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CONTENTS

List of Figures ....................................................................................................... xv
Foreword – Sioux McKenna ................................................................. 1
Preface – the Editors ............................................................................. 7

PART ONE

Chapter 1 • Addressing some of the elephants in South African research education: Race and reflexivity in postgraduate study
   Daniela Gachago
   Introduction: On starting difficult conversations ........................................ 13
   On troubled knowledge and mutual vulnerability ........................................ 15
   On the importance of dialogue .................................................................... 16
   On comfort zones, vulnerabilities and critical emotional reflexivity ............ 17
   On openness and reciprocity ....................................................................... 19
   On gentleness ............................................................................................... 21

Chapter 2 • Student-supervisor relationships in a complex society: A dual narrative of scholarly becoming
   Zondiwe L. Mkhabela & B. Liezel Frick
   Introduction .................................................................................................... 23
   A perilous but decisive start ......................................................................... 24
   Liezel’s narrative ........................................................................................... 25
   Zondi’s narrative .......................................................................................... 25
   Getting to know each other’s contexts ........................................................ 27
   Making headway ............................................................................................ 30
   The oral examination and graduation ......................................................... 32
   Understanding each other’s contexts .......................................................... 33
   Building mutual kindness and trust ............................................................ 33
   No compromises on quality: the role of compassionate rigour in doctoral education ................................................................. 34
   Utilising experts ........................................................................................... 34
Chapter 3 • Research ethics and ethical dilemmas in the South African context

Simangele Mayisela

Introduction ............................................................................................................. 39
“Who am I?” The researcher identity dilemma ..................................................... 39
Have you obtained ethical clearance? Institutional ethical regulations ............... 41
“I am not your subject”: Ethical considerations for research participants ........... 43
“I have a say too”: Ethical principles in working with children as research participants ................................................................. 44
“Promise you will not tell”: The ethical principle of confidentiality ....................... 45
“I can’t take it”: Potential harm to participants ..................................................... 46
Walking on a tight rope: Legal quandaries and harm to institutions ................... 47

PART TWO

Chapter 4 • Getting started: Surviving and succeeding during the pre-doctoral stage

Shakira Choonara

Introduction ............................................................................................................ 53
Full-time versus part-time study ............................................................................. 54
The application process ......................................................................................... 55
Selecting a university .............................................................................................. 55
Application processes ............................................................................................ 56
Brief proposal ......................................................................................................... 56
Identifying a supervisor .......................................................................................... 57
Funding constraints ................................................................................................ 58
Further considerations for international students .................................................. 58
Support structures .................................................................................................. 59

Chapter 5 • Close encounters: Becoming resilient through compassion and imagination

Bella Vilakazi

Introduction ............................................................................................................. 61
Compassion in the context of doctoral supervision .............................................. 61
Cultivating imagination in the context of doctoral supervision ......................... 62
An encounter with a prospective supervisor: My story ......................................... 63
Democratic justice in postgraduate student supervision ...................................... 65
PART THREE

Chapter 6 • Surviving and succeeding: The first-generation challenge
Soraya Abdulatief

Learning in the Third Space ................................................................. 70
Creating a mental Third Space ............................................................. 71
From solitary learner to emerging academic ....................................... 72
Asking and answering questions ....................................................... 73
Publishing and presenting research ................................................... 74
Setting up a virtual study group ....................................................... 75

Chapter 7 • Caught between work and study: Exploring boundary zones as an employed postgraduate student
Andre van der Bijl

Introduction ......................................................................................... 77
Frameworks for navigating different roles ......................................... 78
Power and knowledge ....................................................................... 83
Application, transfer and use of knowledge ..................................... 85

Chapter 8 • The inclusion of visually impaired students in post-graduate programmes: A personal and political perspective
Heidi Lourens

Introduction ......................................................................................... 89
Entitlement to support: Thoughts on imposters and structure .......... 91
Access to the written word: Poverty in the currency of research .... 93
Getting there: Notes on supervision and research interviews .......... 95
Travelling abroad: Notes on academic conferences ....................... 96
A last note on the research supervisor ........................................... 96

Chapter 9 • Being a postgraduate woman: Relationships, responsibilities and resiliency
Guin Lourens

Introduction ......................................................................................... 101
Gender and education ...................................................................... 101
Developing resilience ....................................................................... 104
The role of family and friends ......................................................... 105
The influence of emotional pressures on female postgraduate students ..... 106
Work arrangements ......................................................................... 107
Chapter 13 • Whose voice is right when I write? Identity in academic writing
Catherine Robertson

Introduction ............................................................................................................ 145
Three identities of the writerly self .......................................................................... 146
The “autobiographical self” .................................................................................. 147
The “discoursal self” .............................................................................................. 148
The “authorial self” ................................................................................................ 151

Chapter 14 • The PhD process: Doctor or doctored?
Kasturi Behari-Leak

Introduction ............................................................................................................ 157
Doctoral traditions and conventions ...................................................................... 158
Doctoral or doctored? ............................................................................................ 160
The head, heart, hand of doctoral study ............................................................... 160
Knowing the Doctoral Scholar ............................................................................... 161
Being the doctoral scholar ..................................................................................... 162
Doing: stepping into the space as doctoral scholar ............................................. 163
Locating the doctoral scholar in an emerging paradigm ...................................... 164

PART FIVE

Chapter 15 • So what do you think? The role of dialogue in doctoral learning
Jacqueline Lück

Introduction ............................................................................................................ 171
Dialogic spaces and Communities of Practice (CoP) ............................................ 172
Community Dialogue ............................................................................................. 174
Dialogue with supervisors ...................................................................................... 174
Dialogues with colleagues and critical friends ...................................................... 176
Dialogue at proposal presentation ......................................................................... 176
Dialogue at conferences ......................................................................................... 177
Dialogue with experts ............................................................................................ 178
Dialogue with other doctoral scholars .................................................................. 178
Online spaces ......................................................................................................... 179
Chapter 16 • The benefits of being part of a project team: A postgraduate student perspective
Puleng Motshoane

Introduction ............................................................................................................ 183
Starting the doctoral journey as a team member .................................................. 184
Working in a cohort project team .......................................................................... 184
Different forms of support ...................................................................................... 186
Networking beyond the formal study cohort: the value of closed networks .......... 187
The benefits of networking beyond your established networks ......................... 188

Chapter 17 • Sharing the quest of doctoral success: Creating a circle of critical friends
Liz Wolvaardt, Hannelie Untiedt, Mariana Pietersen & Karien Mostert Wentzel

Introduction ............................................................................................................ 191
Setting up a circle of critical friends ...................................................................... 192
What to address during meetings ......................................................................... 194
Benefits and challenges of participating in a circle of critical friends .................. 195
Survival strategies ................................................................................................... 197

PART SIX

Chapter 18 • Daring to be different: A postgraduate student perspective on originality
Emmanuel Sibomana

Introduction ............................................................................................................ 205
Research needs to be original, but what does that mean? ................................... 205
Original but based on other people’s work .......................................................... 209

Chapter 19 • The viva voce: The living voice of a doctoral thesis
Ndileleni P. Mudzielwana

Introduction ............................................................................................................ 213
Phase 1: Before the defence .................................................................................. 216
Phase 2: During the defence ................................................................................. 217
Phase 3: After the defence ..................................................................................... 219
LIST OF FIGURES

FIGURE 7.1  Engeström’s (1987) Activity Theory model as presented by Engeström, Miettinen and Punamaki (1999, p. 31) .................. 80

FIGURE 7.2  Articulated multiple activity systems (adapted from Bolton & Keevy, 2011, p. 7) ......................................................... 81

FIGURE 11.1 Pushing thresholds .......................................................... 130
FROM THROUGHPUT TO THRIVING: CHANGING POSTGRADUATE STUDY IN SOUTH AFRICA

The push for postgraduate education has intensified internationally. Universities are under enormous pressure to ensure that they graduate more and more PhD and Master’s scholars. South African universities have been given the target to graduate 5 000 doctorates per year by 2030 (National Planning Commission 2011). This is a significant increase from the 2 258 doctoral graduates in 2014 (HEMIS1 2015). To ensure we have enough supervisors to achieve this goal, there is the additional target that 75% of academics should have PhDs by 2030, rather than the current 34%.

However, as academics we need to view this drive with a healthy degree of skepticism. We need to look carefully at the reasons for increasing numbers so that we don’t undermine the very basis of the system simply for the sake of output. We need to ask what it is that postgraduate scholars are expected to do with the high levels of skill they acquire. And we need to revisit what the doctorate is really for.

Most national policies and reports around the world stress that postgraduate education needs to be responsive to the labour market and attend to the developmental needs of the economy (DHET 2013; EUA 2013). In the knowledge economy, the ability to solve industry problems and thereby producing more goods for the market is worth more than physical expertise of almost any kind. Postgraduate scholars are the individuals we look to for enhanced efficiencies and improved outputs.

I would argue that we need to be very cautious of such discourses, as pervasive as they may be. If postgraduate education results only in private goods – better salaries for the graduate and higher production levels for the employer – why should the taxpayer subsidise it? If universities are structured as private corporations, why should public funds be spent on them? In a country as unequal as ours, the narrow conception of the postgraduate qualification as a private good has major implications for student access because the logical consequence of seeing education as a private good is that the burden of cost should rest with the person receiving such goods.

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1 Many of the statistics used in this piece have been sourced from HEMIS, the national Higher Education Management Information System, as this allows for more recent statistics than from published documents. They were accessed in November 2015.
Such a dystopian view of postgraduate education as merely a set of highly advanced industry skills is of course flawed in every possible way. The PhD and Master’s degrees may well offer private goods, but their primary function should be to serve the public good. As such, these qualifications should benefit far more than the university offering the degree, the industry employing the graduate and the graduate herself. The postgraduate qualification should be the space in which we strive for a better understanding of our planet and society, and where a critical citizenry is fostered to the benefit of all. It is the intellectual place in which we contribute to the “frontiers of a field” (HEQSF 2013). Postgraduate education is the place where new knowledge is created that can be harnessed for the good of the public and thereby assist all of us to live in more creative and compassionate ways.

Postgraduate education, perhaps more than any other form of higher education, offers a significant space for resisting the human capital model of education. The dominant focus on economic matters and in particular the ways in which postgraduates serve to grow our economies is far too narrow. It is imperative that we scrutinise the intrinsic value of the postgraduate education offered to our scholars. When we move beyond the sterile language of employability in postgraduate education discussions, we open conversations about how this highest level of education contributes to social justice and the sustainability of the planet. And these conversations crucially need to include the scholars themselves.

This book offers a range of scholars’ voices and thereby looks at what postgraduate education means here and now for those engaged in it. The book is being published during a time in which higher education in South Africa is undergoing substantial self-reflection. Student protests have raised questions about our institutional cultures, troubled our curriculum assumptions and challenged dominant pedagogical approaches. Postgraduate education should not consider itself immune from such deliberations. We need to ask ourselves tough questions about the extent to which our postgraduate education has been inclusive and socially just. We need to scrutinise who gets admitted, who graduates, who supervises and who examines.

Issues of social inclusion and epistemological access, which have been central to debates about undergraduate education in South Africa, are rarely raised in discussions about postgraduate pedagogy. There is generally a view that at postgraduate level people already need to be working at the most advanced levels and so collective engagement and collegial support is somehow inappropriate. But the “always already” scholar (Manathunga & Goozee 2007:309) is as rare as the “always already” supervisor. If we want all higher education in South Africa to be socially just, we need to foreground this issue at postgraduate level too.
In 2014, 54% of postgraduates\(^2\) enrolled in higher education South Africa were black African\(^3\), which indicates great strides made in the last two decades, but shows there is still much work to be done at the point of access. Sadly, the percentages at enrolment do not echo those at graduation and in 2014, only 47% of postgraduate graduates were black. The racially differentiated success rates found in all other qualification levels (CHE 2013) are thus sadly continued into the postgraduate sector. In terms of gender, 50% of Master’s enrolments in 2014 were female, but this drops to 44% at doctoral level.

The issue of who participates is crucial as it has implications for who contributes to knowledge production in every sphere of society and is part of the explanation for the lack of racial transformation of staffing in South African universities. We need to ask serious questions about both equity of access and equity of success in postgraduate education.

Students are also raising questions about whose knowledge is being cited and extended, and which theories are privileged. The canon on which we rely is neither neutral nor inherently excellent simply because it is dominant. Drawing on a wider range of theories is often a challenge for the supervisor whose expertise generally arises because of her years of induction in knowledge from the “Global North”. We therefore need to look carefully at ways of doing supervision differently, so that multiple perspectives and contextually relevant knowledge come to the fore. To do this, we will also need to reconsider our approaches to supervision.

In South Africa, we have retained the traditional apprenticeship model of supervision as the main approach, particularly in the Humanities and Social Sciences. Research demonstrates that this model often results in the PhD being experienced as a lonely journey by the isolated scholar (Harrison 2012). There have been challenges to the traditional apprenticeship model as we look for creative supervision pedagogies that make space for other ways of knowing and generating the powerful knowledge we need and expect at this level of study. In 2010, the ASSAf report on PhD study in South Africa found that the two major risk factors for non-completion were poor student-supervisor relationships and inadequate socialisation experiences. While there are multiple causes for these problems, many of which are explored in this

\(^2\) “Postgraduate” here only includes Master’s and doctorates, the focus of this book, and thus excludes Honours and other postgraduate students.

\(^3\) HEMIS uses Department of Labour terminology for racial categories. According to the 2011 census data, black Africans made up 79% of the South African population. It should be borne in mind that the 54% black African enrolment referred to above also includes black African students from outside of South Africa.
book, the ASSAf findings provide a significant challenge to our current models of supervision. Alternative models are available and may be more suited to our context of needing to increase postgraduate numbers and widen our theoretical base. In some instances, universities are beginning to adopt alternative models of postgraduate education such as project teams, supervision panels and doctoral schools (Lotz-Sisitka et al. 2010; McKenna 2014; Samuel & Vithal 2011).

To this end, a great many books have been written about postgraduate education that provide insights into the different models of supervision that are available and what is expected of a supervisor. These books generally foreground the experiences of the supervisor and offer useful insights for both supervisor and postgraduate scholar. But few texts give us access to the voices of the scholars themselves. We really need to hear reflections from those engaged in the doctoral process if we are to understand what we need to do to ensure that the doctorate is a stimulating and worthwhile endeavor that genuinely serves a public good. This book is thus a crucial contribution to this process as we come to make sense of the context of low retention and high drop-out, and move beyond surviving to genuinely succeeding (Cloete, Mouton & Sheppard 2015; ASSAf 2010). To do this, we have to change our focus from what will increase throughput to what will ensure thriving.

SIOUX MCKENNA

REFERENCES


Postgraduate Study in South Africa: Surviving and Succeeding is timely given the currently evolving national narrative of emerging student voices that are making themselves heard from within the realms of higher education institutions across the country. Many of these students are voicing their concerns about the lack of higher education transformation around issues of equity, curriculum reform, language and race. Many of these debates have centred on undergraduate education, though some of the issues of course cut across under- and postgraduate levels. This book provides a glimpse of the postgraduate experience amidst these debates. As such, it aims to constructively contribute to a growing national discourse on how students navigate these complexities in order to survive and succeed during their postgraduate studies.

A variety of contextual factors may influence the initiation, development and progress, and eventual outcome of a postgraduate study – whether the student ultimately survives and succeeds. Institutional policies and regulations provide some direction. A myriad of published research literature, self-help guides, online resources as well as institutional support programmes may provide guidance, while supervisors may provide mentoring and subject-related expertise. Family and friends may share the initial euphoria of the (sometimes first-generation) candidate pursuing a postgraduate degree. The value of such contextual influences in supporting the study and in particular the student should not be underestimated, to which many of the authors in this book attest. However, the contributors to this book also show that surviving and succeeding demand more than a contextually rich support system. Students’ own self-reflective abilities, creativity and pragmatic approaches to surviving and succeeding show that postgraduate student success is as much internally as externally determined.

The book explores these elements from various thematic perspectives. Part 1 sets the South African scene of postgraduate study in a complex society. The contributors to this section provide us with unique perspectives on postgraduate study in a relatively young democracy. The students’ reflexive experiences of sensitive issues such as race, developing constructive student-supervisor relationships within a context characterised by cultural and linguistic diversity, and dealing with ethical dilemmas that may arise as a result of working amidst such complexities are addressed. Part 2 provides a student perspective on starting the postgraduate journey in the context described in the previous section. The contributors to this section explore the pre-doctoral stage and the role of imagination and compassion in becoming resilient. Part
3 challenges the notion of the “always already” prepared student in the South African context (a notion borrowed from the work of Manathunga & Goozée 2007). Aspects that define many a postgraduate experience in South Africa – including being a first-generation postgraduate student, a working academic caught within institutional transformation, a disabled student, a woman in a predominantly patriarchal society – are outlined in this theme. The section concludes with how postgraduate students might achieve a work-life balance as they navigate these multiple responsibilities and identities. Part 4 explores postgraduate study as identity work within the South African context. The contributors to this section focus on crossing transformative thresholds in becoming a researcher, the possibilities of merging both individualistic (agentic) and collective (Ubuntu) notions of being, developing a writerly identity, and a student voice. Part 5 positions postgraduate study as a social practice in South Africa. The role of dialogue in doctoral learning, the benefits of being part of a project team and circles of critical friends are social practices that receive attention. Part 6 helps us to make sense of postgraduate outcomes in the South African context. A student perspective on the notion of originality, the viva voce and science communication beyond academic circles provide student insights on how postgraduate outcomes can be valued and valuable.

In conceptualising this project, an open invitation was sent out through all our respective networks to potential contributors. Those interested were asked to send us proposals for possible chapters, thus opening the space for a truly student-driven perspective. The contributing authors in this book hail from 11 different South African universities and a variety of disciplinary backgrounds (including Health Sciences, Education, Language Studies, Sociology, Psychology and Theology), which enrich the diversity of perspectives offered here1. The book builds on the success of similar initiatives focussed on postgraduate students’ experiences in Aotearoa New Zealand (McMaster & Murphy 2014), Australia (McMaster, Murphy, Whitburn & Mewburn, in production), the United States of America (McMaster & Murphy 2016), the United Kingdom (McMaster, Murphy, Cronshaw & Codiroli-McMaster, in press) and Scandinavia (McMaster, Murphy & Rosenkrantz de Lasson). Though each of these books has its own character and unique national flavour, it highlights the importance of hearing the student voice above and beyond its potential epistemic and discipline-based contribution. Therefore, each chapter included in this book speaks from a uniquely South African perspective and we have tried to remain true

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1 The self-selection process followed through the open invitation process yielded a diversity of contributions; however, the sciences were relatively under-represented. Twenty of the 33 proposed chapters we received were accepted and developed further into full chapters included here.
to the voice of each contributor, while at the same time providing a coherent body of scholarly work. The contributors were tasked to move beyond a personal narrative (even though this might have provided the impetus for their ideas), and asked to also consider current scholarship in their area of interest, yet provide useful insights to those who follow in their footsteps, as well as to those who will supervise their successors. The chapters in this book are not limited to a specific discipline, but are as universal to postgraduate study as possible.

As editors, we not only share the experience of having been postgraduate students ourselves, but we also share a keen interest in encouraging postgraduate students’ voices, as well as contributing to the broader field of postgraduate literature. As such, we believe that this book may provide the catalyst for a continued scholarly debate on surviving and succeeding the postgraduate student experience.

THE EDITORS
STELLENBOSCH
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REFERENCES


