

SUPPORT PRACTICES TO PROVIDE SOCIAL CAPITAL IN OPEN DISTANCE LEARNING: MASTER'S AND DOCTORAL STUDENTS' VIEWS

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ABSTRACT

The University of South Africa is challenged by the slow throughput and high dropout rates of its master's and doctoral students. Thus, the aim of the investigation was to determine these students' views of the support they received in all aspects of their studies within one particular college of the university. The researcher also investigated if different student groups had different views in this regard. Using a survey design, 77 master's and doctoral students completed a questionnaire (constructed by the researcher), by means of a five-point Likert scale. There was also an open-ended question, which made provision for students to provide recommendations for how institutional support could be improved. The findings revealed problems with the appointment process of supervisors, the guidance given by some supervisors, as well as the timing of and support provided at seminars with regard to some facets of research. Statistically significant differences were determined between males and females and between master's and doctoral students respectively in some aspects. Recommendations for improvement of student support were made.

Keywords: community of practice; postgraduate supervision; seminars; social capital; support of master's and doctoral students; survey design

INTRODUCTION

Worldwide concern has been expressed over slow throughput and high dropout rates of master's and doctoral students (Brill, Balcanoff, Land, Gogarty and Turner 2014,



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26; West, Gokalp, Peña, Fischer and Gupton 2011, 310). This concern has also been raised in South Africa (Mouton 2007, 1078-1090; Mtshali 2013, 1). The University of South Africa (Unisa), where this study took place, is an open distance learning (ODL) institution. Unisa ranked 10th on the list of South African universities with regard to graduate–academic proportion and 23% of its doctoral students completed their degrees within six years (Mouton 2013, 10). This confirmed the problem of poor throughput of students, which previous Unisa studies had highlighted (Marx 2011, 30), in addition to the inferior quality of some of the research reports (Brynard 2005, 364).

The fact that students and supervisors are divided physically with regard to space and time in ODL environments (in contrast to residential universities) contributes to the problem, since many students experience a feeling of social isolation (Du Toit-Brits 2015; Wisker, Robinson and Shacham 2007, 312). Authors have therefore recommended that more opportunities be developed for the social support of these students (Ali and Kohun 2007, 33). One way to do this is through social media such as Facebook, which can enhance collaborative learning among students and significantly improve their academic performance (Al-Rahmi, Othman and Yusuf 2015, 177).

Apart from social isolation, various reasons for student procrastination have been identified. In ODL environments, non-academic factors related to work and domestic responsibilities often create barriers to success (Ehlers and Van der Wal 2014, 1; Subotzky and Prinsloo 2011, 182). In addition, studies conducted at Unisa have identified a lack of student research skills (Heeralal 2015, 99; Ssegawa and Rwelamila 2009, 293; West et al. 2011, 312) and the inappropriate allocation of supervisors (Heeralal 2015, 99) as problem areas.

In the college where this study took place, generally only one-third of master's and doctoral students completed their degrees – and often only after a lengthy time period (M.M. Nieman, pers. comm.). This highlights the need to evaluate the processes and practices in the college with regard to postgraduate studies. When students register for their master's and doctoral studies, they gain access to various tutorial letters and documents on a Unisa website maintained by the relevant college. This provides them with useful information, such as a template for writing a research proposal, a checklist for evaluating their proposals, how to compile a bibliography, how to access the library and electronic resources, how to loan books, and the art of academic writing. A discussion forum enables students to post questions and receive support from the research directorate. A seminar on proposal writing is arranged annually in April at Unisa, while another seminar for students who are already engaged with their research is arranged at Unisa regional offices in Pretoria, Durban and Polokwane during July. An additional seminar for Ethiopian students is also presented in Addis Ababa. These seminars focus on topics such as academic writing, the literature review, research methods, finding emotional support, research ethics

and plagiarism. In addition, a two-day student conference is organised annually in Pretoria, where students can present their work and obtain feedback from peers and lecturers. Two part-time contract workers provide statistical support to students who embark on quantitative research projects, and a list of editors who are affiliated with relevant bodies is provided by the research directorate for the language editing of dissertations. Financial support is also provided by Unisa, if supervisors support these applications.

There is additional support for students who are permanently employed as academics at Unisa and are under the age of 50 years. They can pursue their studies on a full-time basis while Unisa funds the salary of a substitute lecturer for up to two years for master's degrees and three years for doctoral degrees. In addition, there are four "brown bag" sessions per year in the college, where staff can present their work to be commented on by senior academics.

Most students are in dyadic relationships with their supervisors (one supervisor paired with one student). Students who register for their proposals submit essays on their topics of interest, that are made available to departmental staff members to indicate their interest in a study. Supervisors are assigned to students on the basis of the supervisors' expertise and current supervisory loads. A decision was taken by management to allow full professors to supervise ten students, associate professors to supervise eight students and senior lecturers to supervise six students, in view of their varying levels of expertise.

With regard to the training of supervisors, most supervisors learn by doing. Supervisors can also use Unisa training funds at their disposal to attend any relevant workshops. For example, the University of Stellenbosch annually presents three-day workshops in Stellenbosch entitled "Upping your game in postgraduate supervision". In 2015, a departmental chair of one of the departments in the College of Education also arranged for an experienced academic from another university to offer relevant training to the members of her department in a one-day workshop.

The aim of the study on which this article is based was to determine the perceptions of postgraduate students in the relevant college of the assistance they received. In particular, the study aimed to answer the following two research questions: (i) *What are the views of master's and doctoral students in one college at Unisa of the support that the college provides?* (ii) *How do demographic variables impact on students' views?* The investigation was conducted against the background of the theoretical framework that is explained in the next section.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Current learning theories emphasise the need for social support during learning, in consideration of Vygotski's zone of proximal development, which states that with such support, a student can achieve greater insights than when studying alone. Two social

learning theories were therefore viewed as relevant for this study, namely situated learning theory and social capital theory (West et al. 2011, 314). In consideration of the challenges that the distance in an ODL context offers, an examination of these theories is crucial.

Situated learning theory explains how learning is facilitated through participation in the social activities of specific communities of practice, such as academic communities (Lave and Wenger 1991). Through various activities in a community of practice (CoP), new traditions and understanding are developed and transferred to novice members, known as legitimate peripheral participants. As with other kinds of communities, three elements define an academic CoP: its members share goals, a specific language, conventions and a mutual accountability; members engage in similar actions, such as research endeavours; and there is a shared repertoire that involves a pooling of resources and emotional support (Wenger 1998; Wisker et al. 2007, 304). As novice members, postgraduate students develop academically by participating in the practices of the community, such as in research projects (Herzig 2002, 177). Through the support of the academic CoP, students are able to enter into the university CoP. As they learn, their academic identities are formed by their belief concerning how successful or unsuccessful they are, which is influenced by the feedback they receive from others. As the students acquire the knowledge and skills of the CoP, they move to more central participation in the local academic community and then into the global research community (Wisker et al. 2007, 305).

Social capital theories complement situated learning theory by explaining how relevant and effective social networks in a CoP provide social capital that can contribute to the success of the students (Social Capital and Education u.d.). Social networks can provide the information, norms and expectations of an academic CoP, for example the criteria for rewarding or negating the students' work. In this network, co-students are a valuable resource to provide social capital (Brill et al. 2014; Klenowski, Ehrich, Kapitzke and Trigger 2011; Leshem 2007; Trees 2013). Liaising with other students affords opportunities for academic discussions, benchmarking progress and emotional support (Baker and Lattuca 2010; Hopwood 2010; Pilbeam, Lloyd-Jones and Denyer 2013). However, in an ODL context, students seldom have the opportunity for face-to-face interaction with co-students, unless such opportunities are arranged by institutions. Supervisors are also an important resource that provides social capital (Schulze 2011, 784; Quan-Baffour and Vambe 2008, 1). By engaging in learning conversations with peers and supervisors, students are empowered to address their research problems, to own the research process and to develop as equal partners with their supervisors (Wisker et al. 2007, 1).

In the light of the aforementioned learning theories, student support through supervision and student seminars are particularly important. The student-supervisor relationship is the primary relationship to provide social capital in the academic CoP and, thus, pivotal for student success (Buttery and Richter 2005, 8; Quan-Baffour

and Vambe 2008, 1; West et al. 2011, 313; Wisker et al., 2007, 301). In an ODL context, supervisors provide instrumental help, such as guidance with research; they offer psychosocial help, which includes pastoral care; and they afford networking assistance by helping students make connections in the applicable academic field. Within the traditional dyadic approach used at the relevant college, it is particularly important that students and their supervisors be well-matched (Brynard 2005, 370), since supervision relies mainly on the individual styles and attitudes of supervisors. However, such a dyadic approach may cause problems in contexts of increasing distance and diversity, among others because of poor communication between the two parties (Bitzer and Albertyn 2011, 874). This could be compounded by supervision that crosses cultural boundaries, since not all supervisors are culturally competent (Ancis and Marshall 2010, 282; Wisker et al. 2007, 303). Moreover, while many students lack research knowledge and skills, many supervisors also lack such knowledge (Netswera and Mavundla 2001, 161). Although institutions can move away from traditional dyadic approaches to team/group approaches, as recommended by Bitzer and Albertyn (2011, 884), this change has not been adopted at the relevant college because of high student numbers. Experienced supervisors can mentor novice supervisors (Wisker et al. 2007, 307), and such mentoring does sometimes occur in the applicable context, even though most mentoring focuses on research and publication output. In an ODL environment, regular e-meetings between supervisors and students are required (Andrew 2012, 51; Jowallah 2014, 196). Since social cues are absent in this environment, misunderstandings may occur, which may be influenced by age, culture, gender and personality, thus emphasising the importance of supervisor sensitivity regarding online feedback to students (Augustsson and Jaldemark 2014, 31). Supervisors can use social media to bridge the space and time differences of an ODL environment (Evans and Green in Andrew 2012, 44). In particular, social media such as Skype and online discussion forums are useful (Heeralal 2015, 99).

Social capital can also be awarded by arranging workshops/seminars. At these seminars, students can acquire important information regarding research. Assistance with academic writing seems to be of particular importance (West et al. 2011, 319), although the technical support given at seminars frequently transforms into emotional support. In addition to learning from presenters, the students meet and interact with one another and develop networks. These enable the students to collaborate, share their research and offer one another mutual support that counters isolation (West et al. 2011, 314). Seminars where students present their work in progress to peers encourage the development of independence from supervisors (Wisker et al. 2007, 301) and contribute towards dissertations of a higher quality (Lovitts 2008, 165). In addition to workshops arranged at local venues, use could be made of web-conferencing tools (Jowallah 2014, 186).

Against the above background, the next section contains an explanation of the quantitative research design, followed by the results and a discussion of the results. The article ends with conclusions and recommendations.

RESEARCH METHOD

Data Collection

The study commenced after ethical clearance and approval for the study had been obtained from all relevant parties. The data collection was by means of a self-compiled, structured questionnaire. To determine biographical information, the students were requested to indicate their gender, race, whether their supervisor was of the same race and what their preferences were in this regard (and to justify this preference). They were also asked to indicate if they were master's or doctoral students. The second section of the questionnaire required the students to evaluate the support they received on a five-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (very poor) to 5 (excellent). In consideration of the theoretical framework of the study, the items focused on processes that would allow the students to access and participate in the academic CoP, as well as provide them with social capital. The items were therefore related to admission information and registration; information about financial support; supervisor appointment, guidance and feedback; library support; and seminars (that focused on time management, emotional support, the literature review and research methods). Finally, one open-ended question asked the students to provide suggestions for how student support could be improved.

To ensure content and face validity of the questionnaire, it was perused by a senior member from the research directorate tasked with postgraduate studies. Some items were added. Cronbach's alpha reliability was calculated at .77, which is good for this type of questionnaire (McMillan and Schumacher 2014, 198).

The questionnaire was completed by all 77 students who attended the seminars for postgraduate students at three centres countrywide and in Ethiopia. The biographical data indicated that of the 77 students, 37 (48.1%) were master's (M) students and 36 (46.8%) were doctoral (D) students; and 38 (49.4%) were male, while 34 (44.2%) were female (there were missing values). Regarding race, five (6.5%) were white and the same number were coloured; 56 (72.7%) were black and four (5.2%) were Indian. A few missing values occurred in all instances.

In line with accepted practice, students' responses were captured on a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet and analysed by means of descriptive statistics and inferential statistics (chi square analysis). To this end, use was made of the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS), since Unisa is licensed to use it. Responses on the open-ended question were analysed thematically (qualitatively), as well as quantitatively.

RESULTS

Race and Racial Preferences

In the open-ended responses, students gave reasons for their racial preferences of supervisors. The majority said that the race of the supervisor was not important, but rather his/her experience and knowledge in their field of specialisation. Two wrote the following:

Academic work cuts across cultures so as far as the supervisor is up to his duty, nothing else counts. (Black male D student)

The race for me is not an issue. What is important is the support that the supervisor may provide and the relationship between the student and the supervisor. (Black female M student)

In contrast, three (3.9%) white students preferred a white supervisor, but also indicated that this was not crucial. Two wrote the following:

[M]ostly, unless it is a dynamic other like prof X (a coloured man). More important than race is knowledge of my subject. I prefer someone whom I can communicate with in an easy, accessible manner – understanding my language and culture. (White female M student)

Differences in culture can be a problem sometimes. But I can work with any person. It depends on personalities as well. (White female M student)

The Indian student who preferred being supervised by an Indian indicated that this “aided understanding” between them. Similarly, the seven (9.1%) black students who preferred a black supervisor explained that a black supervisor would be more understanding of the teaching contexts in black schools and would also understand their language, their writing and where they came from.

Students’ Evaluation of the Support Mechanisms in the College

Students indicated their evaluation of 15 practices in the college, as indicated in Table 1.

Table 1: Descriptive statistics indicating students' evaluations of the support mechanisms in the college

Item	Poor F(%)	Moderate F(%)	Good F(%)	Mean	SD
Admission information	5(6.5)	10(13)	59(76.6)	4	.922
Registration support	4(5.2)	14(18.2)	58(75.3)	4.03	.894
Financial support	29(37.7)	19(24.7)	23(29.9)	2.72	1.267
Appointment of supervisor	22(28.6)	12(15.6)	39(50.6)	3.34	1.465
Guidance of supervisor	12(15.6)	8(10.4)	46(59.7)	3.8	1.361
Library support	4(5.2)	13(16.9)	56(72.7)	3.93	.887
myUnisa support	4(5.2)	5(6.5)	43(55.8)	4.04	.969
Seminar					
procedures	1(1.3)	11(14.3)	61(94.8)	4.21	.745
academic writing		5(6.5)	67(87)	4.43	.64
time management		2(2.6)	8(10.4)	4.14	.718
finding emotional support		18(23.4)	52(67.5)	4.04	.751
doing a literature review	2(2.6)	9(11.7)	59(76.6)	4.14	.744
conceptual framework	3(3.9)	15(19.5)	54(70.1)	4.07	.861
quantitative research	6(7.8)	17(22.1)	39(50.6)	3.69	1.018
qualitative research	5(6.5)	19(24.7)	42(54.5)	3.8	1.041

The means in table 1 indicate how satisfied the students were with any particular aspect of support they experienced. (Values could range from 1 to 5; the closer the value is to 5, the more satisfied the students were.) Table 1 reveals that the students were most appreciative of the guidance they received with regard to academic writing ($M = 4.43$), and least satisfied with the information on financial support ($M = 2.72$). Other values that showed some dissatisfaction on the part of a number of students were the appointment of supervisors ($M = 3.34$) and the guidance by supervisors ($M = 3.8$). However, the standard deviations in these two instances were relatively high ($SD = 1.4$ to 1.5), indicating different experiences regarding these aspects. The qualitative data shed some light on this. Regarding being assigned a supervisor, five (6.5%) students indicated their discontent with how slow the process was. One wrote the following:

Getting a supervisor is a big hassle if not a war. I submitted my draft proposal two months ago and up to now there is no feedback from the contact person. All Unisa post-graduate students are complaining about this. Please address it urgently. (Black female M student)

Eleven others (14.3%) were unhappy with their supervisors, particularly with regard to the time it took to receive feedback on submitted work (one student indicated that he waited two months for feedback), and five (6.5%) were dissatisfied with the supervisors' accessibility. One stated the following:

Supervise the supervisors to ensure that they do their work diligently and give feedback to students within a set time, and not to cite their busy schedules as an excuse as this affects the

one-year period during which students have to finish their proposals. Alternatively this also should be considered when deciding on the fate of the student. (Black female M student)

Indicating a need to overcome social isolation, some students wanted regular contact with supervisors, in particular face-to-face contact.

I suggest that supervisors from Pretoria come and visit supervisees at least once in two years because without having face-to-face communication studying will become frustrating. Please, much work has to be done to improve supervisor assignment. Truly speaking, it is heart-breaking. (Black male D student)

The open-ended question revealed that many responses (23 or 29.9%) focused on the master's and doctoral seminars and guidance or support of the supervisor. Table 1 also reveals that not all students were satisfied with the support they received at the seminars with regard to quantitative and qualitative research designs and data analysis ($M = 3.69$, $SD = 1.018$ for quantitative research; and $M = 3.8$, $SD = 1.041$ for qualitative research).

Regarding the master's and doctoral seminars, 12 (15.6%) students said that these should be conducted earlier in the year, shortly after the registration process had been completed; seven (9.1%) of the students indicated that there should be more workshops throughout the year.

The timing of the workshop was poor. It came in the middle of the year when I had already submitted my draft proposal. It should have been done at the beginning of the year. I am already bemoaning some of the mistakes that I made in the draft. (Black male D student)

More seminars on research designs, methodologies and research proposals should be organised for students to have a consolidated view of their study. (Black male D student)

A few students also suggested more clarity on venues, more practical examples and the grouping of students into similar fields.

Although 55.8% of the students evaluated the Unisa web-based support as "good", the open-ended question revealed significant difficulties experienced by some of the students with regard to their internet connections to Unisa. This affected their ability to download and review relevant documents. The students also described their struggles to access new library systems and to pay their registration fees.

I used the online link to pay fees and it seems to have disappeared. I've written e-mails, sent snapshots of the electronic transfer but I don't get feedback. Please check on procedures for paying fees. (Black female D student)

Accessing myUnisa and myLife emails was really a challenge and still remains to be so. PLEASE DO SOMETHING!! (Coloured male D student)

One student recommended that the support information on the web be better packaged to assist students with general information and research support material, while two (2.6%) students suggested that information about financial support be more readily available.

Since the standard deviations in table 1 revealed that the students sometimes differed quite markedly in their evaluation of the support they received, the study proceeded to test for statistically significant differences between the views of different genders and levels of study (i.e. master's or doctoral students).

Gender Differences

With regard to gender, statistically significant differences were found for three items, namely supervisors' guidance and feedback, as well as the support given at the seminars with regard to (i) quantitative research designs and (ii) qualitative research designs. These results are indicated in tables 2 to 4.

Table 2: Cross tabs of gender and evaluation of the guidance and feedback given by supervisors

Evaluation	Male f(%)	Female f(%)	Total f(%)
Poor	1 (2.9)	10(37)	11(17.7)
Moderate	5(14.3)	3(11.1)	8(12.9)
Good	29(82.9)	14(51.9)	43(69.4)
Total	35(100)	27(100)	62(100)

Chi square = 10.54; df = 1; p < 0.01

According to Table 2, more than 80% of the male students thought they were well-supported by their supervisors. However, the table also reveals that the female students were significantly less satisfied (on the 1%-level) than the male students in terms of their supervisors' support: 51.9% females versus 82.9% males thought they were well-supported, while 37% females and 2.9% males indicated that the support was poor.

Table 3: Cross tabs of gender and evaluation of the support given at the master's and doctoral seminars with regard to quantitative research designs

Evaluation	Male f(%)	Female f(%)	Total f(%)
Poor	0(0)	6(22.2)	6(10.2)
Moderate	10(31.3)	7(25.9)	17(28.8)
Good	22(68.8)	14(51.9)	36(61)
Total	32(100)	27(100)	59(100)

Chi square = 4.86; df = 1; p < 0.05

Table 4: Cross tabs of gender and evaluation of the support given at master's and doctoral seminars with regard to qualitative research designs

Evaluation	Male f(%)	Female f(%)	Total f(%)
Poor	0(0)	5(17.2)	5(8.1)
Moderate	9(27.3)	10(34.5)	19(30.6)
Good	24(72.7)	14(48.3)	38(61.3)
Total	33(100)	29(100)	62(100)

Chi square = 6.435; df = 1; p < 0.05

As in the case of table 2, tables 3 and 4 show that more than two-thirds of the males were pleased with the support provided at seminars. On the other hand, female students were significantly less satisfied than male students (on the 5%-level) with the assistance given at seminars regarding (i) quantitative research designs and (ii) qualitative research designs. Of the sample, 51.9% and 48.3% of the females, versus 68.8% and 72.7% of the males thought this support was good; while 22.2% and 17.2% of the females thought the support was poor, while no male student shared this view.

Differences Between Master's and Doctoral Students

When tested for statistically significant differences between the views of master's and doctoral students, significant differences were found with regard to satisfaction with supervisors' guidance and feedback and with the support given at seminars in terms of academic writing. These results are indicated in Tables 5 and 6.

Table 5: Cross tabs of degree and evaluation of the guidance and feedback given by supervisors

Evaluation	Master's degree f(%)	Doctoral degree f(%)	Total f(%)
Poor	11(33.3)	1(3.3)	12(19)
Moderate	4(12.1)	4(13.3)	8(12.7)
Good	18(54.5)	25(83.3)	43(68.3)
Total	33(100)	30(100)	63(100)

Chi square = 8.472; df = 1; p < 0.01

Table 6: Cross tabs of degree and evaluation of the support given at master's and doctoral seminars with regard to academic writing

Evaluation	Master's degree f(%)	Doctoral degree f(%)	Total f(%)
Moderate	5(15.2)	0(0)	5(7.4)
Good	28(4.8)	35(100)	63(92.6)
Total	33(100)	35(100)	68(100)
Total	33(100)	30(100)	63(100)

Chi square = 5.724; df = 1; p < 0.05

According to Table 5, doctoral students were significantly more satisfied than master's students (on the 1%-level) with their supervisors' guidance and feedback: 33.3% of the master's students thought this support was poor in comparison to only 3.3% of the doctoral students; and 54.4% of the master's students thought this support was good in comparison to 83.3% of the doctoral students. Similarly, Table 6 illustrates that 4.8% of the master's students thought the support given at seminars with regard to academic writing was good in comparison to 100% of the doctoral students. This difference was on the 5%-level of significance.

DISCUSSION

Supervisors were identified as key role-players to provide social capital, which could enable the students to become active members of the academic CoP. The fact that the majority of the students did not have any particular preference for a supervisor of a specific race is viewed in a positive light, given South Africa's apartheid history. The few students who preferred supervisors of their own race indicated that their preferences were related to the fact that their use of language and their research contexts would be better understood by someone of their own race. The appointment process of supervisors surfaced as a major obstacle – only about half of the students thought this process was handled efficiently. This finding corroborates an earlier Unisa study, conducted by Heeralal (2015, 99). When looking at the effectiveness of the supervision itself, one Unisa study with doctoral students in the health sciences found that most students were satisfied with their supervisors (Ehlers and Van der Wal 2014, 1). In this study, about 60% indicated that the supervisors supported and guided the students rather well, indicating that there was room for improvement. In particular, the female and master's students desired better supervisory guidance and support. This confirms previous studies that determined that many female students lack self-efficacy and therefore, desire greater assistance (Magano 2011, 365); this is in spite of the fact that South African female students tend to outperform their male counterparts (Subotzky and Prinsloo 2011, 178). Finally, only about 30% of the students in this investigation were satisfied with the information their supervisors

provided about study bursaries. The fact that bursaries are transformed into loans for unsuccessful students may play a significant role in this regard.

The other institutional factor that was significant for its role in providing social capital in the academic CoP was the master's and doctoral seminars that the college arranged. The students indicated their satisfaction with the guidance they received in terms of academic writing – none of the students thought it was poor, and 87% thought it was good. The fact that the doctoral students experienced greater satisfaction than the master's students with this aspect of the workshop is understandable because the doctoral students have already gained experience in academic writing during their master's studies. Master's and doctoral students' displeasure with the seminars was related to the time of presentation (too late in the year), the presenters (not their own supervisors) and the frequency of seminars (not often enough). Other studies have also noted that students could benefit from the social capital provided by more contact with supervisors and group interaction with other students (Ehlers and Van der Wal 2014, 1). Finally, social capital is provided by user-friendly internet communication between students, their peers and their supervisors. The effective use of social media in this regard has been noted by previous researchers (Heeralal 2015, 99; Al-Rahmi et al. 2015). This is important, since many students, particularly the females, indicated that the training at the seminars with regard to data collection and analysis was insufficient.

CONCLUSIONS

The aim of the study was to survey master's and doctoral students' views on the support practices at one college at Unisa and to determine if students of different genders and grade levels differed in this regard. Although the study was limited to students in one college, the results could be noteworthy for all colleges at Unisa, as well as for other institutions where supervisors and students are divided by time and distance.

Key findings point to the fact that, according to the students, the appointment of supervisors is often a very slow and frustrating process. This problem needs to be dealt with urgently. In addition, the students' views indicate that the support provided by some supervisors needs to be improved. Clear guidelines for supervisors on effective practices could be developed. These could include guiding principles for the use of social media, such as Facebook and Skype, to overcome the distance in ODL and to provide general information to students. This option needs further research. Supervisors should also note that students, especially female students, often lack self-efficacy. Supervisory communication therefore needs to inform, guide, affirm value and build students' research efficacy to provide social capital. With regard to the annual seminars, the findings revealed the value of these seminars to engage students in the academic CoP, where they can learn about research and network with relevant

others to gain social capital. However, the seminars need to be presented earlier in the year for proposal-writing students. As first-time researchers, the master's students especially need more support than is currently provided, in particular with regard to academic writing and research methodology. In consideration of the workload of staff, more recently retired, experienced professors may be contracted to be involved in workshops, which could be presented more often and for longer time periods.

The investigation was significant in highlighting the issues that need to be dealt with to enhance the support provided to postgraduate students in one college at Unisa. The recommendations indicate a need to move away from the current high reliance on the dyadic student-supervisor relationship by providing greater support within a social network of role-players. This could benefit the students and improve success rates, which would ultimately enhance the image of the college and of Unisa as a whole.

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