support (Ferguson, 2009); develop information literacy (Green, 2006); and influence the likelihood of completing the qualification. Group engagement can also foster self-motivation, which helps students maintain momentum, track progress and feel motivated by the knowledge that they are going through the same struggles. Students face challenges with accessing sufficient support and guidance from their supervisors and may experience communication breakdowns or conflicts with their supervisors. Some researchers (Atieno Okech & Rubel, 2007; Kiley, 2011) maintain that the cause of delays is a lack of supervisory training. The gap between low completion rates of research work and high completion rates of research work can be minimized through conducting workshops, seminars and training. Sarwar, Shah and Akram (2018) posit that the working relationship between supervisor and student, workload of supervisors as well as institutional-related factors add to the delays experienced by postgraduate students. The supervisory relationship is primary for ensuring that a wealth of personal and cultural issues, as well as experiences, are addressed so that students

are guided and empowered to be autonomous learners, engaged to gain their postgraduate qualifications (Wisker, Robinson, Trafford, Warnes & Creighton, 2003). Furthermore, the distinguished role of the supervisor emphasizes the importance of the supervisory relationship in ensuring that doctoral students are guided and empowered to be autonomous and competent students.

The emergent themes identified in the study are related to the five dimensions of the lived experiences of doctoral students in South Africa, highlighting the complex and multifaceted nature of the challenges faced by doctoral students. The general findings include:

- Personal development is crucial towards students achieving autonomy and competence.
- Participants' tendency towards managing their expenses within their allotted funding was another key finding that the study makes.
- Delayed progress emerged due to difficulties in the administrative processes, particularly registration and proposal review.
- Group engagement highlights the need for peer support to fulfil the relatedness needs of doctoral students.
- The important role of supervisors emphasized their critical role in supporting doctoral students in their academic journey.

The findings indicate that learning needs to be supported through various avenues such as informal social networks, which is very well documented in undergraduate contexts (Briggs, Clark & Hall, 2012; Christi, Tett & Cree, 2016; Wilcox Winn & Fyvie-Gauld, 2005; Xuereb, 2014).

## 7 CONCLUSION

This study aimed to investigate the dimensions of the lived experiences of

doctoral students in South Africa and to shed light on the challenges that they face. The study emphasizes the importance of supporting and mentoring doctoral students. Supervisors play a critical role in providing support to doctoral students, and addressing issues related to personal development, funding and peer support. This study's themes offer a broader perspective that can be used to inform larger studies, encompassing a more extensive sample of doctoral students. The study's findings underscore the need for a more comprehensive and supportive approach towards doctoral students in South Africa. The study also identified some paradoxes, such as the fact that students who were most successful academically were not necessarily those who received the most support. Furthermore, there was a disconnect between the support that students perceived they were receiving and the support that they actually received. The study had some limitations, including the fact that the sample size was small. To address the challenges faced by doctoral students, it is recommended that universities provide specific support for doctoral students, such as mentorship programs, funding and academic support. Indeed, further research is needed to explore the challenges faced by doctoral students in other contexts and to identify effective interventions to support them. Additionally, larger sample sizes and multi-institutional studies can provide a more comprehensive understanding of doctoral student challenges and lived experiences.

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