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# Barriers to and enablers for the success of postgraduate students in social work

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## ABSTRACT

All over the world, higher education institutions (HEIs) are concerned about low enrollment, delayed completion rates, non-completion, and the subsequent smaller number of graduates of Master's and doctoral programmes. This is also true for the postgraduate students in Social Work at a South African public university, with statistics showing a high dropout rate and extended completion times. The poor throughput rate of the postgraduate programme in Social Work motivated the exploration of barriers to and enablers for student success in this programme. This was done through a qualitative descriptive design, using an online questionnaire with open-ended reflective questions. The collected data was uploaded to Atlas.ti 9 and analyzed by means of inductive thematic analysis. The findings of this study indicated barriers pertaining to supervision, personal challenges, and the distance-learning delivery mode of academic programmes. External factors and enablers that impacted the success of postgraduate students were also identified.

## ARTICLE HISTORY

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## KEYWORDS

Social work; post graduate students; post graduate studies

## Introduction

Worldwide, tertiary education institutions are facing challenges regarding the success rate of postgraduate students. These challenges include the time it takes for postgraduate students to complete their studies and the high percentage of these students who terminate their studies and drop out of the system before graduation (Delnoij et al., 2020; Reason, 2017; Sondlo, 2013). In 2008, Watson had already raised concerns about poor postgraduate student throughput in higher education institutions (HEIs) in South Africa. She found that most postgraduate students took significantly longer to graduate than expected, which has implications for the institution's graduation rate (Watson, 2008). Cronjé (2007) reported similar completion rates of  $n + 1$  in Master's level qualifications at another major South African institution while Mouton (2007) reported similar completion rates of doctoral degrees for the entire South African educational system. The rule of  $n + 1$  means that students only have  $n + 1$  years to complete a degree

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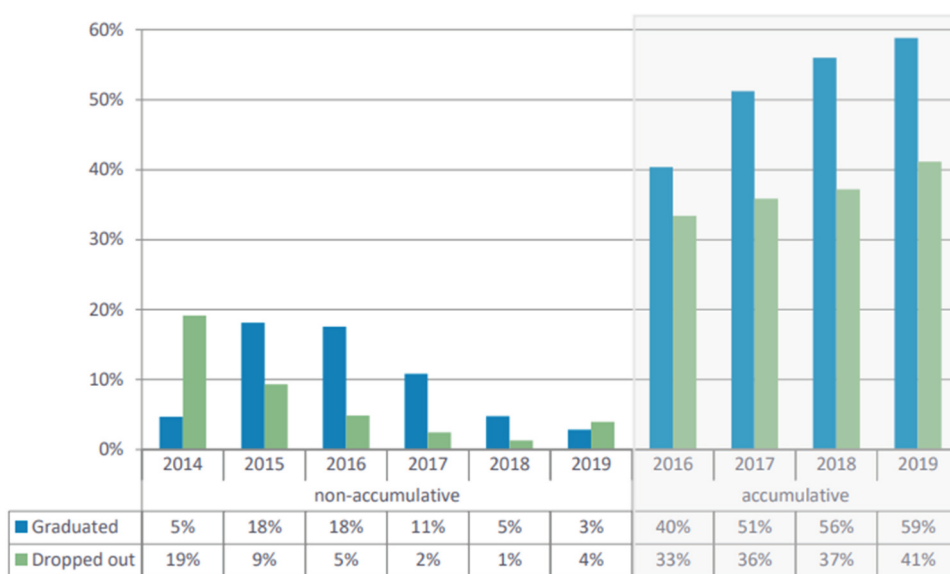
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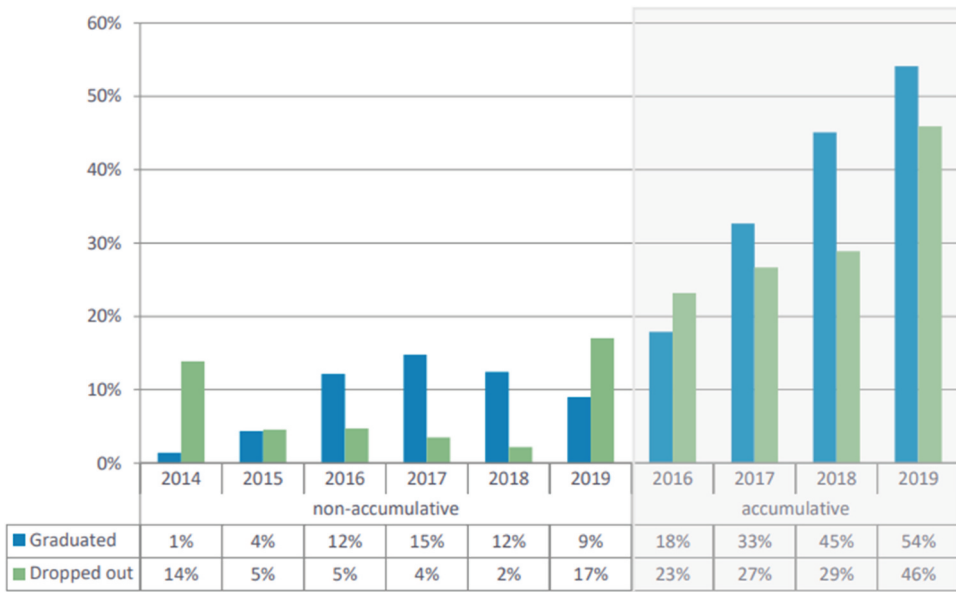
where  $n$  is the minimum completion time of the qualification and  $+1$  refers to the extra year that a student may need to complete the qualification (Cronjé, 2007). Since the studies of Cronjé (2007), Mouton (2007), and Watson (2008), there has not been a corresponding increase in student success as measured by timely graduation (Department of Higher Education and Training [DHET], 2016). More than a decade later, the Council on Higher Education (CHE, 2021) reported on a 2019 study, saying that the dropout rate of Master's and PhD students had increased and was an ongoing concern. According to the CHE report, student throughput and graduation rates for research Master's degrees increased while the dropout rate also increased from 33% (2013) to 41% (2019), as indicated in Figure 1.

The same pattern, although more significant, was observed in the doctoral degree throughput rate, with an increase in the dropout rate from 23% (2016) to 49% (2019), as indicated in Figure 2 below.

HEIs are focused not only on the successful completion of postgraduate studies, but also on completion timeframes. Postgraduate student success is critically important for universities as subsidies for students' graduation and research outputs are a key source of income for these institutions. Furthermore, completion rates are important for knowledge production. Research on the duration of postgraduate studies and concerns about reducing the time it takes students to complete their postgraduate studies have therefore become crucially important to students and higher education administrators, governments, postgraduate study funders, and other stakeholders in higher education. In several of these studies, issues with postgraduate education have been raised, notably the time it takes students to complete their studies (Amehoe, 2014; Holdaway et al., 2005; Lessing & Schulze, 2012; Sayed et al., 2008; Sondlo, 2013; Thomas, 2015). Similar studies in Africa have confirmed that both institutional and student-related factors are affecting students who take longer to complete



**Figure 1.** Throughput rates for research master's degrees in the first year of enrolment in 2014. Source: CHE (2021).



**Figure 2.** Throughput rates for doctoral degrees in the first year of enrolment in 2014. Source: CHE (2021).

their postgraduate studies or who do not complete their studies at all, resulting in HEIs with record low student throughputs (Amehoe, 2014; Lovitts, 2012; Luescher-Mamashela, 2015).

A case in point is the Postgraduate Programme in Social Work offered by a public university in South Africa. This distance-education programme allows students to enroll and study online, supported by virtual meetings and training sessions throughout the year. Even though the success of postgraduate social workers is the desired outcome worldwide, it remains elusive and challenging (Davis et al., 2017; Skills for Care, 2023). The challenge of the successful throughput of postgraduate social work students is also evident at other public universities in South Africa.

The recommended time frame for completing a Master's degree is two years (DHET, 2016). From 2011 to 2020, a total of 207 students enrolled for a Master's degree in Social Work at the public university where the study was conducted. However, during this period, only four students graduated within the recommended timeframe; 12 graduated in the recommended time plus one year; 21 graduated in the recommended time plus two years; and 13 took longer than four years to complete the degree. The dropout rate over the specified time was 47.8% (99 students) (B. Pietersen, personal communication, April, 19, 2021).

The recommended time frame to complete a PhD is three years (Department of Higher Education and Training, 2016). A total of 84 students enrolled for the PhD in Social Work from 2011 to 2020, with a dropout rate of 24% (17 students) (B. Pietersen, personal communication, April, 19, 2021). Only one student graduated within the recommended timeframe, eight in the recommended time plus one year and six in the recommended time plus two years while six students took more than five years. It is clear from the statistical information that the completion rate is very low, since only four Master's degree students (2.3%) and one PhD student (1.4%) completed their postgraduate studies within the

recommended time. Disconcerting is the extremely high dropout rate of 99 Master's degree students (47.8%) and 17 PhD students (24%) in Social Work during this time.

Sonn (2016) found that South African postgraduate students experience several challenges in completing their research projects within the recommended time frames. These challenges include difficulty to formulate a clear problem statement, the complexity of proposal writing, lack of academic writing skills, unclear research methods, lack of resources, poor student-supervisor relationships, and delays in the external assessment process. These findings correspond with those of Heeralal (2015) who indicated that, in terms of the supervision process, students struggle with research methodology, data analysis, proposal writing, and the assignment of a suitable supervisor.

The Higher Education Quality Committee (HEQC) audit cycle has pointed out that universities do not provide adequate support for their postgraduate students. According to the Academy of Science of South Africa (ASSAf), the HEQC encourages universities to improve their quality assurance and support structures for postgraduate education in order to improve student success (ASSAf, 2010). In a follow-up study, ASSAf (2018) proposed several initiatives to support postgraduate education and improve the current throughput of postgraduate students. According to the literature, providing adequate and effective support is crucial to ease and overcome the challenges faced by distance learners (Boyle et al., 2010; Guiney, 2014; Heyman, 2010; Mills, 2003; Park & Choi, 2009).

From the discussion, it is evident that HEIs have substantial concerns about delayed completion, non-completion and high dropout rates as this has a negative impact on university subsidies. What's more, postgraduate distant-learning students need to deal with additional challenges, which were exacerbated during the COVID-19 pandemic, highlighting the need to explore the barriers to and enablers of success for postgraduate students in Social Work. The enablers identified in this study can be utilized to counteract barriers and thus improve students' success rates.

## Methods

This study used a qualitative approach that, according to Mohajan (2018), generally explores meaning and insights in a given situation. Furthermore, it is deemed important to understand and describe the phenomena from the point of view of the participants (Fouché, 2021). The qualitative descriptive design used in this study is less interpretive than other designs and provides the opportunity to reflect the data more accurately (Sandelowski, 2000).

## Data collection

Due to the COVID-19 restrictions and because most of the students were distance-education students, data was collected in the online environment. An online questionnaire was therefore used as the qualitative data-gathering instrument. The questionnaire consisted of demographic details of the target population and open-ended reflective questions. The open-ended reflective questions allowed the participants to share their experiences in their own words, providing the researchers with rich and authentic data with which to answer the research question. The open-ended questions in the online questionnaire were developed

and guided by recent literature and the research question and aim. The participants were recruited by an appointed research assistant who emailed all students registered for Master's or PhD degrees in Social Work between 2011 and 2021, and who had received supervision from research supervisors for at least ten months ( $N = 285$ ). The students who agreed to participate received links to an informed consent form and the online questionnaire. The completed questionnaires were anonymized and prepared for data analysis.

A total of 25 students agreed to participate in the study. Of the participants, 30% were in the age group 41–50 years, 52.5% were current postgraduate students, 43.5% had completed their studies, and 4.3% did not complete their studies.

### **Data analysis**

Inductive thematic analysis (according to the steps described by Braun & Clarke, 2006) was applied to ensure that all possible themes were identified and described. The data obtained from the open-ended reflective questions was uploaded to the Atlas.ti 9 software program for analysis. The researcher and an independent co-researcher analyzed the data sets separately and then compared their findings to enhance the trustworthiness and validity of the process and the findings. The characteristics of the study population were analyzed using descriptive statistics.

### **Ethical clearance**

The university's research ethics committee approved the project. When reporting on the accounts of the participants, the names were omitted to maintain anonymity and confidentiality. To protect their identities, they used pseudonyms instead (Creswell, 2012). During the data collection and reporting processes, ethical safeguards, including informed consent (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010), were used to prevent participant coercion.

### **Findings**

Four main themes emerged from the data analysis, which are divided into barriers and enablers, as illustrated in Table 1.

In the following discussion of the findings, barriers and enablers will be presented per theme and will be supported by verbatim quotes from the participants.

#### **Theme: supervision**

Supervision is a crucial element in the research process of postgraduate students. Yet, the participants experienced several barriers in this regard that they believed had a negative effect on their progress.

#### **Barriers to supervision**

The participants perceived *supervisors who are not experts in the students' field of study* as a barrier to supervision, as indicated by P24 and P3:

**Table 1.** Barriers and enablers reported by postgraduate social work students.

Main theme	Barriers	Enablers
Supervision	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The supervisor is not an expert</li> <li>• Ineffective/delayed feedback</li> <li>• Strained relationship/conflict</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Experienced and competent supervisors</li> <li>• Guidance and support</li> </ul>
Personal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Balance of work/studying part-time while working full-time</li> <li>• Managing family life</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Perseverance</li> <li>• Emotional support</li> <li>• Motivation</li> </ul>
Distance learning as a mode of delivery	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lack of interaction</li> <li>• Isolation</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Institutional support</li> <li>• Support from groups</li> </ul>
External factors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lack of support from others</li> <li>• Covid lockdown implications</li> <li>• Load-shedding</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Emotional support from family and spouses</li> </ul>

... to have a study leader who is not knowledgeable in the field. (P24)

... given a promotor that is no expert in the title of the study or field of study. (P3)

The participants furthermore experienced that *ineffective or delayed feedback from the supervisor* on the work they had submitted delayed their progress:

To pay for an extra year of study because study leaders delay the process cause a lot of stress. (P9)

It sometimes takes time for my supervisor to return the chapters that I have sent in in order for him to work on corrections. (P5)

Several participants stated that they had *strained relationships with their supervisors* since they felt that the supervisors were not open for discussion, and that there was conflict between the student and the supervisor:

Study leaders who are not open for discussion or explanation cause limited opportunity for the student to learn. (P9)

Conflict between student and supervisor ... (P6)

### **Enablers in supervision**

Most of the participants also identified enablers within supervision, which had a positive effect on progress with their studies. The participants felt they made good progress because they had *experienced and competent supervisors* who understood the research and the procedures to be followed.

P2 stated that 'I got a supervisor that was on par with my studies and understood what research entails and the procedures to be followed' (P2). P23 voiced that because the supervisor was knowledgeable, it contributed to her progress: '... as he has knowledge in the field of the research topic it made a huge difference for me and contributed to great progress' (P23). P5 and P10 also stated:

... a competent supervisor helped. (P5)

I think it also helped to have an experienced professor as my supervisor. He is experienced in the field of social work, and also in research. (P10)

The participants valued the *guidance and support they had received from their supervisors*, as these participants explained:

... the main factor that assisted me to progress is the support I got from my supervisor. (P24)

She always made sure to guide me through every finer detail of research in general. (P15)

She [supervisor] was always available when I needed guidance and support. (P19)

Supervisor not giving up on me. (P3)  
 She always encouraged me to never give up on my study. (P13)

## **Theme: personal**

### **Personal barriers**

On a personal level, the participants identified several barriers as well as enablers that influenced their progress. Personal barriers included *balance of work, or studying part-time while working full-time*. Most postgraduate students are part-time students who need to focus on their studies as well as their full-time work, resulting in a struggle to maintain a balance between work and studies:

... work schedule demands of student and supervisor impacting on regular Zoom supervision and adhering to deadlines. (P18)  
 My workload in my full-time work was a huge barrier and I did not always have time for my studies. (P7)  
 ... on my side, the workload at my employment doubled up, so that delayed my progress a bit. (P25)  
 Work-related barriers sometimes made it challenging and affected the deliverables of research tasks. (P15)

Several participants found it difficult to *manage their family life* with their studies. Regarding the COVID-19 pandemic, several participants reported that they had been hospitalized or lost family members to Covid:

I was hospitalised. (P18)  
 I lost my father and father-in-law [due to Covid]. (P4)  
 Having to work and seeing to my children and study was a challenge. (P20)

### **Personal enablers**

Personal enablers included personality traits such as *perseverance, motivation, readiness, and a search for knowledge*. Participant 3 identified her '*own ability to persevere*' as an enabler (P3).

The study participants emphasized the importance of motivation. Participant 22 mentioned that she developed a *motivation* to learn:

I was ready to learn. I had to develop motivation to learn. Along with readiness, a strong willpower is also essential to overcome hurdles and problems. Readiness helped me to develop a positive attitude in my studies. It is the most important factor influencing my progress. If I was a student with no motivation to pursue my studies, any amount of force will be futile. (P22)  
 Distant learning requires more commitments than being face to face on campus. (P18)

Several participants indicated the importance of having a quest for knowledge. In this context, Participants 15 and 6 said:

... my quest to know more about research and to have a valuable input to the body of knowledge has always been a driving force. (P15)  
 I wanted to complete the study to gain more knowledge about the topic I have researched. (P16)



### **Theme: distance learning as a mode of delivery**

As postgraduate students are part-time students, they are not on campus. Continuous learning is used for supervision. Several students experienced this mode of delivery as a barrier to learning.

#### **Barriers**

Participant 23 identified the *lack of interaction* between the lecturer and the student in this mode of delivery as a barrier.

One of the limitations of emergency remote learning is the lack of personal interaction between lecturer and student. (P23)

Several participants experienced *feelings of isolation*, as they indicated that they felt alone, isolated, and without support during their studies:

I often felt isolated in terms of my studies. (P4)

The participants also experienced a *lack of support from others*:

It would be wonderful to also have other people to support you. (P18)  
... I had a difficult experience. I didn't have anyone to support me except the support I received from my supervisor. (P18)

#### **Enablers**

At the same time, various participants mentioned some type of support as an enabler.

#### **Support from groups**

The participants appreciated the support they had received from other students, as well as the group supervision sessions that were held:

We were in a group and could assist each other with ideas. (P4)  
Learning in a group provided some sort of security because even if you are not sure or are doubtful to ask questions, you will find one of the group members who is brave enough to ask that same question you wanted to ask, and the answers given will help all the group members. (P7)  
Group work supervision from my supervisor with other fellow student researchers ... (P14)  
Online group supervision sessions that were being conducted on weekly basis—that really assisted a lot. (P24)

#### **Institutional support**

The institutional enablers that were identified included *library support*, *research support*, and *financial support*.

I had excellent support from the library. (P12)  
Support with some literature assisted when I started with my literature study and while I was busy with my proposal. (P4)

... support from the librarian as he sends books requested as soon as possible and ensures that the choice is just wide – as long as he gets the books. (P11)

### **Financial support**

Most of the students received bursaries from the university, which allowed them to study:

I got a bursary. That also motivated me to study and obtain the degree. (P2)

Some students also identified *research support* in the form of workshops—such as the Atlas.ti training and research methodology training—as enablers:

The Atlas.ti training also assisted me in order to analyse and organise my data. (P6)

The endnote training also assisted myself in terms of my referencing. (P8)

I attended some online sessions that were offered during COVID-19 in order to assist postgraduate students, which were also very informative. (P4)

### **Theme: external factors**

Although HEIs are expected to provide as much support as possible for their students, there are external factors that contribute to student success.

### **Barriers**

The participants identified several barriers, such as the *Covid-19 pandemic*. For most of the postgraduate students, the pandemic had a very negative impact on their research progress. This included delayed research progress, delayed data collection, and difficulty with the recruitment of participants, as voiced by these participants:

Covid also played a role, and implementation of my focus groups was delayed. (P11)

The COVID-19 pandemic, I think it contributed to the progress being a bit slow. (P25)

Covid-19 delayed my progress with my proposal progress. (P21)

The issue of the COVID-19 pandemic – this issue was so prominent in the sense that it presented a whole host of challenges for which one could not go into the community and make an impact through my study. (P16)

The COVID-19 pandemic really affected my studies due to the hard lockdown rules. It was very difficult to make arrangements for the recruitment of participants in the research study. Most organisations were closed down temporarily because of the infection numbers of affected staff members. (P8)

... inaccessibility of research participants, which impeded the research process. (P15)

Covid-19 not only affected the participants' research progress but also had a negative impact on their overall progress:

I was seriously affected by Covid-19, to the point where I had to pause my studies for some time. (P22)

In addition, *load-shedding or the electricity crisis* had a severe negative effect on the progress of the participants.

Nationwide crisis of electricity ... load-shedding has costed me a lot more, especially when it comes to send my schoolwork in time. Sometimes I was not able to respect my deadlines due to load-shedding. (P23)

The unexpected impact of load-shedding on cancelling supervision via Zoom and extreme work demands impacting on planned supervision slots ... (P18)

### Enablers

External factors—such as *emotional support from family and partners or spouses* – provided support to the students and allowed them to make good progress with their studies. The students described this as a very important enabler, as indicated by these participants:

My husband took over the house to allow me time to work. (P19)

Support from my husband—more emotional support. (P5)

... to have support from your spouse firstly. (P20)

### Discussion

The findings of this study indicated that although certain barriers were encountered that could have had a negative effect on student success, the participants also identified enablers that could improve the throughput rate of students.

Although effective supervision is central to successful postgraduate research (Cekiso et al., 2019; Yende, 2021), postgraduate students face universal supervisory challenges in higher education (Van Rensburg et al., 2016). Therefore, some of the findings of this study are consistent with those reported in the literature. In this study, some of the participants regarded their research supervisors' lack of knowledge and ineffective or delayed feedback as reasons for poor progress. This concern was also raised by Cekiso et al. (2019), who indicated that students experienced poor or delayed feedback as demotivating.

The issue of poor feedback was underscored by the poor communication experiences of students in the student-supervisor relationship. In this study, some of the participants had strained relationships with their supervisors since they believed that the supervisors were not open to discussion and that there was conflict between the student and the supervisor. This corresponds with the findings of Cekiso et al. (2019) showing that the relationship between supervisors and students was marked by student frustration and that scant feedback was perceived as lack of appropriate supervision. Daniel (2021) explained that when opposing expectations between the student and supervisor were not clearly articulated and communicated in advance, difficulties might arise in the teaching environment which, if not promptly resolved, could result in unhappiness with the postgraduate programme.

While only a few students mentioned a troublesome supervisor-student relationship as a barrier to academic progress, most of the participants confirmed that they had made good progress in their studies due to the guidance and support they had received from

experienced and competent supervisors. This is consistent with the findings of previous researchers who stated that the effectiveness of the interaction between academic research supervisors and their students has been acknowledged as the most crucial driver of timely and successful completion of postgraduate degrees (Roach et al., 2019).

According to Yende (2021), it is the duty of supervisors to meet or address students' academic expectations, such as supporting, guiding, and helping students fine-tune their academic writing (Lee & Murray, 2015; Massyn, 2018; Netshitangani & Machaisa, 2021; Sondlo, 2013). However, as Roach et al. (2019) and Eby et al. (2013) explained, the quality of supervision benefits students pragmatically by reducing the time they need to complete their studies and by positively affecting their psychological well-being. This emphasizes the importance of a good relationship between supervisor and student. A supervisor should have special skills and fulfil multiple roles during the postgraduate journey, such as sharing specialist expertise (Pearson & Brew, 2002), giving feedback (Rose, 2003), demonstrating research skills (Vilkinas, 2005), being accessible (Arambewela & Hall, 2009), encouraging open communication (Ives & Rowley, 2005), and providing emotional support (Wisker et al., 2003). Netshitangani and Machaisa (2021) believed that the academic support given to students by supervisors should include mentoring, nurturing, and guidance. According to Yende (2021), supervisory support is critical for the development of a strong relationship and mutual respect between postgraduate students and their supervisors. This may be more challenging in distance-learning modes where direct or in-person contact between students and their supervisors is limited.

Personal factors in the students' lives can also have an impact on their study success. On a personal level, the participants identified several barriers as well as enablers that influenced their progress. Here, personal barriers included work-study balance, studying part-time while working full-time, and the demands of family life. According to Massyn (2018), students must balance a variety of obligations as working adults in addition to their studies. Students are at risk as they try to strike a balance between competing obligations and regulations. The struggle to balance conflicting responsibilities and rules puts students at risk. The study by Evans et al. (2021) on the experiences of social work students during the COVID-19 pandemic details the cumulative weight of personal and family health concerns, employment uncertainty, and online learning challenges.

Walsh et al. (2021) discovered that working from home during the pandemic made it challenging to make academic progress and remain motivated. Based on the findings of this study, the pandemic certainly had a negative impact on students' progress as these difficulties affected both their academic work and family life.

Personal enablers identified by the postgraduate social work students included perseverance and motivation. According to the findings of Zaheer and Munir (2020), the attitude of students is a critical factor in distant-learning studies. Students must be self-motivated and have high self-efficacy and an internal locus of control. Dlungwane and Voce (2020), who focused on persistence to complete studies, also determined that self-efficacy was crucial to boost resilience despite obstacles and setbacks. Self-motivated students frequently have a fresh perspective on events and perceive the world from a positive angle, which enables them to remain motivated despite setbacks. Internal motivation and willpower reinforce the desire to finish a degree despite challenges. Daniel (2021) stated that for students to complete their studies, they need to take personal responsibility for setting the direction and duration of their research programme.

In his study, Moore (1997) found that distance learning as a mode of delivery comes with its own challenges due to the physical distance between the supervisor and the student. Likewise, the social work students in this study also found distance learning to be a challenge. The biggest concern is the lack of connection between student and supervisor (Ross & Sheail, 2017), resulting in feelings of isolation and a lack of support, as also experienced by the social work students in this study. Similarly, Walsh et al. (2021) explained that the pandemic worsened the feeling of isolation and absence of peer support. To address the disconnect in distance education, supervisors need to apply technology-based approaches as a solution to the inherent challenges caused by the physical distance between supervisor and supervisee (Carlisle et al., 2013).

Although the lack of peer support was identified as a potential barrier, peer support was also listed as an enabler by several participants. Despite the isolation, most of the students indicated that they experienced support from their fellow students. The advantages of peer support were echoed by several researchers (Conrad, 2006; Ferguson, 2009; Gardner, 2010). According to these researchers, the benefits of peer support include assistance with writing, the increase in information literacy, the increased possibility of finishing a degree, a setting where students are held responsible for their work in front of the group, and a setting where students offer and receive help for publication. Massyn (2018) emphasized that peer support is a significant factor that can help students complete their research.

Different forms of support from the institution where the student is registered can contribute to student success. Financial support as well as training support in the form of workshops presented by the institution have specifically been mentioned by the social workers.

The impact of financial aid as a factor that can shorten the time it takes to complete a degree has been examined in international research (R. Chen & DesJardins, 2010; J. Chen & Hossler, 2017; Oketch, 2016; Yue & Fu, 2017). Similarly, Daniel (2021) postulated that the availability of financial support is regarded as essential for student success. A study conducted at the University of KwaZulu-Natal in South Africa has found a positive relationship between success in postgraduate studies and receiving some form of financial aid (Zewotir et al., 2015).

With reference to institutional support, Massyn (2018) suggested seminars, workshops, and full-time courses to gain fundamental research abilities or update research skills. Workshops have also been identified as an enabler. The term ‘research training’ for students encompasses general workshops on the literature review, research design, data analysis methods, and writing up the research, as well as the specific knowledge covered in traditional research methodology courses (McCallin & Nayar, 2012).

The impact of COVID-19 and subsequent lockdowns was also evident in this study. The social work students identified the pandemic as a major barrier to their research progress. Walsh et al. (2021) alluded to this by stating that during the pandemic, research progress was stalled as students’ access to research was restricted or denied. What’s more, the pandemic created or added additional caregiver responsibilities for many students, affecting their academic performance (Lederer et al., 2021).

In South Africa, the electricity crisis and scheduled load-shedding—or long hours of daily power outages—is a reality that people have to live with (Barney & Courtemanche, 2023). For distance-education students who rely on IT and the internet, this lack of electricity had a severe negative effect on their progress.

A theme that emerged strongly from the data analysis was the enabling role of emotional support from the family in student success. This is in line with research showing that families frequently support graduate students by listening to their concerns and offering words of encouragement or support (Burt et al., 2019).

## Recommendations for postgraduate student success in social work programmes

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are made to help improve the success of postgraduate students, not only in Social Work programmes but also in other postgraduate distance-education programmes:

### Supervision

- The importance of a **good supervisor-supervisee relationship** was again emphasized. Supervisors must realize that they play a much more important and comprehensive role than simply providing academic guidance to the students. A negative relationship will affect student performance. It is recommended that alternative plans should be made if a supervisor or student experiences trouble with this relationship.
- Supervisors must be **experts in their field and in research protocols**. As far as possible, students must be placed with supervisors who are knowledgeable in the students' topics of interest. This can be a challenge if not enough experts are available. However, the use of co-supervisors from other institutions may be a solution. Also, experienced senior supervisors can mentor young or new supervisors by including them as co-supervisors in the team.
- **Timely feedback** is important. It is a reality that academics have complex and time-intensive roles. Supervisors should guard against taking on too many students as this can hinder their ability to provide students with the attention they deserve. Imperatives are structured feedback processes, specific timelines for both students and supervisors, and follow-up communication should one of the team members not keep to the timeline.

### Personal

- Supervisors should understand the reality of adult working students' lives. They must be aware of the personal struggles that may impact student performance and they must encourage students—which emphasizes the importance of having a good relationship with their students.

### Distance-learning challenges

- Implement specific strategies to address disconnectedness, isolation, and lack of communication.
- Create social groups where students can support each other and maintain regular communication about workshops presented by other divisions of the institution,

such as postgraduate schools, language centers, and library services. This involves mobilizing existing university infrastructure and procedures that can assist students.

- Encourage the formation of study groups.

## External factors

- Be aware of the additional stress that load-shedding creates and adapt to and accommodate students accordingly.
- Universities and support services must recognize the importance of family involvement and encourage a supportive environment for postgraduate students.

## Conclusions

Low enrollment numbers, delayed completion rates, non-completion, and the subsequent smaller number of graduates from Master's and doctoral programmes at HEIs are a concern. The same concerns apply to the postgraduate Social Work programme at the public university investigated in this study. The poor throughput rate has motivated the author to explore the barriers to and enablers for postgraduate student success in social work. This study has shown that social workers experience barriers and enablers similar to postgraduate students worldwide. Some of the barriers—such as the student-supervisor relationship, supervisor expertise, and institutional support—can be addressed by the higher education institution. However, barriers of a more personal nature—such as students' ability to balance study commitments with work and family life, South Africa's challenge with load-shedding (a controlled way of rotating the available electricity between all electricity users), and student motivation—may not be in the hands of the institution.

## Limitations of the study

Although this is a qualitative study, the small percentage of students who participated in the study could mean that some enablers or barriers experienced by other postgraduate students were missed.

The online questionnaires with open questions did not allow direct interaction with the participants to facilitate follow-up or clarification questions.

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