

## **Reasons for the slow completion of Masters and Doctoral degrees by adult learners in a South African township.**

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*The aim of the study was to investigate the reasons why adult learners took longer than required to complete their Master's and Doctoral degrees. A questionnaire and focus group interviews were used to collect data. Twenty adult learners who registered for the Master's and Doctoral degrees at one township campus of a university were targeted, and 16 responded. All 16 participants lived in the townships, and obtained their primary, secondary and tertiary education from the township schools. It was found that the lack of computer skills, poor research skills, inadequate access to the internet, stress, supervision problems, as well as employer's workload contributed enormously to the adult learners' inability to complete their studies within the prescribed period. The study also highlighted the impact of apartheid education on adult learners at postgraduate level. The apartheid education system, which was characterised by poor education provision, played a major role in the slow completion of Masters and Doctoral degrees by the African adult learners. It is recommended that African adult learners who enroll for Masters or Doctoral*

*degrees should do training in research approaches, computer skills, information search and stress management prior to their study. The study duration for both the Masters and Doctoral degrees also need to be reviewed, especially for adult learners or students who obtained their education from the township schools.*

**Keywords:** *Slow completion, African adult learners, Master's and Doctoral degrees.*

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## **Introduction**

The aim of this study was to investigate reasons why the adult learners took longer than required to complete their Master's and Doctoral degrees at a township campus of a university in South Africa. The specific research question which this study intended to answer was: "Why African adult learners from disadvantaged backgrounds took longer than required to complete their Master's and Doctoral degrees?"

At the particular university, and at most universities in South Africa, the minimum duration for the Master's degree is one year full-time and two years continuous part-time; and no candidate should register for the Master's degree for a period longer than four years – except with the special permission of the Senate. For the Doctoral degree the minimum duration is two years full-time and three years continuous part-time; and no candidate should register for the Doctoral degree for a period longer than five years – except with the special permission of the Senate. However, the adult learners who participated in this study did not adhere to the stipulated durations, since most of them were registered for the Master's and Doctoral degrees for between five and seven years without completing these degrees.

## **Literature study**

The research into Master's and Doctoral studies has demonstrated an array of potential impediments to candidate progress, with the possibilities of either delayed completion or attrition. Attrition differs from country to country, with some countries reporting up to 85%, while in some countries more than a third of all students of Master's

and Doctoral programmes drop out within the first year (Cantwell, Scevak, Bourke, Holbrook, 2012; Essa, 2011). The situation may be more intricate for adult learners, due to the complex nature of their circumstances. Richardson (2013) states that adult learners require much higher levels of motivation in order to start and complete a learning programme, as compared to younger students. Many adult learners view the research process in the Master's and Doctoral programmes as characterised by anxiety, uncertainty and 'stuckness' (Batchelor & Di Napoli, 2006; Evans and Stevenson, 2010). The Master's and Doctoral programmes are generally rigorous, and may require that the adult learners are highly motivated in order to successfully pursue them.

The adult learners are faced with a number of challenges and commitments which compete for their attention. The main responsibilities of most adult learners are work and family. Morris (2013) states that there already exists tension between work and family, and that this tension could be worse if the person is studying. The main sources of tension could be time available, family and social interactions, personal priorities and financial constraints (Morris, 2013; Duke & Hinzen, 2014). The time constraints imply that work, family and studying responsibilities share the limited time that the adult learners have at their disposal – leading to the neglect, postponing and mishandling of some of their responsibilities. Researchers in various parts of the globe have found that adult learners enrol in order to improve their status, productivity and income (Morris, 2013; Spaul, 2013; Rothes, Lemos & Gonçalves, 2013). This is more applicable in South Africa where the *apartheid* government deliberately denied many Africans an opportunity of acquiring qualifications and good education. Access to higher education for African children was also very difficult (Letseka & Maile, 2008; Walker & Mkwanzani, 2015). The efforts by the South African government and local universities to address injustices of the *apartheid* government have led to an increase in the numbers of African students studying at universities, including the numbers of adult learners and women. However, increased numbers of African students at universities was not accompanied by a support system that takes into consideration the deficiencies of the *apartheid* education and township schooling system from which they come. Hence in their manner of writing the African students reveal these deficiencies – as confirmed by

Thesen and Cooper (2014) who believe that an individual's writing is never neutral, but it is always influenced by factors such as background, culture, exposure and experiences – all which may be contradictory to scientific writing. African students need clear guidance in this regard, without which the contradictions they experience in their writing may lead to the risk of failure.

The literature study indicates that there are various reasons for the delayed completion or non-completion of the Master's and Doctoral degrees. The first reason could be the adult learners' readiness to do research. Evans and Stevenson (2010) believe that the adult learners' readiness to engage in research may have a great effect on the time of completion and the quality of the research. Meerah (2010) found that many adult learners doing research generally felt that they have yet to acquire skills in seeking information for their research, and are also deficient in analytical skills.

The second reason could be the supervisor. The nature, style and norms of interaction within the supervision relationship play an important role at the Master's and Doctoral levels of research. Many studies identified that some adult learners initially experience confusion, anxiety and alienation due to a lack of clarity regarding the norms and expectations of the supervision relationship (Essa, 2011; Evans & Stevenson, 2010). Ismail, Majid and Ismail (2013) found that supervision is sometimes characterised by a lack of positive communication, a lack of the necessary expertise to give support, and power conflicts in a case where there are supervisors and co-supervisors. Many research students seem to expect a close relationship in which supervisors display a strong personal interest in the student (Abdulla & Evans, 2011; Sidhu, Kaur, Fook & Yunus, 2013). However, the serious shortage of senior lecturers qualifying to supervise Master's and Doctoral students at many national and international universities make close relationships between supervisors and students very difficult – since supervisors may have a high number of students to supervise (Abdulla & Evans, 2011; Muhar, Visser & van Breda, 2013). The resultant supervision overload may lead to neglect of weaker students, and this may greatly disadvantage adult learners who may need special attention.

The third reason could be what is referred to as problematic candidature (Cantwell et al. 2012). Problematic candidature refers to

shortcomings or weaknesses that are within the student, and which may impede progress, and diminish the quality of the final product (Cantwell et al., 2012). Such candidates may lack the ability to engage with the complexities of Master's and Doctoral studies. The issue of problematic candidature may be common among African adult learners in South Africa, since most of them attended township schools during the *apartheid* era. The *apartheid* education grossly neglected their development in numeracy, literacy and information technology (Blignaut & Els, 2010; Spaul, 2013). Such students struggle to meet the high demands of university education, especially at Master's and Doctoral levels. Essa (2011) found that many adult learners in South Africa quit their postgraduate studies due to 'their inability to cope with the demands of the academic rigour'. The universities in South Africa are also under pressure to produce many Master's and Doctoral candidates, since the funding of universities by government is in such a way that the successful completion of Master's and Doctoral degrees fetch much more subsidies than the successful completion of lower degrees (Govender, 2011). Therefore, in order to claim the higher subsidies, universities may admit many students into the Master's and Doctoral programmes – without properly screening them to determine readiness for studying at such high levels. In some instances, the selection processes may be deliberately skewed to favour weaker or marginalised students. Espenshade and Chung (2005) found that many elite universities apply certain selection qualities, which they call affirmative action, in order to increase the admission of certain type of students. In South Africa, the National Plan for Higher Education suggested that participation rates at universities could be augmented by recruiting increasing numbers of 'non-traditional' students—including mature adults, women, workers and disabled people (Castle, Munro & Osman, 2006). The social benefits for such affirmative action are enormous. Long (2007) found that affirmative action policies such as class-based affirmative action, and targeted recruiting among minority or marginalised groups have had a positive effect on education levels of these groups. Although universities are commended for recruiting among minority or marginalised groups, such students may be high risk cases, with greater chances of taking longer than required to complete the study programme or quitting it. Therefore, support systems are to be in place to ensure that such students successfully complete the study programmes for which they enrolled. Essa (2011) found that

the majority of adult learners who quit their postgraduate studies complained about a lack of institutional and social support. A good institutional support may ameliorate the effects of an ineffective social support and help adult learners to successfully pursue postgraduate studies.

## **Research approach**

The research design comprised a multiple-method process of data collection, where a questionnaire and focus group interviews were used to gather data. The literature on adult education, township education, access to higher education by Africans as well as completion and attrition rates played a major role in the development of items for the questionnaire and for the interview guide (as advised by, for instance, Billett, Henderson, Choy, Dymock, Kelly, Smith, James, Beven & Lewis, 2012; Essa, 2011; Govender, 2011; Walker & Mkwanzani, 2015). The questionnaire had tick boxes for aspects such as biographical information, type of school attended, access to resources, the research environment and the work situation. The questionnaires were delivered to individual candidates, and were collected after one week.

Two focus groups were formed, one for the Master's adult learners and another for the Doctoral adult learners. The purpose of separating the Master's and Doctoral adult learners was to avoid a situation where the Master's adult learners may feel dominated or intimidated by the Doctoral adult learners. Also, the experiences and knowledge of the two groups may not be the same, and this may negatively affect the principle of homogeneity which is emphasised by various authors writing about focus group interviews (Carey, 2015; Yager, Diedrichs, & Drummond, 2013). The Doctoral group was composed of six adult learners, while the Master's group had ten adult learners. The purpose of the focus group interviews was to elaborate upon and help to interpret the findings of the questionnaire. Therefore, the results of the questionnaires were made available to each member of the group, and they had to agree on issues which had to be discussed. Participants were informed that participation was voluntary, and that they should be free to express their opinions. The focus group interviews allowed further probing for purposes of clarity regarding reasons and circumstances which made it difficult for the adult learners to complete their studies within the stipulated

time. Terre Blanche, Durrheim and Painter (2006) believe that probing enables the researcher to explore the participants' subjective realities, feelings, reasoning and belief systems.

This is an interpretive study which explores the experiences of studying at postgraduate level by a selection of African adult learners. Studies around African adult learners at tertiary institutions in South Africa, especially at postgraduate level, have not yet been earnestly pursued. This study aims to influence planning and support for adult learners at tertiary institutions, specifically at Master's and Doctoral levels. The study relies on self-reporting and expression of opinion by the African adult learners. Since there were only 16 participants, the findings of this study may not be applicable to other institutions in South Africa. Nonetheless, they still can be regarded as casting some light on the issues as experienced by these participants and as offering some insight into what is needed in the institution. Furthermore, other researchers can continue to explore the extent to which similar conditions and experiences apply in other South African tertiary institutions.

## **Participants**

The population comprised of all adult learners who registered for Master's and Doctoral degrees in the Faculty of Humanities at one campus of the university. While the main campus of the university is situated in another city, the campus in this study is situated in the township. Twenty adult learners were targeted, but 16 (80%) responded. All the participants were African. Of the 16 adult learners who responded twelve (75%) were male. The Master's programme had ten participants, of which seven were male. The Doctoral programme had six participants, of which five were male. The ages of the participants ranged between 37 and 61. All the participants were involved with the township schools, either as teachers or principals (school-based) or education administrators (office-based). The majority of the participants held positions of authority, such as school principal, subject adviser, school inspector and director in education; only two of the 16 participants were ordinary post level one teachers. Most of the participants were registered for between five and seven years for the Master's and Doctoral degrees, and had not yet completed these degrees. All the participants met the minimum requirements to be

in the Master's and Doctoral programmes. All the participants did their previous qualifications on a part-time basis or through distance learning. All participants acquired their primary education, secondary education and teacher training qualifications in the township schools during the *apartheid* era.

## Results of the questionnaire

**Table 1:** Access to resources

No.	Item	Yes	%	No	%
1	I have access to a librarian for information search	15	94	1	6
2	I am able to visit the library, at least, twice a week	9	56	7	44
3	I have a computer of my own	13	81	3	19
4	I am able to write reports using a computer	15	94	1	6
5	I always find the library internet services available	9	56	7	44
6	I have my own private internet access	8	50	8	50
7	I am able to search for articles on the internet, on my own	11	69	5	31
8	It is possible to complete my studies within the normal duration	13	81	3	19
9	I have access to a computer at my workplace	12	75	4	25
10	I only have access to the internet when I am at the campus	6	38	10	62
11	I have completed a report or dissertation before this study	9	56	7	44
12	The library has enough books for my field of study	3	19	13	81

The results indicate that the lack of relevant books in the university's library and the students' inability to access internet were the major problems experienced by the participants. About 13 of the participants complained that the library did not have enough books relevant to their fields of study. Although 13 of the participants had computers of their own, ten could not access internet on campus, and eight had no internet access of their own. There were also seven adult learners who were unable to visit the campus regularly. Nevertheless, 15 of the participants were able to write reports using the computer, 11 could search for articles on the internet and 15 had access to a librarian for subject search.



**Table 2: Research issues**

No	Item	To a great extent	%	Somewhat	%	Very little	%	Not at all	%
1	I struggled with my research proposal	1	6	6	38	9	56	0	0
2	I need training in the basics of research	4	25	7	44	2	12	3	19
3	My family accepts that I am studying	13	81	2	13	0	0	1	6
4	I experience stress due to the difficulty of my studies	4	25	7	44	4	25	1	6
5	The attitude of the supervisor is encouraging	13	81	2	13	0	0	1	6
6	My work environment contributes positively to my studies	11	69	1	6	2	12	2	13
7	The township environment contributes negatively to my studies	4	25	3	19	3	19	6	37
8	My employer's workload allows me to do my studies	2	13	5	31	0	0	9	56
9	My employment is relevant to my field of study	13	81	3	19	0	0	0	0
10	The problem I am researching is based on my work environment/situation	12	75	4	25	0	0	0	0
11	The use of English is a problem for me	0	0	2	13	3	19	11	68
12	My previous degree adequately prepared me for this research	8	50	7	44	1	6	0	0
13	I can handle the pressures of work, family and studies	4	25	12	75	0	0	0	0
14	I need this qualification for promotion or improved status	6	37	2	13	2	13	6	37

The results indicate that the work situation, lack of research skills and stress negatively affected the participants' studies. Fourteen of the 16 participants reported that their employers' workload did not allow them to do their studies, and 13 of the 16 participants reported that they needed training in basic research skills; while 15 of the 16 participants experienced stress due to the difficulty of their studies. Ten of the participants needed the qualification to improve their status or chances of promotion. Nevertheless, 13 of the participants were comfortable with their studies since their studies were in their area of employment.

### **Results of the focus group interviews**

The group members had used the tables above to prioritise and agree on issues they wanted to discuss. Most of the participants showed interest in discussing issues around the library, research, work, stress, the supervisor, computer skills and internet access. The results of each of the items mentioned above will be briefly discussed.

#### **Library**

The complaint by both groups was that very few relevant books were available in the library, while those books which were available had fewer copies – with the result that adult learners waited for too long before they could obtain a copy of the book. Other problems related to the library included noise by undergraduate students, shortage of computers in the library and limited internet access. One adult learner remarked as follows: 'I think the campus library was not meant for post-graduate degrees because for us there is just not enough resources in place'. The inability to visit the library regularly was also a common concern for both groups, with work and family commitments cited as the most common reasons for failure to go to the library regularly. One member said: 'We are really busy, and always away from home for up to a week'. The lack of internet access and the shortage of relevant books in the library were summed up as follows by one participant: 'If you make efforts to go to the library, you may go home empty-handed, with no books and no information'.

#### **Computers and the internet**

Although both groups felt that their poor mastery of computers was

a serious problem for their studies, the Doctoral group felt that there were basic computer operations they could manage, but these were inadequate since their Doctoral studies required much more advanced skills than the basic skills they possessed. Common words used included: 'I can use a computer, but for my simple everyday needs'; 'The tables which I have in my studies I cannot do'. When it came to internet access, both groups felt that the university's inability to provide them with internet access on campus was disadvantaging their studies. However, the majority of the Doctoral adult learners seemed to have made personal efforts to access internet through their 3Gs (private internet access) and using their cell phones as modems. The problem the Doctoral adult learners had was that some of the articles and material they needed to access were not available via 3Gs and private modems, but only accessible through the university internet since the university paid subscription fees to some of these publishing companies. The students used words such as: '3Gs don't help'; 'Whether you have internet of your own or not, it's [lack of access] the same'.

## **Research**

Both the Masters and Doctoral adult learners complained a lot about their poor research skills. Although the Doctoral adult learners showed a much better effort and knowledge as compared to the Master's participants, they still felt that their knowledge fell short of the demands made by their doctoral studies. 'I can't help myself with what I know, I need guidance', and 'The many research concepts and approaches confuse me' were some of the comments made by the Doctoral adult learners. The Master's adult learners' comments were: 'I really struggle with research', and 'I don't know it [research]'.

The participants also mentioned that supervisors expected them to know more about research; and the supervisors, therefore, did not explain much in their feedback to these adult learners. The Master's participants were particularly concerned about the lack of detail and the use of complex research concepts during the feedback discussions with their supervisors.

## **Work**

When it came to the impact of the employer's work on their studies,

both groups felt that their workloads were too heavy, and thus made it difficult for them to complete their studies in time. The Doctoral participants complained about being away from home a lot (due to work) as a reason for their inability to visit the campus library regularly. The Doctoral participants held higher positions in Education administration, and were thus travelling a lot and spending a number of days away from home and from the campus. The comments from the Doctoral adult learners were along the lines: 'Work demands keep me out of town most of the time', and 'I am always away from home'.

The Master's adult learners also complained about school teaching and administration work. Their comments included: 'Preparing and marking learners' work take time', and 'I always do administration work which I cannot do when I am in office'.

### **Stress**

Both groups were clear on the impact of stress on their studies. They mentioned that the family and work pressures were taking a toll on their health, with experiences of headaches, stomach aches and stiff muscles becoming common or regular. 'This work will kill me' or 'These studies will kill me' were common statements among the adult learners.

### **Discussion**

The study sought to investigate reasons why adult learners in the Master's and doctoral programmes took longer to complete their studies. The factors which were reported by the adult learners as problematic in their studies were the following: a lack of research skills, inadequate computer skills; a lack of sources in the library, stress and work pressure. The biographical information revealed that all the participants lived in the townships and obtained their primary and secondary school education, as well as their teacher training qualifications from institutions situated in the townships; while their tertiary education was also pursued through university campuses situated in the townships, or through part-time or distance learning. The townships were residential areas established for occupation by Africans only, in line with the apartheid policy. These townships were characterised by inadequate infrastructure, shortage of education institutions, inferior education and high rates of crime, unrests and unemployment.

The results revealed that most of the participants did not have the basic research skills required for their level of study prior to embarking on the Master's and Doctoral studies. The research skills are promoted by projects, group discussions and analysing available data. However, the teaching content in the township schools was too basic, and memorisation of facts was encouraged. Therefore, there was no need to find additional information. Hence the adult learners' basic research skills could not be developed from an early stage. The focus group interviews confirmed that the participants experienced problems with research skills, with Master's adult learners experiencing more research related problems than the Doctoral participants.

The participants' poor knowledge of research created communication problems between them and their supervisors. The participants reported that their supervisors assumed that they were conversant with basic research, and thus in their feedback and discussions, the supervisors simply used research concepts which participants did not understand. In many instances the supervisors were white males, who have never attended or worked at township schools, but have been exposed to a different and better system of education as compared to that of the participants. Therefore, the supervisors did not understand the research deficiencies of students from township institutions. The shortage of suitably qualified lecturers at many universities means that supervisors are overloaded with too many students to supervise (as emphasized by, for instance, Mouton and Boshoff (2015)). Although the participants felt that their supervisors displayed professionalism and a caring attitude, the supervisors' work overload and their lack of knowledge about township schooling negatively affected their ability to adequately guide students from disadvantaged backgrounds.

The inability to effectively use computers and access the internet also posed a serious problem for the participants. The participants attended township schools where they never had access to computers and internet connectivity. Hence the application of complex functions of the computer may be a problem for the participants. Although the majority of participants reported that they could write reports using a computer, the focus group interviews revealed that they could only write short reports needed for their work situation, but could not handle tables, graphs and complicated computer operations needed for their post-graduate studies.

Some of the participants had access to the internet only when they were on campus, with others unable to do so even on campus. However, many participants were unable to visit the campus library regularly – in order to use the internet facilities available on campus. In many instances, the scholarly research sites are not freely available to private internet users, since universities pay subscription fees to these sites in order for students to freely access such sites. Therefore, students who have private internet may not be able to access these sites without paying – which most students are not willing or able to do. Access to the internet is crucial for studies at Master's and Doctoral levels. In the case where the library did not have adequate books, as reported by the majority of the participants, access to the internet would even be more important since most of the sources the participants needed for their studies would be available on the internet. Meerah (2010) recommends that Master's and Doctoral candidates, prior to embarking on their studies, need to equip themselves with higher order information-seeking skills such as the ability to access, select, interpret and critically evaluate the related information in a timely and efficient manner. Therefore, the lack of internet access, coupled with poor computer skills for some of the participants, may make studying at Master's and Doctoral levels very difficult.

The work and family pressure also contributed negatively to the completion rates of the adult learners who participated in this study. The ages of the participants ranged between 37 and 61. They all had families and stable jobs, and most of them held key positions at their work places. Since the responsibilities of work and family were already demanding, the Master's and Doctoral studies may have been an additional burden to the adult learners. Hence an overwhelming majority of the participants reported that the employers' workload did not allow them to adequately focus on their Master's and Doctoral studies. In South African, the pressure to produce good results in Grade 12, to improve school administration and to adjust to the ever changing assessment systems in schools is unbearable for the majority of teachers and education administrators (John, 2015). The high numbers of resignations by teachers in South Africa is attributed to the pressure teachers are continuously exposed to (Nkosi, 2015). The work situation for teachers and education administrators is generally stressful, and the Master's and Doctoral studies may worsen the stress situation of the

adult learners who are also involved with schools in the townships.

The few female learners who participated in the focus group interviews seemed withdrawn, or participated less in discussions as compared to their male counterparts. However, they did mention that they were faced with a lot of responsibilities around the home – which male learners never complained about. The reason could be that in the African culture women, including professional or working women, are often expected to take care of their husbands, children and all household chores – with little or no help from their husbands. Therefore, the female adult learners may have experienced much more pressure than their male counterparts. The situation may make it very difficult for African professional women to focus on their studies and professions. Hence there were fewer women students at post-graduate level at the institution.

The majority of the participants reported that they enjoyed their Master's and Doctoral studies. This is in line with the view that adult learners who are working become more comfortable with their studies if such studies are relevant to their work situation (Essa, 2011; Morris, 2013). Choy, Billet and Kelly (2013) maintain that working adult learners prefer to engage in studies or training which could help them to become more productive, and also to improve their employment opportunities. Since the participants were in education, studying in education may have helped them to improve their performance or to manage situations more efficiently. The relevance of their studies to their work could also be the motivation which kept them in the Master's and Doctoral programmes for that long.

The minimum duration for both the Master's and Doctoral degrees may also be too short. The above discussion indicates that education provision for the African learners had been characterised by deficient content, inadequate facilities and poor administration. Therefore, recipients of such education would need longer time in order to cope with the demands of tertiary education. The fact that all the participants had not completed their studies after five to seven years of study could be indicative of their unpreparedness for the rigorous tertiary education programmes such as the Master's and Doctoral programmes. It could be that universities need the subsidies paid by government after successful

completion of these degrees, hence they could not make longer durations.

## Conclusion and recommendations

The study focussed on the adult learners' slow completion of Master's and Doctoral degrees. While the number of participants in this study is small, the results are very clear: the adult learners took longer to complete their Master's and Doctoral degrees mainly due to their heavy workloads, inadequate knowledge of research and a lack of technological skills. The delayed completion of the Master's and Doctoral studies by the adult learners may be costly for the university since government subsidies are delayed or even forfeited in the case of attrition. There is a need to address the slow completion rates of the adult learners, especially in the fast-changing world, which is characterised by technology, longer life-spans and a need for life-long learning. The introduction of a training programme for the adult learners who enrol for the Master's and Doctoral programmes could help to improve completion rates in these programmes. The training programme could include research approaches, computer skills, information search and stress management. The extension of study durations could also reduce the pressure (to complete) on adult learners, and thus enable them to have time for family and work – without feeling guilty.

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