

Negotiating Survival: A Qualitative Study of Postgraduate Student Experiences in A Historically Disadvantaged South African University

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Abstract: Postgraduate education continues to expand globally and within South Africa, driven by increasing demands for advanced knowledge, research output, and professional expertise. Despite broader access to postgraduate studies, many students face significant challenges in progressing and completing their qualifications, particularly within rural, historically disadvantaged university contexts in South Africa. This study investigates the experiences of postgraduate students as they navigate these challenges within a historically disadvantaged South African university. Utilising a qualitative research approach, data were collected from 30 participants, comprising 15 master's students and 15 doctoral students across various faculties, and were analysed using thematic analysis. Informed by Ecological Systems Theory, the study reveals that postgraduate experiences are shaped by interconnected academic, institutional, and socio-economic pressures rather than isolated challenges. The findings underscore several recurring issues, including inconsistent supervisory support, administrative delays, limited access to research resources, financial insecurity, psychological strain, and ongoing struggles for inclusion and recognition within academic spaces. These challenges interact and accumulate over time, affecting students' academic progress, well-being, and sense of belonging. This study contributes to existing scholarship by providing an integrated understanding of how

institutional, interpersonal, and socio-economic pressures intersect within postgraduate experiences in a historically disadvantaged university context. Furthermore, the study introduces the concept of "negotiating survival" to describe how postgraduate students continuously adapt to and navigate structurally constrained environments. The findings have implications for higher education policy and practice, particularly regarding the enhancement of supervision, improvement of institutional processes, addressing resource inequalities, and strengthening postgraduate support systems within resource-constrained universities.

Keywords: Postgraduate student support, historically disadvantaged universities, ecological systems theory, institutional inequality, student well-being, rural higher education.

1. Introduction

Participants in previous studies have reported difficulties with research writing, methodological decision-making, and the management of independent academic work (Cloete et al., 2015; Soysal & Baltaru, 2021; Altbach et al., 2019). Globally, universities are under increasing pressure to expand postgraduate enrolments as part of broader agendas aimed at developing high-level skills and research capacity (UNESCO, 2021; Walker & McLean, 2013). In the South African context, this imperative is further intensified by the necessity to address historical inequalities and transform higher education systems that were previously exclusionary (Badat, 2010; Department of Higher Education and Training [DHET], 2019; Mzangwa, 2019). Consequently, widening access to postgraduate studies has become a national priority. However, increased access has not necessarily translated into successful completion, with many postgraduate students experiencing difficulties in

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progressing and graduating within the expected timeframes (Council on Higher Education [CHE], 2018; DHET, 2020; Hoeta, 2021).

A growing body of literature has documented the range of challenges faced by postgraduate students. These challenges encompass difficulties related to research design, academic writing, and methodological competence, as well as inconsistent supervision and delayed feedback (Abeid et al., 2025). Financial constraints, including limited funding opportunities and the rising cost of living, further exacerbate these challenges, often necessitating that students engage in part-time or full-time work that competes with their academic responsibilities (Hordósy et al., 2018). Additionally, institutional barriers such as bureaucratic administrative processes, delayed ethical clearance, and restricted access to research resources have been identified as factors impacting postgraduate progression (Amani et al., 2022; Mwangi et al., 2024). These pressures are frequently accompanied by psychological strain, with students reporting experiences of stress, isolation, anxiety, and self-doubt throughout their academic journey (Maia-Lima et al., 2025).

While these studies provide valuable insights, much of the existing literature tends to examine postgraduate challenges in isolation, often focusing on singular dimensions such as supervision, funding, or academic preparedness (Gardner, 2009; Lee, 2008). Such approaches risk overlooking the intersection of multiple pressures within students' everyday academic experiences (McAlpine & Amundsen, 2011). Consequently, there exists a limited understanding of how institutional, interpersonal, and socio-economic pressures interact and accumulate within historically disadvantaged university contexts. This gap is particularly significant as postgraduate students often encounter these pressures concurrently rather than as distinct challenges (McAlpine et al., 2014; White & Ingram, 2021).

This necessity is particularly pronounced within historically disadvantaged universities (HDIs) in South Africa, where structural inequalities continue to shape institutional capacity, resource availability, and student experiences (Badat, 2010; Cloete et al., 2015). HDIs are often characterised by limited research infrastructure, constrained funding, and administrative inefficiencies, all of which may disproportionately affect postgraduate students (CHE, 2018; DHET, 2019). Furthermore, many students enrolled in these institutions come from rural or under-resourced backgrounds, introducing additional socio-economic pressures that intersect with institutional challenges (Letseka & Maile, 2008; Walker & McLean, 2013). Within such contexts, postgraduate study extends beyond academic engagement alone and becomes intricately linked to navigating structurally constrained institutional and socio-economic conditions (Tlali & Chere-Masopha, 2022).

To better understand these dynamics, this study employs Ecological Systems Theory as a conceptual lens. Ecological Systems Theory posits that individual experiences are shaped by multiple interacting systems, ranging from immediate interpersonal relationships to broader socio-cultural and structural contexts (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). Applying this framework to postgraduate education facilitates an examination of how students' experiences are influenced not only by direct academic interactions, such as supervision, but also by institutional processes, financial structures, and wider socio-economic conditions (McAlpine & Amundsen, 2011; Rogoff, 2003). This perspective promotes a more integrated understanding of postgraduate challenges as embedded within layered and interconnected systems rather than isolated obstacles.

Against this backdrop, the present study aimed to explore how postgraduate students at a rural historically disadvantaged South African university experience and navigate the challenges associated with their academic journeys. The study was guided by the following research question: How do institutional, interpersonal, and socio-economic factors interact to shape postgraduate students' experiences, progression, well-being, and sense of belonging within this context? Drawing on qualitative data from 30 master's and doctoral students across multiple faculties, the study seeks to provide a contextually grounded and theoretically informed understanding of postgraduate

experiences within a resource-constrained institutional setting. Hence, focusing on the interconnected nature of postgraduate challenges, the study contributes to existing scholarship by demonstrating how multiple pressures accumulate and interact across different systems over time. In doing so, it introduces the notion of “negotiating survival” to describe the ongoing process through which postgraduate students navigate structurally constrained academic environments. The findings also offer insights that may inform more responsive institutional policies and support mechanisms for postgraduates within historically disadvantaged university contexts.

2. Theoretical Framework

This study utilises Ecological Systems Theory to explore how postgraduate students’ experiences are shaped by various interconnected environments. Developed by Bronfenbrenner (1979) and later expanded by Bronfenbrenner and Morris (2006), the theory posits that human experiences and development are influenced by continuous interactions with surrounding social, institutional, and structural conditions. In this context, the theory serves as a valuable framework for understanding postgraduate experiences as the result of multiple interacting influences rather than isolated individual challenges. The relevance of Ecological Systems Theory to postgraduate education lies in the recognition that students’ experiences are shaped by factors beyond mere academic ability. They navigate supervisory relationships, institutional procedures, financial pressures, family responsibilities, and broader socio-economic realities concurrently. These interconnected factors significantly influence students’ experiences of progression, belonging, motivation, and well-being throughout their studies.

In this research, Ecological Systems Theory guided both the analytical interpretation of findings and the overall organisation of the inquiry. While the coding process remained primarily inductive, allowing themes to emerge directly from participants’ accounts, the ecological framework was subsequently applied interpretively to discern how various forms of pressure interacted across interpersonal, institutional, and structural systems. Consequently, the ecological levels were not used as predetermined coding categories; instead, they served as analytical lenses for examining the relationships between themes, systems, and experiences more holistically. This approach allowed the study to progress beyond merely identifying isolated challenges, facilitating an analysis of how postgraduate experiences are shaped through the interaction and accumulation of pressures across multiple systems over time.

The microsystem focuses on students’ immediate relationships and environments, encompassing interactions with supervisors, peers, colleagues, and family members. Within the context of postgraduate education, these relationships can significantly influence emotional well-being, academic confidence, and engagement with research activities (Gardner, 2009; McAlpine & Amundsen, 2011). However, the findings of this study indicate that these relationships are not always stable or supportive, as students frequently encounter both encouragement and frustration within the same academic environments. The mesosystem refers to the interactions between different environments surrounding the student. In postgraduate education, this may involve the relationship between supervisory expectations and institutional procedures. For instance, students may feel pressure from supervisors to make progress while simultaneously facing delays in ethical clearance, registration, or funding processes. Such tensions illustrate how postgraduate difficulties often arise from the interaction between systems rather than from a single isolated challenge (Lee, 2008; Lovitts, 2001).

The exosystem encompasses institutional structures that indirectly influence postgraduate students, even when these students are not directly involved in decision-making processes. These structures include administrative systems, funding frameworks, research infrastructure, and access to academic resources (Cloete et al., 2015; CHE, 2018). Within historically disadvantaged universities, these institutional conditions frequently determine the pace, quality, and feasibility of postgraduate

research. By contrast, the macrosystem refers to the broader socio-economic and cultural environment in which postgraduate education occurs. In South Africa, extensive structural inequalities, uneven resource distribution, and socio-economic disparities persistently affect students' educational opportunities and experiences (Badat, 2010; Walker & McLean, 2013). These realities influence not only access to postgraduate study but also students' capacity to maintain academic, emotional, and financial stability. The chronosystem introduces the temporal dimension in shaping postgraduate experiences. Challenges such as delayed funding, extended administrative processes, and ongoing financial pressures do not occur in isolation but accumulate throughout the academic journey. Over time, these pressures exert a significant influence on students' motivation, well-being, and academic progression.

Although Ecological Systems Theory provides a valuable framework for comprehending interconnected experiences, the theory has been critiqued for insufficiently addressing issues of power, historical inequality, and structural exclusion. These concerns are especially pertinent within South African higher education, where the legacies of colonialism and apartheid continue to shape institutional cultures, resource allocation, and access to academic opportunities (Badat, 2010). In this context, the present study acknowledges that postgraduate experiences within historically disadvantaged universities cannot be fully understood solely through interpersonal and environmental interactions; they must also be contextualised within broader structural realities associated with inequality, marginalisation, and institutional disadvantage. Consequently, the study utilises Ecological Systems Theory in conjunction with broader critical perspectives on structural inequality in higher education to better account for how historically embedded conditions continue to shape postgraduate experiences in resource-constrained settings.

Importantly, the structural inequalities shaping postgraduate experiences within historically disadvantaged universities are neither politically nor historically neutral. Many of these pressures are linked to broader power structures associated with the legacies of apartheid, uneven institutional funding, and racialised and class-based inequalities, as well as the increasing pressures of neoliberal higher education systems that impose growing demands on students and institutions despite constrained resources. Furthermore, students' experiences may be further shaped by intersecting responsibilities related to family care, employment, gendered expectations, and rural disadvantage, all of which influence their ability to sustain postgraduate engagement. While Ecological Systems Theory does not explicitly theorise power relations to the same extent as critical or decolonial frameworks, it remains suitable for the present study because the primary aim was to examine how multiple systems and environments interact to shape postgraduate experiences holistically. Thus, the framework provides a flexible, contextually relevant lens for analysing how structural, institutional, interpersonal, and socio-economic pressures intersect in students' academic journeys.

In this study, Ecological Systems Theory functions as an interpretive lens for examining how interpersonal relationships, institutional conditions, and socio-economic realities interact to shape postgraduate experiences. Rather than treating challenges as separate categories, the framework supports a more integrated understanding of how these pressures overlap, accumulate, and influence students' academic journeys over time.

3. Literature Review

Within the South African higher education landscape, the institutional context plays a critical role in shaping postgraduate experiences. Historically disadvantaged institutions (HDIs), in particular, continue to operate within conditions shaped by past inequalities, which influence their capacity to provide adequate research infrastructure, funding, and administrative support (Badat, 2010; Cloete et al., 2015). These structural constraints are not merely institutional characteristics but actively shape the conditions under which postgraduate study takes place.

Existing research in the South African context has highlighted persistent challenges related to supervision, administrative inefficiencies, and limited access to resources (Tlali & Chere-Masopha, 2022; CHE, 2018). For instance, delays in ethical clearance, registration, and procurement have been identified as barriers that disrupt research timelines and contribute to student frustration. Recent South African scholarship has further shown that postgraduate students often experience uncertainty regarding research ethics processes, institutional guidance, and supervisory support, particularly within resource-constrained environments (Makola & Ntoyanto-Tyatyantsi, 2023). Such findings suggest that postgraduate challenges extend beyond academic competence alone and are closely linked to institutional systems and support structures. However, much of this work tends to document these challenges as institutional shortcomings without sufficiently examining how they are experienced and negotiated by students within their everyday academic practices. As a result, the relationship between structural conditions and student agency remains underexplored.

International scholarship has increasingly argued that postgraduate education should not be understood solely through a deficit lens focused on student “challenges” or attrition. Rather, postgraduate experiences are increasingly conceptualised as processes of identity formation, professional socialisation, belonging, and negotiation within complex institutional cultures (Li & Zhang, 2023; Hradsky et al., 2022). Emerging research highlights that postgraduate students continuously construct and renegotiate their academic identities through interactions with supervisors, peers, institutional environments, and broader socio-economic realities. For example, Li and Zhang (2023) demonstrate how doctoral students transition through multiple professional identity stages shaped by institutional participation and socialisation processes. Similarly, Hradsky et al. (2022) argue that postgraduate experiences are deeply affective and relational, with belonging, pastoral care, and social support playing important roles in sustaining students’ well-being and academic engagement. These perspectives challenge purely individualised explanations of postgraduate success and failure by foregrounding the importance of institutional culture, social relationships, and emotional support systems.

At the same time, the growing international literature has highlighted the precarious nature of postgraduate study within increasingly uncertain higher education environments. Atkinson et al. (2022), for example, describe doctoral journeys as characterised by liminality, precarity, and ongoing negotiation, particularly during periods of institutional disruption such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Their work shows that postgraduate experiences are often shaped by instability, competing pressures, and uncertainty, which can intensify feelings of isolation and vulnerability. Such arguments resonate strongly with scholarship on academic precarity and structural inequality, framing postgraduate struggles not merely as individual difficulties but as reflections of broader institutional and socio-economic conditions.

Moreover, the socio-economic backgrounds of postgraduate students further complicate these dynamics. Many students enrolled in historically disadvantaged institutions (HDIs) come from rural or under-resourced communities, where financial constraints, limited access to technology, and broader social responsibilities intersect with academic demands (Letseka & Maile, 2008; Walker & McLean, 2013). While existing studies acknowledge these socio-economic pressures, they often treat them as external factors rather than as integral components of the postgraduate experience itself. This distinction is problematic, as it overlooks how socio-economic conditions are deeply embedded within and continuously shape students’ engagement with institutional processes and academic work.

Recent international scholarship suggests that educational inequalities within higher education are multidimensional and systemic, rather than isolated or incidental (Fitzgerald et al., 2025). Factors such as socio-economic status, geographical location, previous educational opportunities, and institutional cultures intersect in complex ways to shape students’ experiences and access to success.

These arguments are particularly relevant within historically disadvantaged South African universities, where institutional inequalities continue to intersect with broader social and economic disparities. Consequently, postgraduate experiences cannot be understood independently from the wider structural realities within which higher education institutions operate.

Furthermore, contemporary debates on postgraduate education increasingly emphasise the need for universities to reconsider how postgraduate programmes support students academically, socially, and institutionally within rapidly changing global contexts (Acevedo-Duque et al., 2023). Scholars argue that postgraduate education must move beyond narrow academic training models towards more holistic approaches that recognise the interconnected intellectual, emotional, social, and structural dimensions of postgraduate life. Such perspectives are particularly important within resource-constrained contexts, where institutional limitations may significantly shape students' opportunities, progression, and well-being.

In summary, these gaps highlight the need for a more contextually grounded and theoretically informed understanding of postgraduate experiences within historically disadvantaged institutions. In particular, there is a need to examine how institutional, interpersonal, and socio-economic factors interact to shape not only the challenges students face but also how they navigate and respond to these challenges. This study seeks to provide a more integrated account of postgraduate experiences by exploring how postgraduate students negotiate structurally embedded pressures across multiple systems and institutional conditions.

4. Methodology

The study was conducted at a historically disadvantaged institution (HDI) in South Africa. Such institutions continue to operate within the legacy of historical inequalities, which influence institutional capacity, access to resources, and student support structures (Badat, 2010; Cloete et al., 2015). This context provides a pertinent setting for examining how structural and institutional factors shape postgraduate experiences, particularly concerning access, progression, and completion. This study employed a qualitative research design to explore how postgraduate students experience and navigate the challenges associated with their academic journeys within a historically disadvantaged South African university. A qualitative approach was deemed appropriate as the study sought to gain in-depth insights into participants' lived experiences, perceptions, and interpretations of the factors shaping their postgraduate trajectories (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Rather than measuring predefined variables, the study aimed to understand how multiple academic, institutional, and socio-economic dimensions interact within specific contexts.

4.1 Participants and sampling

The study involved 30 postgraduate students, consisting of 15 master's students and 15 doctoral students, from various faculties. Participants were recruited using a combination of convenience and snowball sampling techniques. Initially, convenience sampling was employed to select participants who met the inclusion criteria of being currently enrolled in either master's or doctoral programmes at the institution. Initial participants were identified through networks within the postgraduate office and faculty postgraduate communication platforms. Subsequently, snowball sampling was utilised to identify additional participants through referrals from the initial participants.

The chosen sample size was deemed appropriate for qualitative inquiry, as it allowed for the identification of recurring patterns while still providing depth and diversity of experiences. In accordance with qualitative research principles, the emphasis was not on statistical representation but on attaining sufficient insight into the participants' experiences. Thematic sufficiency was established by assessing the recurrence and stability of patterns across participant responses, where additional data no longer produced substantially new insights relevant to the study's analytical focus.

(Ahmed, 2025). Including participants from different disciplines and levels of study (master's and doctoral) further enriched and diversified the dataset.

4.2 Data collection

Data were collected through self-administered semi-structured open-ended questionnaires, which facilitated participants' reflection on their experiences in their own words while providing sufficient flexibility to capture a range of perspectives. The questionnaires were administered anonymously online using Google Forms, enabling participation across different faculties and postgraduate levels. Participants were allocated two weeks to complete and submit the questionnaire, which they were able to do within approximately 15–20 minutes. While interviews are commonly associated with qualitative inquiry, the intentional use of open-ended questionnaires in this study enabled the inclusion of a broader and more diverse group of participants, while also mitigating potential power dynamics that may arise during face-to-face interactions. Furthermore, the self-administered format allowed participants to respond at their own pace and level of comfort, which was considered important given the personal and, at times, sensitive nature of some experiences discussed. The open-ended structure encouraged participants to provide reflective accounts of their postgraduate experiences, including supervisory relationships, institutional support, financial challenges, administrative processes, and personal well-being. Although questionnaires may not offer the same depth of probing as interviews, many participants provided detailed narrative responses that yielded rich insights into their lived experiences. Nonetheless, the absence of real-time probing and clarification is acknowledged as a methodological limitation of the study.

4.3 Data analysis

The researchers analysed the data thematically following Braun and Clarke's (2006) approach. This method was selected for its flexibility and suitability for identifying patterns of meaning across qualitative datasets.

The analysis followed a systematic and iterative process:

- a) Familiarisation with the data through repeated reading of responses.
- b) Generation of initial codes based on recurring ideas and patterns.
- c) Organisation of codes into potential themes.
- d) Review and refinement of themes to ensure coherence and distinction.
- e) Definition and naming of themes.
- f) Interpretation of themes in relation to the research questions and theoretical framework.

The coding process employed an inductive approach, facilitating the emergence of themes directly from the data rather than imposing them a priori. The researchers undertook repeated readings of participants' responses to attain familiarity with the dataset prior to manually generating initial codes. Similar codes were subsequently clustered to discern broader patterns of meaning across the responses. Themes underwent continuous review and refinement to ensure coherence, internal consistency, and alignment with the overall dataset. Throughout the analytical process, reflexive attention was devoted to how the researchers' interpretations might influence the development and interpretation of themes. The analysis concentrated not only on the recurrence of issues across responses but also on the depth, meaning, and contextual significance of participants' accounts. This iterative process facilitated the formulation of analytical themes that encapsulated both shared patterns and variations within postgraduate experiences.

3.5 Ethical considerations

Ethical approval for the study was procured from the relevant institutional ethics committee prior to the commencement of data collection (ethics number: WSU/FREC/FNS/001ND/2026). Participation was entirely voluntary, and informed consent was obtained from all participants. To

safeguard confidentiality and anonymity, no identifying information was incorporated into the data, and participants' responses were reported in a manner that preserves their identities.

3.6 Trustworthiness of the study

To ensure the trustworthiness of the findings, several strategies were employed in accordance with established qualitative research practices. Credibility was enhanced through sustained engagement with the data and careful interpretation of participants' responses, ensuring that the findings accurately reflected their experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The utilisation of thematic analysis further supported the systematic identification of patterns across the dataset, facilitating a rigorous and transparent analytical process (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Dependability was achieved by adhering to a clear and structured analytical procedure, as outlined in the data analysis section, which enhances the transparency and consistency of the research process. Confirmability was addressed by grounding interpretations in participants' accounts, supported by the inclusion of direct quotations in the findings. This approach ensured that the analysis remained closely linked to the data rather than being influenced by the researcher's assumptions. Furthermore, reflexivity was maintained throughout the research process, with the researchers remaining cognisant of their positionality and potential influence on the interpretation of the data. These measures collectively contribute to the rigour and trustworthiness of the study.

The researchers are academics within the higher education sector and possess familiarity with the broader institutional context within which postgraduate education occurs. This positional proximity provided contextual sensitivity to participants' experiences while also necessitating ongoing reflexive awareness regarding potential assumptions and interpretive bias. Throughout the study, reflexivity was upheld through continuous reflection on how the researchers' experiences, perspectives, and familiarity with postgraduate education may influence data interpretation. Consequently, attention was given to grounding interpretations closely within participants' accounts and ensuring that themes emerged from the data rather than from preconceived assumptions.

5. Findings

The findings indicate that the experiences of postgraduate students are not determined by isolated challenges; rather, they are influenced by a complex interplay of interpersonal, institutional, and socio-economic factors. Throughout the dataset, participants consistently characterised their academic journeys as processes of navigating multiple, overlapping constraints. These experiences illustrate how pressures manifest across various dimensions of postgraduate life and accumulate over time, ultimately shaping both academic progression and personal well-being.

5.1 Theme 1: Supervisory relationships as both enabling and constraining

Participants' accounts of supervision revealed a dual and often contradictory role, wherein supervisory relationships functioned as both sources of support and sites of constraint. Some students described highly supportive engagements, noting that *"my supervisor provides outstanding guidance... their timely, constructive feedback has sharpened me,"* and that such support *"enabled me to graduate... in record time."* However, these positive experiences were not consistent across the dataset. Other participants described supervision as limited, unpredictable, or even disruptive, with one stating, *"he is mostly not being helpful in terms of guiding how to go about doing things,"* while another noted that *"the spontaneous ideas... tend to set me back and disrupt my schedule."* These contrasting accounts suggest that supervision is not a uniform institutional resource but rather a relational experience shaped by individual dynamics and expectations. Thus, even in supportive relationships, elements of pressure and instability were present, indicating that enabling and constraining aspects of supervision often coexist within the same academic interaction.

5.2 Theme 2: Institutional bureaucracy and delayed academic progress

Institutional administrative processes emerged as a significant and recurring source of disruption in postgraduate students' academic journeys. Participants frequently described delays in ethical clearance, registration, and communication as critical barriers to progress. One participant explained that *"it has now been 6 months and I still have not received [ethical clearance]... the first year had gone to waste,"* while another reported receiving clearance only late in the year, stating that *"this long delay significantly affected our research timeline."*

These accounts indicate that administrative delays do not merely impede academic progress; rather, they actively reshape students' research trajectories, emotional well-being, and perceptions of institutional legitimacy. In certain instances, prolonged delays have been associated with feelings of academic stagnation, uncertainty, and procedural exclusion. The findings suggest that institutional processes function as gatekeeping mechanisms that influence not only the pace of postgraduate research but also its integrity. Moreover, the lack of transparency and consistency exacerbates students' frustration and uncertainty, thereby reinforcing the perception of administrative systems as barriers rather than as supportive structures.

5.3 Theme 3: Resource constraints and unequal research conditions

Limited access to institutional resources was a prominent feature of participants' experiences, affecting both the quality and feasibility of their research. Students highlighted challenges related to software access, laboratory infrastructure, and general research support, with one noting that *"WSU is not licensed on NVivo... most students have to look for help outside,"* and another explaining that *"we always settle for less... because we feel our ideas are too ambitious due to limited resources."* In laboratory-based disciplines, these challenges were compounded by equipment issues, as reflected in the statement that *"our instruments... hardly ever get serviced... means redoing my work."* Beyond institutional resources, participants also described broader infrastructural constraints, including unreliable electricity and limited internet access, with one remarking that *"data and load shedding were my worst enemies,"* and another stating, *"I have to travel to campus to use Wi-Fi."* These findings demonstrate that resource inequality influences not only students' capacity to conduct research but also the scope of knowledge production deemed achievable within resource-constrained contexts. Participants' accounts suggest that students frequently modified, simplified, or postponed their research ambitions in response to infrastructural limitations and institutional deficiencies.

5.4 Theme 4: Financial precarity and the burden of survival

Financial challenges emerged as a persistent and structuring condition of postgraduate experience. Many participants reported a lack of funding or insufficient financial support, with one stating, *"I currently do not have a bursary... this places a strain on my ability to focus fully on my studies,"* and another noting that *"funding does not fully cover... transport and living expenses."* Even among those with funding, financial insecurity persisted due to delayed disbursements and hidden costs, as captured in the statement, *"there are always hidden costs... fund disbursements are delayed."* As a result, many students were compelled to engage in employment alongside their studies, with one explaining that *"being a full-time employee... delays you as a student,"* and another noting that *"the need to focus on income... delays my academic progress."* These accounts suggest that financial insecurity extends beyond economic hardship to shape how students allocate time, manage cognitive demands, and engage with their research.

Postgraduate study, in this context, becomes inextricably linked to broader survival strategies, where academic progression is continuously negotiated alongside employment, financial insecurity, and competing socio-economic responsibilities. Financial precarity consequently shapes not only students' economic conditions but also their cognitive focus, time allocation, and capacity for sustained academic engagement.

5.5 Theme 5: Psychological burden, resilience, and cumulative pressure

While Theme 4 highlighted the material and economic dimensions of postgraduate precarity, participants' accounts further revealed the psychological and emotional consequences associated with the accumulation of these pressures over time. The cumulative impact of academic, financial, and institutional pressures was reflected in participants' narratives of psychological strain. Many described postgraduate study as emotionally demanding, often characterised by stress, fatigue, and moments of self-doubt. One participant described the experience as "WAFWA WAFWA," a colloquial expression referring to an ongoing and exhausting struggle, while another admitted that "*it drained me... I felt like giving up.*" These accounts suggest that psychological distress did not emerge from isolated academic pressures alone, but from the cumulative convergence of institutional delays, financial strain, uncertainty, and prolonged instability across students' postgraduate journeys. Despite these challenges, participants also demonstrated resilience, with one noting that "*the experience has strengthened my resilience and commitment to my goals.*" However, this resilience appeared to emerge as a response to sustained pressure rather than as an inherent attribute. The findings suggest that postgraduate study functions as both a site of vulnerability and personal growth, where psychological strain accumulates over time and is managed through ongoing adaptation and perseverance.

5.6 Theme 6: Negotiating belonging, marginalisation, and academic identity

Participants' sense of belonging within the academic environment was uneven and often contested. Some students described feeling excluded or unsupported, with one stating, "*most academics gate-keep information and resources,*" and another expressing that "*it feels like my struggles are neglected.*" Others highlighted experiences of marginalisation linked to their backgrounds, noting, "*I have felt marginalised due to my rural upbringing.*" At the same time, some participants described belonging as something that develops over time, with one explaining that "*this sense of belonging has grown... and requires self-assertion and perseverance.*" These findings suggest that belonging within postgraduate education is relational, conditional, and unevenly distributed. Participants' experiences indicate that institutional cultures and access to academic networks significantly shape whether students experience recognition, inclusion, or marginalisation within academic spaces.

5.7 Theme 7: Inadequate preparation for independent research

A significant number of participants reported that their undergraduate education did not adequately prepare them for the demands of independent postgraduate research. While some acknowledged a theoretical foundation, many described a lack of exposure to practical research skills, with one participant stating, "*did not prepare me at all... I had to learn everything from scratch,*" and another noting that their training offered "*limited preparation for independence.*" These accounts highlight a disconnect between undergraduate education and postgraduate expectations, where students are required to transition rapidly into independent research roles without sufficient preparation. This gap intensifies reliance on supervisory support and contributes to early-stage uncertainty and delays, suggesting a broader structural discontinuity within the educational system.

5.8 Theme 8: Moments of crisis and consideration of withdrawal

For many participants, postgraduate study was marked by moments of significant strain during which they considered discontinuing their studies. These moments were typically linked to the convergence of multiple pressures, including financial challenges, academic demands, and institutional delays. One participant explained that "*financial pressure, workload, and delays made it overwhelming,*" while another admitted, "*many times than I could count.*" These reflections indicate that withdrawal is not instigated by a singular factor but rather arises from the cumulative impact of intersecting constraints. Such moments of crisis elucidate how postgraduate persistence is influenced not solely by academic competence but also by students' capacity to navigate prolonged institutional,

emotional, and socio-economic instability. Consequently, considerations of withdrawal emerge as systemic rather than purely individual responses to cumulative pressures.

6. Discussion

The findings of this study indicate that the experiences of postgraduate students cannot be adequately understood through isolated analytical categories such as supervision, funding, or institutional support. Instead, the data demonstrate that these dimensions operate as interconnected and mutually reinforcing systems that shape students' academic trajectories in complex and cumulative ways. While existing literature has increasingly acknowledged the multifaceted nature of postgraduate education (McAlpine & Amundsen, 2011; McAlpine, 2013), much of this work continues to treat key challenges as analytically separable. The findings contribute to the growing scholarship that recognises postgraduate experiences as shaped by intersecting and layered pressures rather than isolated challenges (Fitzgerald et al., 2025). Within the present study, these interactions appeared particularly pronounced within a resource-constrained, historically disadvantaged university context, where institutional, interpersonal, and socio-economic pressures frequently converged over time. From an ecological perspective, this interconnectedness reflects the dynamic interaction of systems rather than the influence of isolated factors. These findings therefore encourage a more integrated understanding of postgraduate experiences that considers how pressures accumulate and interact across systems rather than treating challenges as analytically separate.

Supervisory relationships have emerged as a central yet highly variable influence on postgraduate experiences, aligning with existing research that highlights the importance of supervision for student progression (Gardner, 2009; Lee, 2008). While much of the literature tends to categorise supervision as either supportive or problematic, the findings of this study complicate this binary perspective by showing that supervisory relationships can simultaneously serve as both enabling and constraining forces. This duality suggests that current conceptualisations may underappreciate the instability and relational complexity inherent in supervisory practices. Even in contexts where supervision is perceived as supportive, elements of unpredictability and disruption can persist, indicating that supervision is not a stable resource but rather a negotiated and context-dependent interaction.

According to Ecological Systems Theory, these dynamics exist within the microsystem, where direct interactions shape student engagement (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). However, the observed variability indicates that the microsystem is not inherently enabling; rather, it is contingent upon relational alignment and institutional conditions. Additionally, disruptions in supervision often intersect with institutional processes, reflecting mesosystemic tensions between interpersonal relationships and structural systems. This reinforces the argument that postgraduate challenges arise not from individual systems in isolation, but from the interaction and misalignment between them.

Institutional delays related to ethical clearance, registration, and administrative communication further highlight how institutional systems function not merely as operational structures but as mechanisms that shape the temporal organisation of postgraduate research. Participants' experiences of prolonged delays and inconsistent communication support existing literature that identifies institutional inefficiencies as barriers to student progress (CHE, 2018; Tlali & Chere-Masopha, 2022). In this context, the findings suggest that these disruptions extend beyond mere administrative inconvenience to influence students' motivation, research continuity, and perceptions of institutional support. Specifically, the misalignment between supervisory expectations and institutional timelines creates mesosystemic disruptions that directly impact students' ability to progress. Thus, institutional processes serve not only as support structures but also as gatekeeping mechanisms that regulate the pace and integrity of postgraduate research.

Resource constraints further underscore the structural inequalities embedded within postgraduate education. Consistent with prior research on disparities in institutional capacity (Badat, 2010; Cloete et al., 2015), the findings show that limited access to infrastructure, software, and research tools influences not only the feasibility but also the scope and quality of postgraduate research. Furthermore, these constraints affect the epistemic boundaries within which postgraduate research is conducted, as students often adjust, simplify, or postpone their research ambitions in response to institutional limitations and infrastructural instability. From an ecological perspective, this illustrates the interaction between the exosystem and macrosystem, where institutional conditions converge with broader socio-economic realities to shape knowledge production.

Financial insecurity emerged as a pervasive and structuring condition of the postgraduate experience, echoing previous findings on the role of funding in shaping academic progression (CHE, 2018; Walker & McLean, 2013). However, the findings indicate that financial insecurity cannot be understood solely as an economic issue; it continuously interacts with academic, institutional, and personal responsibilities to influence students' engagement with postgraduate study. The necessity to balance employment with academic commitments reflects the intersection of institutional funding structures and broader socio-economic conditions, resulting in competing demands on students' time and cognitive resources. This reinforces broader arguments that socio-economic inequality continues to shape educational outcomes, particularly in historically disadvantaged contexts (Badat, 2010).

The psychological strain reported by participants further illustrates the cumulative impact of challenges across multiple systems. Experiences of stress, fatigue, and self-doubt align with existing research on postgraduate mental health (Casey et al., 2022). However, within this study, psychological strain appeared closely linked to prolonged exposure to overlapping institutional, financial, and interpersonal pressures rather than isolated emotional experiences. From an ecological perspective, this highlights the significance of the chronosystem, where pressures accumulate and intensify over time, particularly amid prolonged delays and sustained financial uncertainty. While participants demonstrated resilience, this resilience seems to function primarily as a response to systemic pressures rather than as an inherent individual trait. Consistent with Casey et al. (2022), the findings suggest that postgraduate well-being is shaped not only by academic demands but also by broader institutional and socio-emotional conditions that affect resilience and persistence. This raises concerns regarding the sustainability of relying on personal coping mechanisms within structurally constrained higher education environments.

In addition, participants' experiences of marginalisation and exclusion underscore the significance of the macrosystem in shaping postgraduate education. While existing literature has highlighted issues of inequality and transformation in South African higher education (Badat, 2010; Walker & McLean, 2013), the findings of this study suggest that belonging within postgraduate education is relational, uneven, and continuously negotiated rather than automatically secured through institutional access alone. Students actively construct and assert their place within academic environments that may not fully recognise or accommodate their identities. This indicates that belonging is shaped not only by access to resources but also by institutional culture, recognition, and inclusion.

The findings also draw attention to the inadequate preparation of students for independent postgraduate research. While much of the literature focuses on challenges arising within postgraduate environments themselves, the present findings suggest that some difficulties encountered at the postgraduate level may originate from broader structural discontinuities across educational pathways. Participants' accounts indicate that students are often expected to transition rapidly into independent research roles without adequate methodological, conceptual, or practical preparation during earlier stages of their studies. From an ecological perspective, this reflects the

interaction of systems over time, reinforcing the importance of understanding educational trajectories as continuous and interconnected rather than segmented stages.

Finally, the study reveals that many postgraduate students experience moments in which they contemplate discontinuing their studies. These moments are not triggered by singular factors but emerge from the cumulative impact of intersecting pressures, including financial strain, institutional delays, and psychological burden. The findings therefore support broader understandings of postgraduate attrition as a systemic rather than purely individual phenomenon. From an ecological perspective, these moments reflect the convergence of pressures across multiple systems over time, highlighting the precarious nature of postgraduate study within resource-constrained contexts.

In this study, the concept of “negotiating survival” goes beyond mere resilience or perseverance at an individual level. It encompasses the ongoing and often precarious process through which postgraduate students navigate overlapping institutional, interpersonal, and socio-economic pressures within constrained environments. This concept illustrates the necessity for students to constantly adapt, make compromises, manage uncertainty, and mobilise limited resources to maintain their academic participation and progression. Furthermore, negotiating survival is not seen as an exceptional experience affecting only a few individuals; rather, it is an ongoing condition inherent in the broader structural realities of historically disadvantaged higher education contexts.

Considering this, the findings contribute to the ongoing scholarship examining postgraduate experiences in historically disadvantaged and resource-constrained higher education environments. By highlighting the interplay between institutional, interpersonal, and socio-economic pressures, the study fosters a more integrated understanding of postgraduate education that transcends isolated explanations of student difficulties or attrition. Additionally, the application of Ecological Systems Theory offers a valuable interpretive lens for exploring the layered and cumulative nature of postgraduate challenges in the current context. Through this framework, the notion of “negotiating survival” effectively captures how postgraduate students continually adapt to and navigate structurally embedded pressures to sustain their academic pursuits and progress.

7. Conclusion and Implications

This study explores how postgraduate students at a historically disadvantaged South African university experience and navigate the challenges associated with their academic journeys. The findings demonstrate that postgraduate experiences are shaped not by isolated difficulties, but by the interaction of institutional, interpersonal, and socio-economic pressures that accumulate over time. Drawing on Ecological Systems Theory, the study highlights how supervisory relationships, institutional processes, financial insecurity, resource inequalities, and broader structural conditions intersect to influence students’ progression, well-being, and sense of belonging within postgraduate education. Rather than framing postgraduate difficulties primarily as individual academic deficits, the study foregrounds the broader structural and institutional conditions within which these experiences unfold. In this regard, the notion of “negotiating survival” encapsulates the ongoing process through which postgraduate students navigate layered pressures within resource-constrained higher education environments. The study, therefore, contributes to ongoing scholarship on postgraduate education by offering a contextually grounded understanding of how multiple systems and pressures interact within historically disadvantaged university contexts. Furthermore, the application of Ecological Systems Theory enables a more integrated interpretation of postgraduate experiences by illustrating how challenges emerge through the interaction and accumulation of pressures across systems over time.

7.1 Implications for policy and practice

The findings indicate several implications for higher education institutions, particularly those operating within resource-constrained environments. First, supervisory practices require

enhancement through clearer institutional guidelines, structured feedback processes, and ongoing professional development. Given the variability in supervisory experiences, ensuring consistency and accountability is paramount. Second, institutional administrative systems necessitate urgent reform. Delays in ethical clearance, registration, and communication disrupt academic progress and contribute to student frustration and disengagement. Streamlining these processes and improving transparency are critical for supporting timely progression.

Third, addressing resource constraints is essential. Equitable access to research tools, software, and infrastructure is necessary not only for improving completion rates but also for enhancing the quality and scope of postgraduate research. Investment in institutional capacity remains a key priority for historically disadvantaged universities. Fourth, financial support structures must be re-evaluated. Funding models need to account for the full cost of postgraduate study, including hidden expenses, and ensure timely disbursement. Without adequate financial support, students will continue to face competing demands that limit their academic engagement. Finally, institutions must prioritise student well-being and a sense of belonging. This includes creating inclusive academic environments, strengthening mental health support, and addressing issues of marginalisation and gatekeeping. Supporting postgraduate students necessitates a coordinated approach that recognises the interconnected nature of the challenges they face.

7.1 Limitations of the study

While this study offers valuable insights into postgraduate experiences, several limitations must be acknowledged. Conducted at a single historically disadvantaged university, the research may restrict the transferability of the findings to other institutional contexts. However, the aim was to provide a contextually grounded and in-depth understanding rather than a broad generalisation. Additionally, the reliance on self-reported data may reflect participants' subjective interpretations of their experiences. The use of self-administered open-ended questionnaires also limited opportunities for real-time probing, clarification, and deeper exploration of participants' responses that could have been achieved through interviews or focus groups. Furthermore, the study depended on a single qualitative data source and did not employ triangulation methods such as observations, document analysis, or multiple forms of data collection. Nevertheless, the consistency of patterns across responses enhances the credibility of the findings. Future research could expand on this study by examining postgraduate experiences across multiple institutions, including comparative analyses between historically disadvantaged and well-resourced universities. Longitudinal studies would further deepen the understanding of how postgraduate experiences evolve over time.

8. Declarations

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