

Motivational Pathways for Young People to Pursue Postgraduate Studies at Historically Disadvantaged Universities: Insights into Key Motivators and Challenges

Volume 7 Issue 1
(April 2025)

e-ISSN 2716-5191
doi: [10.30997/ijsr.v7i1.568](https://doi.org/10.30997/ijsr.v7i1.568)

Thulani Andrew Chauke

¹*Department of Adult Community and Continuing Education, University South Africa, South Africa*

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received: 12-09-2024

Revised version received: 12-31-2024

Accepted: 03-0-2025

Available online: 04-28-2025

Keywords:

higher education; graduates;
motivation; postgraduate; young
people.

How to Cite:

Chauke, T. A. (2025). Motivational Pathways for Young People to Pursue Postgraduate Studies at Historically Disadvantaged Universities: Insights into Key Motivators and Challenges. *Indonesian Journal of Social Research (IJSR)*, 7(1), 65-80.
<https://doi.org/10.30997/ijsr.v7i1.568>

Corresponding Author:

Thulani Andrew Chauke
chauke.thuli@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Postgraduate students, particularly those lacking exposure to scholarly learning, have to confront significant financial shortages, which delay the attainment of their academic objectives. This study explores the factors that motivate young people to get master's degrees and the challenges students face during their postgraduate journey at South Africa's historically disadvantaged universities. Data were collected and processed using a qualitative research method. The study employed purposive sampling and a snowball sample to select participants. Thematic analysis was employed to scrutinize the data. The study revealed that augmented employment prospects, enhancement of remunerative status, familial heritage, and aspiration for scholarly attainment are the factors motivating young people to pursue postgraduate studies. The challenges of insufficient supervision and limited familial support have been identified. The study recommends that the higher education sector seek financial support from external sources, including foreign donors and the private sector, to address some of the challenges young scholars experience during their postgraduate studies and encourage the pursuit of master's degrees. Additionally, it is advised that supervisors receive appropriate training in adequate student support.



Available online at <https://iojs.unida.ac.id/index.php/IJSR/>
Copyright (c) 2025 by Indonesian Journal of Social Research (IJSR)

1. Introduction

The South African higher education landscape is confronted with a pressing concern: an aging academic cadre. This phenomenon jeopardizes the integrity and vitality of the higher education system, which is grappling with finding successors for the aging cohort (Muller, 2013). Regrettably, the South African higher-education sector does not sufficiently emphasize knowledge preservation and intergenerational knowledge transfer between established and nascent academics (Dube & Ngulube, 2013). Consequently, South African universities have difficulty attracting young aspirants to their postgraduate programs, possibly because they appeal to older, seasoned candidates (Mphekgwana et al., 2020). Hako (2022) cautions against the South African higher education sector's inability to allure youthful participants to postgraduate endeavors and contends that PhD graduates may be categorized as over-qualified in their pursuit of gainful employment. Statistical data of the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) for the year 2020 reveals that 17.7% of students enrolled for postgraduate studies and that 52% of them were doctoral graduates within the domains of Science, engineering, and Technology (Department of Higher Education, 2019). This attests to the comparative gravitation of postgraduate aspirants toward STEM disciplines instead of the humanities and social sciences.

To counterbalance the advancing age demographics of the professoriate, the National Research Foundation has undertaken to finance postgraduate studies and facilitate the academic progression of African and Coloured youth in particular (Education, 2016). Postgraduate pursuits are imperative as they contribute substantively to ameliorating the South African academic landscape (Mmadi, 2022). Noteworthy progress has been made in this regard. In 2019, 13.5% of postgraduate students in South Africa successfully attained doctoral degrees (Department of Higher Education, 2019). These statistics underscore the steady progress the higher education sector in South Africa is making in attracting and retaining postgraduate scholars.

In South Africa, higher education implies tertiary education after matric, encompassing community colleges, TVET colleges, universities, and traditional universities (Southafricaneducation, 2022). The higher education sector in South Africa is characterized by moderate knowledge production, low enrollment, and high dropout rates (Cloete, 2014). In this study, higher education refers to specifically historically disadvantaged universities. In South African educational history, the term "historically disadvantaged universities" pertains to venerable institutions that were predominantly attended by individuals of African, Colored, and Indian descent who, during apartheid, were confronted with circumscribed financial means (Temoso & Myeki, 2023). In South Africa, eight universities are considered historically disadvantaged universities. Established by the apartheid government to serve black, Coloured, and Indian people, these universities are the University of Fort Hare, the University of the Western Cape, the University of Limpopo, the University of Venda; the Walter Sisulu University; the University of Zululand; the Mangosuthu University of Technology; and the Sefako Makgatho Health Science University (Africa & Mutizwa-Mangiza, 2020).

According to IGI Global (2022), a postgraduate student is someone pursuing a master's degree, M.Phil., or PhD, all of which necessitate an undergraduate degree. This study defines a postgraduate student as someone currently engaged in a master's degree program. Motivation is rooted in the term "motive," denoting a need requiring fulfillment or a desire either influenced by culture, society, and lifestyle (Vincent & Kumar, 2019). A study by Wiegerová (2016) indicates that high-achieving students who receive commitments of future employment from their tertiary institutions exhibit a greater willingness to pursue postgraduate studies. This study does not examine historically disadvantaged universities and concerns the general student population, not young people in particular. Consequently, this study distinguishes itself from previous studies by investigating postgraduates at historically disadvantaged

universities, its sample of young people, and its endeavor to elicit their perspectives on the subject of inquiry.

Various factors motivate young people to pursue postgraduate studies at historical universities. Alabi et al. (2019) note that young women often enroll in postgraduate programs due to a passion and strong desire for self-education. Professional skills, cognitive interests, and intellectual and analytical abilities are vital in influencing students to pursue postgraduate studies (François, 2014). Professional advancement and the ability to impact society are key motivators for young and mature students seeking further education (Arar & Abramowitz, 2017). In South Africa, many factors drive young people to postgraduate studies. A study by Hoffman and Julie (2012) highlights the desire to expand knowledge as one motivating factor for students at historically disadvantaged universities. Similarly, Havenga and Malmsey (2018) identify progression prospects as a key motivator for students pursuing postgraduate studies at historical universities.

The purpose of this study is to investigate the factors that motivate young people to pursue a master's degree, as well as to examine the challenges they encounter throughout their postgraduate journey at South Africa's historically disadvantaged universities. This study assumes that intrinsic and extrinsic factors motivate young people to pursue master's degrees at historically disadvantaged universities. Additionally, postgraduate students encounter various challenges while studying at historically disadvantaged universities. This study recommends novel approaches to enhance the support network for postgraduate students and elevate the overall experience of master's studies at historically disadvantaged universities. Because it contributes to a better comprehension of the higher education landscape in South Africa, its insights are valuable to universities, policymakers, and organizations interested in postgraduate education and research in historically disadvantaged environments.

1.1. Factors Contributing to Young People's Pursuit of Postgraduate Studies

1.1.1. Career Advancement

Ugwuzor and Ngwoke (2021) conducted a study in Nigeria that shows that 93% of young people pursue master's and doctoral studies with an eye to becoming higher education educators. They are also motivated to enhance their employability and influence the country's policies. In support of these findings, Hoffman and Julie (2012) posit that 57.8% of students embark on postgraduate studies with the intention of contributing to the body of knowledge. Studies by Gunawan and Amalia (2015) and Altbach et al. (2019) find that many young people pursue postgraduate studies in pursuit of better employment opportunities and higher salaries.

Because both young and mature students believe that enrolling in master's and doctoral studies mitigates the risk of unemployment, they enroll in postgraduate programs, hoping to have good job prospects upon graduation. Postgraduate studies are a pathway into the labor market for students in the lowest income bracket. According to Knutsen (2011), young people are inclined to pursue education up to doctoral level in the hope of promotion in the workplace.

1.1.2. Gaining Skills and Self-Actualisation

According to Buzdar et al. (2017), young people pursue master's and doctoral studies to be stimulated intellectually, acquire research skills, and improve their career prospects. Saiti et al. (2017) argue that intrinsic factors, particularly self-motivation, drive young people to pursue postgraduate studies. Their contention finds support in the findings of Amani et al. (2022), who assert that, in addition to self-motivation, factors such as prestige and the realization of one's full potential influence an individual's decision to pursue master's level studies. François (2014) further suggests that students embark on master's and doctoral studies to hone their intellectual and analytical skills.

1.1.3. Family Influence

Brooks and Waters (2011) find that young people's desire to differentiate themselves from their parents, who have no postgraduate qualifications, is a notable motivation for postgraduate studies. Building on this idea, Sedahmed and Noureldien (2019) identify two determinants of enrollment in master's programs: family income and the reputation of the higher education institution. Liu et al. (2022) posit that familial mental support prompts individuals to embark on master's level studies. Yusuf et al. (2023) underscore the substantial impact of scholarships on young people's decision to engage in postgraduate education. Moreover, the pivotal role of various stakeholders must be acknowledged. Adefulu et al. (2020) emphasize colleagues' and parents' encouragement of young people to pursue postgraduate studies. These findings illuminate the multifaceted motivations and determinants that underlie the enrollment of young individuals in postgraduate programs.

1.2. Challenges Postgraduate Students Encounter in Higher Education

1.2.1. Lack of Institutional Support

According to Ghatak et al. (2021), institutions of higher learning globally have made a substantial effort to recruit postgraduate students. However, the protracted duration of postgraduate studies constitutes a pressing issue (Ward & Brennan, 2020). Tardy completion is common among master's and doctoral candidates hamstrung by the procedural intricacies of faculties and the broader higher education landscape in South Africa (Terrell et al., 2012). Regrettably, postgraduate students often lack support (Pappa et al., 2020). The absence of a nurturing environment may culminate in attrition (Orellana et al., 2016). Cotterall (2013) attributes prolonged completion times to postgraduate students' adversarial relationships with their supervisors. Selecting a well-defined research topic can also extend the duration of postgraduate studies (Asogwa et al., 2014). Therefore, quality supervision to ensure the timely completion of postgraduate studies is imperative (Van Rooij et al., 2021).

1.2.2. Gender Roles and Social Activities

Galdino et al. (2016) posit that master's and doctoral students' inability to manage their social interactions and leisure activities often leads to burnout. Burnout contributes to discontinuing master's and doctoral studies (Essa, 2011). Within the domestic sphere, gender roles cause young female students to drop out of their postgraduate studies. Gender roles do not affect their male counterparts similarly (Alabi et al., 2019). Tzanakou et al. (2024) contend that female postgraduate students struggle to reconcile their academic commitments with familial responsibilities. Successful navigation of these challenges necessitates determination, perseverance, and intrinsic motivation (Spaulding & Rockinson-Szapkiw, 2012).

1.2.3. Financial Constraints

Van Rooij et al. (2021) assert that postgraduate students, particularly those lacking exposure to scholarly learning, have to confront significant financial shortages, which delay the attainment of their academic objectives. Postgraduate scholars frequently have to contend with fiscal constraints and often cannot afford the costs of travel, tuition, printing, photocopying, and data. Financial stress can slow program completion (Sengane & Havenga, 2018).

1.3. Theoretical Framework

The present study is grounded in self-determination theory, a psychological framework conceptualized by Dr. Edward Deci and Richard Ryan. This theory posits that fundamental psychological needs influence individuals' inclination to initiate change in pursuing their objectives (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Central to self-determination theory is the assertion that pursuing growth and fulfillment drives individuals. It further asserts that self-determination depends on the promise of reward. In other words, individuals are more inclined to engage in activities promising self-fulfillment than in activities associated with punitive outcomes (Deci & Ryan, 2000).

Additionally, the theory seeks to help individuals to master life challenges, have novel experiences, and grow personally. This perspective aligns with the findings of Gunawan and Amalia (2015) who observe that young people pursue postgraduate studies to master their field of interest and, ultimately, enhance their employment prospects. Moreover, the self-determination theory contends that intrinsic motivation propels individuals toward the realization of their long-term objectives.

Consistent with this theoretical framework, the present study posits that young South Africans in higher education opt for master's level studies because of an intrinsic psychological imperative to pursue their aspirations. Consequently, an inclination towards autonomy, competence, and relatedness induces them to enroll in master's level studies. Intrinsic motivation steers their decision to embark on a postgraduate academic journey. This form of motivation encompasses a desire to comprehend their chosen field better using literature reviews and engagement with research participants. Adams et al. (2017) affirm that individuals who enjoy adequate support are bound to acquire new skills and improve their quality of life. Consequently, young individuals with emotional and financial support tend to enroll and excel in their postgraduate studies.

2. Methods

In pursuit of the study's objective, qualitative data collection and analysis methods were applied. A qualitative inquiry facilitated the researcher's comprehension of the participants' lived experiences within an unaltered environment. A qualitative approach employs non-quantitative techniques to acquire insights (Sofaer, 2002). An interpretive paradigm was adopted to delve into the experiences of young postgraduate students. Qualitative research was paramount in this study as the researcher endeavored to fathom the participants' experiences according to their interpretation of their lived realities. The factors that motivate young people to pursue postgraduate studies and the challenges they face vary based on individual experiences. Therefore, a qualitative approach was appropriate for this study as it allowed the researcher to capture the diversity of these experiences, providing valuable insights into participants' journeys. This approach also allowed participants to share their personal stories regarding the factors that motivate them to pursue postgraduate studies and the challenges they encounter at historically disadvantaged universities. Qualitative techniques help to grasp the semantic nuances of a given situation perceived by the participants (Tracy, 2024). The interpretive approach facilitated a better grasp of the world from the vantage point of young postgraduate students constituting the sample in this investigation.

Information was gathered from a purposively selected sample of ten individuals aged between 21 and 30 years. These participants received some financial support from their parents, while others were supported by the National Research Foundation to further their studies. Both purposive and snowball sampling methods were employed to select them. The study cohort consisted of young adults concurrently pursuing their master's studies at previously disadvantaged academic institutions in South Africa. Although no restrictions

based on gender, ethnicity, linguistic background, or living circumstances were imposed, eligibility criteria required that participants fall within the specified age range (21–30 years) and pursue master's level studies within the human and social sciences field. The sample size of ten participants restricts the generalizability of the findings to the entire youth participants pursuing a master's degree. Two key factors necessitated this sample size. First, this researcher encountered difficulty in finding a larger pool of young people aged between 21 and 30 years pursuing a master's degree within the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences and Education. Many potential participants were between 40 and 45 years old and fell outside the desired age range. Second, the qualitative research approach prioritizes an in-depth exploration of participant experiences and thematic saturation. No new themes emerged from the data after interviewing the ten participants and conducting a thematic analysis. This indicated that the sample size adequately captured the range of experiences relevant to the study's focus. Purposive sampling was applied because it allowed the targeted selection of participants to possess the requisite criteria and knowledge about the subject under investigation (Bless et al., 2006). The demographic characteristics of the participants are presented in Table 1 below.

Table 1 Demographic characteristics

Demographic Characteristics	Frequency
Gender	
Female	5
Male	5
Age	
21–24 Years	4
25–30 Years	6
Language	
Xitsonga	2
Tshivenda	4
Sepedi	3
SiSwati	1

A well-informed participant assisted in identifying these individuals, thereby incorporating elements of snowball sampling into the study. Snowball sampling, a form of non-probability sampling, involves participants referring the researcher to others who meet the study criteria (Du Plooy-Cilliera et al., 2014). In this study, purposively sampled participants acted as gatekeepers. The researcher initially requested a master's student at the University of Limpopo, currently pursuing his master's degree, to enquire about other master's students in the Faculty of Human and Social Science and Education. This initial contact led to the identification of a 23-year-old master's student who subsequently directed the researcher to additional eligible participants. A similar approach was employed at the University of Venda. Furthermore, the researcher engaged with lecturers and department heads at both universities to identify master's students aged between 21 and 30 under their supervision. Once their contact information was obtained, the researcher corresponded with participants via email and sometimes conducted phone calls.

Data was gathered by means of semi-structured individual interviews conducted during face-to-face and Microsoft Teams meetings, as well as on WhatsApp. This approach provided triangulation measures to enhance the study's robustness and facilitated follow-up interviews. This method was valuable in eliciting comprehensive information from participants and exploring this novel topic in depth. Two master's students from the University of Limpopo

were interviewed face-to-face, which lasted for 30 minutes each, three via Microsoft Teams for 40 minutes, and five responded to interview questions on WhatsApp. The questions in Table 2 below were asked to get information.

Table 2 Individual interview guide

Interview Questions
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• How did finding a better employment opportunity motivate you to pursue your master's degree?• How did being in academia motivate you to pursue your master's degree?• What other factors motivated you to pursue your master's degree?• How often do you experience a lack of a supportive system in your master's studies?• How often do you experience a lack of financial support during your master's studies?• What other challenges do you face in your master's degree journey?

2.1. Data Analysis, Trustworthiness, and Ethical Considerations

The gathered data was thematically analyzed. Initially, the researcher immersed himself in the data by iterative readings of the transcripts. Subsequently, initial codes were generated by direct verbatim excerpts. Once this coding process was complete, the researcher reviewed the codes and the corresponding verbatims comprehensively. Following this, thematic clusters were formulated by categorizing distinct codes into cohesive groupings. Either deconstruction or amalgamation further refined these themes. Finally, the themes got descriptive labels, and the underlying concepts of each theme were clarified. Subsequently, a comprehensive explication of the findings was undertaken. Four criteria, credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability, ensured trustworthiness. Credibility was established by seeking feedback from participants on the initial draft to verify the alignment of findings with their responses. Transferability was achieved through purposeful sampling to represent young people completing their master's degrees accurately. Dependability was ensured by requesting peers experienced in educational studies to identify significant, overlooked themes. Confirmability was maintained by storing and playing the recorded answers to participants to correct any misinterpretation of their views. Participants' anonymity, confidentiality, and informed consent were guaranteed using explicit communication about the study's objectives and benefits. Ethical clearance was obtained from the University of University of South Africa (Reference: 2023/04/12/90501543/08/AM).

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. Results

The study examined the motivating factors compelling young individuals to pursue advanced studies at the master's level. It identified postgraduates' challenges during their academic journey at historically disadvantaged South African tertiary institutions. The emergent themes and their respective sub-thematic categorizations derived from the empirical data encapsulate the following motivational drivers: augmented employment prospects, enhancement of remunerative status, familial heritage, and scholarly aspirations. Subsidiary themes associated with the adversities faced by postgraduate students include deficient supervisory oversight and a dearth of familial backing.

3.1.1. Theme 1: Factors that Motivate Young People to Pursue a Master's Degree

In South Africa, as in other parts of the world, young people are driven by various internal and external motivators to engage in postgraduate studies. This section examines the incentives that prompt them to obtain a master's degree.

3.1.1.1. Sub-theme 1: Augmented Employment Prospects

Young people with postgraduate degrees are more likely to join the workforce than their peers without formal education or an undergraduate degree. Participants say enhanced employment prospects are a crucial incentive to further education. Additionally, participants noted that a master's degree, particularly in a challenging economic environment like that of a developing country such as South Africa, increases the likelihood of securing a superior job or access to multiple employment options. One participant commented as follows:

Since the economy is very tough in South Africa, it is hard for us, as graduates, to secure decent employment. Returning to university to get my master's degree will help me stand a good chance of securing decent employment. (Male master's candidate)

Another, who views two degrees in different fields of study as important, said the following:

I earned my honors degree in psychology but then returned to the university to obtain my master's degree in public health. Two different degrees in different fields will provide more opportunities for me to get decent jobs. (Male master's candidate)

A master's degree improves graduates' chances of being absorbed into the labor market because they have analytical communication and teamwork skills. The participants believe that a master's degree will enable them to get decent employment opportunities because they will have the skills employers require. One of the young master's graduates mentioned that her chances of employment were better than those of her peers with junior degrees:

I always knew that obtaining a master's degree in development studies would create opportunities for me and not leave me unemployed. I could not get a job when I had an honors degree in development studies. However, after registering as a master's student, I got a job as a researcher at a government department. (Female master's candidate)

The above extract demonstrates that a master's degree ensures the economic empowerment of youth. After she registered for a master's degree, the participant could get a decent job as a researcher. This signifies the importance of a master's degree in the labor market, particularly in a field requiring research skills.

3.1.1.2. Sub-theme 2: Enhancement of Remunerative Status

The participants indicated that because the cost of living in South Africa, as in other developing countries, is extremely high, they had enrolled in a master's program to earn a good salary and live a comfortable life. The participants further indicated that their level of education would influence how much they would earn. A reputation salary also emerged as a factor that motivates young people to pursue postgraduate studies. Most of the participants mentioned that their enrolment in a master's degree program was motivated by the desire to earn a reputation salary in the workplace. Because of the high cost of living in South Africa, people prefer jobs that pay reasonable salaries. Participants indicated that obtaining a master's degree will help them earn a good salary to survive tough times. Two participants aptly explained this attitude as follows:

The cost of living is exceptionally high in South Africa, so I have decided to further my studies, believing that after getting my master's degree, I will get a good job that will pay me well. (Female master's candidate)

I have always believed that with a master's degree, I will be able to earn a good salary compared to my colleagues without a master's degree. However, this is not always the case since having a master's degree does not qualify us to earn a better salary than others because companies do not care much about the level of qualification. (Female master's candidate)

The quotations above indicate that young people enroll in master's programs hoping to earn a good salary upon graduation. However, young people know this is not always true since employers do not necessarily compensate employees based on their qualifications.

3.1.1.3. Subtheme 3: Familial Heritage and Aspirations of Scholarly Attainment

The participants indicated that family legacy is important and that starting a new chapter in their family history will have a long-lasting impact on the next generation. Participants decided to enroll in a master's degree program to motivate the next generation to obtain more than one qualification. The following young people aptly capture this sentiment:

I am the first person in my family to obtain a master's degree. I returned to school to pursue my master's degree to encourage my younger sibling to continue studying. They must go back to school and obtain more than one degree so that our family can have people who are educated. (Male master's candidate)

Another participant remarked the following:

Having a master's degree will also motivate the rest of my family members to further their education. I aim to create a family legacy where education is our priority. (Male master's candidate)

The above statements indicate that the participants believed that pursuing their postgraduate studies would create a legacy of education in their families.

These findings indicate that both male and female postgraduate students share similar motivations for pursuing a master's degree, such as improved employment prospects. However, one distinction emerged: more male than female students envisaged qualifications in diverse fields to secure a well-paid job. Additionally, the findings suggest that a family legacy is a more prominent motivator in male students than in female students.

3.2. Theme 2: Challenges that students experience during their postgraduate journey

Young people experience a variety of challenges during their postgraduate journey. Even though some challenges may hamper their academic success, others can turn them into critical thinkers. The following section examines the factors that postgraduate students face in their postgraduate journey: inadequate supervision and low-income family support.

3.2.1. Sub-theme 2.1: Insufficient Supervision

Students need supervision to be successful in their postgraduate studies. The findings show that postgraduate students do not receive the necessary academic support from their supervisors, which demoralizes them. The following excerpts highlight participants' experiences of inadequate supervision.

"I am in my third year of my master's degree, but still busy with chapter two, not to say that I am lazy, but my supervisor is not giving me the support that I need. When I send

her a chapter, she will take more than 2 months to complete without giving me feedback. This is delaying me from completing my studies.” (Male master’s candidate)

“My supervisor and co-supervisors do not have a good working relationship. This affects my work because my supervisor hardly communicates with me. I talked to my co-supervisor, and my supervisor always overturned the decision made by my co-supervisor, which delayed my progress. Providing supervisors with training on supporting students is important because some lack this important skill. (Female master’s candidate)

“There was a time when things were going well. I used to get help from my supervisor. Now I feel like I am on my own. I hardly get any help from my supervisor. When he gives me feedback, it is also negative feedback.” (Male master’s candidate)

The above quotations show that participants received little support from their supervisors, which affected their academic success. This resulted in participants not completing their studies on time. One participant believed that if supervisors received training, they would be able to give efficient support.

3.2.2. Subtheme 2.2: Limited Familial Support

Postgraduate students who enjoy the support of their families are more likely to complete their postgraduate studies on time. Students whose families are indifferent tend to take longer to complete their studies. The postgraduate students in this study indicated that it was challenging to pursue postgraduate studies when they come from a poor background. The fact that families believe that once a member has a degree, they must earn a living and not ask for financial support affects the performance of postgraduate students. This conundrum is evident from the following statements:

“I am the first born at home. When I was busy with my undergraduate studies, my mother was much more supportive than she is now with my master’s degree. She believes that I should be looking for employment so I can support her rather than keep studying. She does not understand that a master’s degree can give me an advantage when I start applying for jobs.” (Male master’s candidate)

“As a master’s degree student, I do not receive support from my parents because they think I should be working now. I do not have a scholarship that can help me financially. I sometimes feel stressed without having financial support. However, I must ensure that I work hard to complete my studies. (Female master’s candidate)

“My supervisor is not a supportive person, and when he needs something from me, he will give me a deadline on short notice, which is stressful. My family also hardly noticed that I was stressed, and no one gave me the emotional support to get through this. (Female master’s candidate)

Family support is essential for young people's academic success. In the study, the participants reported that their families did not support them emotionally. Some participants also reported struggling because their families did not support them financially. They expected them to find employment rather than pursue their postgraduate studies.

This study suggests that many postgraduate students, regardless of gender, encounter similar challenges during their studies. However, one potential difference emerged. Male students experience more pressure from their family members, particularly their mothers, to prioritize finding employment over pursuing a postgraduate degree.

3.3. Discussion

This study explored the factors that motivate young people to pursue their master's studies and the challenges that students experience during their postgraduate journey at selected previously disadvantaged South African universities. Factors that motivated young people included augmented employment prospects, higher remuneration, familial heritage, and scholarly attainment. Their challenges were insufficient supervision and limited familial support. The pursuit of postgraduate education is underpinned by motives such as improved employment prospects. This contention is substantiated by the findings of a study wherein young people articulated enhanced employment opportunities thanks to a master's degree, which gave them a significant advantage over their less educated peers. It aligns with the assertion of Altbach et al. (2019) that the pursuit of postgraduate studies is linked to a propitious professional trajectory, which is an imperative component of economic development.

Furthermore, given the high cost of living in South Africa, pursuing postgraduate studies is motivated by the prospect of a good salary. The static nature of South Africans' salaries impedes the inclination to study further. Alabi et al. (2019) underscore this tendency by asserting that postgraduate qualifications expand the spectrum of prospects and lucrative remuneration packages. The envisaged consequence of this pursuit is advancement within the professional sphere and a commensurate salary augmentation.

Knutsen (2011) corroborates it, who contends that a single objective, namely ascension within their respective professional domains, motivates young scholars. Ascension depends on acquiring advanced qualifications, underscoring the symbiotic relationship between postgraduate education, professional progression, and commensurate financial reward. In short, pursuing postgraduate education is motivated by the possibility of employment opportunities and reasonable remuneration. These imperatives are corroborated by Alabi et al. (2019), Altbach et al. (2019), and Knutsen (2011), who affirm that advanced education is crucial in professional ascension and economic empowerment. This study found that some master's students wished to start a familial legacy by pursuing higher education. Such aspirations were particularly pronounced in participants who were the first in the family to study for a master's degree. The pioneering pursuit was seen as a catalyst inspiring other family members to consider postgraduate studies. Notably, the primary impetus for embarking on postgraduate studies was the acquisition of intellectual and analytical competencies (François, 2014). Additionally, disadvantaged students demonstrated a keen passion for academia in their master's studies. A Nigerian study conducted by Ugwuozor and Ngwoke (2021) shows that most young individuals (90%) pursued further education to become lecturers.

Pursuing postgraduate studies entails challenges ranging from the administrative bureaucracy of universities to a shortage of resources (Birhanu et al., 2022). The findings of this study revealed that mentors' poor academic support delayed the completion of their studies. Deficient academic support influenced their scholarly odyssey and subsequent career trajectory. It is noteworthy that deficient supervision delays the completion of their studies and causes attrition among postgraduate students (Orellana et al., 2016). Inadequate supervision and support constitute a real obstacle for postgraduates (Van der Laan et al., 2021). The neglect of their mentors is an unsettling reality (Netshitangani & Machaisa, 2021). Supervisors' hostile attitude also contributes to a strained student-supervisor relationship (Cotterall, 2013).

This study also highlighted that many young people do not have the financial backing of their families because they expect them to get employed and see no reason for further study. This aligns with the observations of Breitenbach et al. (2019) that postgraduate students often have to contend with families' misperception that postgraduate studies are a waste of time and resources. The conclusions drawn in this study resonate with the self-determination theory of

Deci and Ryan, which delineates the motivational underpinnings of getting a master's degree. According to this theoretical framework, advanced studies' impetus arises from intrinsic and extrinsic sources and the innate human drive for personal growth, fulfillment, and reward. Consequently, young scholars embark on postgraduate studies to enhance their employability and secure a well-paid position, fulfilling their aspirations for a gratifying and prosperous life (Deci & Ryan, 2000).

Previous studies did not focus specifically on historically disadvantaged universities. Therefore, the present study fills this gap by focusing on these universities. This study represents a pioneering endeavor. To the researcher's knowledge, it is the first investigation of the motivational underpinnings propelling young people to pursue their master's studies. It also examines the impediments encountered at historically disadvantaged higher education institutions in South Africa. Employing a qualitative methodological framework, this study offers a comprehensive vantage point for researchers, policy architects, and academic stewards, furnishing them with a comprehension of master's students' motivational stimuli and the challenges of higher education.

Furthermore, the present study is significant in its endeavor to revolutionize the landscape of higher education in South Africa by emphasizing the position that young scholars should assume in higher education. Nevertheless, the limitations of this study have to be acknowledged, namely the geographical confinement of the participants' selection to universities in the province of Limpopo. Therefore, to enhance the comprehensiveness of future investigations, a broader geographic scope encompassing other provinces with comparable disadvantaged educational institutions is recommended. Additionally, the modest sample size makes it impossible to generalize and apply the findings to the broader cohort of young master's students studying at other universities.

4. Conclusion

It was found in this study that young people in historically disadvantaged universities are primarily motivated by the prospects of high remuneration and career advancement. Furthermore, the study illuminates young postgraduate students' challenges during their academic journey. To address the challenges encountered by young people pursuing postgraduate studies and incentivize their enrolment in master's programs, the higher education sector ought to seek financial support from international and private sources. Financial assistance will facilitate the academic pursuits of young postgraduate students. Furthermore, it is imperative to train supervisors in student mentorship and support. In tandem with this, the research, postgraduate, and innovation directorates at higher education institutions must draft a well-informed policy mandating supervisors to furnish progress reports detailing their contributions towards the advancement of postgraduate students. Such a measure will expedite the completion of postgraduate studies and inspire young people to embark on master's programs. Additionally, the policy should include incentives for supervisors who expedite the completion of their students' master's degrees. Such incentives will motivate them to ensure their students' academic progress.

Acknowledgment

I thank all young postgraduate students who participated in this study.

References

- Adams, N., Little, T. D., & Ryan, R. M. (2017). Self-determination theory. *Development of Self-Determination through the Life-Course*, 47–54. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-024-1042-6_4
- Adefulu, A., Farinloye, T., & Mogaji, E. (2020). Factors influencing postgraduate students' university choice in Nigeria. In *Higher education marketing in Africa: Explorations into student choice* (pp. 187–225). Springer.
- Africa, C., & Mutizwa-Mangiza, S. (2020). The Need for a New Language? How Historically Disadvantaged Institutions* Grapple with the Effects of Labelling in Higher Education: The Case of the University of the Western Cape. In *Decolonisation after Democracy* (pp. 81–93). Routledge. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/02589346.2018.1418213>
- Alabi, O. J., Seedat-Khan, M., & Abdullahi, A. A. (2019a). The lived experiences of postgraduate female students at the University of Kwazulu Natal, Durban, South Africa. *Heliyon*, 5(11). <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.heliyon.2019.e02731>
- Altbach, P. G., Reisberg, L., & Rumbley, L. E. (2019). *Trends in global higher education: Tracking an academic revolution* (Vol. 22). Brill. <https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004406155>
- Amani, J., Myeya, H., & Mhewa, M. (2022). Understanding the motives for pursuing postgraduate studies and causes of late completion: Supervisors and supervisees' experiences. *Sage Open*, 12(3), <https://doi.org/10.1177/21582440221109586>.
- Arar, K., & Abramowitz, R. (2017). Motivation and choice of teachers to pursue their postgraduate studies in an ethnic minority college. *Journal of Applied Research in Higher Education*, 9(4), 616–629. <https://doi.org/10.1108/jarhe-03-2017-0020>
- Asogwa, V. C., Wombo, A. D., & Ugwuoke, C. U. (2014). Challenges and coping strategies adopted by postgraduate students of agricultural education in thesis writing in Nigerian universities. *American Journal of Operations Research*, 4(5), 311–318. <https://doi.org/10.4236/ajor.2014.45030>
- Birhanu, E. T., Assefa, Y., & Tilwani, S. A. (2022). Challenges of learning postgraduate class with no prior work experience: A phenomenological study. *Education Research International*, 2022(1), 5153972. <https://doi.org/10.1155/2022/5153972>
- Bless, C., Higson-Smith, C., & Kagee, A. (2006). *Fundamentals of social research methods: An African perspective*. Juta and Company Ltd.
- Breitenbach, E., Bernstein, J., Ayars, C. L., & Konecny, L. T. (2019). The influence of family on doctoral student success. *International Journal of Doctoral Studies*, 14, 761. <https://doi.org/10.28945/4450>
- Brooks, R., & Waters, J. (2011). *Student mobilities, migration and the internationalization of higher education*. Springer. <https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230305588>
- Buzdar, M. A., Mohsin, M. N., Akbar, R., & Mohammad, N. (2017). Students' academic performance and its relationship with their intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. *Journal of Educational Research*, 20(1), 74.

- Cloete, N. (2014). The South African higher education system: Performance and policy. *Studies in Higher Education*, 39(8), 1355–1368. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2014.949533>
- Cotterall, S. (2013). More than just a brain: Emotions and the doctoral experience. *Higher Education Research & Development*, 32(2), 174–187. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2012.680017>
- Deci, E. L., & Ryan, R. M. (2000). The "what" and "why" of goal pursuits: Human needs and the self-determination of behavior. *Psychological Inquiry*, 11(4), 227–268. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0021-9010.74.4.580>.
- Department of Higher Education, R. of S. A. (2019). *Statistics on post-school education and training in South Africa: 2017*.
- Du Plooy-Cilliera, F., Davis, C., & Benzuiedenhout, R. (2014). Research matters. Cape Town: Juta. Durai. *Human Resource Management*, 2010.
- Dube, L., & Ngulube, P. (2013). Pathways for retaining human capital in academic departments of a South African university. *South African Journal of Information Management*, 15(2), 1–8. <http://dx.doi.org/10.4102/sajim.v15i2.560>.
- Education, H. (2016). *Postgraduate funding in South African universities: National Research Foundation (NRF) briefing; Staffing SA Universities Framework (SSAUF): Department of Higher Education & Training briefing*. <https://pmg.org.za/committee-meeting/21375/>
- Essa, I. (2011). Reflecting on some of the challenges facing postgraduate nursing education in South Africa. *Nurse Education Today*, 31(3), 253–258. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.nedt.2010.11.007>.
- Francois, E. J. (2014). Motivational orientations of non-traditional adult students to enroll in a degree-seeking program. *New Horizons in Adult Education and Human Resource Development*, 26(2), 19–35. <https://doi.org/10.1002/nha3.20060>
- Galdino, M. J. Q., Martins, J. T., Haddad, M. do C. F. L., Robazzi, M. L. do C. C., & Birolim, M. M. (2016). Síndrome de Burnout entre mestrandos e doutorandos em enfermagem. *Acta Paulista de Enfermagem*, 29, 100–106. <https://doi.org/10.1590/1982-0194201600014>.
- Ghatak, S. K., Menon, B. G., & Mahanty, B. (2021). Identifying, prioritizing and ranking of factors influencing the PhD milestones' completion delays. *Quality & Quantity*, 55, 1457–1476. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11135-020-01068-5>.
- Gunawan, H., & Amalia, R. (2015). Wages and employees performance: The quality of work life as moderator. *International Journal of Economics and Financial Issues*, 5(1), 349–353.
- Hako, N. (2022). Overqualified? Why South Africa's PhD students may struggle to find employment. *News24*. <https://www.news24.com/life/overqualified-why-south-africas-phd-students-may-struggle-to-find-employment-20220208>
- Hoffman, J. C., & Julie, H. (2012). The academic transitional experiences of Masters' students at the University of the Western Cape. *Curationis*, 35(1), 1–8. <http://dx.doi.org/10.4102/Curationis.v35i1.33>.

- IGI Global. (2022). *What is Graduate Student* [Online post]. <https://www.igi-global.com/dictionary/graduate-student/33559>
- Knutsen, D. W. (2011). *Motivation to pursue higher education*. Doctoral thesis. Olivet Nazarene University. 26.
- Liu, Z., Ren, N., Dong, H., Pei, Y., Zhu, Y., & Zhang, J. (2022). *Research on factors influencing decision-making about pursuing postgraduate education among Chinese graduates with work experience*. 308–311. <https://doi.org/10.2991/assehr.k.220107.060>
- Mmadi, P. J. (2022). Perceived Benefits of Postgraduate Qualifications Among Social Workers Without Postgraduate Qualifications. *Southern African Journal of Social Work and Social Development*, 34(Sup1), 1–16. <https://doi.org/10.25159/2708-9355/10642>.
- Mphekgwana, P. M., Mabila, T. E., Tirivangasi, H. M., & Makgopa, H. M. (2020). Analysis of survival rates among postgraduate students at a historically disadvantaged university in South Africa. *Gender & Behaviour*, 18(3), 16208–16221.
- Muller, S. (2013). No replacement for ageing brains. *Mail and Guardian* (2013).[Online]. Available: <https://Mg.Co.Za/Article/2013-10-04-No-Replacement-for-Ageing-Brains>. Accessed, 18(03), 2019.
- Netshitangani, T., & Machaisa, P. R. (2021). Supervision experiences of postgraduate students at an ODL institution in South Africa. *Cogent Social Sciences*, 7(1). <https://doi.org/10.1080/23311886.2021.1970442>
- Orellana, M. L., Darder, A., Pérez, A., & Salinas, J. (2016). Improving doctoral success by matching PhD students with supervisors. *International Journal of Doctoral Studies*, 11, 87. <https://doi.org/10.28945/3404>.
- Pappa, S., Elomaa, M., & Perälä-Littunen, S. (2020). Sources of stress and scholarly identity: The case of international doctoral students of education in Finland. *Higher Education*, 80(1), 173–192. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-019-00473-6>.
- Saiti, A., Papa, R., & Brown, R. (2017). Postgraduate students' factors on program choice and expectation. *Journal of Applied Research in Higher Education*, 9(3), 407–423. <https://doi.org/10.1108/JARHE-06-2016-0040>
- Sedahmed, Z. M., & Noureldien, N. A. (2019). Factors influencing students decisions to enrollment in sudanese higher education institutions. *Intelligent Information Management*, 11(4), 61–76. <https://doi.org/10.4236/iim.2019.114006>
- Sengane, M. L., & Havenga, Y. (2018). Challenges experienced by postgraduate nursing students at a South African university. *Health SA Gesondheid*, 23(1), 1–9. <https://doi.org/10.4102/hsag.v23i0.1107>
- Sofaer, S. (2002). Qualitative research methods. *International Journal for Quality in Health Care*, 14(4), 329–336. <https://doi.org/10.1093/intqhc/14.4.329>
- Southafricaneducation. (2022). *South African Higher Education System*. https://www.southafricaeducation.info/higher-education#google_vignette
- Spaulding, L. S., & Rockinson-Szapkiw, A. (2012). Hearing their voices: Factors doctoral candidates attribute to their persistence. *International Journal of Doctoral Studies*, 7, 199. <https://doi.org/10.28945/1589>.

- Temoso, O., & Myeki, L. W. (2023). Estimating South African higher education productivity and its determinants using Färe-Primont index: Are historically disadvantaged universities catching up? *Research in Higher Education*, 64(2), 206–227. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11162-022-09699-3>.
- Terrell, S. R., Snyder, M. M., Dringus, L. P., & Maddrey, E. (2012). A grounded theory of connectivity and persistence in a limited residency doctoral program. *Qualitative Report*, 17, 62. <https://doi.org/10.46743/2160-3715/2012.1747>
- Tracy, S. J. (2024). *Qualitative research methods: Collecting evidence, crafting analysis, communicating impact*. John Wiley & Sons.
- Tzanakou, C., Infanger, C., Oliveira, L., & Staniscuaski, F. (2024). A critical reflection on internationalizing gender equality certification: The case of Brazilian academia. *Equality, Diversity and Inclusion: An International Journal*. <https://doi.org/10.1108/edi-02-2024-0056>
- Ugwuozor, F. O., & Ngwoke, D. U. (2021). Assessment of young people's motivation for pursuit of higher degree in the field of education: Implications for educational philosophy and teacher policy in Nigeria. *SAGE Open*, 11(2). <https://doi.org/10.1177/21582440211013810>
- Van der Laan, L., Ormsby, G., Fergusson, L., & Pau, M. (2021). The higher degree by research student as 'master': Utilising a design thinking approach to improve learner experience in higher degree research supervision. *Journal of University Teaching and Learning Practice*, 18(1), 1–20. <https://doi.org/10.53761/1.18.1.3>.
- Van Rooij, E., Fokkens-Bruinsma, M., & Jansen, E. (2021). Factors that influence PhD candidates' success: The importance of PhD project characteristics. *Studies in Continuing Education*, 43(1), 48–67. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0158037X.2019.1652158>.
- Vincent, T. V., & Kumar, M. (2019). Motivation: Meaning, definition, nature of motivation. *International Journal of Yogic, Human Movement and Sports Sciences*, 4(1), 483–484.
- Ward, A. M., & Brennan, N. M. (2020). Developing a student-doctoral education fit analytical model to assess performance. *Studies in Higher Education*, 45(7), 1448–1460. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2018.1545758>
- Wiegerová, A. (2016). A study of the motives of doctoral students. *Procedia-Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 217, 123–131. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sbspro.2016.02.043>
- Yusuf, B. N. M., Asni, M. F. A. H. M., Abd Rahim, R. T., & Japri, R. (2023). Factors on The Choice and Selection of Postgraduate Programs at The Islamic University College, Perlis. *Asian Journal of Research in Education and Social Sciences*, 5(2), 123–138. <https://doi.org/10.55057/ajress.2023.5.2.14>