

SUGGESTIONS FROM SOCIAL WORK DOCTORAL GRADUATES ON WHAT ASPIRANTS NEED TO KNOW BEFORE ENROLMENT

Mankwane Daisy Maria Makofane

The complexity of societal needs in a new democracy requires a high level of human resources to facilitate transformation among individuals, groups, as well as in society to enhance human circumstances. This requires a distinct contribution to knowledge-building and practice through doctoral research. Six suggestions offered by doctoral graduates indicate that during preparation for this learning journey, aspirants should want to pursue viable topics they are passionate about; be ready to make a unique contribution to the discipline; disseminate and implement findings after completion of their studies; identify a knowledgeable and supportive promoter; have financial assistance; and remain emotionally disposed to engage with an intensive, rigorous programme.

Prof. Mankwane Daisy Maria Makofane, Department of Social Work, University of South Africa, Pretoria, South Africa.

MDM Makofane, ORCID iD; 0000-0002-2382-8471

Email: [nase.melale@gmail.com](mailto:nase.melale@gmail.com)

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## SUGGESTIONS FROM SOCIAL WORK DOCTORAL GRADUATES ON WHAT ASPIRANTS NEED TO KNOW BEFORE ENROLMENT

**Daisy Makofane**

### INTRODUCTION

Some social workers endeavour to address the complexity of societal needs through empirical doctoral research. It was reported a decade ago that the knowledge needs of the profession are increasing in the light of the social, economic and political systems impacting on the profession in the United States of America (USA) and elsewhere in the world (Anastas & Kuerbis, 2009:71). Aspiring doctoral candidates need to think thoroughly about the nature of their research inquiry before deciding to enrol at a university. The doctoral learning journey (Wisker, 2010) or journey of development (Bayley, Ellis, Abreu-Ellis & O'Reilly, 2012:90) or transformative journey (Kim, 2004:81) is intellectually demanding (Flowers & Lazaros, 2009:25), requires persistence (Spaulding & Rockinson-Szapkiw, 2012:199) and a great deal of time and energy (Weidmann, Twale & Stein, 2001:63), including personal commitment (Martinsuo & Turkulainen, 2011:103). The concept of "journey" as it applies to research conjures up images involving the mental, physical, emotional and/or spiritual preparation for learning (Batchelor & Di Napoli, 2006:14; Haynes, Bulosan, Citty, Grant-Harris, Hudson & Koro-Ljungberg, 2012:13; Richards, 2019:185), which would most likely lead to constructive outcomes. This requires preparatory groundwork dictated by the research goal, which determines the research method, validation and implementation of the results. It is therefore logical for a doctoral aspirant to prepare adequately before embarking on such a research journey. Supervisors or promoters are appointed to guide candidates along the way. A doctoral degree is the highest degree obtainable at a university, and is often referred to as the apex or terminal degree (Spaulding & Rockinson-Szapkiw, 2012:199).

The concept *doctorateness* "combines 'doing' and 'achieving' a doctorate, and so it merges the issues of research process and research techniques" (Trafford & Leshem, 2009:305). It includes research design, presentation of a coherent argument, quality of writing, results, conclusions and contextualisation (Murray, 2003:78). Furthermore, doctorateness is a prerequisite scholarly feature that examiners look for when assessing theses for their academic worth. Candidates need to understand its nature in order to deliver quality theses (Trafford & Leshem, 2009:315). Doctoral education programmes in social work are essential for the advancement of the profession, including the supply of educators and researchers who can train the next generation of postgraduates (Liechty, Liao & Schull, 2009:481), although it should not be assumed that all researchers have the ability to teach effectively (Gibelman & Fast, 2001:455).

The requirements for a doctor of social work (DSW) are explained by the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA) (2010), which is a statutory body regulated by the South African National Qualifications Framework (NQF) Act No. 67 of 2008. At doctoral level a candidate is expected to demonstrate "expertise and critical knowledge in an area at the forefront of the field, discipline or practice; and the ability to conceptualise new research initiatives, and create new knowledge or practice" (SAQA Level Descriptors for the South African National Qualifications Framework, (NQF) 2010:10). A DSW is research based and culminates in a thesis. Such studies prepare candidates for advanced practice. Available information will help aspirants change their focus and perceptions of the requirements necessary for a master's degree to those more appropriate for a doctorate. The inability to make this transition may be attributed to the candidate's<sup>1</sup> underestimation of the demands of the doctoral programme or a lack of insight into the requirements for the highest academic degree. It has

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1 The concepts 'candidate' and 'student' are used interchangeably.

also been found that “[c]andidates may not always recognise that their view of doctoral research is underdeveloped, whilst others may know when blockages prevent them from making progress” (Trafford & Leshem, 2009:314). The book *Stepping stones to achieving your doctorate* by Trafford and Leshem (2008) is an informative and valuable resource that clarifies the entire process that candidates should follow to obtain a doctorate through a thesis.

Even though there seems to be little research on factors contributing to success in doctoral studies in South Africa (Bitzer, 2011:429), the literature points to the fact that individual success is dependent upon relational (e.g. social support by families, peers and faculty advisors or supervisors) and systemic factors (e.g. support offered by the department and institution), as well as aptitude (Brailsford, 2010:22; Haynes et al., 2012:13; Jairam & Kahl Jr., 2012:311; Liechty et al., 2009:481;). However, some researchers hold the view that “PhD students are usually high achievers, who are among the brightest and most successful students” (Wollast, Boudrenghien, Van der Linden, Galand, Roland, Devos, De Clercq, Klein, Azzi & Frenay, 2018:143). On the contrary, Golde (2000:199) postulates that “[p]aradoxically, the most academically capable, most academically successful, most stringently evaluated, and most carefully selected students in the entire higher education system – doctoral students – are the least likely to complete their chosen academic goals.” The conclusion stems from three case studies on students’ experiences with attrition from doctoral programmes. Key reasons were difficult advisor-student relationships which led to change of advisors, lack of direction and encouragement from advisors, and student’s multiple roles or interests.

Doctoral candidates are a valuable asset to the research and teaching teams of many institutions (Ampaw & Jaeger, 2012:641). They are expected to make a substantial and original contribution to knowledge and practice to fulfil their social work mandate. Furthermore, “[t]hroughout that doctoral journey, candidates are expected to display doctorateness in their theses via the characteristics of high-quality scholarly research” (Trafford & Leshem, 2009:305). The final thesis has to provide evidence conceptual, critical and creative work (Wisker, 2010:223). Those with deficiencies in academic writing and other requisite skills need to recognise these challenges, acknowledge them, seek assistance from relevant university divisions, and strive to improve these skills. Challenges should be perceived as part of the learning process.

Publicised marketing data are available on university websites which offer reasons for pursuing doctoral research, and providing the necessary requirements for this; this can assist aspiring doctoral students in making informed decisions regarding their goals and objectives. Generally, candidates are expected to start working on their research proposals with energy and enthusiasm immediately after enrolment. In the University of Pretoria 2019 guidelines for prospective master’s and doctoral candidates, a pertinent question is posed: *Are there shortcuts?* The answer is an unequivocal *no*. Furthermore, a comprehensive description states: “Postgraduate studies are demanding and require in-depth knowledge, extensive reading, theoretical engagement, intellectual independence, critical thinking, insight, independent research, and the ability to document your findings – and often repeating this process.” Similarly, a summary of the literature on the expectations of examiners shows the typical criteria used during examination of theses, namely that a “[d]octorate should indicate that the student is able to problematise, conceptualise, successfully design, construct, and conduct research; work creatively, critically, and then analyse, interpret, and write thoroughly to completion and beyond to publication, dissemination and change” (Wisker, 2010:225). University rules for doctoral candidates also provide an outline on the requirements for awarding this degree (Trafford & Leshem, 2009:307).

In South Africa most social work doctoral candidates study on a part-time basis while in full-time employment and managing multiple roles as spouses, partners, parents, siblings – to mention but a few. It is common for students engaged in professional fields such as education and social work to study on part-time basis (Gardner & Gopaul, 2012:64). However, the experiences of part-time doctoral students in the USA are viewed as “more complicated and required sustained and flexible efforts to adequately

address" (Gardner & Gopaul, 2012:63). This may be due to the fact that the doctoral programmes offered are a combination of coursework and a research component.

The motivations identified for individuals who aim to pursue doctoral studies range widely from "personal intellectual satisfaction through to pragmatic career-oriented reasons" (Guerin, Jayatilaka & Ranasinghe, 2015:90). Additionally, a connection between personality, self-efficacy and career choice has been noted (Rottinghaus, Lindley, Green & Borgen, 2002:2). Five factors identified as motivating candidates to enrol for higher degrees by research (HDR) are (i) family, friends, and colleagues; (ii) inherent motivation; (iii) influence by a lecturer; (iv) research experience; and (v) career advancement (Brailsford, 2010:22; Guerin et al., 2015:89). It has been established that young doctoral students enrol for the degree for vocational reasons (Leonard, Becker & Coate, 2005:137). Completion of a doctoral degree is a significant accomplishment that alters the graduates' personal and professional trajectories.

Unfortunately, not all doctoral candidates continue with their research to the point of graduation in a doctoral programme (Cochran, Campbell, Baker & Leeds, 2014:29). Forty percent of students in the USA failed to complete their doctoral programme (Golde, 2005:669). In 2008 the Council of Graduate Schools (CGS) 2008, reported the rate of doctoral student completion at 57%. Fifty percent of PhD students left graduate school without completing their studies (Liechty et al., 2009:481; Cassuto, 2013). In South Africa the National Research Foundation (NRF, 2007) reported that only 75% registered doctoral students completed their degrees. However, the 25% non-completion rate is similar to international trends, without consideration of quality differences (Bitzer, 2011:425).

The unsatisfactory success rates may be the result of various factors such as inexperienced or overburdened supervisors, inadequate preparation of candidates for research, inadequate admission requirements and procedures, insufficient financial support for students, and overall ineffective infrastructural support for postgraduate studies (Bitzer, 2011:425-426). The discontinuation of studies is attributed to attrition (drop-out) resulting from a combination of several issues, such as students' attitudes or underlying problems in a department, discipline or the university itself (Golde, 2005:670; Ali & Kohun, 2006:21; Gardner, 2009:98). In a study by Leijen, Lepp and Remmik (2015:1) it was found that 14 doctoral students who did not complete their studies associated their failure with personal circumstances, supervisory arrangements, and with aspects related to the institution and the broader learning environment.

Conversely, a study carried out among 215 professors revealed that candidates' difficulty with planning and writing, working independently, finances and personal relationship pressures were major obstacles to completing their studies (D'Andrea, 2002:42). Additionally, the faculty members in Gardner's (2009:108) study placed the responsibility for the early withdrawal from doctoral programmes on students' shortcomings. On the other hand, 16 doctoral programme leaders ascribed attrition to six factors: students' personal reasons; lack of ability, skills or motivation to successfully complete a doctorate; lack of financial support; poor supervision; inflexible policy; and faulty equipment (Herman, 2011:43). Some programme leaders also linked attrition to supervisors' overload, the quality of supervisors, and supervisory relationships (Herman, 2011:44). Moreover, there is a notion that adequate action is not taken to ensure that inexperienced supervisors such as recently qualified doctoral graduates and that those without doctorate, do not supervise doctoral candidates (Herman, 2011:44). Likewise, participants in a study by Leonard *et al.* (2005:144) shared that the supervisor "was supportive but overloaded and inexperienced".

Attrition rates vary between disciplines from 11% to 68% with lower rates in the natural sciences and higher rates in the humanities and social sciences (Gardner, 2009:97). In the USA, similar to doctoral programmes elsewhere, schools of social work struggle with the general problem of doctoral programme attrition of about 50% of persons who begin their doctoral study and drop out before completion of the degree (Liechty et al., 2009:481). Secondary analysis of two studies on doctoral education in South Africa shows a lack of understanding of the causes of attrition (Herman, 2011:40). Considering that a lack of understanding of doctoral attrition may exacerbate the problem, a suggestion

for further research on this phenomenon has been advanced (Herman, 2011:40). This is crucial in light of the following sentiment: “[t]he most important reason to be concerned about graduate student attrition is that it can ruin individuals’ lives” (Lovitts cited by Gardner, 2009:98).

Future prospects for doctoral graduates abound and can transform their career trajectories in positive ways ranging from joining academia, attaining managerial positions, or becoming policy-makers. A doctorate also provides the high-level manpower required for societal development in appropriate government positions, business and academia (Nwanzu, 2017:424).

## PROBLEM STATEMENT

In South Africa the increasing numbers and diversity of candidates enrolled social work doctorates have been encouraging over the past decade. However, this has not translated into a high success rate of completion of studies, since many candidates discontinued their participation in a programme citing an array of personal, academic and other impediments. Some reasons for the candidates’ non-completion of studies relate to their inability to deal with self-sabotaging behaviours, overcommitting, procrastinating and unnecessary perfectionism (Kearns, Gardiner & Marshall, 2008:77), and financial challenges. Candidates venture into unknown territory, which may evoke anxiety and intense fear to the detriment of progress in their studies. Additionally, feelings of guilt and worry may result from the amount of time candidates devote to their studies compared to the time they can allot to their families. Hence, candidates may drop out of the programme because of changes in their goals, jobs, and/or marital status. It also appears that the initial excitement diminishes after enrolment when candidates realise the rigorous demands of the programme.

Nonetheless, instead of seeking professional assistance to grapple with the expectations of the programme, some candidates either withdraw or sever ties with promoters or blame them for “making them sick” with what they deem unrealistic expectations. Juggling and balancing family and work responsibilities may be unmanageable to some candidates. This may challenge “their ability to maintain a positive sense of well-being” (Haynes et al., 2012:2). Moreover, lack of insight into work/family and study demands may result in some candidates accusing supervisors and institutions of “unrealistic demands” for their inability to cope. Some doctoral candidates are likely to face significant mental health challenges. A study conducted in Belgium shows that 32% of PhD students were at risk of having or developing depression (Levecque & Gisle, 2017:868). Furthermore, one in three students is at risk of developing a psychiatric disorder resulting from psychological distress.

The ramifications of non-completion of studies can lead to individual stress, feelings of failure, guilt, and a loss of valuable time and resources invested in the candidate (Herman, 2011:40; Van de Schoot, Yerkes, Mouw & Sonneveld, 2013:1). While candidates’ frustration may result in emotional issues and financial loss, supervisors experience loss of time and effort taken guiding students to become future researchers, which also impacts on their research own productivity (Golde, 2005:670; Liechty et al., 2009:482). In South Africa academic departments lose substantial government subsidies as a result of candidates’ non-completion of their studies. The literature shows that personal support systems may serve as a barrier to stress and that friendship, religion or personal spirituality provide equanimity (Spaulding & Rockinson-Szapkiw, 2012:201).

This paper is a sequel to a published article entitled: “Sharing of findings and recommendations remains a fallacy: reinvigoration of the dissemination and implementation of social work doctoral research findings” (Makofane, 2018). The current paper is premised on the assumption that since little is known about what motivates candidates to enrol for doctoral studies including social work (Leonard et al., 2005:135; Anastas & Kuerbis, 2009:71), suggestions should be provided on aspects that aspirants need to take into account during preparation for their learning journey. Candidates’ discontinuation of their studies is disappointing for various reasons, including lack of psychological, emotional and personal preparation. As a result, it is anticipated that suggestions shared by doctoral graduates will

prompt, inspire, sensitise and have a positive impact on aspiring candidates as they prepare for doctoral studies and avoid blindly “taking a leap into the dark.”

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

A qualitative, exploratory, descriptive enquiry was undertaken within the South African context. Purposive and snowball sampling were used to recruit potential participants who graduated between 2004 and 2014 via online and peer referrals across South Africa. After ethics approval was granted by the University of South Africa (Unisa) to conduct the study, invitations were sent out to South African social work doctoral graduates who had completed their studies at different universities during the stipulated period. The letter described the purpose of the study, and graduates who were willing to take part in the inquiry were requested to complete the consent form and provide written responses to open-ended questions. In a few instances, participants were requested to provide clarification of their responses.

The primary research question that guided the study was: *What do you suggest social work doctoral aspirants need to know before enrolment?* The question is premised on the fact that people learn from the lived experiences of others. The major aim of the study was to provide suggestions from social work doctoral graduates on what aspirants need to know before enrolment. Written responses received from 31 doctoral graduates from different universities (refer to Table 1) were thematically and independently analysed by the researcher and an independent coder to give credibility to the study.

## FINDINGS

Since social work is a female-dominated profession, of the 31 doctoral graduates, 21 were women (10 Africans, 1 Coloured, and 11 Whites) and 9 men (7 Africans and 2 Whites). The ages of the participants ranged from 26 to 60 years. Five participants were employed by the government, 3 in private practice, and 23 in academia. The mean age of the graduates in 2017 was 51.29 and the mean age at completion of their doctoral studies was 44 years. This attests to the fact that most women are able to enrol and pursue doctoral studies successfully when their children were either at tertiary institutions or employed. Notably, the participants in Gardner and Gopaul’s (2012:73) study indicated that few people understood the burden which ensued when attempting to strike a balance between their many roles successfully.

**TABLE 1<sup>2</sup>**  
**DEMOGRAPHIC DETAILS OF DOCTORAL GRADUATES**

							Current position	Number of years in current position
Doctoral graduate	Race <sup>3</sup>	Gender	Age	University <sup>4</sup> degree obtained	Year degree obtained	Age at graduation		
1	A	F	30	UFH	2014	27	Lecturer	8 months
2	A	M	31	Wits	2013	29	Senior Lecturer	4 years
3	W	M	37	NWU	2006	26	Senior Lecturer	5 years
4	A	F	38	Wits	2014	35	Senior Lecturer	2 years
5	A	M	39	NWU	2009	31	Manager Research	6 years
6	C	F	41	Unisa	2014	38	Senior Manager EAP	1 year
7	A	M	42	NWU	2009	34	Associate Professor	2 years
8	A	F	46	UP	2012	41	Director	10 years
9	A	F	47	Unisa	2010	40	Director	5 years
10	A	M	48	UCT	2012	43	Senior Lecturer	3 years 6 months
11	W	M	49	RAU (UJ)	2004	36	Professor	1 year
12	W	F	50	Unisa	2010	43	Institutional Researcher	6 years
13	W	A	50	UL	2005	38	Manager	15 years
14	A	M	52	UKZN	2004	39	Professor	5 years
15	W	F	53	Unisa	2014	50	Associate Professor	1 year 6 months
16	A	F	53	UP	2004	40	Senior Lecturer	7 years
17	A	M	54	UP	2004	41	Professor, School Director	5 months (Prof.) 6 years (Dir.)
18	A	F	54	UL	2012	49	Assistant Manager	11 years
29	W	F	54	SUN	2010	50	Lecturer	4 years
20	W	F	54	NWU	2014	51	Programme Leader, Acting School Director	3 years (PL) 5 months (ASD)
21	A	M	55	NWU	2007	45	Professor	18 months
22	W	F	58	UP	2014	55	Senior Social Worker	20 years
23	W	F	58	UP	2008	49	Senior Lecturer	8 years
24	W	F	59	Unisa	2010	52	Social Worker Private Practice	12 years
25	A	F	59	NWU	2009	51	Executive Dean	2 years 6 months
26	W	F	60	UWC	2004	47	Senior Lecturer, COD	1 year 6 months
27	A	F	61	UP	2013	57	Senior Lecturer	4 years
28	A	F	61	NWU	2010	54	Associate Professor	2 years
29	W	F	63	UWC	2014	60	Lecturer	33 years
30	W	F	66	NWU	2008	57	Social Worker Private Practice	9 years
31	W	F	68	Unisa	2010	61	Social Worker Private Practice	3 years 8 months

2 Tables 1 and 2 were reprinted with permission from the Editor of the *Journal of Social Work/Maatskaplike Werk*.

3 Race: A – African, C – Coloured, W – White.

4 University: UFH – University of Fort Hare, Wits – University of the Witwatersrand, NWU – North West University, UP – University of Pretoria, UCT – University of Cape Town, UJ – University of Johannesburg.

**TABLE 2**  
**GRADUATES' AGE, GENDER AND RACE AT COMPLETION OF THE DEGREE**

Age group	Female	Males	Total
50 – 61 years	3 (A), 8 (W)		11
40 – 49 years	4 (A), 3 (W)	3 (A)	10
31 – 39 years	2 (A), 1 (C)	3 (A), 1 (W)	7
26 – 29 years	1 (A)	1 (A), 1 (W)	3
<b>Total</b>	<b>22</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>31</b>

A – African, C – Coloured, W – White

Even though women are applauded for their determination to obtain a doctorate at an advanced age, such an achievement may not necessarily facilitate promotion to a higher position, which they may already occupy. For instance, 6 graduates (3 in public service, 2 in the private sector, and 1 in academia) remained in their positions after completion of doctoral studies. Similarly, a participant in a study by Leonard et al. (2005:137) indicated that although the degree “was worthwhile personally, it had not been worthwhile professionally.”

The outcomes of the enquiry suggest that the aspirants’ success is depended upon their performance of certain actions in preparation for their doctoral studies. Doctoral graduates made suggestions – presented below – based on their lived experiences; however, these are by no means exhaustive. They are meant to offer aspirants an idea of what doctoral graduates regard as paramount when preparing to enrol for a doctoral degree.

**TABLE 3**  
**SUGGESTIONS OFFERED BY DOCTORAL GRADUATES**

Number	Suggestions
1	Choose a relevant topic that has support of policy-makers and the community
1.1	Choose a topic in your area of interest
2	Delimit your study
3	Be equipped with sound research knowledge
4	Have a knowledgeable and supportive promoter
5	Appropriate dissemination of results
6	Personal considerations and advice
6.1	Be prepared for hard work and sacrifice
6.2	Beware of negative influences

### **SUGGESTION 1: CHOOSE A RELEVANT TOPIC THAT HAS THE SUPPORT OF POLICY-MAKERS AND THE COMMUNITY**

Selection of a researchable topic will more likely be challenging for aspirants. This exercise should be undertaken in consultation with relevant role players for their buy-in and support. Clarification of research topics is necessary since a general interest in research without a specific topic may result in the eventual discontinuation of studies (Leijen et al., 2015:7). There is limited literature on postgraduate candidates’ conception of research (Pitcher, 2011:972). The review of relevant literature on topics of interest is crucial to stimulate their confidence in formulating provisional research topics required for enrolment at a university. A lack of focus in the selection of a topic may contribute towards the non-completion of doctoral studies (Barnett, Cropley, Hanton & Fleming, 2013:130).

When selecting a topic, aspirants should pay particular attention to practical aspects such as beneficiaries of the research, contribution to knowledge, practice and possible implementation of the findings.

*It is critical to focus on studies that benefit the communities, policy-makers, and professionals in terms of policy development, theory, and practice.*

*They need to choose a topic that will be helpful in the area where they are working and thus it will be implemented with ease.*

*They need to focus on two aspects, namely a contribution to the body of knowledge and a clear description of how this knowledge should be used in practice.*

Participants in a study conducted by Spaulding and Rockinson-Szapkiw (2012:211) explored factors that doctoral candidates attributed to their success; these included among others, persistence and a strong foundation in their areas of study. Selecting a topic that falls outside a candidate's line of work may pose a challenge as pointed out by a former doctoral candidate in education who discontinued her studies: "... where your doctoral research topic is not connected to your everyday work at all, then it's really difficult to combine these things" (Leijen et al., 2015:12). On the other hand, students studying part-time found it easier when their doctoral topics were related to their occupation (Herman, 2011:46).

Furthermore, it is advisable to establish relationships and partnerships with relevant individuals and organisations to assist in clarifying the topic, and the implementation of practice recommendations after completion of the project.

*Partner with local authorities on a topic of relevance for them and so ensure a greater chance of implementation*

*...work with the respondents and/or relevant people such as NGOs or government to be able to implement the findings*

*Doctoral candidates should embark on research which is according to their practice areas such that they can be able to implement their recommendations by putting them into practice and become experts in those fields.*

Acquisition of expert knowledge and skills in specific fields of study related to the researchers' work should be the target for doctoral research. Partnership between a researcher at doctoral level and an organisation is a win-win situation. Some studies are commissioned by organisations, in which case access to target populations would be easy. Another advantage is that such organisations provide a budget for the implementation of the recommendations to improve the wellbeing of service users. Furthermore, such an opportunity will assist in addressing "a wide gap between the two worlds of educational research and practice" (Penuel, Allen, Coburn & Farrell, 2015:182).

### **Suggestion 1.1: Choose a topic in your area of interest**

Aspirants' knowledge of their areas of interest is important in inspiring confidence in the identification of existing gaps in knowledge and practice that need to be addressed through empirical research.

*They need to read extensively in the field that they want to undertake their study.*

A few participants indicated that candidates should pursue their passion regardless of possible impediments.

*Fight for your passion, fight for the research outcomes, and promote all of them.*

*Do it for your own development, because in government it will mostly not lead to a promotion or a better position. Be sure of your rationale when you embark on your studies.*

*Follow your voice; stand in your own authority. Your promoter is the guide on the side to direct you to the best methodologies to tell your story with credibility and accountability. If you do not have a heart for the core of your study, don't do it!*

The candidates' quest to obtain a doctorate in social work must be clearly articulated. A disposition for positive change, growth and development should be the driving force that propels them towards embarking on a learning journey. The focus of the study must be clear, suitable and justified for a learning exercise (Trafford & Leshem, 2008:14; Luse, Mennecke & Townsend, 2012:144; Punch,

2016:14) to such an extent that it would be difficult for anyone to discourage them from achieving their goals. Even though candidates are within their rights to protect their interests based on sound reasoning, they also need to be amenable to the promoters' suggestions to align the topic and focus the study, and to adhere to the requirements of a doctoral research project. Therefore, a sound supervisory relationship is important to facilitate discussions that would encourage students to question and analyse their work (Lee, 2008:267). Schulze (2012:7) postulates that "[s]upervisors have to actively engage in their relationships with their students in order to help them to find their own voice".

## **SUGGESTION 2: DELIMITATION OF THE STUDY**

Doctoral candidates should delineate a study topic to manageable proportions, with a realistic expectation of the end result. Aspirants should be mindful that a PhD is not a Nobel Prize (Mullins & Kiley, 2002), but a means to facilitate candidates' development into critical thinkers and scholars.

*There is a tendency to want to solve all the country's problems.*

*Universities (also read promoter) should not have unrealistic ideas regarding the research and expect things from students that are not possible in practice.*

Information published by the Council of Graduate Schools (2008) on attrition at doctoral level points to the fact that unrealistic expectations may be an indicator of underlying problems likely to increase the discontinuation rate. Therefore, promoters and academic departments need to ensure that candidates are familiar with the required standards for a research thesis.

## **SUGGESTION 3: BE EQUIPPED WITH SOUND RESEARCH KNOWLEDGE**

Reading and mastering research theory should be a priority for aspirants to a doctoral degree. Postponement of this until after enrolment may lead to frustration, since the majority of candidates are in full-time employment and fulfil other multiple roles.

*Be equipped with advanced qualitative and quantitative data analysis skills before embarking on the process.*

Prior advanced knowledge of the research methodology will be an advantage for prospective candidates considering that the journey to completing the degree is intellectually demanding (Trafford & Leshem, 2009:305).

*Conduct a study which uses intervention research as part of the methodology, as it's easier to implement post-PhD.*

The myriad challenges facing individuals, families, groups and communities call for relevant and appropriate intervention strategies that may be developed through intervention research. This is a requirement for candidates registered for professional doctoral degrees such as a DSW that focuses on practice.

## **SUGGESTION 4: HAVE A KNOWLEDGEABLE AND SUPPORTIVE PROMOTER**

Sufficient appropriate information on the profiles of potential seasoned supervisors together with theses they have supervised is accessible online from university repositories. Aspirants have the right to search for supervisors with proven academic records of excellence in their fields of interest. When searching for a suitable promoter, they should consider, among other things, the academics' accomplishments in their fields of interest, promotion of doctoral candidates, publications, gender and cultural background. However, in instances where academic staff have the prerogative to match promoters with prospective candidates, aspirants may or may not be able to exercise their right to choose. Similarly, supervisors also have the right to recruit doctoral candidates and where possible assist them in accessing bursaries. It is always intriguing in reading the acknowledgements of theses to note how supervisors are lauded for their contributions.

*Be sure your promoter has an excellent knowledge of the topic. Lecturers are sometimes removed from the practical world where the student is operating.*

*To find the right study leader and to make sure you have enough time to complete your studies; also to make time to work every day on your studies.*

The findings are consistent with the advice by research students in Leonard et al. (2005:144): “Get a good/the right supervisor and choose an area in which you are really interested.” This is important as the supervisory relationship is explained as “an arena for mediating disciplinary traditions, practices, cultures, and norms” (Pyhälö, Vekkaila & Keskinen, 2012:395). Promoters are expected to build students’ capacity as scholars, foster their aspirations, and work towards retention of candidates and success in their studies (Baker & Griffin, 2010:2). Furthermore, they are expected to be student-centred and responsive to students’ needs and concerns. As a result, unwavering encouragement to persevere as well as support by promoters are important to render the candidates’ learning journey instructive, rewarding and productive. Successful accomplishment of the study rests upon the candidate’s consistent commitment to the research project.

On the other hand, if not properly managed, if the ideas of promoters and candidates on the conception of the research diverge, this is likely to create problems in their relationships and completion of projects (Makofane, 2018:150; Pitcher, 2011:971). In a study by Leijen et al. (2015:10), a participant mentioned conflict with the supervisor as the only reason for dropping out of the programme.

Candidates should be financially equipped to pay for tuition and not become solely dependent on bursaries, given the unpredictable government funding to universities.

*Facilitate access to bursary. More bursaries should be made available to encourage and enable students to do doctoral degrees.*

Currently, almost all South African universities offer bursaries based on merit. The promoter’s recommendation is important. Other funding may also be accessed through the National Research Foundation<sup>5</sup> (NRF). Candidates should be encouraged to perform optimally and strive to access bursaries to avoid being faced with an onerous financial burden.

## **SUGGESTION 5: APPROPRIATE DISSEMINATION OF RESULTS**

Supervisors should encourage candidates to disseminate research results to relevant target groups and to implement recommendations to improve practice. Ideally, the contract between the promoter and candidate should extend beyond completion of the degree to accommodate prospects of joint publication and future collaboration on research initiatives. Acquisition of a doctorate is not an end in itself, but an opportunity to share the outcomes of the study worldwide.

*Supervisors should ensure that recommendations made are put to fruition and it should not just be the student’s own initiatives ... On completion of the degree, the promoter can set up an implementation plan with the student. If possible, the promoter can be consulted as a mentor.*

After completion of the study the promoters may assume the mentorship role which involves a long-term emotional commitment that goes beyond sharing academic information to caring about a graduate’s personal and professional development (Baker & Griffin, 2010:4). A mentor creates an environment for newly qualified doctors to learn about publishing, as such a relationship “allows junior

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<sup>5</sup> “National Research Foundation (NRF) seeks to promote and support research through human capacity development. The Thuthuka funding instrument aims to develop human capital and to improve the research capacities of researchers from designated groups (black [African, Indian and Coloured], female or disabled) with the ultimate aim of redressing historical imbalances” (NRF, 2019:5).

members of a group an opportunity to receive guidance, advice, and opportunities for personal and professional development" (Simon & Eby, 2003:1084).

The research projects should culminate in a worldwide dissemination of results through, for instance, professional journal articles, books, conferences, workshops, and colloquia. The outcomes of the study should be made known to colleagues and other interested parties who may find them insightful and valuable in social work education and service delivery. Promoters should play a pivotal role in preparing candidates for this critical step in doctoral research.

*Develop a dissemination plan in which you identify potential users of your research and a series of actions to target these users and maximise the chances of your research being taken up into practice.*

*I would strongly encourage them to publish their findings in both local and international peer-reviewed journals and books despite challenges that they may experience regarding work pressure or lack of funding as it was the situation in my case. Findings should be disseminated in conferences and through publications.*

*To ensure that findings of their studies are widely distributed especially in conferences and get published in professional journals to ensure that their recommendations reach the intended audience who will subsequently implement such recommendations.*

*To do their doctorates with publishing in their minds as part of an end result of the degree. To make sure that this is discussed with the promoter/supervisor throughout their studies. To make sure they publish from their dissertation immediately after their degree is awarded.*

*Ensure portions of the thesis are published to make the contribution of the study visible.*

Detailed information on the publication and implementation of the research findings derived from theses (2004–2014) feature prominently in the first paper (Makofane, 2018).

## **SUGGESTION 6: PERSONAL CONSIDERATIONS AND ADVICE**

Preparation for enrolment in doctoral studies should occur based on the emotional and practical levels of the candidates. A revealing account by a doctoral graduate on motivating and inhibiting factors that she considered as an employed working mother and wife prior to enrolling for doctoral studies is offered in an article "Taking the plunge: reflections on the decision to register for a doctorate" by Barnett et al. (2013). Furthermore, recommendations are made for aspirant doctoral candidates to take into account before deciding to embark upon doctoral studies.

### **Suggestion 6.1: Be prepared for hard work and sacrifice**

Psychological and emotional preparation for doctoral studies is imperative and involves a great deal of reading, reflecting and writing, while less time is devoted to spending time with significant others or friends and engaging in social events. It should be noted that some doctoral programme leaders are of the opinion that South African students, particularly Africans (black), lack the foundational skills required to pursue a doctorate as they struggle with language and academic writing (Herman, 2011:44).

A faculty with a high PhD success rate that took part in focus groups affirmed that doctoral candidates should have the patience and willingness to work hard, show initiative, persistence and intellectual curiosity (Lovitts, 2008:309). Some candidates found it difficult to balance work, study and family (Herman, 2011:46), while others "felt least satisfied with their ability to juggle work and family with their overall workload" (Wasburn-Moses, 2008:265). Clearly, balancing and managing work, family, studies and other responsibilities may be challenging to those who are not adequately prepared and may not have the support and cooperation of family members. Tension that may arise between candidates and their family members will have an adverse effect on their progress; hence the majority of women in the current study graduated when they were older than 50 years.

The time with family members and friends will need to be renegotiated and often sacrificed as candidates consider opting out of important events (e.g. children's sports activities, vacations, social gatherings) in order to conduct research and write a thesis (Spaulding & Rockinson-Szapkiw, 2012:213). Furthermore, they should be prepared for sleep deprivation, reduce their job responsibilities, and limit hobbies and leisure activities (e.g. personal reading, watching movies, or attending sports events).

Of the 14 interviewees in the study by Leijen et al. (2015:12), only one had the opportunity to work continuously on the research project, while the others experienced short-term interruptions during their studies owing to their everyday work, family life and personal events.

*Think very carefully before enrolling, because if you are not in a position to obtain study leave or you are working as well as studying, doing a doctoral is extremely taxing – financially as well as emotionally.*

*...need time to commit to their studies.*

These responses are consistent with those from previous studies in which the success of participants was attributed to the candidates' continuous and systematic work on their theses without taking lengthy breaks (Spaulding & Rockinson-Szapkiw, 2012:211). It is important for the candidates' financial needs to be met while studying (Wao & Onwuegbuzie, 2011:117) to enable them to focus. Some researchers also reached the conclusion that doctoral students who were not in a position to reduce their employment workload were unable to find sufficient time to commit to their studies; an alternative to consider would be that students join a funded research project to earn a living (Leijen et al., 2015:14). A student's success requires certain qualities and support from a promoter.

*Hard work, motivation, high energy levels, and a good relationship with your promoter during the period.*

Personal motivations relate to the achievement of personal goals, enjoying a challenge and desiring the title (Spaulding & Rockinson-Szapkiw, 2012:201). The relationship between candidate and promoter is paramount in assuring success of the project. There is a plethora of literature on how the promoter-candidate relationship should be established and maintained – most importantly the quality of the relationship (Li, & Seale, 2007; Lee, 2008). A valuable model for the supervisor-doctoral student relationship is also available for consideration (Mainhard, Van der Rijst, Van Tartwijk & Wubbels, 2009).

The successful completion of a doctorate should be viewed as a step towards the advancement of transformation.

*Graduation should not be the end all. This should be a new beginning to make a difference in a new way.*

The finding suggests that successful change in people's circumstances through research outcomes should be the ultimate fulfilment for a researcher. By implication, after completion of doctoral studies, researchers should undertake research on a continuous basis, starting with postdoctoral research to hone their skills and become more knowledgeable in their field of study. They may also get involved in research-practice partnerships (Penuel et al., 2015) to contribute towards the creation of new knowledge (Kim, 2004:81) and the development of intervention strategies.

### **Suggestion 6.2: Beware of negative influences**

After enrolment for doctoral studies, candidates are cautioned to guard against and to refrain from associating with those who may seek to discourage them from pursuing their studies. Participants provided pertinent suggestions regarding what candidates should do to avoid being discouraged or derailed from their studies. It is thus imperative for one to associate with those who are on a similar

journey or have successfully completed their degrees. Candidates need to associate with successful people who display positive energy and encouragement.

*They must surround themselves with motivated people.*

*They must not discuss their studies with colleagues who do not want to study further as they will discourage them.*

*They must refrain from discussing with jealous people as they will make your study a den of hell.*

Candidates should be aware of professional jealousy which may emanate from, for instance, those in managerial positions who are likely to serve as gatekeepers to potential research participants. In situations where line managers impede students' progress by refusing to grant them study leave or support their applications for financial assistance, particularly from their organisations, students must be willing to challenge such unfair treatment through proper channels.

## DISCUSSION

This inquiry accomplished its goal of soliciting suggestions from doctoral graduates to share with aspiring doctoral candidates. It is hoped that the suggestions will dispel the aspirants' fear and afford them an opportunity to make informed decisions. The suggestions confirm that a doctoral learning journey is a rigorous, intellectually demanding process that requires determined candidates who are in pursuit of making a distinct and valuable contribution to knowledge-building and practice. Aspirants need to gain insight into the scholarly nature of doctorateness. Therefore, they need to give serious thought to the time, energy, financial, emotional and hard work required for doctoral research project.

Extensive reading on the philosophical underpinnings of social research will help demystify and allay fears relating to research. Acquired knowledge and insight will also assist aspirants to gain confidence in their readiness to embark on an empirical investigation. Attendance of postgraduate research workshops and seminars is recommended to enhance aspirants' knowledge of research methodology and to sustain their enthusiasm.

Aspirants' awareness and knowledge of trends in their areas of interest and the theoretical frameworks used to understand the phenomenon are important. Additionally, they need to become acquainted first with SAQA and the university requirements; second, they need to understand factors contributing to successful completion of doctoral studies or failure to do so, and possible delays; and third, they should embark on deliberate, purposeful, and systematic planning in all spheres of their lives and leave nothing to chance. It is advisable that aspirants record and reflect on their preparation by following the example proffered by Barnett et al. (2013). Nevertheless, preparation for the learning journey is not a guarantee for the successful completion of a doctorate; neither is it a solution to avoid discontinuation of studies. It will assist prospective candidates to broaden their understanding of possible impediments or challenges that lie ahead.

Psychological, financial and personal preparation are important before enrolling for a doctorate to counter the perception that doctoral studies are cumbersome, overwhelming and daunting. It has been established that candidates who acquire substantive, practical knowledge are particularly successful (Lovitts, 2008:307). Therefore, doctoral candidates should invest time in consultation with doctoral graduates to learn from their experiences. They should adopt a positive outlook on their prospective studies so that, despite challenges that might lie ahead, the experience would still be exciting, worthwhile, enriching, fulfilling and empowering.

Doctoral students should enjoy "the journey of knowledge discovery" (Ibrahim, 2011:130); hence, the learning journey should not be a lonely endeavour; neither should aspirants isolate themselves from others and their usual surroundings. For instance, they may garner support from mentors or establish a support group with other candidates. Such links will assist them to remain encouraged, motivated and grounded. In universities where there are peer mentoring programmes, students are matched with

individuals who have had similar experiences to assist them in understanding and successfully navigating their own experience (Gardner, 2008:135). Nevertheless, the learning journey will be characterised by mixed feelings of excitement and frustration experienced at different times depending on the progress made or lack thereof. It is assumed that thorough preparation may reduce the incidence of discontinuation and increase successful completion of doctoral studies.

Brailsford (2010:15) advanced a recommendation derived from research with 11 History PhD holders from an Australasian university that universities should “consider offering workshops for would-be candidates before enrolment so that initial motives for doctoral study can be explored and reflected upon before a candidate embarks.” Such an initiative might not only assist aspirants to gain insight into expectations for a doctorate but also provide them with an opportunity to discover that their desires may not necessarily be met through obtaining a doctorate. After enrolment, it will be worthwhile for candidates to utilise effective planning, time management, including taking advantage of available resources for stress management.

## RECOMMENDATION AND SUGGESTED FUTURE RESEARCH

In addition to a written draft proposal accompanying the application for a doctoral degree, it is recommended that a panel of promoters should interview aspirants to assess their familiarity with their area of study, research competence, motivation and level of readiness for the learning journey.

The following future studies are suggested: first, an investigation should be carried out to determine doctoral candidates’ motivation to enrol for doctoral studies and the level of their preparedness for the task ahead; second, an enquiry into attrition should be made by departments of social work at various universities in order to develop viable strategies to improve the success rate; third, investigate admission practices to determine the criteria that are most likely to assist the department to select aspirants who have the potential to complete their studies; fourth, explore and describe factors contributing towards doctoral success.

## CONCLUSION

Despite the inevitable challenges that will occur along the way, candidates should be committed and encouraged to continue their research and complete their studies. Unless appropriate measures are taken to encourage and support aspirants to take the preparation for the doctoral learning journey seriously, the drop-out rate at doctoral level will continue. Aspirants should be encouraged to appreciate challenges as milestones towards growth and development, while mistakes should be embraced as learning opportunities, bearing in mind that success is the ultimate goal.

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