

# Reflections on my PhD journey: Five years in the wilderness

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## ARTICLE INFO

## ABSTRACT

Embarking on a doctoral journey is a daunting endeavour, filled with academic challenges and personal growth. PhD students experience many roles that require managing many skills, identities, responsibilities and challenges. This paper reflects on a five-year wandering PhD odyssey marked by supervision challenges, a change of supervisor, and the crucial role of university postgraduate support. The journey was pursued in consecutive registration cycles (2017-2022). The paper adopted a diaristic approach to document and examine PhD experiences at a South African university in KwaZulu-Natal province. The qualitative research gathered data from the author's experience through the journey. I reflect on my PhD journey as a case study. A documentary research method was used to gather data. Experiences were recounted as diarised research. Interpretive systematic review was used to show existing research. The study was rooted in the transformational learning theory. Research showed that academic challenges could be turned into learning opportunities for career development, networking and collaboration, personal growth, resulting in meaningful research contributions. The lessons learnt, challenges overcome, and contributions made during the journey lay the foundation for future academics to focus on academic excellence during their academic wilderness. The new supervisors offered expertise, mentorship, and a renewed sense of purpose, emphasising the importance of collaborative and supportive supervisor-student relationships. The unavailability of resources, workshops, seminars, writing retreats, and peer networks were setbacks in my journey, which could have helped navigate the academic landscape, maintain mental well-being, and regain the momentum to complete the PhD. Insights gained are shared.

**Keywords:** PhD journey, reflections, challenges, supervision, support

## Introduction

This paper discusses PhD journey experiences. The aim is to highlight and analyse some of my experiences during the doctoral odyssey. While there is some available literature on PhD experiences, which this paper compliments, it also brings new insights and understanding of the nature and personal academic development of new scholars. While a journey generally means moving from point A to point B, Miller\* and Brimicombe (2010) use the travel metaphor to examine students' experiences, assuming that they travel together and help each other navigate towards their destinations. The PhD journey started on a high note when I was addressed with prestigious names like Doc and PhD candidate.

This paper presents my PhD journey perspective from 2017 to 2022. The doctoral research focused on TVET lecturer learning during work-integrated learning (WIL). I present some of the hurdles faced in pursuit of the prestigious PhD qualification. The journey was gruelling and long, and one could easily become discouraged, frustrated and exhausted. Brydon and Fleming (2011, p. 996) admit that "*The literature lacks the capacity to capture the trials and tribulations of becoming a researcher*".

Recent studies have, however, identified signs of many challenges faced by PhD candidates during their research. Some of these challenges have hampered PhD students' progress towards completion, while others dropped out (van Rooij et al., 2021). On average, postgraduate students took 4.6 and 4.7 years to complete their

studies towards a doctoral degree in 2000 and 2005, respectively (Department of Science and Innovation, 2022), the average period it took students to complete studies towards the same qualification increased to 5.21 years in 2020 (Council on Higher Education (CHE), 2022a). Council on Higher Education (CHE) (2022b) reports that the average duration for postgraduate students to complete a doctoral degree was 4.7 years in 2005 and increased to 5.21 years in 2020. With the change in educational technology and new teaching and supervision models in this era, the completion rate would be expected to increase substantially. However, statistics have a different story to tell.

The PhD topic I researched on WIL was known to me, and I experienced WIL in industry. Through that experience, I understood the common procedure of acquiring industry skills. As a developing researcher, the choice of my research was constrained by what was practically possible based on available resources. I selected case studies in my proximity to avoid extensive travel and cost. Hence, three cases in the KwaZulu-Natal province were used. My PhD research journey was motivated by TVET lecturer critics who propounded that they lack the requisite practical skills for teaching and learning in the South African TVET sector (Duncan, 2017; Wedekind & Watson, 2016).

### **My position in the research**

During my PhD journey, I identified myself as a TVET lecturer. Therefore, I came to this research with pre-existing ideas of practice (Lotty, 2021). Having gone through WIL, I was familiar with the context since I shared experiences as a lecturer (colleague) with some research participants. I led a programme that had over 110 lecturers. Hence, my position placed me in some participants' spheres. My position established trust and rapport with participants (Lotty, 2021). Being a lecturer, I knew the procedures to get gatekeeper letters and access to participants. My position as an insider brought some benefits to this research. However, I was very mindful of the risk of bias caused by being an insider. An insider is often seen as being at risk of being too subjective and unable to separate their experiences from participants (Holmes, 2020). A well-defined research design helped me to separate my experiences from the participants. I was motivated to produce research contributing to TVET lecturer learning through WIL.

### **Purpose of the study**

This study explores the challenges associated with the late completion of a PhD study. The study focuses on the following:

1. Supervision challenges.
2. Change of supervisor.
3. Lack of university support systems towards PhD studies.

### **Theoretical framework**

Transformational learning theory relates to learning influenced by individual experiences, emerging from social collaborations and interactions, peer discourse, and self-reflection. The extensive work of Freire (1970) and Giroux (1983) forms the basis of transformational learning theory, where some references to certain aspects of their writings complement features of the theory. The work by Freire (1970) highlights the free nature of critical reflection and how its practices lead to the highest expression of one's potential output. Giroux (1983) believes that the theory and practice of education should build critically thoughtful citizens equipped to make a positive change in the community. The transformational learning experience involves acknowledging one's beliefs and values and evaluating whether those attitudes are practical and real in all contexts. Transformational learning occurs after a series of events have taken place. One needs to reflect on the experience, have a dialogue about that experience and learn from the experiences and views of others in an open way (Mezirow & Taylor, 2009; Taylor & Laros, 2014). After much reflection, one cross-examines assumptions and convictions deeply rooted within one's mind. Transformational learning is enabled when the supervisors create a safe and conducive learning atmosphere where students can discuss conflicting feelings and thoughts without fear of victimisation (Taylor & Laros, 2014). Through experiencing these stages of learning, I acquired a modern and wider comprehension of study life experience as a PhD student.

The following table represents uncomfortable learning characteristics (Mezirow, 1997, pp. 168-169), which often involved painful episodes of learning, squarely fitting my relation to the 'wilderness':

**Table 1: Learning Characteristics**

(a) disorientation and confusion,
(b) self-examination of assumptions,
(c) recognition that others are negotiating similar changes,
(d) exploration of new relationships, new roles, and a plan of action,
(e) creation of self-confidence in new roles,
(f) integration of a new perspective into one's life.

**Source: Mezirow (1997, pp. 9-10)**

Table 1 above shows the concepts of Mezirow (1997) transformational learning theory as applied in this study. The PhD journey often involves initial disorientation and confusion, prompting self-examination of assumptions. This leads to exploring new relationships, roles, and creating an action plan. Gradually, self-confidence develops as a new scholar, culminating in the integration of a fresh perspective into one's life, embodying both personal and professional growth. Mezirow (2009) describes transformational learning as dichotomously exhilarating and challenging. In addition, reflective-based learning develops autonomous thinking where one is guided by “*personal interpretations more than by following the feelings, perceptions and judgement of others*” Mezirow (2009, p. 5). Transformative learning is rooted in how people communicate, because communication is the primary means through which ideas are exchanged, through engagement in reflective discourse. Collaboration through group discussions and peer reviews promotes a collective learning environment, thereby encouraging different viewpoints and enhancing the depth of understanding.

### Literature review

I reviewed literature focusing on challenges faced in pursuing the prestigious PhD qualification. The literature focused on, supervision challenges, change of supervisor and university postgraduate support. In explaining a PhD journey, Roberts (2010) says: *Completing the PhD journey is an exploration of learning and personal growth, the outcome of which can result in extraordinary achievement and contribution to knowledge. Obtaining a PhD is the summit of academia – the highest degree any university can bestow.*

The excerpt above explains PhD completion as an achievement of the highest pinnacle of academia. Nevertheless, the personal experience seemed like someone on a ‘wild goose chase’. The high esteem attached to the PhD qualification scares candidates away from completion.

Hove and Nkamta (2017) researched the lack of support and guidance during a doctoral journey, resulting in more study time, abandonment or withdrawal and a drop in completed studies in South Africa. The study showed PhD as a pinnacle of academic achievement and likened it to more than an intellectual pilgrimage. It was emphasised that the journey requires commitment, perseverance and mental stamina. The challenges with supervisors are summarised: “*The supervisor, in being a key companion on the doctoral journey, invariably belongs to a small coterie of academic ‘gatekeepers’, some of whom find a nebulous but vindictive pleasure in asserting their authority in a discipline to the extent that ‘admission’ into their community of scholarship is jealously protected*” (Hove & Nkamta, 2017, p. 1). Lee (2008, p. 272) adds that supervisors act as gatekeepers who decide which gates to open, when, how, and why.

Nyamubi (2021) explored doctoral study experiences with supervisors during the proposal writing stage of his at a university in Tanzania. The study showed that supervisors were not involved in selecting students for supervision, resulting in possibilities of a misfit and power relation conflicts between supervisors’ expertise in the students’ learning discipline and methodology. Failure to match the student with a supervisor often led to drawbacks and liminality. The study gathered that students who negotiate good relations with supervisors gain professional maturity and generally succeed in their studies. Effective communication between PhD students and their supervisors is important to the successful and well-timed completion of a doctoral journey (Lee, 2008; Nyamubi, 2021). While supervisors and students enter the supervisory relationship with unequal knowledge experience, aligning their expertise and specialisation is important. Manyike (2017) suggest that the success of doctoral students depends more on an established personal relationship with supervisors. Therefore, a good relationship with the supervisor facilitates the timely completion of PhD studies and academic growth. Effective communication, mutual respect, and clear expectations promote a healthy supervisory relationship (Khosa et al., 2024).

Griffiths et al. (2015) researched the supervisor’s role and the impact of supervisory change during a PhD study. The study revealed that feedback from supervisors is fundamental for learning and growth. A good PhD supervisor should be an active researcher with technical expertise and a general knowledge of the research area and methods. Supervisors publish peer-reviewed articles, attend conferences, and support students in pursuing their academic careers. Griffiths et al. (2015) opine that supervisors promptly receive, read, and return students’ work. While a good supervisory relationship is crucial for successful PhD studies, it also depends on supervisors’ working styles and students’ expectations.

Mantai and Dowling (2015) explored the important types of social networks and relationships identified by PhD candidates in their acknowledgements of a successful PhD journey. The study attempted to address social support and connections and compared with technical and academic PhD support. The key findings included three types of support: academic, emotional, and instrumental, and acknowledged colleagues, families and supervisors as support providers. The study showed doctoral research as a collaborative endeavour that does not occur in social isolation but involves various people and institutions. Jairam and Kahl Jr (2012) assert that

social relations and networks, peers and fellow candidates aid doctoral progress and complement supervisory guidance. The value of family (immediate and extended), colleagues (people explicit to academic and professional context), and friends (PhD fellows and colleagues outside the research context, was highlighted as crucial in the PhD journey. Most research narrated the PhD journey as a “hard adventure”, “path of my life”, “a long passage of learning”, “this long process”, “leisurely but costly trip” (Mantai & Dowling, 2015, p. 113). There is an acknowledgement of the lengthy and difficult PhD which was achieved through a collaborative effort of academics, peers, friends and family.

Cornwall et al. (2019) researched stressors faced by early-stage doctoral students at the University of Otago in New Zealand. The qualitative findings from an online survey of PhD students highlighted key stressors such as time pressure, uncertainty of doctoral processes, sense of belonging in the scholarly community, social isolation, financial impact of study, anticipation of the future workload associated with PhD, doubt regarding abilities or strengths, work/life balance, and engagement and effectiveness of supervision. The research found that stress is common among graduate students and can negatively impact their well-being and performance. Understanding stress in early-stage doctoral students is important for universities to provide a positive student experience, minimise attrition, and support research and skills development.

The study highlighted the various sources of stress experienced by doctoral students and shed light on unique stressors such as supervisory relationships, anticipation of stress, financial concerns, and specific elements of the transition to becoming a PhD student. The dynamics of the student-supervisor relationship have evolved from a traditional top-down (hierarchical) model to a more collaborative model, where access to supervisors, conflicts between co-supervisors, and communication issues are significant stressors for students. The study discussed the sources of stress for first-year doctoral students, highlighting factors such as changing supervisory relationships, financial concerns, life transitions, and perceptions of the PhD experience. Financial stress, transitions, and uncertainties about the doctoral journey were identified as key stressors. The cited articles cover various aspects of doctoral student experiences, including peer support groups, reasons for dropping out, stress and coping mechanisms, social support, student satisfaction, the impact of service quality, and more. The studies highlighted the challenges faced by doctoral students, the importance of social support, and the impact of stress on their academic journey.

### **Supervision challenges**

Everything seemed well when I explained my research idea as a TVET specialist. I was a TVET senior lecturer with teaching and supervision responsibilities. When preparing a proposal, I asked for a guideline, and the feedback was that a PhD candidate has to navigate and write. As a result, my proposal was about 76 pages. During my proposal discussion with both supervisors, the main supervisor introduced me as a student who wanted to finish a PhD in one submission. It appeared this was the beginning of my difficult journey. I cannot count the number of proposal drafts I did. The back-and-forth process took over two years to get a chance to sit before a higher committee and defend my proposal. The day to defend my proposal was met with challenges when I was shocked to hear that I was not ready to present an hour before time. I was depressed, confused and disoriented. It was difficult to explain what happened to my family after spending three days on a writing stint and failing to present a proposal. My state aligned with Mezirow and Taylor (2009) transformative learning, where I was disorientated and confused. I faced experiences that challenged my existing beliefs and assumptions. The theory assisted in recognising moments when I felt uncomfortable, uncertain, or conflicted by the slow supervisor-led progress. I considered the dilemmas as opportunities for transformation of my PhD journey. This experience is explained by Thaba-Nkadimene (2020), who revealed the prevalence of delayed graduation due to single-handed supervision. I remember sending a scary message to my family about the possibility of not making it to the following day. I did not lock my hotel room that night because I felt I was losing my breath.

It took another three months to prepare until I finally presented and sailed through. I found the defence process very educative and informative. It is a workshop on its own. Doctoral students on the proposal stage should be allowed to attend such presentations to ‘tick boxes’ and strengthen their future presentations. The challenge that dragged my studies was the supervision model used, which did not work in my favour. After sending work to the supervisor, the response indicated receipt of work and that it was in the queue since we were many. Responses would take a month or so to come. Initially, it was fine because the whole submission would be marked. Over time, only the first five pages would be marked with the comments to follow the comments for the rest of the work. It was devastating. This aligned with a study by Hove and Nkamta (2017), who noted, “*I had written 20 pages of a proposal, and Prof. had read the first five, a trend that was to be a patent of Prof.’s feedback in the copious drafts of my thesis*”. The next blow was to find a reviewer who would check the work before submission to the supervisor. This mission was impossible as my two attempts with different people did not bring positive results, as none gave feedback. It caused further delays in progress. From the cohort, it appeared that some students’ work always received priority over mine as they would send and receive feedback twice before me.

It was difficult to approach the supervisor and ask why the work took so long, otherwise, it would take even longer. It pointed to the importance of supervisor openness and approachability. These events led to the decision to change supervisor.

### **Change of supervisor**

At the start of my PhD journey, I knew little about my supervisors beyond their names and reputations within the field. As my doctoral journey progressed, there was a shift from mapping out the project to conducting research, writing, and eventually deciding to part ways with the initial supervisors. While students typically do not anticipate a change in their supervisory team, it can happen for various reasons, and in the event of an inevitable change, manage the transition process professionally and maintain a positive attitude (Griffiths et al., 2015). In this light, I established clear expectations and communication channels with the new supervisory team, discussed concerns and explored potential solutions.

After four years of back and forth, 'running', and 'shuffling', I finally got family support to change the supervisor as a last resort. A single factor may not be responsible for the postgraduate students' delay in their thesis completion rate (Mkhai, 2023). Student deficiencies, supervisor-related factors and school environment may not be left out among the factors. I became a doctoral orphan at some point, as it took me four months to receive feedback about the request. It appeared that my concerns were not prioritised because the papers were not forwarded for authorisation six months after submitting the request to change supervisors. After submitting the thesis write-up in November 2021, it took over three months to release it for examination. Unfortunately, no official communication was sent to confirm that the dissertation was sent for examination.

Changing supervisors was the most nerve-wracking process I went through. What triggered the fall was a discussion on a chapter where the supervisor indicated that I would not finish if I continued writing the way I did. The comment came at a time when I expected to get finishing timelines. Having completed only two chapters in four years indicated that I would not finish. Noting other PhD students from my cohort who had spent more years under the same supervisor, it was testimony that I would also fall victim. Since I had prepared all draft chapters for the dissertation, I sought alternative supervision. I was tired of keeping in mind the admonition from the supervisor that I should keep shuffling ... *keep shuffling*. That phrase haunted me. I sought to shelve my hurt and seek console from a colleague in our cohort. A change in supervisors can be disorienting for a PhD student. Suddenly, the familiar guidance and expectations shift, challenging existing assumptions about research and progress (Mezirow, 1997).

After realising endless back-and-forth processes, I changed the main supervisor to seek alternative progress. The response from the co-supervisor paid allegiance to the main supervisor. Therefore, I had to change both supervisors. The co-supervisor indicated that he could not continue if the main supervisor left. It was clear that the two supervisors had agreed on a collective decision, which led to seeking two new supervisors altogether. The supervisors used a supervision model where they shared my work before returning it to avoid conflicting comments. However, the model failed as it was not discussed with me (the student). My main reason for the change of supervisor was to find an advisor who would share timelines towards completion and work towards that target. Supervisors who provide high levels of autonomy support are the opposite of controlling supervisors who press their viewpoint (van Rooij et al., 2021).

The back-and-forth exercise appeared to be a ploy to keep someone employed. There were instances where the main supervisor would keep correcting previous corrections, which made one keep going in circles. Such cases confused the student who did not know what would be accepted as correct.

Through the process, I realised that the supervisor could have judged my performance and ranked me lowest among other PhD students. This experience aligns with Brydon and Fleming (2011), who showed that supervisors judge their students on grounds not necessarily concerned with academic ability. Mezirow (2009) opines that individuals with disorienting dilemmas engage in deep self-reflection. The theory posits that students evolve by critically reflecting on their experiences and reinterpreting them as they progress in their learning journey (Contreras & Bedord, 2023). My motivation and opinion to change the supervisor was met with resistance because the supervisors did not sign the release forms. I, therefore, stayed for some months without supervision as the process was stalled. The supervisors were unhappy about my motivation to change them. Because it was the truth, I stood by it. The process was accelerated when I involved the deputy vice-chancellor – research and innovation to intervene after the stalemate. The responsible officials completed the necessary paperwork, and new supervisors took over.

While the change process was not easy and smooth, it brought a lot of learning and experience. I learnt to endure the pain of the fear of taking such a life-changing decision. During the waiting period, I read and re-read my chapters repeatedly, compiled my write-up, and started writing articles based on the research

questions. It helped to manage stress levels and anxiety as I had to focus on something positive. When new supervisors were appointed, I presented a draft dissertation and 4 draft manuscripts for journals. The three drafts were shared with the supervisors, who suggested improvements. The manuscripts were forwarded to accredited journals and accepted for publication before graduation.

There were issues like text alignment, which were imposed to use 'left alignment' instead of 'justify', a common alignment method that looks neat and organised. Furthermore, using data analysis software was discouraged in favour of thematic analysis. The supervisor cited that one would gain insight into the data through thematic analysis compared to using different software. This approach offers deeper insights into the data, promoting direct researcher engagement and a detailed understanding that software could overlook. While thematic analysis promotes deeper engagement and understanding, it is necessary to balance these benefits with the potential for subjectivity, time constraints, and consistency. Automated software can complement thematic analysis by handling large volumes of data and providing a preliminary overview, which can be explored in-depth through manual methods (Masuku & Ngulube, 2020). In my mind, I felt deprived of the future by not using data analysis software, as it would have been part of the learning process.

On the bigger picture, a PhD is a learning process where one would learn all processes in preparation for future engagements. Even if you do not apply the software in the study, learning how to use it broadens your understanding and preparation for future endeavours. The supervisor had much strength in the thematic analysis method, which was well presented. However, the fourth industrial revolution brought technology that needed to be used, which would also skill the candidate. Besides the main reason for time loss, these were some of the reasons which fuelled the move to change supervisors. All other methods that the supervisor was not proficient in seemed as if they did not exist and could not be tabled for discussion as options. As a result, there were no workshops or training in data analysis software and no conferences, seminars, or symposiums attended. Sverdlik et al. (2018) suggested that universities can address PhD candidate issues through workshops, support services, and improved communication between students and supervisors. Research points out students' success in completing theses through one-on-one coaching and using a forum for seminars and colloquia for presenting stage-by-stage ideas (Hove & Nkamta, 2017). The emphasis was placed on finishing a difficult PhD, where attending such academic gatherings would disrupt the rough journey.

### **Lack of postgraduate university support**

A PhD journey can be likened to a long marathon race, where support structures will keep the athlete in motion. Bolli et al. (2015) report that many universities set up graduate schools to provide doctoral students access to resources that increase their chances of success. It was suggested that many working students tended to lower completion rates due to their commitments, which drained their time. It was suggested that having on-campus conferences would raise completion rates for some students while having dedicated postgraduate rooms would improve completion (Bolli et al., 2015).

Submitting Postgraduate (PG) forms was a real nightmare (PG 2A – Research proposal to PG10 – Declaration in respect of the Doctoral Thesis Submitted for Examination). I noted with concern the annual progress report form, which sought to draw information about student progress, yet the form was submitted to the supervisor. It was difficult to highlight challenges linked to the supervisor during the journey as it would raise tension. Therefore, years went by, writing false reports as if all was well, yet I was burning with stress and anxiety. The process of signing the PG forms did not seem to favour students. The personal experience proved that re/registration was difficult because of the manual process. A few personal experiences were drawn to show how difficult the PhD journey was made to become. Signing the change of supervisor drew the attention of the vice chancellor-research and innovation, as well as the faculty research coordinator. Again, getting the final submission for graduation was a hurdle. I had to 'knock on doors' with the help of the new supervisor to have my name appear on the graduation list. However, this responsibility could be left to the student to make submissions through the online system, removing red tape and improving efficiency and access according to the higher education transformation agenda (Department of Higher Education and Training, 2013).

According to university guidelines, a PhD candidate is allocated R15000 financial support to conduct research. There were no clear-cut processes to request the funding. Cornwall et al. (2019) revealed an uncertain research structure, clear direction and expectations. Several efforts to secure the funding were in vain. Escalating the matter to the head of the department (HoD) did not yield fruit. Furthermore, financial stress, transitions, and uncertainties about the doctoral journey were identified as key stressors (Cornwall et al., 2019). I deduced that the university faculty was reluctant to make available funding to its students because my efforts did not trigger any alarm. There appeared to be no system to track the signing of forms. As such, progress was delayed due to that hold-up.

Extending studies for the fifth year required payment because the fee remission period had elapsed. One had to source money to self-fund studies. In my final year of registration, I had no breakthrough in claiming

funding, which I could have used for travelling, accommodation, refreshments, data, phone calls to arrange interviews with participants and pay for dissertation editing. I kept receipts for accommodation, fuel and other expenses, but it was futile. Support could have been in the form of seminars, workshops and conferences. I remember attending one workshop when we started PhD, highlighting proposal writing and methodology. There was no other form of training organised to match us with the prestigious title.

On a good note, the new supervisor supported me when I applied to present a paper at an international conference in Mauritius. The supervisor's research fund granted financial support, and the trip was successful. The paper was later published as a conference proceeding soon after graduation. The open-mindedness, free-spirited approach, and the fact that we can all learn from each other helped us reach the finishing line of the PhD journey. In the same breath, Ahmad (2020) expresses that proper, continuous, and follow-up supervision support is vital to achieving desired goals. Most importantly, I engaged in a rational discourse to understand the new supervisors' perspectives.

### **Student factors relating towards a delay in PhD studies completion**

I was addressed as a student who wanted to finish a PhD in one submission because my proposal was long. On reflection, this was an indicator where one was asked to add more information without proper guidance on the length and breadth of the submission. The original idea on the topic was maintained. The theory underpinning the study was a challenge as it kept changing from my original choice. The idea was to focus on adult learning and the pedagogical effect of industry attachment on TVET lecturers' teaching and learning. I used a theory by Kolb (1984) on experiential learning theory, Shulman (1987) domains of teacher knowledge and a conceptual framework on soft skills. The challenge was on the domains of teacher knowledge, which I did not quite understand. Hence, when I got to Chapter 7, I had challenges with its application.

A supervisor brings a wealth of knowledge on how to make the students understand and realise their potential. In many instances, chapter writing was difficult because of a lack of clarity on tackling crucial aspects. While a freestyle may promote originality and a freethinking mind, it can also be time-wasting if not properly guided. My experience showed the need for a template (guideline) that a student follows to cover relevant facets of the chapter. Following a guide gives direction and prevents time to research and write material that may be discarded. Some vital information was shared at the end of the fourth year when I had already written in my original style, showing how much time was wasted. It was also very difficult to be asked to reduce from a 40 to 30-page chapter as I had to read through and sift out some information. It was not easy.

### **Registration**

The registration process was an excessively complicated administrative manual procedure involving completing several forms such as the linking form, PG-4 form and approval from the supervisor, HoD and FRC. Other universities facilitate full online registration, and financial clearance occurs automatically once a minimum fee is paid. I had five consecutive registrations where the process was so inflexible. The experience proved that the registration process was so difficult and outdated. The registration procedure could easily eliminate a student from the system. A rollover system for current students could solve the bulk of registration issues at the university. Computerising the financial clearance part has the possibility of clearing the registration glitch, allowing students to self-register. I moved with my laptop everywhere, especially at the beginning of the year, because an instruction could come anytime to complete and return a registration form for processing.

After completing the dissertation write-up with the assistance of the new supervisor, there were several challenges with submission for examination. Four months after completing a change of supervisor forms, it emerged that the necessary paperwork for dissertation submission had not been processed. When the 'intention to submit' form was filed, it came to light that the new supervisor appointment process was not completed. Again, I had to involve the office of the DCV to ensure my case received attention. Even though forms were completed and submitted on time, no action was taken to finalise the supervisor change process. On enquiry, I was informed to resubmit all forms submitted earlier. Amplified Study Bible (2016) explains that studying does not make sense because "... *the writing of many books is endless, and excessive study is wearying to the body*" Ecclesiastes 12v12. At this stage, I felt like everything was useless. The journey was shattering and mind gobbling.

Even though communication was sent, it was requested again, indicating that email communication was not attended. The response confirmed that communication was sent earlier but not processed or acknowledged. The lack of urgency contributed towards drawing back students' progress towards finishing PhD studies on time. It showed some disregard for students' existence in the university system, hence the non-response to formal communication. Two months after submitting recommended corrections from examiners and 2 hard copies of the dissertation and CD, no further communication was received until the much-awaited results came.

### **Now a developed researcher**

The change of supervisor was the dawn of a new research era. It enabled me to fulfil the dream of article writing. I wrote my second article (first for the dissertation) and had it published. The second paper from the thesis was accepted by a top international journal subject to recommended corrections. While the dissertation write-up has many benefits towards academic writing, much more is learnt from preparing a manuscript according to different journal guidelines. The article writing process created self-confidence in the new roles as described in Table 1 by Mezirow (1997) transformational learning theory. Apart from writing skills, one learnt to persevere when manuscripts were thoroughly critiqued through a double-blind peer review process and sometimes got rejected. Communication, collaboration, patience, perseverance and adaptive skills were acquired through the journey. I found solace in the three examiners' reports:

There is evidence of thorough work on the part of the candidate and supervisors. These parties are well commended for a meticulous job that assists in shaping both TVET institutions and the academic world through addition to the existing literature on TVET issues. On the whole, with the few corrections, the thesis can be accepted as it surpasses minimum international standards (Examiner 1).

The study is of higher quality and contributes to the new knowledge in Education and other sectors. The candidate brought new knowledge and scholarly contribution about the topic "TECHNICAL AND VOCATIONAL EDUCATION AND TRAINING LECTURER LEARNING THROUGH WORK-INTEGRATED LEARNING: A STUDY OF THREE COLLEGES IN KWAZULU-NATAL" The work done by the candidate is original and shows creativity in education sectors (Examiner 2).

The thesis is well written and it should be accepted on condition that specified revisions are made to the satisfaction of the promoter. Overall impression: If a distinction is awarded, your motivation should be given here (Examiner 3).

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

A PhD journey is a transformative and rewarding experience characterised by dedication, determination, resilience, mentorship and personal growth. Determination in the five-year odyssey in the academic wilderness opened research pathways. I can now contribute to academia and influence policy, practice, and societal change. The lessons learnt, challenges overcome, and contributions made during the PhD journey lay the foundation for future academics to focus on academic excellence. I recommend that universities scrutinise their supervision models and employ a mechanism to track and trace postgraduate students (particularly doctoral) so that students can complete their studies timeously.

The PG2A form appears to be a paper exercise since the timelines are not followed or monitored. The research support fund for PhD candidates should be easily accessible to recipients once the students receive the ethical clearance. An online application system can be used to eliminate barriers to accessing funding. Centralising the system to a postgraduate office responsible for student support services may assist students in receiving financial and academic support.

Supervisors must give attention to students and help them do their proposed research. I noted a diversion of ideas towards supervisor inclination. While it makes sense from the supervisor's perspective to focus on areas of strength, it disturbs the student's focus and original research idea. While thematic analysis allows immersion into the data, it can be time-consuming. Having personally gathered the data means that I know who said what. Data analysis software (e.g. Excel, ATLAS.ti, NVivo, SPSS) must be encouraged to develop more skills, saving time simultaneously. A rollover system for current students could solve the bulk of registration issues at the university. Computerising the financial clearance part has the possibility of clearing the registration glitch, allowing students to self-register.

This study has limitations in that it is based on the author's recounted experiences during the PhD study. Studies on PhD students and supervisors would further clarify issues around supervision and reasons for late and non-completion of this prestigious qualification.

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