

# The Post-Graduate Student's Survival Guide

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This guide is the fruit of a dream that I had while I was working on my thesis as a full-time doctoral student. I used, at times, to feel so isolated and lonely. It seemed to me that nobody else could ever have found post-graduate study so difficult. Sometimes I just wanted to give up. (At other times, of course, I found the work exhilarating but I soon forgot that during the inevitable difficult patches!) I vowed that, once I graduated, I would write a guide that would help, support, and motivate post-graduate students. I would put into it all the things that I so desperately needed to know and to hear when I was a student.

Of course, when I completed my thesis I went on to other exciting pieces of work and forgot all about this vow. One evening Nelleke Bak, the PET project co-ordinator, asked me to speak to post-graduate students about my experiences as a doctoral student. Their enthusiasm, questions and fears reminded me of the need for a 'Post-Graduate Students' Survival Guide'.

Significantly, as I set to work on the guide, all I could remember of my doctoral studies were the joys, the moments of pleasure, and the extreme pride that I felt that evening when I graduated. I wish you those moments too. I hope that this guide will go some way to helping you achieve the success that you anticipate now as you start off the terrifying and thrilling project of post-graduate study. Remember, there are many before you – including myself – who have achieved this success. My motivation throughout the final year of my study was a quotation from Nelleke Bak's *Thesis Guide* (2001:29): "Writing a thesis is a demanding task. However, remember that many before you have managed to complete, so it is doable". I printed it out in huge letters and stuck it at my work station. My hope is that this guide will provide you will similar motivational catch phrases – and that you, like me, will look back on your studies as amongst the most memorable years of your life.

Best wishes

Dr Wendy McMillan

## **A SIGNIFICANT RELATIONSHIP**

My supervisor had a baby in the second year of my thesis – and this event, unexpectedly, brings me to a very important aspect of post-graduate study. The relationship between a Masters or Doctoral student and his or her supervisor is unique. It demands concerted effort and sacrifice on the part of both people – as my supervisor was so willing to demonstrate. She generously agreed to continue supervising me through her maternity leave. I have memories of holding a wailing infant while listening to her insightful and constructive comments on my theoretical chapter.

### **How do you choose a supervisor?**

For structured Master's courses with a mini-thesis

- it is likely that a supervisor will be allocated to you.
- You may, however, request to work with a specific person – but this will depend on how busy he or she is, and whether your topic is within his or her field of expertise.

For a full Masters or a Doctorate, the choice of supervisor is crucial.

- The ideal supervisor will be experienced in your field of study, interested in your topic, empathetic, and able to offer appropriate support and guidance.
- Ask fellow students, colleagues, or university academic staff to recommend a potential supervisor. Make an appointment to discuss your ideas with him or her. Try to create a good impression (for example, be prepared with a mindmap of your topic, or take along readings that you think appropriate).

### **What can you reasonably expect from your supervisor?**

You can expect someone who is interested in your academic development. To achieve this, s\he will:

- provide regular constructive feedback about your progress
- know when to push you, and when to be supportive and encouraging
- have expertise in your research area, and be willing to share without spoon-feeding.

### **And, what should you expect to give in return?**

A supervisor can reasonably expect you to:

- keep your appointments
- keep to agreed schedules of work
- take responsibility for proof reading drafts and final submissions (including correct spelling, grammar, and referencing)
- respect him or her as a human. Like us, supervisors have strengths, shortcomings, and responsibilities to their families, communities, employers, and other students.

### **What when the relationship breaks down?**

- Speak to your supervisor first. Focus on what they need to do to help you achieve academic success. For example, “I need regular feedback so that I know whether I am on track or not”. Be honest and realistic.
- If the problem persists, speak to the Head of department or the Dean of the Faculty. Collect all your facts before the interview so that you know what you want to say.
- When all else fails, contact the Dean of Research at the university.

## NEEDING TO KNOW AND FINDING OUT

As a student I have always functioned on the ‘need to know’ basis – in other words, when I need to know something, then I’ll find out about it. There are two problems, of course, with this strategy. Firstly, we seldom know that there is something that we don’t know! Secondly, I found that by the time I needed to know something, it had become urgent. This point is well illustrated when I explain how I came to get substantial funding through a Fellowship at UWC.

At the time that I registered for my doctoral studies I was unemployed having taken severance from the Department of Education. I had some money from the severance payout but I wasn’t quite clear about how I was going to support myself while I studied. On the day of registration I was chatting informally about this worry with the Registering Officer. She mentioned that there were a number of scholarships and fellowships available for post-graduate study and directed me to the Education Faculty notice board. Because I had taken so long to get around to thinking about funding, a number of the offers had already closed. However, there remained one that closed at the end of that week. Two sleepless nights later I had a tight proposal ready for submission. The good news is that as a result of the Registering Officer’s chance remark I received substantial funding that covered my living expenses for two years of full time study.

The lesson, of course, is not to leave things until you ‘need to know’. Get in first! Here is my list of the things that I think you might need to know about:

- find out about funding ( see Appendix 1)
- find out how the library works (Appendix 2)
- find out what other support facilities are available (Appendix 3)
- find out what are the requirements for a Masters or Doctoral thesis (for example, length, technical aspects) (see Appendix 4).

## GIVING TO EACH PART OF YOUR LIFE

My friend, Sally, is also a post-graduate student. When last we chatted she commented on her busy life and how she balances all the demands that are made of her:

*Besides my studies, so many other things need my attention. I can’t just every time say that I am studying that I can’t do the other things. I have a family life and all of the other things and a social life so my whole life can’t just revolve around the studies. So I give to each part of my life what I think is good enough.*

I thought how sensible her comment was. As adult learners we have many demands upon us – and all seem to be The Most Important. I liked Sally’s idea of giving to each aspect what was good enough. There is a nice balance here. Sometimes your teenage son might have to do the dishes so that you can finish the chapter for your supervisor. At another

time, the death of the family dog and the grief of your daughter will mean that the thesis has to wait.

I went to a very valuable workshop while studying at UWC. Called “Juggling to Learn” (see Appendix 5), it offered helpful ways in which post-graduate students can manage the multiple roles that they face. Here are some strategies for effective juggling:

- Be realistic about how much time you will be able to spend on the thesis or studies. Consider work and family demands. Set realistic deadlines for completing this degree.
- With your supervisor set realistic short term and medium term deadlines. Try to meet them. But not at the cost of your health or sanity – or that of your family.
- Don’t wait for the ‘right’ time before you begin to work. The time will never be ‘just right’. Successful study is like eating an elephant – a mouthful at a time. Huge blocks of free time are unlikely to happen. The secret is to work systematically – for short periods, when you can. When you don’t work regularly you will find that all your energy goes into the effort of getting started, instead of into productive labour.
- Take a holiday. Sometimes just leave your thesis behind. Go away and read a frivolous book or page through a magazine. You’ll have lots more energy and be much better focused after the break.

### **POINTERS FOR YOUR JOURNEY**

When I plan a journey I usually ask a friend who is familiar with the route to give me tips for finding my way easily. I have always thought of study as a journey – with graduation as the delicious destination! As one who has travelled this route before you, these are tips that I have found worthwhile. Some I learned the hard way, some I found in books, and some were shared by colleagues and friends who had already travelled the post-graduate route.

- Organise a quiet, private space to work. The dining-room table really won’t do. I found that it was such a hassle to unpack before working or to pack away after writing that I used it as an excuse not to begin at all. A study, of course, is ideal – but not a privilege available to all of us. Try screening off a section of your bedroom, living room, or shared work space. This is your ‘work-in-progress’ place. Here you should feel free to leave papers and piles of books lying on the floor, and to stick notes to yourself on the wall. Plan good lighting for this area. I found that poor lighting made me sleepy and reluctant to work.
- Read the theses of people who have written in your field. It is invaluable to have examples of how other people arranged their argument, addressed a tricky issue, or wrote with an academic voice. I photocopied a few as ‘role models’
- Tape the feedback sessions with your supervisor. Transcribe them yourself. This will help clarify your thinking about whatever aspect of the research project you were

discussing. I found these transcripts useful because I could refer back to them later when I wanted to revisit a point that I or my supervisor had made. I also found them useful because my supervisor modelled appropriate discourse for my topic. Through listening to her I came to understand and use the language appropriate to my field of study.

- Take clear notes of everything. (This I learnt the hard way. Just before I was to submit my thesis for examination I was still running to the library to check up on bibliographical details and correcting quotations.) My advise to you is:
  - Put the full bibliographical details at the top of any notes that you take.
  - Begin your bibliography straight away – with the first book that you read. Set it out correctly from the first.
  - Copy your quotations carefully. You don't want to have to worry about whether they are correct or not at a later stage. Be particularly careful of the difference between American spellings and British English spellings, and the computer's auto-correct.
  - Make a note of the author's gender. You will need this information when you present his or her argument – for example, "Raissiguier (1994:26) presents a working definition of identity. She argues that ...".
- I found the "Glad" ziplock bags (you get them from grocery stores) very useful for filing. They come in A4 and A3 sizes, and with a sticky label to identify their contents, I found they made my life much easier.
- A fellow post-graduate student suggests sticking an outline of the sections of your thesis on the wall at your work-station. It helps, he says, to keep you focused and gives you a sense of progress. Any relevant ideas can be written onto this outline so that they are not forgotten.
- When you work on computer, save your documents regularly. By that I mean, at least three times a day – and both onto hard drive and onto floppy. In that way, if anything goes wrong you have not lost too much of your hard work. I used to leave a set of floppies with a reliable friend too, just in case I had a fire or a burglary. There is a story of a Cape Town academic who lost the final draft of his thesis in a fire at his home – and had to start virtually from scratch again. I wasn't going to let that happen to me!
- Date each section of work that you are writing so that you can be sure which draft is your most up to date version. I know of a Master's student who printed out and handed in for examination an early draft of her thesis mistaking it for her final version. The examiners almost failed it because of the number of errors!

### **'A FRIEND IN NEED IS A FRIEND IN DEED' – KEEPING MOTIVATED**

One of the most difficult things I found as a full time doctoral student was the sense of isolation. Writing a doctorate takes ages – and for a lot of that time it was just me, my cat, and the computer. Although my supervisor was a great support, she couldn't be there for me all the time – she had commitments to other students and to her

family and friends. So often I wanted to give up, so often I felt inadequate. I even, at times, just felt that I was not a suitable candidate for the demands of a doctorate – in short, I felt I was stupid! Three things – totally different in nature – kept me motivated.

Firstly, I was so in debt from the Fellowship funding that I simply couldn't give up! I didn't have the money to pay the funder back. This was probably my strongest motivational factor. Because it was so clear-cut, I just had to keep on slogging.

Secondly, I was introduced to a fellow doctoral student who was a year ahead in the process. He was wonderfully generous with his time, sharing his triumphs and darkest moments with me. Suddenly, I realised that all my fears were just part of the process of post-graduate study. I was not alone!! Being part of a larger body of post-graduate students gave me the confidence to believe in myself and my potential. Quite apart from that, his wife had their second baby three months before he handed his doctoral thesis in. I thought, if he can achieve under those circumstances, I can do anything!

Finally, my partner, friends and family kept me going. They were so proud of me. They spoke of me as though I was already 'The Doctor'. I used to dream of the graduation and the blue gown and my whole proud family there to witness the event. And it happened just like that, too – with my frail very proud father waving joyously from the back of the hall on graduation night.

I hope that these ideas for motivation stimulate you to want to keep going. Remember, "It is doable." Many before you have succeeded. And, when you are a Master or a Doctor, you too – as one who has been down that road and triumphed – can reminisce and motivate and support others!

## APPENDIX 1

### POSSIBLE SOURCES OF FUNDING

There are a number of different sources you may want to pursue:

1. Some departments / post-graduate programmes have grant money available for research projects. Consult with the Head of department or programme convenor for information.
  2. UWC also has a composite list of bursaries and funds available for post-graduate students. Collect a booklet from Financial Aid Office, ground floor, Administration Building.
  3. A number of national bodies also have funds available for post-graduate studies. Visit the following sites:  
Social sciences, humanities, business:  
<http://www.nrf.ac.za/programmeareas/rsf/grants.stm>  
Natural sciences, agriculture:  
<http://www.nrf.ac.za/funding/guide/stud.stm>  
Health sciences:  
<http://www.mrc.ac.za>
  4. The Skills Development Act requires employers to assist their employees in further education and training. You could approach your employer to find out if there is any company funding you could access.
    5. The National Research Foundation (NRF) and the Medical Research Council (MRC) supports post-graduate studies. Consult your supervisor about applying for an NRF or MRC grant, or contact Prof Renfrew Christie (x 2949) for further details.
    6. The International Relations Office has information about a number of student exchange programmes for study at an overseas university. Contact Prof Persens on x 2884.
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## APPENDIX 2

### HOW THE LIBRARY WORKS

Don't be misled by the possible lack of books or journals on the shelves into thinking that the main library doesn't have the references you're looking for. Many of the library's resources are in electronic form and can be accessed via the various databases. Also, there are some well-stocked resource centers and libraries within certain units and departments.

1. There is a Faculty specific librarian to assist students. Contact your specific librarian for general library orientation sessions and advice and assistance relating to sources.

Faculty	Librarian	Tel no	Office	Level
EMS	Ms Zona Koen	959 2931	6.9	6
Natural Sciences	Ms Valda Knoll	959 2296	6.6	6
CHS	Ms Lilian Mitchell-Kamalie	959 2922	6.2	6
Law	Mr Sulaiman Tarkey	959 2906	9.1	9
Education	Ms Benita deWet	959 2296	6.7	6
Deputy University Librarian: Mr John Andrea				
Head of section: Ms Teresa van Rooyen				

2. The library runs courses on general and specific database searches, bibliographic instruction, and on-line search training.
3. A UWC registered student is able to take out books from UCT, Stellenbosch Univ, Pentech and Cape Technikon libraries. You will first have to obtain a letter of permission from UWC library. Download the form from the UWC library webpage under "What's new?" – Calico Referral letter. Fill the form in on line, print and take to Lending desk (or get a hard copy from there). You'll need 2 passport photo graphs for UCT.
4. Interlibrary loans, on, level 4, are available if you need to get a book or photocopied journal article from another library. Costs are R2 per book per month, and 50c per journal article page. Interlibrary loans will normally take about a week. You can enquire about fax services in cases of urgency.
5. The audio-visual lending section has videos, cassette, and CD roms on a variety of topics. This is on level 4.
6. The UWC library web page – under icon "i" – has information about how to find a research topic, construct a research proposal, how to do research., mind-mapping,

plagiarism, getting focus, key words, etc. An example case with very useful guidelines is given..

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## **APPENDIX 3**

### **VARIOUS SUPPORT SYSTEMS AND SERVICES**

#### **1 Seminars/workshops**

Every semester, a series of seminars on topics identified as important by post-graduate students is offered via the PET project - e.g. How to develop a research proposal, How to construct interviews, How to do a Literature Review, How to negotiate the supervision process, Juggling to learn, etc. Contact Nelleke Bak (x2451) for further details.

#### **2. Thesis Guide**

It lists the various thesis requirements and procedures for submitting. Contact Mandy Samuels (x3920) or Nelleke Bak (x2451) for copies.

#### **3 Research Proposal Guide**

This generic guide spells out the necessary parts of a Research Proposal..

#### **4. Supervision Guide**

This guide is aimed specifically at supervisors, but contains pertinent information for students on the supervision relationship and responsibilities.

#### **5. Websites**

The Thintana Lab has a Bookmarks list of general and specific search engines. There are also some excellent websites you can consult about thesis writing and research designs and techniques.

*For thesis writing and practical advice on getting started:*

[www.phys.unsw.edu.au/~jw/thesis](http://www.phys.unsw.edu.au/~jw/thesis)

and

[www.sce.carleton.ca/faculty/chinneck/thesis](http://www.sce.carleton.ca/faculty/chinneck/thesis)

#### **6. Study space**

Small Study carrels are available on campus - contact NellekeBak

#### **7. Computer software**

Research Toolbox software is available to all UWC users. It can be downloaded onto your home PC as well. (Contact Mandy Samuels x3920 for an installation disk.)

#### **8. Email addresses and intranet**

Groupwise email addresses are available for all M and D students. These can also be accessed via UWC website. Phone Mandy x3920 who will process your application.

#### **9. Library assistance**

See Appendix 2 for the kinds of library services on offer.

#### **10. Language development services**

The UWC Writing Centre offers services free of charge -There are 2 Writing Consultants specifically trained to assist post-graduates with language development. Phone x 2390 for an appointment.

The Writing Centre also offers various academic development workshops on academic writing, interpersonal communication skills, research strategies, etc. Phone x2390 for more details.

#### **11. Language acquisition classes and proofreading/editing services**

The illwimi Centre (tel 959 21480) offers language acquisition classes in Afrikaans, Xhosa and English.

Typing, editing, proofreading, translation, transcription services are available from the illwimi Centre on campus. It provides these services *at a fee*.

The Writing Centre also has a list of available typists/ translators who offer these services at a fee.

#### **12. Research focused meeting groups in UWC residences**

In order to encourage the sharing of research and thesis writing, trained co-ordinators in the post-graduate residences assist in facilitating and sustaining regular discipline-specific group meetings.

#### **13. Computer and Internet access**

Most departments have specific PCs for post-graduate use. Enquire within department re availability.

There is also the Thintana Great Hall walk-in computer lab (Great Hall open Mon-Thurs from 08:30 - 21:00, Fri from 08:30 - 18:00 and Sat from 09:00 - 15:00)

There is the TLTU Multimedia student walk-in Lab (Anatomy Building - open Mon-Fri from 08:30 - 17:00)

There is the TLTU Docwill student walk-in Lab (Goldfields Building - open Mon-Fri from 08:30 - 17:00)

There is also the Thintana EMS student computer lab.

The Education Faculty has a computer Lab - tel Gasant Gamiet x 2642.

#### **14. Part-time student support**

For various supports like time management of part-time studies and transport lift clubs, tel the Division of Lifelong Learning (DLL) on x3787.

#### **15. Help with statistical analysis and research design**

Dr Theunis Kotze has been hired as a Statistical Consultant, for one day a week, to help only Master's and Doc students with their thesis research. Tel x 3010 to make an appointment. Service is free of charge.

**16. Database of past and current research**

The post-graduate website is being developed, with a proposed list of all the past and current research theses undertaken.

**17. Overseas research opportunities available.**

For information on research available opportunities, contact the Dean of Research, Prof Renfrew Christie (x 2949) or the International Relations Committee for exchange linkages with other universities (x 2884).

**18. Financial Aid**

The Workstudy programme and the SANTED project have a number of workstudy employment opportunities for post-graduate students. (Tel x 2119/ 2294).  
See also Appendix 1.

**19. Student Counselling and Special educational needs students**

For support and help with personal problems, tel Student Counselling on x 2299.  
Student Counselling also assists students with special educational needs. Transcription into Braille is available.

**20. Student Health**

At a nominal fee, students can receive medical attention. Tel Student Health on x 2876.

**21. SRC**

The Student Representative Council addresses student issues. Tel x 2738.  
A proposed Post-graduate Student Association, affiliated to the SRC, is being considered.

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See also UWC website for useful information on admission requirements, registration procedures, residence information, information for international students, as well as a list of workshops and copies of the workshop handouts. Click on “student” tab, then on “post-graduate student” .

## APPENDIX 4

### REQUIREMENTS OF A MASTER'S AND DOCTORAL THESIS

#### Criteria in terms of which theses are assessed

Examiners are asked to report on the following:

- Is the scope of the thesis clearly defined?
- Is the nature of the topic adequately interpreted?
- Does the thesis develop a critical and disciplined discussion?
- Is there evidence of engagement with the relevant literature?
- Is sufficient command of appropriate techniques of research, analysis and scholarly presentation demonstrated?
- Is the thesis well-structured and coherently argued?
- Is the thesis presented in an appropriate style and with due regard to formal conventions of scholarship (such as referencing and bibliography)?
- Has the candidate paid adequate attention to linguistic and formal features of presentation such as grammar, style and layout?
- What are the strengths and weaknesses of the thesis?
- In the case of a Master's thesis, do you think that the candidate should be encouraged to proceed to Doctoral study?
- Do you judge that the thesis, in whole or in part, is suitable publication. If so, what changes might be necessary before it was presented for publication?

In reporting on a Doctoral thesis, examiners are asked to comment in addition on the following:

- Does the thesis show proof of original work?
- Is it a distinct contribution to knowledge of and insight into the subject?

#### There are four possible outcomes of the thesis examination:

1. The thesis passes as it is, without any corrections.
2. The thesis passes, but certain minor recommended changes as noted in the examiners' reports must be effected before the final copies are submitted and the student can graduate. The corrections must be checked by the supervisor.
3. The thesis fails, but the student can substantially re-work the thesis and re-submit for examination.
4. The thesis fails and it is recommended that the student doesn't try to re-work.

#### Examination procedure:

1. Usually candidates are required to submit their theses for examination after obtaining approval from their supervisors.
2. Theses are sent to at least three examiners of whom at least two are independent (have not been involved with the supervision in any way) and at least one is external (not an employee of UWC)
3. Based on the examiners' reports, the supervisor or Head of Department is asked to make a recommendation via the Faculty Higher Degrees Committee to the Senate Higher Degrees Committee (SHD).

4. If the examiners make conflicting recommendations, the supervisor or Head is asked to consult with examiners to see whether agreement can be reached. If no agreement can be reached, the Faculty Higher Degrees Committee may recommend to the SHD that a further examiner be appointed by the SHD. The SHD considers all the examiners' reports and the recommendations of the Faculty Higher Degrees Committee, but is then free to make its own decisions.
5. After the reports have been tabled, it is standard procedure to make anonymous copies of these available to the candidate, unless examiners make a request to the contrary.
6. Each examiner may keep their examination copy of the thesis.
7. Students must make the necessary recommended changes before submitting the final copies to Exams Office. No student may graduate unless final copies have been received.

#### **Master's minithesis**

- A minithesis is normally between 7000 - 20 000 words in length and is limited in scope.

#### **Master's full thesis**

- A full Master's thesis should range between 20 000 - 45 000 words in length
- The scope and depth of a Master's full thesis is more extensive than that of a Master's minithesis.

#### **Interpretation of percentage marks for Master's minitheses/theses:**

85% and over:

A truly outstanding distinction: masterly coverage demonstrating advanced levels of understanding, originality and analysis or research (theoretically and/or empirically) over and above that required for other distinction categories below. Worthy of publication as is.

80 – 85 A strong distinction without reservations: authoritative coverage of relevant material as well as background literature and/or related issues; outstanding presentation in terms of argument, organisation, originality and style. Demonstrates full understanding of subject matter and at most minor typographical corrections required.

75 – 79 Merits distinction though with some reservations: a more than competent presentation with good organisation and sound critical arguments. Evidence of originality / clear insight / solid depth of understanding. Some minor omissions and / or corrections required.

70 – 74 Does not merit a distinction, but there is evidence of some originality and flair. The substantive part of the work is competently covered, well organised and lucidly argued. There are omissions or areas where revisions would improve the work.

60 – 69 Solidly executed, adequate organisation, competent methodology and conclusions adequately drawn. Very little originality, if any, but an adequate overall performance. May require some minor revisions.

50 – 59 No originality, but a pedestrian, albeit competent, review of the literature, a basic understanding of the significance of the issue discussed, and a fairly competent methodology. There may be problems of organisation and expression, of layout and typographical errors, but the work exhibits the main features of academic work sufficiently to pass. Some major revisions may be required.

49 and less

The work is clearly not adequate. It exhibits such a level of disorganisation and incoherence as to be termed incompetent. The work fails to demonstrate familiarity with basic academic conventions of presentation and organisation. A failing mark indicates that it clearly does not pass in its present form, but if re-worked substantially and re-submitted it may be brought into a passworthy form.

### **Doctoral theses**

- The content of a Doctoral thesis is defined as original work and should make a distinct contribution to knowledge of and insight into the subject.