Polarity in research-based postgraduate students’ persistence and withdrawal behaviour.

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Keywords
Research-based; postgraduate; persistence; withdrawal; student satisfaction approach.

Abstract
The aim of the study was to do an institution-wide survey of the state of research-based postgraduate education at the University of Pretoria as seen by its senior postgraduate students (research-based masters and doctorate candidates). This paper reports on research completed during 2006.

The research was completed in two phases and targeted both current research-based masters and doctorate candidates, as well as those candidates who opted to cancel their postgraduate studies. The first phase made provision for an exploratory survey of current research-based students’ satisfaction regarding their current postgraduate experience. Some 2850 students were targeted, eliciting a total of 482 responses (17%). A customised student satisfaction approach (Student Satisfaction Manual, Open University Press, 1997), covering nine key areas in postgraduate study was used. The approach is unique in combining student-determined questions, satisfaction and importance ratings, and management information for action. The questionnaire was piloted before its launch among academics and postgraduate students. The trends emerging from this survey were cross-validated using a range of focus group discussions in each faculty.

The second phase was associated with telephonic interviews with candidates who chose to permanently withdraw from postgraduate studies. A list of all research-based postgraduate withdrawals (between January 2003 and 31 May 2006; N = 197) was retrieved from the UP database. Interviews were conducted with 79 students (sample size: 40%). Interviews were audio-taped for purposes of recordkeeping and moderating during and after data capturing. A semi-structured instrument was used.
The findings from the two phases were consistent and highlighted a number of key needs, including general information needs (programme, facilities, funding, access); key academic information services (electronic information resources, subjects specialist support, selection of reference material, loan periods); clarification of roles and responsibilities of role-players associated with the postgraduate episode; inclusion of postgraduate students into the research community; structured supervision and support (especially during proposal development and approval stage); the revisiting of current training and development programmes in research methodology skills, academic writing, and editorial support; smaller postgraduate supervisor:student–ratios; improved connectivity for postgraduate students; acknowledgement of the personal circumstances of postgraduate students; and accommodation and parking arrangements for postgraduate students on campus.

The research highlighted a relationship between three key variables. Students that have not developed the ability to manage their time, as well as their personal circumstances and other responsibilities properly, find it difficult to focus on the selected research topic, which leads to either their not completing their studies in the prescribed time, or eventual withdrawal. These students tend to transfer the responsibility to supervisors by demanding a more structured approach in supervision. Students’ experiences of their postgraduate exposure are determined by two drivers, namely students’ level of satisfaction with their postgraduate experience, and their ability to cope with the collective realities associated with postgraduate studies. A number of events/causes trigger four typical categories of persistence behaviour. These causes determine whether students withdraw, continue, complete and return to UP to further their higher education. A model is proposed to explain these behavioural patterns.