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**Coping with stress among post-graduate students at UNISA during research
report writing**

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Abstract

Recent and past research on goal attainment emphasises the value of underlying factors impacting on student success. These studies either investigate psychological sub-dimensions or combine these with other factors to the factors impacting on student success Tinto (1975), Cope (1978), Fraser & Killen (2003) and (Okopi, 2011). It is against this background that this paper will investigate, describe and understand the coping mechanisms post-graduate students adopt in dealing with stress when writing research reports in an Open Distance Learning environment in South Africa.

A census will be conducted among all the colleges whereby students will be invited to complete electronic web-based questionnaires by accessing a unique URL. At the end of the survey, the data will be downloaded to a statistical programme that is the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) 20 for tabulation and analysis. The results from this study are expected to improve understanding of stress and coping mechanisms adopted by post-graduate students at UNISA. The results should further be indispensable in the life design of programmes and initiatives to provide support to post-graduate students at UNISA.

Key terms: stress, coping, psychological factors, Open Distance Learning, post-graduate students

1. INTRODUCTION

Student records indicate that there were approximately 4800 post-graduate students enrolled for masters and doctoral degrees at the University of South Africa (UNISA) in 2012. It is estimated that 70% to 80% of the students drop out in the first 2 years of registration (E. Swanepoel, personal communication, February 07, 2012). The Department of Education in South Africa in the latest available graduation rates for all higher institutions published in November 2010 show that cohort graduation rates for 2009 were as follows: 75.1% of final year students enrolled at institutions of higher learning (108 769) obtained undergraduate degrees or diplomas in 2009 while 6.6% (9 492) students completed their masters and doctoral degrees Department of Education (2010).

Past research on student drop-out emphasises the role of stress as one of the primary causes for poor academic progress and student drop-out in institutions of higher learning Pillay and Bundhoo, 2011; Pillay and Ngcobo, 2010; Robotham and Julian, 2006. (Krypel and Henderson-King, (2009) states that students at institutions of higher learning engage in challenging academic work, explore career options and make decisions that induce stress. Students furthermore find it demanding to complete their research reports in institutions of higher learning due to among others, lack of motivation, increased external locus of control, low self-efficacy and stress (Abouserie, 1994; Bull, 1990; Chacon-Duque, 1987; Parker, 1999; Whittington, 1995).

2. UNDERSTANDING THE AIM OF THE STUDY

The aim of this study is to investigate, describe and understand the coping mechanisms post-graduate students at Unisa adopt when dealing with stress while completing their qualifications. The results from this study are expected to improve understanding of stress and coping mechanisms adopted by post-graduate students at UNISA. The results should further be indispensable in the life design of programmes and initiatives to provide support to post-graduate students at UNISA.

3. METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this exploratory sequential mixed study is to explore and understand the coping mechanisms adopted by post-graduate students engaged in research report writing in an ODL environment.

3.1. Data collection method

A structured standardised questionnaire will be used to elicit responses from the participants. The questionnaire will be administered through an e-mail web-based system and follow-up interviews will be administered through the CATI. The questionnaire will involve quantitative survey with closed and open ended questions. At the end of the survey, the data will be downloaded to a statistical programme that is the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) 20 for tabulation and analysis. The Nvivo 9 programme will be employed to analyse the qualitative data.

3.2. Research instruments

A thorough literature review will be undertaken to identify the possible research instruments conforming to the objectives of the study.

3.3 Data Analysis Plan

The analysis of the data will involve both bivariate and multivariate techniques in order to determine the stress and coping mechanisms the study participants adopt. Structural indices will be computed to show the relative magnitude of the different stress and coping mechanisms. In presenting the results use will be made of descriptive statistical methods such as graphical presentations and tabulations.

Nvivo 9 will be employed to analyse the qualitative data. The analysis will involve thematic content analysis which will present the results thematically to depict the different stress and coping mechanisms post-graduate students at UNISA adopt.

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