

# Experiences of a distance education doctoral programme's graduates: A questionnaire survey

**V. J. Ehlers\***

e-mail: ehlersjh@mweb.co.za

**D. M. van der Wal\***

e-mail: vdwaldm@unisa.ac.za

\*Department of Health Studies

University of South Africa

Pretoria, South Africa

## Abstract

From 2000 until 2010, 66 students obtained D.Litt et Phil (Health Studies) degrees awarded by the University of South Africa (Unisa). Students' theses should make original and unique contributions to the health and/or nursing sciences. This study attempted to identify D.Litt et Phil graduates' experiences during their studies to enhance other students' chances of successfully completing their theses. Questionnaires were sent to the population of 66 D.Litt et Phil graduates. Only 37 (56.1%) graduates returned completed questionnaires. Most graduates were female nurses with an average age of 50.9 at graduation and took 4.6 years to complete their theses, but 80.6 per cent managed to do so within four years. The major challenges related to role overload and time management. Most graduates were satisfied with the university's services and with their academic supervisors. Current and future doctoral students might benefit from better time management, better language and computer skills, more contact with their supervisors and group activities with other students. Future studies should address challenges encountered by currently registered D.Litt et Phil (Health Studies) students and by those who did not complete their theses successfully. Such information could then be harnessed to enhance students' chances of completing their theses within shorter periods of time.

**Keywords:** challenges of distance education students, distance education doctoral programmes, doctoral education for nurses, doctoral students' experiences, library skills of doctoral students, postgraduate nursing education

## INTRODUCTION

'As a core function of universities, doctoral research provides invaluable education and training aimed at producing highly skilled knowledge workers capable of transferring their intellectual and technical expertise to wide-ranging

global contexts. The PhD gained in this process is arguably the key qualification defining the quality of research standards of a country, and is particularly acknowledged as a means for acquiring, generating and using research-based knowledge' (ASSAf 2010, 35). The University of South Africa (Unisa) occupied the 10<sup>th</sup> position out of all South African universities in terms of the doctoral graduates-academics ratio, and only 23 per cent of Unisa's doctoral candidates managed to complete their theses within six years (Mouton 2013, 10, 24).

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

The first doctoral programme for nurses in the United States of America (USA) was founded at the Teachers' College of Columbia University in 1924, focussing on nursing education (Beckstead 2010, 653). In South Africa, the first doctoral programme in nursing was founded at the University of Pretoria in 1976. However, the first doctoral degree (in Sociology) conferred on a South African nurse was in 1965 (Brink 1986, 137).

During the 1970s, nurse leaders in the USA faced challenges '... to convince university administrators that the field of nursing had developed a substantive knowledge base – the mastery of which qualified the candidate for the [doctoral] degree' (Meleis 1988, 436). During this time (1975) the Department of Nursing Science at Unisa was established. This opened distance education opportunities to all South African nurses, from Bachelor's degrees in nursing education, management and community health through to a doctoral degree (D.Litt et Phil) programme. The vision that guided the establishment of a chair of Nursing Science at Unisa would resonate three decades later as: '[T]he most important goal of nursing doctoral education is to prepare leaders who can use their expertise to guide and lead country and international efforts to address health, education, and policy needs' (Ketefian 2008, 1401). The Department of Health Studies at Unisa retains its currency as nursing is facing a global '... unprecedented human resource shortage crisis including a critical shortage of nurse educators and leaders. University-based education requires nursing faculty with higher degrees, thus an ongoing challenge for nursing in many countries is the production and retention of suitably qualified faculty ...' (Evans and Stevenson 2010, 239–240).

Acquiring health-related doctoral qualifications in Western countries might not be the best way to improve Africa's healthcare and nursing services. 'The desperate need to build sustainable human and institutional capacity for health requires that new approaches to education and training in health sciences be considered by South African institutions. The continued heavy reliance on American and British universities is inappropriate, extremely expensive and not sustainable' (Yach 1998, 127). Distance education doctoral programmes provide

one means of accelerating doctoral qualified nurses, but pose unique academic challenges, partly attributable to the geographic distances between students and supervisors. During 2013, 115 students were registered with the Department of Health Studies at Unisa for the D.Litt et Phil programme. Of these, 55 students were from countries other than South Africa (Unisa 2013).

Students who obtained their D. Litt et Phil degrees successfully overcame several challenges to do so. This study aimed to identify these graduates' experiences and to identify ways in which current and future doctoral candidates could be assisted to facilitate the successful completion of their theses.

## **PURPOSE**

The purpose of the study was to describe the experiences encountered by D.Litt et Phil (Health Studies) doctoral graduates while completing their theses. Strategies, based on these graduates' experiences, might enable more doctoral candidates to complete their studies successfully through distance education within shorter periods of time, benefitting students, supervisors and universities.

## **RESEARCH METHOD**

A quantitative descriptive design was adopted, using self-completion questionnaires to collect data. All D.Litt et Phil graduates from 2000–2010 comprised the study population (N=66). Questionnaires were sent to all 66 graduates, but only 37 (56.1%) returned the completed documents, comprising the study sample (n=37). However, of these 37 graduates, not all respondents answered all questions, and in some cases respondents could provide more than one answer; consequently the number of responses varies for different items.

### **Data collection**

Permission to conduct this research was granted by the Research and Ethics Committee of the Department of Health Studies, Unisa. The return of the completed questionnaires was accepted as the respondent's consent to participate. D. Litt et Phil candidates, who graduated prior to 2000 and were excluded from the actual study, completed questionnaires to pre-test the instrument. Out of the 12 questionnaires, eight (66.7%) were returned. All these respondents indicated that the questionnaire focused on challenges pertaining to their experiences during their D. Litt et Phil studies. Some respondents indicated errors in question numbers and these were corrected. The questionnaire took approximately 40 minutes to complete.

During August 2011, questionnaires were posted to all 66 graduates, followed by reminder letters during October 2011. By January 2012, 37 completed questionnaires had been returned. These were accepted as comprising the sample and data analysis commenced.

## **Data analysis**

The responses were entered into a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet. Descriptive statistics were compiled. Responses to open-ended questions were analysed using the principles of thematic qualitative data analyses. Responses within themes were quantitatively processed. Some direct quotations are also provided in the discussion of the findings to portray some of the graduates' experiences in their own words.

## **FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

### **Demographic information**

#### ***Geographic distribution***

Out of the 66 doctoral students who graduated from 2000 to 2010, 51.5 per cent (n=34) were South Africans, three (4.5%) were from the USA and the rest (34.8%; n=23) came from 11 different African countries: Botswana, Cameroon, Kenya, Lesotho, Malawi, Namibia, Swaziland, Tanzania, Uganda, Zambia and Zimbabwe (Unisa 2013).

In South Africa, the D.Litt et Phil (Health Studies) degree is recognised as a level 10 National Qualifications Framework qualification, equivalent to a PhD or D.Phil degree awarded by other South African universities. No graduate reported problems in getting the D.Litt et Phil degree recognised in his/her country. The Department of Health Studies, Unisa, is a World Health Organization Collaborating Centre (WHO CC), and is listed on the websites of the International Forum for Doctoral Education in Nursing, and of the Sigma Theta Thau International Nursing Society. This international visibility probably enhances the international acceptance of the D.Litt et Phil degree. 'Most academics hold cosmopolitan values in high esteem. Cross-border communication and cross-border reputation seem to be viewed as almost identical with "quality", the most positive thing in academia' (Teichler 2009, 96). Geographic dispersion did not seem to pose a challenge to the D.Litt et Phil graduates as no respondent mentioned any challenges in this regard.

### ***Gender and professional qualifications***

Of the 66 D.Litt et Phil graduates, 90.9 per cent (n=60) were female compared to 9.1 per cent (n=6) males and 93.9 per cent (n=62) were nurses while 6.1 per cent (n=4) were non-nurses (who had obtained the Master of Public Health degree to gain admission to the D.Litt et Phil programme). This implies that most graduates were probably professional healthcare providers, mothers, and wives and caregivers in their families and communities while pursuing part-time distance education studies.

### ***Age at graduation and time taken to complete the D. Litt et Phil theses***

The 37 respondents indicated that their ages ranged from 39 to 65 years at graduation, with an average age of 50.9 years, which is 10.9 years older than the global average age of 40 (Hinshaw and Leino-Kilpi 2005, 32) of nurses attaining doctoral degrees. Since the average age at graduation is 50.9 years, that leaves about nine years (compared to the global average of 19 years) to retirement at 60, implying that the graduates could complete a limited number of research projects, produce limited research outputs, and supervise only a few doctoral students during this time.

Of the 36 D.Litt et Phil graduates who replied to this question, only 19.4 per cent (n=7) took five years or longer to complete the degree, while 80.6 per cent (n=29) managed to do so within four years. This is a commendable achievement, as globally about 60 per cent of nurses complete their doctoral studies within four years (Hinshaw and Leino-Kilpi 2005, 27). At Unisa only 23 per cent of all doctoral candidates managed to complete their theses within six years (Mouton 2013, 24), implying that the D.Litt et Phil (Health Studies) graduates participating in this study, completed their theses successfully within shorter periods of time than the average Unisa doctoral candidate. However, registered doctoral students and those who discontinued their studies were excluded from the study's respondents and might have produced different statistics.

The respondents' average time taken to complete their theses was 4.6 years, from two to nine years. However, it took them 28.1 (ranging from 17 to 38) years to obtain their doctoral degrees after they qualified as registered nurses. Out of three responses, 30 (88.2%) completed basic entry-level diploma and three (8.1%) basic entry-level degree courses to qualify as registered nurses. The graduates' school subjects could have contributed to this lengthy period. Out of 36 respondents, the minority (22.2%; n=8) passed English (First Language), Biology (22.2%; n=30), Physical Science or Physics and Chemistry combined (25.0%; n=9), and Mathematics (30.6%; n=11) at higher grade (A level) in their final school year. These findings indicate that fewer than 31.0 per cent of

these graduates were fluent in English and academically competent in biology, physics, chemistry and mathematics. Even these academic competencies could have waned over the 17–38 years it took to complete their doctoral theses after becoming registered nurses.

Taking many years to complete a doctoral thesis is a disadvantage both to the university and student. Unisa loses government subsidy when students take too long to complete their degrees. Such students add to supervisors' workload, impacting on their ability to mentor students effectively. Extended registration periods for postgraduate studies involve additional annual student fees, and could deplete students' energy and motivation. Unisa allows doctoral students to defer their doctoral registrations and re-instate their registration at a later stage. These students might find that their 'momentum and immersion in thinking and writing get dispersed, leading to the potential risk of abandoning their program' (Bruce et al. 2008, 3).

However, globally, slow progress has been reported in helping practising clinical nurses to become active researchers (Segrott, McIvor and Green 2006, 642) because '... research activity is quite different from the applied, practice-based nature of a profession whose practically minded staff were more concerned with passing on craft knowledge' (Jootun and McGhee in Segrott et al 2006, 644). In addition, nursing research is usually judged in terms of '... academic judgments about the way that the study has been conducted rather than professional judgements about the nature of the evidence itself ... [supposing] that it is possible for academic researchers to make "wise" judgements about the way that the study has been conducted rather than professional judgements about the nature of the evidence itself' (Rolfe and Davies 2009, 1271). This is not unique to nursing but seems to apply to academic research in different disciplines, as explained by De Witt (2012, 48): 'Academic research requires numerous research skills and intellectual qualities which the novice researcher may not find easy to develop, as it implies a whole history of intellectual development'.

### **Experiences encountered by distance education D.Litt et Phil graduates**

These experiences were grouped into three categories, based on the relevant literature reviewed. These include: factors that could have impacted negatively on their progress; factors that would have helped them to complete their theses within a shorter period of time; and the respondents' recommendations for future doctoral candidates. The doctoral graduates were requested to respond according to a four-point Likert scale (1=very important; 2=important; 3=not important and 4=not at all important). The two columns pertaining to importance were added

together as well as the two columns indicating that the specific aspects were not important. Not all respondents answered every item, and these are indicated in a 'no answer' column in the relevant tables.

### **Factors that could impact negatively on doctoral graduates' progress with their theses**

In this section, comprising 29 items (as shown in Table 1), only three factors were regarded as important challenges by more than 50 per cent of the respondents: working full time and studying part time (78.4%; n=29); being a mother during the student's doctoral studies (54.1%; n=7); and being a wife during the study period (51.4%; n=19).

**Table 1:** Challenges encountered by D. Litt et Phil graduates in completing their theses (n=37)

	No response		Important		NOT important	
	n	%	n	%	n	%
Working full time and studying part time	2	5.5	29	<b>78.4</b>	6	16.2
Being a mother during studies	3	8.2	20	<b>54.1</b>	14	37.8
Being a wife during studies	2	5.5	19	<b>51.4</b>	16	43.2
Paying for a professional editor's services	3	8.2	17	<b>45.9</b>	17	45.9
Interpreting the statistics	3	8.2	14	<b>37.8</b>	20	54.1
Getting help with qualitative data analysis	4	10.8	12	<b>32.4</b>	21	56.8
Maintaining community and/or church responsibilities	2	5.5	12	<b>32.4</b>	23	62.2
Job promotion during studies	1	2.7	11	<b>30.8</b>	25	67.6
Paying for a statistician's services	5	13.5	11	<b>30.8</b>	21	56.8
Taking care of parents or other persons	1	2.7	11	<b>30.8</b>	25	67.6
Difficulties to implement comments from promoter(s)	1	2.7	11	<b>30.8</b>	25	67.6
Ability to write in English	1	2.7	11	<b>30.8</b>	25	67.6
Promoters' delays in responding to chapters/documents	2	5.5	10	<b>27.0</b>	25	67.6
Disagreements between promoter and joint promoter	1	2.7	10	<b>27.0</b>	26	70.3
Problems to access and print information from the Internet	3	8.2	10	<b>27.0</b>	24	64.9

Problems in using Unisa’s website	2	5.5	9	24.3	26	97.3
Problems to communicate with promoter(s) by e-mail	2	5.5	9	<b>24.3</b>	26	70.3
Inability to use Epi-Info, MS Excel or SPSS for data analysis	5	13.5	9	<b>24.3</b>	23	62.2
Taking on a new job during studies	3	8.2	8	<b>21.6</b>	26	70.3
Inability to use the MS Word computer program	3	8.2	7	<b>18.9</b>	27	73.0
Difficulties in using ‘track changes’	1	2.7	6	<b>16.2</b>	30	81.1
Promoters’ knowledge about the research process	2	5.5	5	<b>13.5</b>	30	81.1
Promoters’ knowledge about the topic/ field of research	2	5.5	5	<b>13.5</b>	30	81.1
Problems to contact promoter(s) by telephone	4	10.8	5	<b>13.5</b>	28	75.7
Financial problems to pay for registration, typing, editing, statistical analyses, photocopying and/or binding of theses	2	5.5	5	<b>13.5</b>	30	81.1
Interpreting data based on the qualitative analysis	1	2.7	4	<b>10.8</b>	32	86.5
Problems with annual Unisa registrations	4	10.8	2	<b>5.4</b>	31	83.8

**Note:** Unisa refers to the University of South Africa.

The 11 most important factors (according to at least 70% of the respondents responses portrayed in Table 1) that did NOT influence their doctoral studies’ progress included: problems with Unisa’s website (97.3%; n=26); qualitative data analysis (86.5%; n=32); annual Unisa registrations (83.8%; n=32); financial problems (81.1%; n=30); supervisors’ knowledge about topic/field of research (81.1%; n=30); supervisors’ knowledge about the research process (81.1%; n=30); problems contacting supervisors by telephone (75.7%; n=24); inability to use a word processing program (73.0%; n=27); problems communicating with supervisors by e-mail (70.3%; n=26); disagreements between the supervisor and the joint supervisor (70.3%; n=21); and taking on a new job during the student’s doctoral studies (70.3%; n=26).

***Aspects that could have facilitated the completion of doctoral graduates' theses within shorter periods of time***

Although 17 items were listed in the questionnaire that might have facilitated the students’ completion of their doctoral studies, based on the literature reviewed, only eight items were regarded as important by at least 50.0 per cent of the

respondents, namely: getting fully paid study leave (78.4%; n=29); having access to expert qualitative data analysts (67.6%; n=25); meeting other doctoral students (in person or online) (59.5%; n=22); presenting the research proposal to a panel of experts (56.8%; n=21); presenting every chapter personally to a panel of experts to improve the quality of every chapter (56.8%; n=21); monthly face-to-face or online appointments with the supervisor (54.1%; n=20); having every document edited professionally before submitting it to the supervisor (51.4%; n=19); and the ability to contact a statistician regularly (51.4%; n=19).

Table 1 indicates that the respondents identified only one major challenge, namely, working full time and studying part time. As approximately half of the respondents were wives and mothers, they might have been unable to leave their homes to pursue full-time studies at residential universities. Working full time enabled the graduates to gain professional experience and earn full-time salaries while they studied, but this may have resulted in work overload.

Most graduates were satisfied with Unisa's services as they encountered no problems with Unisa's website (97.3%) or annual registrations (83.8%). Concerning their supervisors, 81.1 per cent of the graduates considered their supervisors to be knowledgeable about the research process and topic; 75.7 per cent encountered no problems communicating with their supervisors personally or telephonically or by e-mail and 70.3 per cent encountered no disagreements between their supervisors and joint supervisors. These are commendable achievements, as can be seen in the verbatim statements of some respondents:

Respondent: I discovered that doing a D.Litt et Phil degree with Unisa enhances students' critical thinking and analytic skills. The promoters put their full effort in to assist the students to produce academic theses that generate evidence for improving practice/education.

Respondent: My facilitators had given me this opportunity [to prove myself] and believed in me. This made a profound impact on my life.

Respondent: Not enough people know about the wonderful work that is being done by Unisa.

Respondent: Based on the knowledge gained through my D.Litt et Phil I have confidence to conduct independent research.

Respondent: I would also like to write an article on the role played by Unisa health Studies Department in the emancipation of black women in Africa.

Respondent: It [my D.Litt et Phil] gave me insight into planning and implementing the research process. My promoters gave excellent feedback, which I can now use during the supervision of my master's students.

Respondent: As a novice, I had been facilitated by expert researchers, thereby gaining experience in qualitative research.

***Aspects that could have facilitated the completion of graduates' theses***

Getting fully paid study leave would have facilitated the completion of 78.4 per cent of the graduates' theses. This finding implies that the students wanted to earn a salary, and continue to occupy their professional positions with substitute appointments for the duration of their study periods, while studying full time. Few healthcare institutions in Africa might be able to afford such extensive sponsorship of doctoral students.

Access to a qualitative data analyst would have facilitated the completion of 67.6 per cent of these graduates' theses. This finding might have been expected as only 22.2 per cent of the respondents had passed English at higher grade (A level) and the majority might thus have encountered problems with qualitative data analyses. Their language capabilities may also explain why 51.4 per cent indicated that it would have been easier to complete their theses if a professional editor could have edited every document prior to submission to the supervisor(s).

Some respondents indicated a desire to have meetings with other doctoral students (59.5%), and to present their proposal (56.8%) and individual chapters (56.8%) to a panel of experts to improve the quality of their work. The D.Litt et Phil programme at Unisa does not require any attendance of contact sessions on-campus or any group work. It is thus possible to complete one's doctoral thesis without ever meeting fellow doctoral students and possibly without meeting one's supervisor(s). However, since 2010 every proposal, once approved by the supervisor(s), must be submitted to a review panel. This ensures inputs from different academics prior to the acceptance of the proposal. It does not, however, address the potential academic loneliness of a distance education doctoral student. Bain (2004, 18) maintains that people 'learn by confronting intriguing, beautiful, or important problems, authentic tasks that will challenge them to grapple with ideas, rethink their assumptions, and examine their mental models of reality'.

The respondents had to pay for editors' and statisticians' services, which could amount to substantial expenses, especially since the minority had passed English and/or mathematics at higher grade (A level). This explains why the ability to contact a statistician regularly would have facilitated the completion of 51.4 per cent of the respondents' theses. These students might have benefited from completing a course in basic statistics prior to enrolling for their doctoral studies.

Students reportedly expected rapid feedback from the Unisa library. Getting feedback within one week from the Unisa library seems to be unfeasible, because Unisa has many postgraduate students. The Unisa library does supply a list of references to postgraduate students who supply keywords to the library staff. However, it would be more expeditious if every doctoral student realised that he/she could access and print articles from all journals to which the Unisa library

subscribes without incurring any costs. Although the Unisa library supplies every newly registered student with information about accessing and using the library's resources, including e-journals and books, few respondents appeared capable of doing so.

**Table 2:** Factors that could have facilitated the doctoral graduates' completion of their theses (n=37)

	No response		Important		Not important	
	n	%	n	%	n	%
<b>Factors promoting the completion of the thesis</b>						
Getting fully paid study leave	3	8.1	29	<b>78.4</b>	5	13.5
Having access to expert qualitative data analysts	9	16.2	25	<b>67.6</b>	3	8.1
Meetings other doctoral students (in person or online)	9	24.3	22	<b>59.5</b>	6	16.2
Presenting the proposal personally to a panel of experts, and using their criticisms/concerns to improve the quality of my proposal	4	10.8	21	<b>56.8</b>	12	32.4
Presenting each chapter to a panel of experts and using their criticisms/concerns to improve the quality of each chapter	7	18.9	21	<b>56.8</b>	9	24.3
Having regular monthly appointments with promoter(s) -- face-to-face or online	6	16.2	20	<b>54.1</b>	11	29.7
Having every document professionally edited before submitting it to my promoter(s)	9	16.2	19	<b>51.4</b>	9	24.3
The ability to contact a statistician regularly	12	32.4	19	<b>51.4</b>	6	16.2
Working with fellow doctoral students and promoter(s) for a week full time at specific intervals	8	21.6	18	<b>48.6</b>	11	29.7
Being better able to use computers	12	32.4	16	<b>43.2</b>	9	24.3
Being knowledgeable about statistical analyses and the interpretation thereof	17	48.6	16	<b>43.2</b>	4	10.8
Getting help from the Unisa library within one week of submitting requests	12	32.4	16	<b>43.2</b>	9	24.3
Completing a computer literacy course	12	32.4	15	<b>40.5</b>	10	27.0
Bursary to pay for the D.Litt et Phil expenses	13	35.1	14	<b>37.8</b>	10	27.0
Having the services of a typist	13	35.1	10	<b>27.0</b>	14	37.8
Completing a research methodology module before commencing with the thesis	13	35.1	9	<b>24.3</b>	15	40.5

***Doctoral graduates' recommendations for enhancing future doctoral students' successful completion of their theses***

The respondents were requested to indicate what advice they would give to future students who intend to register with Unisa for their doctoral degree. According to the respondents, future students' chances of successfully completing their D.Litt et Phil (Health Studies) degree through Unisa could be enhanced, if the student:

- takes responsibility for his/her own progress and the quality of the work;
- devotes at least 10 hours per week to the doctoral studies;
- uses the services of a typist and an editor from the outset, unless the student is exceptionally efficient in these fields;
- is computer literate and saves the work a few times every day in different places (hard disc, USB, CD);
- has his/her own computer, printer and sufficient Internet access;
- chooses a topic about which the student is passionate;
- reads widely before and during their studies;
- writes 'good' English and is 'accurate in all matters penned down';
- attends research methodology workshops and prepares a proposal before the initial registration;
- makes personal contact with the supervisor(s), librarian and statistician;
- is knowledgeable about statistical analyses, interpretations and applications;
- networks with other doctoral students at Unisa;
- budgets appropriately for costs involved with Unisa's annual registrations, data collection, a statistician's services for data analyses, typing and editorial services as well as the costs of photocopying and binding at least five copies of the entire thesis for examination purposes.

These recommendations centred around the responsibilities of the student to find a topic about which he/she is passionate, to find the time to invest in his/her studies, to read widely and also to use the services of a typist, editor, statistician and librarian. They also recommend regular contact with the supervisor, as emphasised by the following direct quotations:

Facilitators are dependable, reliable and very supportive.

They (supervisors) support and guide students with the utmost dedication, expertise and professionalism.

Respondents suggest that computer literacy, having one's own computer and printer, and sufficient Internet access could enhance future doctoral students' chances of successful completion of their theses. These computer-related recommendations may be particularly relevant to students from African regions where many homes might not have electricity, Internet access or computers. Available computers might be shared by a number of people and Internet access might be unaffordable, and/or extremely limited. Some graduates apparently had no access to printers or to the Internet in their homes and had to use these facilities at Internet cafes at great financial cost to themselves.

Respondents recommend that prospective doctoral students should attend research methodology courses, develop their statistical abilities and network with other doctoral students. Unisa offers research methodology courses in a number of geographic locations, but these are not compulsory.

Although Unisa has facilities for online group activities for a number of undergraduate courses, this has not been implemented for the D.Litt et Phil (Health Studies) students.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

### **Recommendations pertaining to supervisors**

Although 70.3 per cent of the graduates reported no problems contacting their supervisors by e-mail, the reasons why the other 29.7 per cent did not have the same experience could not be ascertained from their responses. It is possible that some of the respondents, who graduated prior to 2005, might not have had Internet accessibility, explaining their inability to communicate by e-mail with their supervisors. Students should be informed that their supervisors have numerous other academic responsibilities, and cannot be available to their doctoral candidates 100 per cent of the time. Accessibility should ideally be negotiated between students and supervisors so that reasonable reciprocal expectations can be fostered.

As 27.0 per cent of the respondents reportedly encountered differences of opinion between their supervisors and joint supervisors, this matter should be addressed. Supervisors should be encouraged to reach consensus before they provide feedback to the students.

Unisa offers facilities for supervisors to establish online groups for their students. This would be more meaningful if a specific supervisor's students were doing research in a specific field, ensuring that these groups of students were interested in similar topics. If each supervisor could attend to such online

communication at predetermined times every month, then ongoing communication could be sustained. Any student should also be able to make individual online appointments with the supervisor, in addition to the online group sessions.

### **Admission criteria**

The D. Litt et Phil graduates' registration periods of up to nine years, may have been influenced by their potential lack of language, science and numeracy skills and knowledge. No pre-admission examinations are required to be admitted to the D. Litt et Phil programme, but such examinations might identify future students who could benefit from pre-admission courses focusing on language, numeracy and science knowledge and skills.

A minimum requirement of 60 per cent for the Master's degree is a condition for students to be admitted to the D. Litt et Phil programme, irrespective of their ages. Research should be conducted to correlate percentages obtained for their Master's degrees and graduates' duration of registration for their D. Litt et Phil degrees. Based on these results, it might be advisable to raise the future admission standard for the D. Litt et Phil programme to 65 per cent. Limiting admission to persons aged 40 or younger would ensure that the doctoral candidates could have longer academic careers after graduation.

### **The duration of doctoral studies**

Since the completion of this study, Unisa has instituted annual audits of individual postgraduate students' progress. Registrations can be refused on the basis of inadequate progress during the preceding year(s). However, audits should also identify reasons why it takes doctoral students so many years to complete their theses. This is important because the duration of students' D. Litt et Phil registrations could influence their postdoctoral career accomplishments and influence the university's quality ranking (Kim, McKenna and Ketefian 2006, 477).

### **Services provided by Unisa**

Almost all graduates were satisfied with Unisa's website and annual registration processes. Some students reported delays in getting replies from the Unisa library. Students with electronic skills should be able to access most of their required sources from the Unisa library themselves from their own computers. The utilisation of electronic sources from Unisa's library should be addressed during the proposal phase of the students' doctoral programme.

## **Recommendations for future research**

Future studies should also aim to identify the challenges encountered by supervisors of distance education doctoral students. Better support for the supervisors might translate into higher success rates for the students.

Doctoral students' skills in using the Unisa library's resources should be determined and recommendations made for addressing their potential lack of skills and knowledge. Research should also identify currently registered students' other challenges and suggest interventions to assist these students to complete their theses within shorter periods of time.

Students who have discontinued their studies could yield valuable insights into the challenges they had encountered and with which they could not cope and they may have suggestions about how current and future students can overcome similar difficulties.

Research about doctoral students' challenges and successes should be sustained, heeding Beaudoin's (in Olcott 2005, 1) challenge that 'distance education researchers, practitioners and leaders must pause and reflect on the field, where it's been, where it's going and how we are going to get there'.

## **Expert panels of reviewers**

Some students indicated that they would have preferred submitting their documents to a panel of experts rather than to one or two supervisors. Although it might not be feasible to consider using a panel of experts, rather than one or two supervisors, due to the large numbers of students and limited numbers of supervisors, periodic inputs from such a panel might be valuable for students and supervisors. Group supervision of doctoral candidates reinforces students' doctoral identities. According to Forbes (2008, 459), 'This offers more than just an environment of mutual support, providing a pedagogical basis which supports participative learning and reflexivity.' Three panel discussions about the proposal, the first few chapters (usually comprising the introduction, literature review and research methodology); then the data collection and analysis; and, lastly, the interpretation might enhance the quality of the final product. These panel members could be recruited from within and outside the university and could include retired academics and researchers. If at least one panel member from the student's home country could be included, this would be commendable. Ideally every student should have a joint supervisor from his/her own country, because this would benefit the student and the supervisor, and possibly also the student's country.

Since 2010, with the introduction of proposal modules for postgraduate students, every student's proposal is reviewed by at least three academics, in

addition to his/her supervisor(s). Thus, feedback is provided by at least four academics prior to the acceptance of the proposal, approximating inputs from panel members at least during the proposal phase of the thesis. Telephone conferences and Skype sessions might provide cost-effective options where the student and the supervisor(s) can engage in these panel discussions. The feasibility of engaging future examiners as panel members should also be investigated. In this regard, Hallberg (2006, 926) warns: 'We have to be careful about how we deploy experienced researchers, who are our most valuable resource ... Too many doctoral students and too many inexperienced researchers on any research team make it fragile and limit its ability to deliver research to a high scientific standard as well as develop research methodology.'

Nolan (2005, 504) adds that nurses need to 'identify ways of recognizing work that involves partnership between researchers and users and carers. This will involve attention to both the research process and the product or output.'

### **Recommendations for current and future doctoral students**

During the basic nursing education diploma and degree courses, students should be informed about the requirements to register for Master's and doctoral degrees. Students should be discouraged from taking long breaks between qualifications as this contributes to the number of elderly nursing doctoral graduates.

Distance education students can retain their full-time jobs and family commitments while they complete their theses. As the major challenge seems to be finding sufficient time for their studies, students should be advised about time management strategies. Students should delegate some tasks, employ helpers and get their families' support if they hope to complete their theses successfully within four years.

### **CONCLUSION**

The D. Litt et Phil graduates' major challenge was time. Consequently, information about effective time management at registration might be useful, as well as recommendations that students consider interventions to improve their English language skills, computer and statistical research abilities and scientific knowledge, if relevant. The importance of possessing one's own computer and printer and having sufficient Internet access should also be emphasised.

Since 2010 only those students whose proposals are accepted within one year are allowed to register for their theses, therefore, current doctoral candidates might be able to complete their theses within a shorter period of time. These requirements could help to address how long doctoral students take to complete.

Most D.Litt et Phil graduates were satisfied with the university's services, and with the accessibility and expertise of their supervisors, and managed to complete their theses within four years. However, it is essential that ongoing research should be conducted to enhance doctoral candidates' chances of successfully completing their theses within reasonable periods of time. This has also been emphasised by ASSAf (2010, 107), as the '... production of doctorates in South Africa is and has remained stable for many years ... working only within existing systems, and taking into account available capacity, there is simply no way that rapid growth in high level qualifications at the level of the doctorate will materialise in the foreseeable future'.

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