

Experiences of Postgraduate Nursing Students at the University of Namibia

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Abstract

While the number of students who choose to enrol in various postgraduate academic programmes continues to increase, the number of postgraduate students who graduate each year remains low. This requires institutions of higher learning to establish which factors and study modes are likely to promote an environment that is conducive to learning for postgraduate students. The experiences of postgraduate students can be used to promote a positive learning environment for postgraduate students. The objective of this study was to explore and describe the experiences of postgraduate nursing students enrolled in postgraduate nursing diploma coursework and research at the University of Namibia with a view to describe what aspects affect their learning. An exploratory, descriptive and qualitative design was used. The study was contextual in nature. A sample of seven students participated in the study. Purposive sampling was used. Data were collected from semi-structured interviews conducted with seven postgraduate diploma nursing students. The data were analysed through qualitative content analysis. The following four themes were identified: individual experiences, academic factors, institutional factors, and suggested improvement measures which included an improved research approval process and institutional support system to enhance postgraduate studies. The findings of this study highlighted the need for well-articulated actions to deal with the negative challenges identified in the study by offering more academic support to the students during their research proposals and research project writing.

Keywords: experiences, student, postgraduate, challenges, Namibia

Introduction

The majority of tertiary institutions throughout the world are acknowledged as vital platforms where knowledge transformation, learning and innovation advancement take

place (Mutula 2011). In embarking on their studies at tertiary institutions, scholars are classified as either undergraduate or postgraduate students. A postgraduate course is defined as a study course or an academic programme that a student undertakes after he/she has achieved a specific university or college degree (as an undergraduate) (*Oxford Dictionary*, s.v. “postgraduate”). A postgraduate diploma (PGD) is a type of qualification which is attained following the satisfactory achievement of a sizeable, coherent group of learning outcomes requiring an advanced level and which is aligned with one or more learning areas (NQA 2014). The Namibia Qualification Authority (NQA) (2014) further explains that a PGD involves the attainment of a volume of learning outcomes smaller in comparison to other postgraduate programmes like honours, master’s and PhD degrees. Postgraduate study programmes are undertaken either full-time or part-time (Ekpoh 2016).

The enrolment in postgraduate education has increased in nursing over the past years, however, its benefit to students, employers, patients and its overall impact on practice remain underrated (Linda et al. 2014). As a result, postgraduate students make up a vital segment of university and college populations. Sadly, however, most, if not all, tertiary educational institutions often fail to properly acknowledge their status as adult students with unique developmental and life matters and concerns (Benshoff, Cashwell, and Rowell 2015). Apart from the PGD courses being costly, it is also sometimes impossible for students to study for PGDs in some fields of study owing to various limitations (Quora 2017). In addition, some programmes contain a postgraduate research and thesis writing component which often poses major challenges to the majority of postgraduate students during their studies (Ekpoh 2016). Some postgraduate students experience challenges with traditional academic practices of teaching, learning and assessment, which include essay writing (Burrow et al. 2016). Furthermore, attitude change, practice change, and the acquisition of knowledge and skills are believed to be some of the benefits that are more likely to be encountered when pursuing postgraduate nursing programmes (Ng, Eley, and Tuckett 2016). Additionally, it is believed that enabling postgraduate students to obtain postgraduate qualifications is one of the ways to create the link between the value of knowledge and national economic growth (Sonn 2016).

Despite the above-mentioned challenges, some institutions of higher learning do not require a research report as one of the requirements for a PGD. This may, in turn, be of benefit to some students (Keiser University 2018). In addition, a PGD offers the students an opportunity to focus specifically on one module. This type of diploma programme also tends to focus less on the theoretical learning component and more on the hands-on, practical application required for a specified job (Keiser University 2018). Furthermore, a wide range of PGD programmes also offer direct entry into master’s degree programmes at various universities in the world (Keiser University 2018). In the nursing context, postgraduate programmes also play a crucial role in advancing the capacity of the nurses, thus enabling them to meet the complex and

universal healthcare needs of individuals, families and communities at large (Mutula 2011) as well as improving the standard of nursing care (Essa 2011).

The PGD in nursing science offered by the University of Namibia includes various specialisation fields and is a full year residential programme. The PGD includes specialisation in operating room science, critical care nursing, advanced health promotion and clinical instruction. The School of Nursing admits a total of approximately 20 to 30 candidates in the various PGD specialisation programmes. Every year nurses from all the public hospitals, namely Windhoek Central Hospital, Katutura State Hospital, Oshakati Intermediate Hospital, and Rundu Intermediate Hospital, and also other several district hospitals around the country apply for registration for one of these above-mentioned specialisations. The School of Nursing also admits students from private hospitals, namely Mediclinic, Rhino Park, MediPark and the Roman Catholic hospital for these programmes. The programme is offered on a full-time mode where classes are offered for a two-week period, followed by 14 days of clinical allocation in the specialisation for which the student is registered. The clinical knowledge component of the programme is conducted at the two training hospitals in Windhoek.

Problem Statement

The School of Nursing at the University of Namibia offers a wide range of postgraduate programmes, including postgraduate nursing diplomas, master's degrees and doctoral degrees. The school attracts a significant number of postgraduate students wishing to enrol in the various postgraduate programmes every year. Despite the efforts of the School of Nursing to admit and enrol students for the various postgraduate academic programmes, the number of postgraduate students graduating each year from the School of Nursing in Namibia remains extremely low (UNAM 2014). In the cohort of 2014, a total of 15 students were enrolled in the postgraduate nursing sciences and the pass rate was 27.9 per cent. This low number implies the possibility of some contributing factors being overlooked in the teaching and supervision of postgraduate students. It would seem that the students do not receive the necessary support and supervision during their postgraduate studies. In addition, a fear of the heavy workload due to time constraints may be one of the factors that discourage students from pursuing postgraduate programmes (Havenga and Sengane 2018). This phenomenon may, potentially, cause unnecessary delays in respect of students not graduating in the prescribed time and, therefore, wasting both their employers' and their money. In addition, when students do not complete their postgraduate studies in time, they cannot contribute to service delivery in the nursing profession which is already burdened by the shortage of nurses as the majority of these postgraduate students are full-time nurses with the Ministry of Health and Social Services who are being remunerated during their studies.

Research Question

Accordingly, the following research questions were posed:

- What are the experiences of postgraduate nursing students during their studies at the University of Namibia?
- What recommendations may be made to the School of Nursing at the University of Namibia and postgraduate nursing diploma students to deal with the challenges involved in postgraduate study?

Research Aim

The aim of this study was to explore and describe the experiences of postgraduate nursing students during their postgraduate studies at the University of Namibia.

Definition of Key Concepts

Experience: An experience refers to the knowledge that arises from personal involvement in an event or situation or specific circumstances (*Oxford Dictionary*, s.v. “experience”). In the context of this study experience refers to the personal knowledge that a student gains from experiences when enrolled for a postgraduate programme.

Postgraduate nursing student: A postgraduate nursing student is a person who is formally engaged in learning and who is enrolled for a diploma or degree at a higher education institution after having completed his/her undergraduate studies (*Oxford Dictionary*, s.v. “postgraduate nursing student”). In the context of this study a postgraduate nursing student refers to a student who is enrolled full-time at the School of Nursing Science at the University of Namibia for a PGD leading to the specialisation(s) offered in accordance with the Namibia Qualifications Framework Level 8.

University: University refers to a tertiary institution of higher learning (*Oxford Dictionary*, s.v. “university”). This study focused specifically on the University of Namibia which offers professional nursing education at both an undergraduate and postgraduate level. As such the University of Namibia has been inspected and approved by the Nursing Council of Namibia to provide education and training in accordance with section 15(2) of the Nursing Act (Republic of Namibia 2004). In this study the university which is referred to is the University of Namibia which is situated in Windhoek.

Research Design and Method

The study used a qualitative research design, in particular, an explorative, descriptive and contextual research design to explore the meaning of the experiences of the postgraduate nursing students as described by them individually. Qualitative research is concerned with the everyday human experiences within a natural environment (Maree 2016). The semi-structured individual interviews that were conducted enabled the researcher to understand the experiences of the participants.

Research Method

The study used semi-structured interviews which focused on exploring the experiences of postgraduate nursing diploma students as they occurred. The use of semi-structured interviews was facilitated through the use of open-ended questions which oriented the study as suggested by De Vos et al. (2011). Asking participants open-ended questions allows a researcher to gain a better understanding of the scope of the research topic (Brink, Van der Walt, and Van Rensburg 2018). These types of questions allow additional information to flow freely, which may also reveal emotional responses and attitudes to the topic that may not have been considered before, thus also ensuring the credibility of the findings (Grove, Burns, and Gray 2012).

Study Population

Grove, Burns, and Gray (2012) define a study population as a bigger pool from which sample elements are drawn. The accessible population in this study consisted of 15 nursing postgraduate students enrolled for the PGD in nursing science at the School of Nursing, University of Namibia in Windhoek in 2015.

Sample and Sampling Technique

In the research context a sample is a subset of the population elements (Polit and Beck 2008). The sample in this study comprised all the nursing science postgraduate students enrolled for the PGD in nursing science at the School of Nursing at the University of Namibia in Windhoek in 2015. A purposeful sampling method was employed and was based on the judgement of the researcher regarding participants whom the researcher felt would be especially knowledgeable about the research topic as suggested by Brink, Van der Walt, and Van Rensburg (2018). The requisite data were collected by the researcher through semi-structured interviews in accordance with the interview guide and until data saturation was reached. This point was reached at the seventh interview.

Data Collection Methods

Grove, Burns, and Gray (2012) define data collection as the exact, systematic gathering of information related to the research purpose of the intended study. In this study the data were collected by the researcher through semi-structured individual interviews that lasted for approximately 30 to 40 minutes in accordance with the

interview guide until the data were saturated. The researcher, before he collected the data, asked a colleague to look for questions that may lead to biased data that the researcher may not be able to notice. The researcher conducted the interviews. The researcher requested the participants' permission to record all conversations on an audiotape. The main questions posed during the interviews were as follows:

- What are your experiences as a postgraduate nursing student at this university?
- What recommendations would you make to deal with postgraduate challenges?

Data Analysis

The aim of the data analysis process is to organise, structure and elicit meaning from the data which have been collected (Polit and Beck 2012). In this study, a content analysis was used to analyse the data as this is deemed to be the most reliable method used in qualitative research as it is fairly systematic and allows the researcher to organise the information into themes and subthemes (Leedy and Ormrod 2013). The transcribed interviews and narratives from the research notes were organised into codes, main themes and subthemes. An independent coder then verified the accuracy of the analysed data and held a meeting with the researcher to discuss and agree on the themes which had been identified. The data were stored in a computer encrypted with a password to restrict access, and only the primary investigators were granted access.

Data Trustworthiness

The trustworthiness of the entire study was assessed using the criteria proposed by Lincoln and Guba (1965), namely credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability. Credibility was ensured through prolonged and varied engagement with the participants in the field while objectivity was maintained throughout the data collection process. Testing of the interview guide was conducted with three students who were not part of the study. However, no major changes were made to the questions of the interview guide after the test. In order to ensure both confirmability and dependability, an experienced independent coder analysed the data. The final themes and subthemes were identified after consensus has been reached during a meeting between the researcher and the independent coder. A chain of evidence was kept through the detailed recording of both the research methodology and the data analysis process.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval to conduct the study was obtained from the chairperson of the School of Nursing Research Committee of the Faculty of Health Sciences, University of Namibia. The researcher obtained the participants' personal consent in relation to their participation in the study after the purpose and significance of the study have been explained to them. Ethical principles were adhered to throughout the study in order to

protect the rights, dignity and safety of the participants (Grove, Burns, and Gray 2012). The researcher adhered to the principles of guiding nurses in clinical research as contained in the Declaration of Helsinki which was adopted by the World Medical Association (WMA 2013). Participation in the study was voluntary and the participants were free to withdraw from the interviews at any time if they so wished (Creswell 2014). Confidentiality was ensured as each participant was given a numerical code at the beginning of the semi-structured interviews which was then used to refer to the participant during the interviews and which subsequently appeared on the transcript of the interviews to ensure anonymity (Grove, Burns, and Gray 2012).

Results

Socio-Demographic Description of Study Participants

The participants were all PGD students at the School of Nursing, University of Namibia, on the main campus in Windhoek. All the participants were under the age of 50. The majority of the participants were employed. In addition, the majority of the participants were being funded by the Ministry of Health and Social Services. The characteristics of the study participants are given in Table 1.

Table 1: Characteristics of participants

Characteristics		Total
Age	18–30	3
	31–40	2
	41–50	1
	51–60	1
	61 and above	0
Gender	Male	3
	Female	4
Marital status	Single	5
	Married	2
Employment status	Employed	15
	Unemployment	0
Employers	Public	5
	Private	2
Source of funding	Self-funding	2
	Government	5

The four themes that emerged from the data analysis (as indicated in Table 2) are as follows: individual experiences, academic factors, institutional factors, and improvement measures.

Table 2: Themes and subthemes which emerged from the data analysis

Themes	Subthemes
Individual experiences	Understanding of PGD studies Learning expectations Family commitments Financial limitations Increased levels of stress and exhaustion
Academic factors	PGD mode of delivery Scope too broad Lengthy research process
Institutional factors	Guidance from lecturers Inadequate information sharing Rigid relationship with some lecturers
Improvement measures	Institutional support system that enhances PGD studies Improved research approval process The Health Service Management module established as a single specialisation for managers Advertised PGD studies

Theme 1: Individual Experiences

The students described their experiences in relation to their understanding of their PGD studies, learning expectations, family commitments, financial limitations and increased level of stress and exhaustion.

Understanding of PGD studies

The participants described a range of individual experiences in relation to their understanding of their role and expectations as postgraduate students. The following comments were made by the participants:

Studying as a postgraduate is different from studying the basic training because postgraduate students are more grown up as people and they are able to work together efficiently as compared to other students. (P1)

I would say that being a postgraduate student you are regarded as an adult student who is regarded as responsible for your own learning. (P7)

Learning expectations

The participants in the study described their expectations in relation to the slight differences between undergraduate and postgraduate courses in terms of the depth of content and research.

My experience as a postgraduate student for this year has been quite okay. I would say that the lecturers are well prepared when they come to teach. (P3)

I would say postgraduate courses are different from undergraduate courses because you have too much research to do and little time in which to do it. (P6)

Family commitments

This study found that the postgraduate students often experienced difficulties when balancing their studies with their family responsibilities. This was highlighted by the participants who had families to take care of as evident in the statements below:

As a married woman with three children and a husband who are waiting for you at home to come and cook or clean the house while you also have to study or do your assignments. It is difficult and stressful sometimes balancing all these things. Then you have children who want you to help them with their homework or they just need your attention and sometimes they make a noise while you have to study. (P2)

In my case I am a household head and I have my own family to take care of. I also have to take care of my extended family. I have to be a cousin, a sister and a guardian to other people and then I also have to make time for my demanding studies. (P5)

Financial limitations

The participants expressed their appreciation for the financial assistance received from the Ministry of Health and Social Services for their tuition and accommodation. However, they also spoke about the financial challenges they often experienced in relation to buying food, books, and other learning materials and the travel costs they incurred in order to attend classes.

The institution is rather far from where most of us reside and getting to classes is a hassle. The financial aspect is also a challenge but, first, I would like to thank the ministry for paying for our tuition and our accommodation. However, we do have to buy food, books and other learning notes ourselves. (P5)

I am happy because I am receiving my full salary although I was used to getting overtime which I am not getting this year. I am responsible only for buying books and study notes. (P2)

So, most of the time I have to get a taxi to town and then from town to UNAM and you can imagine that almost every day I use \$30 just on taxis so it is quite challenging for me. (P7)

Increased levels of stress and exhaustion

Stress, which is a common life experience, may be said to be a double-edged sword. The participants reported that the stress was overwhelming, thereby incapacitating them to the point of impaired cognitive or mental functioning.

It is really hard and stressful to keep up with this studies that are so demanding. (P7)

That module is really a headache and whenever we are going to write a test I get so stressed because I don't know what to expect. (P4)

The challenges and difficulties really leave me feeling stressed, exhausted and physically drained. (P1)

Theme 2: Academic Factors

The participants expressed satisfaction with what they had achieved in the postgraduate programmes. A participant stated:

I am doing clinical instruction as my speciality and I am gaining a lot of knowledge on how to be a good facilitator of students. (P3)

PGD mode of delivery

The participants indicated that they found the programme challenging as they had several other responsibilities in their lives and it was difficult to study at the same time. They expressed this as follows:

It is also a bit challenging because you need to be serious and sacrifice your time to do your work. (P4)

The other challenge is that you are expected to do a lot of self-study at the postgraduate level despite the fact that you also have family responsibilities. (P2)

The classes are okay and the clinical rotation as well. (P6)

Scope too broad

The participants in this study described the programme as too wide-ranging to be covered in one year. The study participants expressed their opinions on the structure of the programme as follows:

The programme itself, I think, it is too wide and too broad for one year because some modules, such as research, are divided into two parts – the theory part and the practical part. The practical part also has two parts – a proposal and a project. I think the theory part is unnecessary in the postgraduate course because we did it in the undergraduate course. (P1)

We have a lot of work because all the lecturers give us assignments and not only research projects that we have to do. There is also our practical book for our speciality modules that we have to complete before the end of the year. (P3)

Lengthy research process

The participants all indicated that the research proposal and the research project together with the practical books for speciality modules were too much work for one

year and that the time was very limited for them to do all the work required. This is evident in the following quotes:

Another thing is the research project itself is quite challenging. I feel the time is too short to do the proposal and then the project itself in the limited time available. (P7)

The research project is delayed by the ministry when they have to approve the proposal. We are actually finished with the proposals but we still have to wait for approval from the ministry before we can start with the data collection. The ministry is taking a long and time is passing and we are approaching the due date for completion of the project. (P1)

Theme 3: Institutional Factors

Institutional factors were cited by the participants in relation to guidance from the lecturers, inadequate information and rigid relationships with some of the lecturers.

Guidance from lecturers

Overall, the opinions expressed by the participants on the postgraduate programmes were favourable. The participants expressed their appreciation in relation to the support they received from the lecturers as follows:

I would say there are lecturers who come to class well prepared with their teaching aids such as PowerPoint and, when they teach you, you will really feel as if you are getting something from them. (P5)

The environment is learner friendly and some lecturers are really supportive. (P1)

Inadequate information sharing

Some of participants felt that certain explanations given to them lacked adequate information, for example:

Some lecturers don't really explain in detail and this is apparently because we are adult students, but I just feel the lecturers need to bring in their expertise when it comes to explaining certain things that are not understood by the students. (P6)

Rigid relationships with some of the lecturers

The study found that some of the participants perceived some lecturers to be strict which caused the atmosphere in class to be tense. The following statements describe the experiences of two of the participants:

This happened to me in a one-year module which is health service management. The lecturer is strict with us. I think she is really a good lecturer, but when she marks our test papers, I think her marking style is really what is challenging because she marks in half marks and her questions are really challenging and confusing at times. (P3)

I can really feel from the atmosphere in this class that people are nervous about this module because we are attending this module with some students who are repeating the module. There are about five or six of them and this is a module that, if you fail it, then you won't graduate. (P4)

Theme 4: Improvement Measures

The participants suggested recommendations to improve the challenges they were facing and for assistance by both the institution and the ministry in question to improve their postgraduate study experience.

Institutional support system that enhances PGD studies

Some of the participants expressed the need for more guidance from their lecturers, stating that they required support through adequate information sharing.

I will just recommend that the lecturers give more guidance to the students rather than just leaving them on their own because they are adult students. (P6)

Lecturers should make time to be consulted by students who might need guidance especially on the development of research proposals. (P2)

Improved research approval process

The participants expressed overwhelming concern about the need to improve the research proposal process. They stated that they would prefer the process to start from the point of admission in order to fast-track the approval process. This was explained in the following quote:

I suggest it should be one of the requirements for admission for this postgraduate course that the applicants indicate their research topics so that they may be approved when admission is granted to enable the students either to start work prior to the commencement of classes or to start early in the academic year. (P1)

Health service management module as single specialisation module

Some of the participants suggested that the health service management specialisation field be offered as a separate programme. This was expressed in the following statement:

Another suggestion is that this module be separated from the other specialisations so that it is a specialisation on its own, thus enabling students who are interested in specialising in management to take this module. (P4)

Advertised PGD studies to increase enrolment

Some of the participants expressed their concern about the limited number of students enrolled for the specialisation programmes such as critical care nursing. They

recommended that the PGD course be advertised to motivate practising registered nurses to apply for the specialisation fields. One of the participants reported that:

Well, in this case I would recommend that they advertise the nursing postgraduate courses and bring them to the attention of the nurses in various hospitals so that more nurses apply for entry admission to the specialisation courses. This year there were only three in our specialisation class. (P3)

Discussion of Findings

The purpose of the study was to explore and describe the experiences of postgraduate nursing students enrolled in postgraduate nursing diploma coursework and research at the University of Namibia with a view to describe what aspects affect their learning. This section presents the discussion of the findings with regard to their experiences as postgraduate nursing students under the following themes: individual challenges, academic factors, institutional factors and improvement measures.

Individual Challenges

It emerged from the study that balancing studies and family responsibilities was a dilemma faced by many of the participants who were parents. This finding was in line with that of Essa (2011) who ascertained that finding a balance between academic studies, work and family responsibilities may be challenging to postgraduate students. In addition, this finding was in line with that of Havenga and Sengane (2018) and Du Plessis et al. (2016) who reported that the participants in their research had indicated that the fact that they had to attend to their families' responsibilities, such as their children's needs, tended to have an impact on their time, energy, and ability to focus on their studies.

Academic Factors

The participants in this study cited the pressure from their studies as a prime cause of the stress they experienced. Nkosi, Makhene, and Matlala (2019) made a similar discovery when the participants in their study highlighted the academic stress which they had experienced and which had stemmed from their failure to fulfil their academic responsibilities. This, in turn, had impacted adversely on their learning and memory function (Shah and Shah 2015). Similarly, a study conducted in Canada at the University of Alberta related the students' perceptions of negative experiences or stress in their educational environments as well as problems with both their physical and psychological health (Kaviani and Stillwell 2000). It has also been established that emotional and physical exhaustion may lead to burnout as a result of the excessive stress that sometimes occurs during clinical placements (Kaviani and Stillwell 2000). In addition, an increased level of stress and exhaustion was also reported in a similar study conducted at Stellenbosch University with the majority of the students

expressing negative reactions to not completing their studies on time as a result of stress (Essa 2011).

Institutional Factors

Some of the participants expressed the need for more guidance from their lecturers and explained that they needed to be supported through adequate information sharing. These results are similar to those of a study conducted by Talebloo and Bin Baki (2013) on the challenges faced by international postgraduate students during their studies with the participants citing a lack of time, and unclear feedback from their faculty supervisors as major concerns. In addition, their supervisors' lack of expertise in the relevant field, limited supervisory support as well as perceived heavy workload were some of the negative experiences identified by the postgraduate students (Crane et al. 2016; Wadesango and Machingambi 2017). On the other hand, Ekpoh (2016) discovered no supervisor-related factors as a challenge faced by postgraduate students.

The participants in this study also highlighted an excessive workload and limited time. This often results from a failure to maintain the pace required in the work plans, leading, in turn, to anxiety, isolation and frustration (Matin and Khan 2017). On the other hand, the high workload arises from the increased number of theoretical and practical requirements that postgraduate students are required to meet within a limited time frame (Havenga and Sengane 2018). However, the students were satisfied with the flexibility experienced in the use of a blended approach as well as the connection between them and the instructors which improved their personal and professional skills (Hahessy et al. 2014). The study conducted by Havenga and Sengane (2018) reported academic workload, time constraints and the structure of the course outlines as some of the major challenges experienced by postgraduate students.

Improvement Measures

The participants in this study suggested that PGD programmes be advertised to motivate practising registered nurses to apply for specialisation fields. There was, however, a challenge in making PGD programmes convenient, accessible and attractive to a number of students (Smyth et al. 2012). In addition, the lack of sufficient and correct information on PGD programmes was discovered to be the cause of the low rate of applicants (Vahedian-Azimi et al. 2014). On the other hand, the participants in the study by Hahessy et al. (2014) suggested that postgraduate students need to be supported financially to encourage more participation. These findings are in line with those of (Reddy 2017) who reported that by providing postgraduate students with the much-needed support during their studies will enable a larger number of students to graduate. However, in this study most of the students were financially supported.

Limitations of the Study

The study focused only on postgraduate nursing students who were enrolled as full-time students at the University of Namibia. As such it is not possible to generalise the findings from the study to other postgraduate students who are enrolled as part-time students, while the scope of this study would have been widened if postgraduate students studying towards master's and doctoral degrees had been included.

Implications for the University

The semi-structured interviews revealed that the postgraduate nursing students were all experiencing challenges related to family commitments, the lengthy research proposal approval process and rigid relationships with some of the lecturers. In addition, inadequate information sharing and the complex scope of the curriculum were resulting in increased levels of stress and exhaustion among the postgraduate students. Finally, financial constraints and family commitments were among some of the factors exacerbating the challenges of postgraduate study.

Recommendations

It is recommended that:

- lecturing staff undergo refresher training on the research supervision of postgraduate students on a regular basis to ensure that they are aware of the challenges facing their students;
- the School of Nursing and its academic staff devise an improved method of and schedule for supportive consultations with the students;
- the duration of the programme be extended to at least two years to allow lecturers sufficient time to cover the curriculum without exerting too much pressure on the students; and
- the University of Namibia (School of Nursing) and the Ministry of Health and Social Services (Research Unit) expedite the process of approving research proposals to prevent unnecessary delays which sometimes result in the students having to extend their studies.

Conclusion

The study revealed several challenges experienced by postgraduate students. Challenging programmes caused increased levels of stress and exhaustion while students need to balance family life and studies while enrolled for a postgraduate programme. On the other hand, the study participants also mentioned some positive experiences related to a supportive teaching and academic environment. The findings

of this study call for well-articulated actions to improve the challenges identified in the study by offering more academic support to the students during the research proposal process and research project writing.

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