

Navigating through the Masters/ PhD journey

At the start of the academic year, university students tend to make decisions without carefully considering the purpose and potential consequences that these decisions will hold for themselves and the people close to them. This realisation can hit home for postgraduate students a few months in, which is why it is important to reflect on the initial motivation for studying further and consider the path ahead to ensure success, an education expert says.



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“When it comes to postgraduate studies, it is important that you know what the main goal is for studying further. Completing a postgraduate programme is a life-changing, long-term personal journey that one embarks on, so students must ensure they have a clear vision for the journey to enable them to reach that vision accordingly,” says Dr Willy Engelbrecht, Dean: Research and Postgraduate Studies at The Independent Institute of Education.

He says current as well as prospective Master’s and Doctoral students should consider the following guidelines to successfully navigate their postgraduate journey:

Planning the journey

Planning your journey is an integral part of successfully completing your postgraduate studies, says Engelbrecht.

“You need to know exactly the reasons for registering for the programme, as well as what the expectations are of students. Once you clearly understand what will be required of you, you need to plan your schedule accordingly for the next few years to ensure you spend adequate time completing your qualification.



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“You also need to factor in the applicable ongoing assessment requirements throughout the programme, workshops which may be scheduled over weekends or after-hours, and consultation time with lecturers or supervisors. Ensure that you are aware of what is required of you and schedule those requirements in your calendar alongside your work and personal commitments.”

Goal setting

The metaphorical question about how to eat an elephant can easily be aligned to postgraduate degree studies, says Engelbrecht.

“The answer is, of course, piece by piece. That is also how one completes a Master’s or Doctoral programme - step by step. Setting **SMART** goals will enable you to break down the task of successfully completing the programme into smaller, more achievable milestones that will ultimately lead to graduation. The milestones can be broken down into smaller chunks, such as to complete module by module for coursework programmes or chapter by chapter for research-based programmes.”

Students can use **SMART** goals to assist them in setting up targets that can be shared with their supervisor, lecturer, or support group to keep them accountable throughout their postgrad journey. This means goals must be Specific; Measurable; Attainable; Relevant; and Time-bound.



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Scheduling

Effective scheduling and keeping to the plan will enable you to manage your time throughout your postgraduate studies effectively.

“The best way to manage your time effectively is to schedule specific timeslots within your calendar and keep to those agreed encounters. Schedule your reading, writing, or thinking time and ensure you utilise those 30-, 45- or 60-min sessions effectively.

“It is also important to schedule free time to relax, catch up with a friend, watch a movie, engage with family, etc. When you have your scheduled downtime, be fully present and engaged with that, and put thoughts of your studies on the backburner for the duration.”

Skillset development

This is an essential part of a good postgraduate programme, and you will benefit by attending such sessions if offered by your university, says Engelbrecht.

“Make sure that you develop readings skills that will enable you to read faster and quickly scan for relevant content; complete a methodology course that will enable you to better understand the methodological processes; attend library training that will assist you with sourcing relevant literature; or join presentations by industry experts on theory vs practice.” Additional developmental sessions offered by an institution will enable you to move with greater ease through the process of completing your studies.



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Support structures

“Don’t do it alone! Support structures are critical for the successful completion of your postgrad studies. Your family and loved ones must understand what you are doing, why you are doing it and what you need from them during this time,” says Engelbrecht.

“You need to expand your support structure to your fellow postgrad peers, so that you are surrounded by people who understand and share with you the challenges, stresses and celebrations during the completion of your studies. A good support structure will keep you accountable, motivated, and committed to completing your studies.”

Rewards

Be sure to celebrate milestones along the way. From the acceptance of the proposal, completion of a chapter, ethics clearance, data collection completion, and write-up of the final document - your rewards can be anything from a celebratory coffee, special dinner with family or friends, a weekend away, or just reading a good book.

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