**The Academic Transitional Experiences of Postgraduate Students
in the Faculty of Community and Health Sciences at the University of the
Western Cape**

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2138228

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Presentations of findings

The Academic Transitional Experiences of Postgraduate Students in the Faculty of Community and Health Sciences at the University of the Western Cape

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Keywords:

Primary motivations

Academic preparedness

Support services

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Transition

Academic Transition

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The Academic Transitional Experiences of Postgraduate Students

Abstract

Transition has been the major focus of educational institutions. The focal argument of the majority of research into student transition deals with the challenges that students faced when they moved from high school to first year at university. Not much focus has been placed on the transition from undergraduate to postgraduate studies. Postgraduate enrollment rates have steadily grown over the past few years in Higher Education Institution`s (HEI). Support systems have been put in place to assist students. In spite of these available support systems, postgraduate students still find themselves facing challenges when engaging with postgraduate studies. The primary aim of this study was to investigate the academic transitional challenges postgraduate students' experience as reflected by the inconsistencies in the enrollment and throughput rates. Secondly, to determine whether students utilised available support systems, e.g. the Academic Writing Centre and the Postgraduate Enrolment and Throughput (PET) programme at the Faculty of Community and Health Science at University of the Western Cape. This was a quantitative study. A cross sectional survey has been conducted by means of a computerised self-administered questionnaire (CSAQ). The study population was postgraduate students in the Faculty of Community and Health Science at masters' level. Both course work and research students were included in the study. No sampling method was employed due to the small size of the population. Data was collected to explore the academic preparedness of postgraduate students, and there primary motivations for studying and the utilization of available support services at the University of the Western Cape. Data analysis was done using SPSS. Descriptive statistics were utilised to present data in tabular and

graphical format. Proportions were used for categorical data while means and standard deviations were used for continuous variables. The main findings of the study were that postgraduate students' population of the FCHS is relatively young in age. Postgraduate students are not very experienced when enroling for postgraduate studies and that postgraduates are intrinsically motivated when they enroll for postgraduate studies.

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Declaration

I declare that, *The Academic Transitional Experiences of Postgraduate Students in the Faculty of Community and Health Sciences at the University of the Western Cape* is my own work, that it has not been submitted before for any degree or examination at any other university and that all sources I have used or quoted have been indicated and acknowledged as complete references.

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Jeffrey Cornè Hoffman

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Chapter 1

1.1 Introduction

The South African Government expressed concern about postgraduate enrolment and graduate output because despite increased enrolment rates in higher education institutions, the average graduation rate remained at 15% between 1993 and 1998 (White Paper 3, Department of Education: July 1997).

In 2002, the National Plan for Higher Education 2001 (NPHESA) was released to address the tensions between the developmental needs of society and the economy, as well as the transition and higher learning needs of South African citizens. The plan was meant to give practical effect to the vision of the transformation of Higher Education by supporting institutional and organisational restructuring. Concerns expressed by the Ministry of Education were that the average graduation rate remained at 15% between 1993 and 1998 and that the total growth in higher education has not kept pace with the enrolment growth in higher education (White Paper 3, Department of Education: July 1997).

NPHESA (2001: 66) stipulated that there should be an increase in postgraduate enrolment and graduate output rates. It can therefore be postulated that increased postgraduate student numbers could mean that more students will struggle with the challenges and constraints associated with academic transition.

(Mc Innes, James & Hartley, 2000) define academic transition as the process of moving from one set of circumstances into the academia. It relates to the range of issues that students face during the various initial stages of their academic career, according to Mc Innes et al 2000

In essence, transition is a very broad concept and due to the nature of this study, the researcher will only concentrate on academic transition. This study will specifically explore the following aspects of academic transition, namely academic preparedness, motivation and utilization of support services at UWC.

1.2 Background

UWC has an established reputation for aligning its admission policy closely with Recognition of Prior Learning (UWC prospectus, 2008). This strategy is employed to widen access to higher education. Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) is defined as Higher Education Institutions (HEI) allowing students access into postgraduate programmes based on age exemptions and previous work experience, instead of by just applying pure academic criteria.

Although UWC has already aligned its strategic research plan with the national imperative by proposing an increased postgraduate enrolment from 9% to 20%, (UWC, 1998), two senior academics at UWC postulate that both situational and institutional barriers form a major constraint to academic transition (Walters & Koetsier, 2006):

> "We lack insight at system level regarding investigations into the
>
> push/pull factors for adult learners entering higher education, their

primary motivations for doing so, the barriers they experience institutionally, and their success and completion rates at South African higher education institutions."

This is evidence that postgraduate students at UWC experience difficulties in adjusting to the learning environment as reflected by inconsistencies in the enrolment and throughput rates (Walters & Koetsier, 2006). The latter serves as evidence that students experience difficulties in completing their postgraduate studies because of academic transitional issues. These may include concerns about writing (assignments, the research proposal and dissertation), organisation (such as using the library, computers and assistance with statistics, the availability of resources and time management), the supervisory relationship, and other general academic and non-academic aspects of doing the degree (Walters & Koetsier, 2006) (Symons, 2006) .
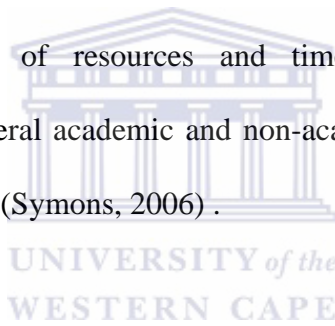
A doctoral study was done previously on academic transition with the focus on ethnic minority students, while this study will include all nationalities (LaBoone, 2006).

The researcher is of the opinion that RPL could be a contributing factor to the challenges students faced during academic transition into postgraduate programmes. Most of the RPL admissions have extensive work experience but lack the necessary academic activities for the enrolled programmes. This is corroborated by different authors that previous tertiary experiences influence attrition rates, as well the throughput rates (Darlaston-Jones, Cohen, Haunold & Drew 2003). Previous tertiary experiences may include participation in research activities, research publications and modules completed

on research methods, to mention a few. The latter is especially relevant for this study because all masters students at UWC are expected to complete a research project as an academic requirement for postgraduate qualifications.

1.3 Research problem statement

Research done with postgraduate students at South African universities clearly shows that enrolments are steadily increasing, yet the graduation rates does not correlate with the increase in enrolment. It is thus evident that students struggle to complete postgraduate studies in the minimum amount of time (Education, 2007).

This further supports the assumption of the researcher that postgraduate students are experiencing difficulties in adjusting to the academic environment and academic roles. This adjustment phase is also termed transition by Earwaker (1992), who defines transition as strategies people use in coping with change as they go through life. It can therefore be concluded that transition is a normal process. The author states that the most common metaphors for transition are adjustment, learning, getting used to it and finding ways to cope. (Earwaker, 1992: 50).

Brown and Holloway concur with Furnham (1993) that transition is best understood as a process of change regarding a student's advancement from undergraduate to postgraduate level. Initially, this process is especially stressful, with problems at its highest upon entry into academia and decreasing gradually as the student advance in the academic programmes (Brown & Holloway, 2008).

1.4 Research aim

The aim of the study states what is expected to be achieved by the study overall. According to Brink, Van Der Walt and Van Rensburg (2006), the aim should include the target population, research setting and the research variables.

The aim of this study is to investigate the academic transitional challenges *(variable)* postgraduate students *(target population)* experience in the Faculty of CHS at UWC *(setting)* and to determine whether students utilize the available support systems provided.

1.5 Research objectives

Objectives are defined as clear concise declarative statements that are expressed in present tense, which indicate the specific information the study must yield (Burns & Grove, 2003).

The objectives of this study are:

1.5.1 To determine the academic preparedness of the postgraduate students as evidenced by experience and previous participation in research activities, publications and papers delivered prior to postgraduate enrolment;

1.5.2 To determine if postgraduate students make use of the support services offered by UWC to facilitate smooth academic transition;

1.5.3   To determine the primary motivations of students enrolling for postgraduate studies in the faculty;

1.5.4 To compare the characteristics of postgraduate students with academic preparedness and primary motivations

1.6 Operational definition of concepts

Primary motivations:

Primary motivation consists of the reasons why postgraduate students enroll for postgraduate studies. Literature suggests mainly two types of motivations that are found within postgraduate studies: intrinsic motivation and extrinsic motivation. Intrinsic motivation refers to the benefit and value that accrues from doing something for the sake of doing it, while extrinsic motivation comprise of those tangible benefits that follow as a result of doing something (Mouton, 2001).

Academic preparedness:

In this study academic preparedness refers "to the academic readiness of a student to undertake postgraduate studies as evidenced by previous experiences in research, knowledge of research process and post registration qualifications". Justification for the abovementioned operational definition is embedded in literature which provides evidence that background characteristics of students, goal commitment and previous tertiary experiences influence throughput and attrition rates (Darlaston-Jones et al., 2003)

Support services:

Any service offered by the institution to assist students with academic issues. Services may include the following: research support, a well-equipped library, academic writing centre that assist students with writing skills, and well-equipped computer laboratories.

Postgraduate student:

Postgraduate students study toward degrees or other qualifications for which a first or Bachelor's degree is generally required, and is normally considered to be part of tertiary or higher education (***Oxford dictionary of english;*** 2006).

Transition

Transition is best understood as a process of change that is especially stressful at first, with problems being greatest upon arrival and decreasing as a function of various variables. These variables range from getting used to the current demands and adapting to the situation (Brown & Holloway, 2008).

Academic Transition

James and Hartley applied transition to the academia by defining academic transition as the process of moving from one set of circumstances into the academia (Laboone, 2006). It relates to the range of issues that students face during the various initial stages of their academic career (Haunold & Drew 2003).

1.7 Limitations of the study

Transition is a broad concept which entails personal, emotional, social and academic transition. However, the focus of this study is on the academic transition of postgraduates only. The researcher would have liked to include all postgraduate students at master`s level at UWC, as the institution consists of different faculties.

Due to time and resource constraints as well as the nature of this study (mini-thesis) only the FCHS was used. The small number of the study population will thus affect the generalisability of the study.

The most important limitation of this study is the low response rate of 15.7%, instead of the 20% required for a 95% confidence interval level as proposed by the statistician.
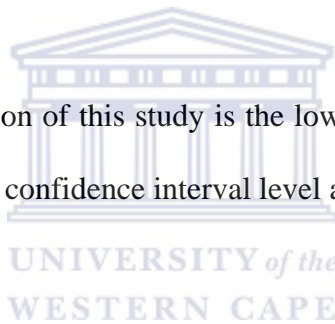
1.8 Outline of chapters

Chapter 1: Introduction to the topic and background information regarding postgraduate students and their studies.

Chapter 2: Literature is reviewed and the discussion unfolds as it is structured according to the objectives of the study to make it as coherent as possible so that the reader can follow the argument as it unfolds. The literature is structured as follows: The introduction leads to a discussion of the national educational imperatives, aspects related to academic transition is explored in detail, namely academic preparedness, primary motivations and

support services, and lastly the literature reviewed is concluded with a discussion on available support systems for postgraduates at UWC.

Chapter 3: The research design, setting, population used, the sampling method, the pilot study, the data collection tool, the data collection procedure and the ethical considerations are discussed.

Chapter 4: The actual sample and its characteristics are described. These are continued with a description and discussion of the main results. This chapter is concluded by summarizing the main results.

Chapter 5: In this chapter outstanding points are summarised and findings compared with the literature reviewed in Chapter 2. Limitations of the study were identified and discussed.
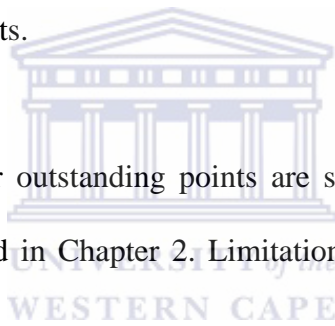
1.9 Conclusion

In this chapter the reader was introduced to the topic with the necessary background and introduction. A statement was made with regards to the problem and limitations were identified. The aims and objectives of the study were also clearly set out in a logical manner.

In the chapter to follow, literature will be reviewed. The literature review unfolds as follows: an Introduction, Current situation regarding postgraduate studies, Aspects

relating to transition, Student motivation and academic preparedness for higher education and Support for postgraduate students.

This is done in order for the reader to clearly understand the necessity to study the Academic Transitional Experience of Postgraduate Students (PGS) in the Faculty of Community and Health Science at the University of the Western Cape.

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Chapter 2

Literature review

2.1 Introduction

To fully explore the academic transition of postgraduate students it was necessary to examine two important factors. Firstly, literature pertaining to research on postgraduate transition identified the factors that may enhance or inhibit academic transition of postgraduate students. Secondly, literature that specifically focused on programmes on support programmes to assist postgraduate transition. The literature review is structured as follows: Aspects relating to postgraduate academic transition, student motivation and academic preparedness for higher education and supports for postgraduate student.

2.2 Current situation regarding postgraduate studies

In order to understand the more recent postgraduate enrolment some history of the higher education sector in South Africa and general growth trends is required. The South African higher education system enjoyed substantial growth between 1990 and 2005 (Education, 2007).

This could be evidence that HEI has been implementing the NPHESA 2001. Enrolments more than doubled (from 56 444 to 120 385) during 1990 and 2005. However, the

proportion of postgraduate students of the overall number of graduates declined rather significantly, from 31.3% to 26.9% over this period (Education, 2007).

Students enrolled for masters degrees have grown at an average annual rate of 4.4% between 2000 and 2005, this trend reversed, with significant declines since 2003. CHE states that in 2001 postgraduate students constituted exactly 50% of all total enrolments. This subsequently declined since 2003.

The figures for masters students graduating during 2000 and 2005 at higher education institutions show that there is a slight increase in the number of graduates (from 5 800 to 7 900) (Education, 2007).

However, the proportion of ongoing enrollments as a share of total enrolments has been increasing for both masters and doctoral students. CHE reveals that nearly two out of five of all enrolled masters students in the system in 2005 were historical enrolments. CHE further acknowledge that the proportion of graduating masters students as a proportion of total enrolments remained the same (one out of five).

During the period of 2000 and 2005, the age of students graduating with a master's degree was 34 years of age. CHE states that the overall master's student takes more or less three years to complete a master's degree (Education, 2007).

2.3 Aspects relating to postgraduate academic transition

The degree to which postgraduate students are able to adjust into the academia plays a significant role in their academic success. Firstly, to explore this experience that may determine postgraduate success, it is thus important to define academic transition. According to literature, transition is a very broad concept, therefore current definitions of transition are provided. These variables range from getting used to the current demands and adapting to the situation.

Different types of transitions are referred to in the literature (Brown & Holloway, 2008; Laboone, 2006; Poyrazli & Grahame, 2007). The researcher will discuss personal-emotional transition, social transition and academic transition.
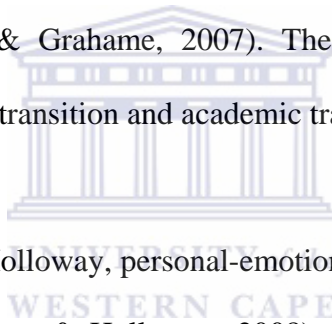
According to Brown and Holloway, personal-emotional transition refers to the emotional wellbeing of students (Brown & Holloway, 2008). Poyrazli and Graham describe this personal-emotional transition as a feeling of disorientation, depressive reactions, and feelings of isolation, alienation and powerlessness that students experience due to academic stress (Poyrazli & Grahame, 2007).

Social transition refers to the lack or malfunction of social support systems, which should always be available for the student. Poyrazli and Graham therefore recommend student mentoring programmes as a possible social support system as this would contribute towards better psychosocial adjustment and greater academic transition (Poyrazli & Grahame, 2007).

Academic transition for postgraduate students means that they often need to readapt to academia when returning for postgraduate studies after they have completed their undergraduate degree and qualifications. Academic transition is defined as the process of moving from one set of circumstances into the academia (Nash and Sacre, 2009).

Transition is imperative and an important part of postgraduate studies as most of these postgraduate students return to studies after a number of years after completing their undergraduate studies. Although transition is imperative, it can, however, present many challenges for postgraduate students.

Mc Innes, James and Hartley postulate that much research should focus on what these challenges are and how students can be supported through this transition (Nash & Sacre, 2009). These challenges/factors include the background characteristics, the disposition/motivation/goal commitment of students, and previous tertiary experiences because these factors influence throughput and attrition rates.

2.4 Student motivation and academic preparedness for higher education

Motivational factors may range from self-actualisation, improving social status to expansion of knowledge, according to the researcher. It is the opinion of the researcher that many of the students' academic transitional challenges are linked to their primary motivation for enroling.

Motivation is also closely linked to students' perseverance, goal commitment and utilisation of support services (extrinsic and intrinsic motivation). Byrne and Flood

conducted a quantitative investigation by means of a questionnaire with open- and closed-ended questions at the University of Dublin to determine that career and educational aspirations are the main reasons why postgraduates choose to return to university after undergraduate studies (Byrne & Flood, 2005). They further state that this is a mixture of extrinsic and intrinsic goal orientations that drive the majority of these students (Byrne & Flood, 2005).

Nichols and Miller reveal a link between motivation and academic preparedness. They state that students' preparation (academic preparedness) for further study, their prior learning experiences and their academic success affect their self-belief, which in turn influences their motivation and willingness to engage in learning (Nichols & Miller, 1994).
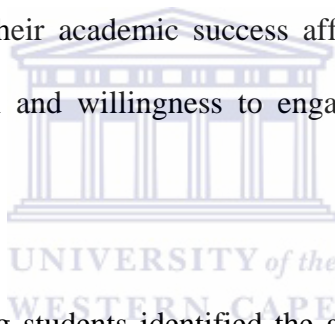
A pilot survey on incoming students identified the gap between prior expectations and experiences to be particularly wide regarding students' predictions of the level of academic difficulty they would experience and the difficulty that they do experience (Lowe & Cook, 2003). They further state that results from their survey indicate that students have been successful in making the initial transition into the academic aspects of their studies.

Ofori and Charlton used a correlational design using path modeling on a sample of 344, but only 315 respondents provided the data for the analysis. They declared after this

investigation that entry qualifications have a direct impact on academic performances (Ofori & Charlton, 2002).

Dawson states that there is one component of training experiences which postgraduates overwhelmingly felt was missing and includes preparing conference presentations, producing publications and socialising in an academic environment and self-reflection. (Dawson, 1994).

Sovic qualitatively interviewed 141 international students from six different geographical areas from various institutions within the University of London and list the following academic issues that challenge students: their experiences of language, adaptation to the English academic system, relationships to tutors, classroom participation, group work and assessment are all fore grounded in their responses of a qualitative investigation (Sovic, 2007).

The issue of academic preparedness is not only applicable to the South African context as a study conducted by Lowe and Cook states that two-thirds of the sample (n=129) predicted problems in coping with the academic demands of their course and around half of this number experience problems (Lowe & Cook, 2003). It is therefore assumed that a student with better entry qualifications and those who are also willing to seek academic support are likely to be highly motivated in the academia.

2.5 Support for postgraduate students

2.5.1 Induction programme

Symons states that institutions have a general belief that since the majority of postgraduate students would have already studied at a university or are in possession of an undergraduate or equivalent qualification, they do not need to be offered an orientation programme. This study used a combination of qualitative and quantitative research methods. A web survey was carried out with 65 responses, In depth interviews were conducted and two focus groups with academics (Symons, 2006).

Symons (2006) suggests that a proper orientation program for students entering postgraduate studies for the first time must be in place to minimise academic transitional challenges.
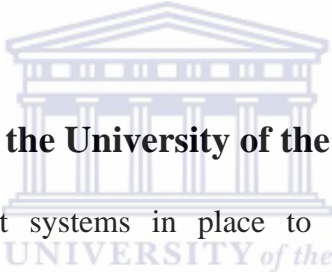
2.5.2 Language proficiency

A study conducted by Poyrazli and Grahame identified multiple academic, social and personal barriers that prevent students from obtaining the qualification. (Poyrazli & Grahame, 2007). They list language proficiency and relationships with academics as academic barriers (Poyrazli & Grahame, 2007). They further state that English language proficiency is an important indicator of success. According to Poyrazli and Grahame academic culture and language difficulties are of special importance for international students as English language proficiency is an important predictor of success at English medium institutions. (Poyrazli & Grahame, 2007)

2.5.3 Relationships with academics/institution

Laboone confirms that it is imperative that positive relationships be established between the student and the institution. Laboone acknowledges that facilitating the integration of students into the academic culture of the institution would help with issues of academic transition. In other words, integration of the student can be initiated if the student and an academic have some kind of relationship with each other, or if the student is assigned to a specific academic to assist the student with academic issues (LaBoone, 2006). Laboone further states that a general principle might be to provide maximum services that are easily available to students, for example academic counseling services (LaBoone, 2006).

2.6 Services offered by the University of the Western Cape

UWC has various support systems in place to assist postgraduate students with adjustment to the academia. For example, the Postgraduate Enrollment and Throughput (PET) programme and the Academic Writing Centre are just some of the support services available to postgraduates. However, a study conducted at UWC by Mkhize revealed that students face inadequate distribution of resources at UWC as acknowledged by staff and students (Mkhize 2005).

The PET programme is a programme offered by UWC to optimise the research conditions of postgraduate students in the hope that it would influence positively on the completion rate. The aim of PET is to encourage the enrolment of postgraduate students through research into the postgraduate culture. It is committed to increasing the throughput rate in the minimum possible time (Rough edge online 2007).

"Just how effective and how accessible the PET programme is to students is unknown, Professor Bak explained, the interventions that we have put in place are hard to measure and require feedback from students so that we can assist them better."

(http://www.uwc.ac.za/articles/English/roughedge/index.htm)

It has come under the attention that writing is a core skill that many postgraduate students struggle with throughout under- and postgraduate study. Clarence, 2009 states in her paper that this could be partly due to the lack of competency in English as a first language, and partly due to a lack of preparation at primary and secondary school level. She further states that those who struggle with writing also have difficulty reading and critical reading skills.
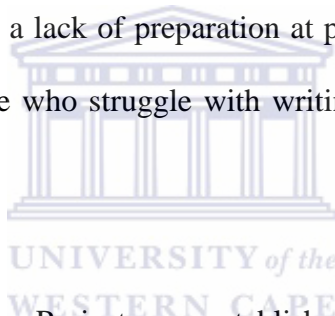
In 1994 the Writing Centre Project was established at UWC, initiated to assist and develop academic writing skills in students. Clarence (2009: 01) declares that this service offered by the university is currently going through transformation.

"The Writing Centre at the University of the Western Cape is currently undergoing a process of revisioning and restructuring to make it a more relevant and focused part of the university, and to make it more responsive to the multiple reading, writing and language needs of students. Part of this vision is to construct a discipline-based consultancy model, so that students receive assistance with both reading and writing from writing consultants who are discipline specialists, so as to develop their skills in a

specific context. Another part of this vision is the use of e-technology like online-learning forums and related media so that distance and off-campus students can also be reached interactively. A third part of the vision is to reach out to faculty members as well, and over the medium to long term begin supporting a process of building reading and writing skills development into the core of disciplines, so that students are taught skills and content simultaneously from within their disciplines, rather than from outside of them. In order to become a more significant part of teaching and learning at UWC, the Centre will need to work increasingly with both faculty and students to address the writing and reading needs of students, and to be part of the creation of a more interactive and supportive learning environment."
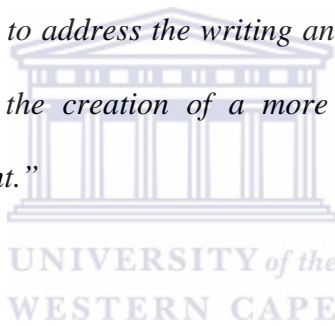
2.7 Conclusion

This chapter showed a wide range of literature ranging from 1992 to 2008. Transition is indeed a well-researched area but the researcher considers that the need still exists to further refine academic transition. The next chapter will focus on how the researcher will work through this refinement by using the methodological research process.

Chapter 3

Research Methodology

3.1 Research design

The research design should flow directly from the research question, hypothesis or the purpose of the study. The research design is regarded as the blue print of the study because "it determines the methodology used by the researcher to obtain sources of information, such as subjects, elements and units of analysis, to collect and analyse the data, and to interpret the results" (Brink & Wood, 1998). The current trend in health sciences research is quantitative and qualitative designs as the broad overarching categories.

The researcher adopted the quantitative research design for this study. Quantitative research is a formal, objective, rigorous and systematic process for generating information about the world. It is usually conducted to describe events or concepts and to discuss the relationship between the concepts and ideas (Burns & Grove, 2003). This design is a good fit for this study as it aims to quantify and compare the responses.

A non-experimental, descriptive design was used to explore and describe the academic transitional experiences of postgraduate students. The researcher used this method

because the main purpose of non-experimental research is to describe phenomena as well as explore and explain the relationships between variables (Brink & Wood, 1998).

A cross-sectional survey was carried out, as it is cost-effective and appropriate for this type of study. A cross-sectional survey can be defined as a survey that collects data from participants at a particular time (Brink & Wood, 1998). Mouton states that surveys may be used for descriptive and exploratory purposes. Furthermore, they state that a survey is highly effective if the population is well educated (Mouton, 2001).

In this study the different sections refer to the different departments within the Faculty of Community of Health Sciences (FCHS).
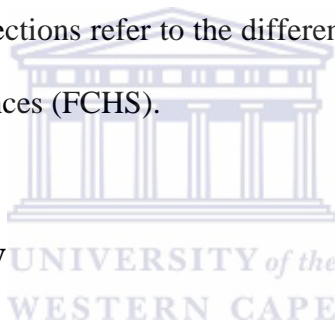
3.2 Setting of the study

The researcher undertook the study at the University of the Western Cape (UWC). This university is a recognized tertiary institution in the Western Cape and is rated amongst the top six universities in the South Africa (http://serveafrica.info/south-africa/top-10-universities). Located in Bellville in the Cape Peninsula.

3.3 The study population and sample

A study population can be defined as all the individuals that meet the sample criteria for inclusion in a study and are sometimes referred to as the target population (Burns & Grove, 2003). The total population comprises all postgraduate students, excluding doctoral students that are registered at UWC's FCHS for the 2009 academic year. This

includes the school of nursing, social work, physiotherapy, human ecology, natural medicine, psychology, school of public health, occupational therapy and dietetics to ensure cross-sectional inclusion. The population consists of 374 postgraduate students as indicated in Table 5.

Community and Health Sciences	Total number of enrolled students
Human Ecology	8
Nursing	50
Physiotherapy	30
Social Work	34
Occupational therapy	5
SRES	2
SOPH	187 +29
Psychology	27
Total number of the population	**374**

Table 5: Postgraduate Enrolment 2009 in the FCHS

3.4 Exclusion criteria

First enrolments for postgraduate studies at masters' level were excluded as well as PhD students. The researcher chose to include only those postgraduate students who have been in the programme for more than a year and who have the necessary experiences. PhD students were excluded because they have already completed a postgraduate degree. Students that were included in the pilot study were excluded for the actual data collection in January/February 2009.

3.5 Sample choice and size

A sample is defined as a subset of a larger set, the defined population, selected by the researcher to participate in the study based on a set of "inclusion criteria". Whereas sampling refers to the process of selecting the sample from an identified population for the purpose of obtaining data regarding a phenomenon in a way that represents the population of interest (Brink & Wood, pg:124). Sampling is done by either following a probability (random) or non-probability sampling approach. The first sampling approach allows the researcher to estimate the sampling error, minimise bias in the sample or sampling and it lends itself to the correct use of inferential statistics. A sampling frame is "the single most important criteria in determining whether probability sampling is possible for a given study" (Brink et al, 1998. pg: 127). Common techniques of random sampling include simple random sampling, stratified random sampling, systematic random sampling and cluster sampling.

The researcher has proposed using stratified random sampling because the FCHS consists of different departments. The sample size proposed in the research proposal submitted to the FCHS Higher Degrees Committee, UWC took into account that a large sample size is required for a cross-sectional descriptive study in order to increase its power, validity, reliability and generalisability.

The sample size was calculated using Katzenellenbogen and Joubert (2007) when using random sampling for a cross sectional study from a large population:

$$n = \quad \boxed{t = \dfrac{t \ \ x \ p(1-p)}{m}}$$

n = required sample size

t = confidence level at 95% (standard value of 1.96)

p = estimated prevalence

m = margin of error 5% (0.05 standard value)

However, De Vos et al (2005) states that approximately 20%-32% of the population should be included in the study with a population size of between (200-500) to ensure that the sample size is representative of the population. The researcher therefore hoped to reach this target.

With a population size of 374 postgraduate students, it is advised that the whole population be included in the study. This measure is done to ensure that the results are reliable and generalisable (De Vos, 2005). Therefore, in this study, the researcher did not use any sampling method but included the whole study population and aimed for a 20% response rate (De Vos, 2005).

3.6 The pilot study

A pilot study is often defined as a small scale study of the prospective study, and it is conducted to refine the methodological aspects of the study (Burns & Grove, 2003). De Vos, 2005 refer to it as a "dress rehearsal" undertaken to identify possible obstacles. The pilot study was done to ascertain that the questionnaire was suitable and consistent with regards to questions that were asked.

The pilot study was conducted on a group of postgraduate students currently registered at the FCHS School of nursing who had been enrolled for MCur Education. This group of students was ideal for the pilot study as they were in advanced stages of their postgraduate studies and therefore their responses could be viewed as a reliable reflection of the nature of the questionnaire.

These postgraduate students were contacted and those who gave voluntary consent to participate in the pilot study were included. A total of 10 postgraduates gave consent to partake in the pilot study voluntarily. The questionnaire was delivered personally to the participants for completion. This was done after the study was explained and voluntary consent was obtained.
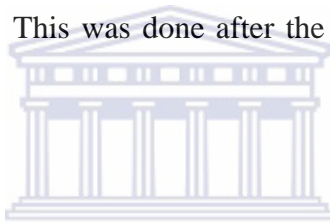
The Commencing Post Graduate Course survey by Symons, (2006) was used. Modifications were made to accommodate the objectives of the current study. The questionnaire is discussed later in this chapter.

It was observed that after the pilot study the data collection instrument needed refinement to make it more reader-friendly and easy to complete. The researcher decided to continue with the planned methodology.

3.7 Data collection instrument

The Commencing Post Graduate Course Survey questionnaire Symons (2006) was modified and adjusted to fit the objectives of the current study. It was a self-administered questionnaire with structured questions.

After modification, the questionnaire consisted of 25 questions that were sub-divided into four sections. Each section had multiple answers and the respondents indicated their answers with a mark in the appropriate blocks provided next to the possible response (see addendum D).

Section A of the questionnaire was called the ***Demographics***. This section consisted of nine questions on age, language, marital status, nationality etc., and thus gave the researcher an insight into biographical information of the respondent.

Section B referred to as ***Academic Preparedness*** consisted of seven questions on experience, research activities and publications produced. Completion of this part allowed the researcher to explore how prepared the student was on entry and what preparation the student had for postgraduate studies.

Section C was titled ***Motivations for enrolment*** and explored the reasons why postgraduate students enroled for studies.

The last section, **Section D,** was labeled ***Support services***. This section consisted of a table where students could tick off all the services that he/she made use of during their

postgraduate studies and rate each one individually according to the quality of the service.

3.8 Data collection procedure

Data collection was done during the January/February 2009 registration period because it was convenient and allowed the researcher to access the whole population. All students that registered during the official registration period of the institution were consulted to partake in the study if they met the inclusion criteria. The study was explained to students on an individual basis and voluntary consent had to be given. After voluntary consent was signed and handed in, the questionnaire was completed by the students.

The above-mentioned strategy was not as successful as the researcher had anticipated. Therefore, the researcher decided to make use of a **computerised** questionnaire. The questionnaire was designed in Microsoft Office (MSWord). The study was explained to the prospective participants, an information letter was included explaining the study and a completed questionnaire would mean that the participant gave voluntary consent to partake in the study. This strategy was executed over a period of ten weeks during July and September 2009.

3.9 Response rate

The questionnaire was emailed to 374 postgraduate students registered within the FCHS for completion. Of these 175 participants opened the email. During the data collection

period the researcher obtained a total of 57 responses, which translate to a 15.2% response rate, which was lower than anticipated.

Firstly, the researcher anticipated a response rate of at least 30% to enable the researcher to generalise the findings of this study. According to De Vos, of a population size that equals between 200-500 approximately 20%-32% of the population must be included in the study to ensure that the sample size is representative of the population (De Vos, 2005). This measure ensured that the sample is representative and thus would have enabled the researcher to generalise the findings to a larger population.

However, the 15.2% response rate, indicating a non-response sampling error, does not allow the researcher to generalise the findings of this study, especially as no randomisation was done.
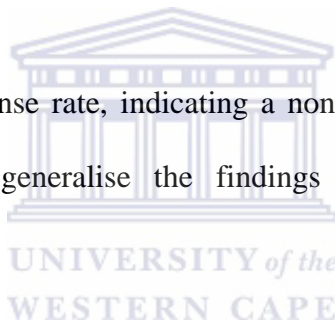
3.10 Data analysis

Data analysis in quantitative studies are conducted to reduce, organize, give meaning to the data and to address the research aim and its specific objectives (Burns & Grove, 2003). Data analysis was done using SPSS, a data-managing package. SPSS is used widely among social science researchers for calculating specifications that allows the researcher to make different kinds of inferences of the research problem. SPSS allows the researcher to generate analysis using descriptive statistics and present it with high quality tabular and graphical output. Proportions were used for categorical data, also referred to

as nominal data, which refers to attributes such as sex, religion and yes- or no-type questions, while means are the arithmetic average of data from interval or ratio scales. Standard deviations (SD) were used for continuous variables. SD describes the variability of data about the sample mean and therefore it describes the variability within a given sample.

3.11 Confidence level and interval

The **confidence interval** is the plus-or-minus figure usually reported in newspaper or television opinion poll result (Sample size calculator - confidence level, confidence interval, sample size, population size, relevant population). For example, if you use a confidence interval of 10 and 47% of your sample picks an answer, you can be "sure" that if you had posed the question to the entire relevant population between 37% (47-10) and 57% (47+10) would have picked that answer (ROR Sitemap for creative Research Systems)

The **confidence level** explains how sure you can be. It is expressed as a percentage and represents how often the true percentage of the population who would pick an answer lies within the confidence interval (Sample size calculator - confidence level, confidence interval, sample size, population size, relevant population). The 95% confidence level means you can be 95% certain most researchers use the 95% confidence level.

When you put the confidence level and the confidence interval together, one can conclude that you are 95% sure that the true percentage of the population is between 43%

and 51%. The wider the confidence interval you are willing to accept, the more certain you can be that the whole population's answers would be within that range. For this study the researcher used a confidence interval of 95%.

3.12 Validity and reliability

Validity and reliability are two of the most important criteria by which a quantitative instrument's adequacy is evaluated.

3.12.1 Validity

Validity indicates whether an instrument measures what it is supposed to measure and has a number of different aspects and assessment approaches to it (De Vos, 2005). To ensure validity of the instrument, the questionnaire to be used was adapted from the one used by Symons, 2006 in a similar study.

Face validity refers to whether the instrument looks as though it is measuring the appropriate construct, whilst *construct validity* can be explained as the degree to which a measure relates to other variables as expected within a system of theoretical relationship (Mouton, 2001). The questionnaire used for this research consisted of four sections as explained earlier in Chapter 3.

Content validity is defined as the degree to which the measure covers the range of meanings included within a concept (Mouton, 2001). The questionnaire was circulated among academic researchers at the UWC School of Nursing for construct, content and

face validity purposes and a pilot study were conducted to ensure that the data collection instrument met all these three criteria.

3.12.2 Reliability

Reliability means the ability of an instrument to produce consistent results (Sarantakos, 1988). The Commencing Postgraduate Coursework Survey (*Symons 2006)* was used and small adjustments were made by the researcher to accommodate the nature of this particular study. The questionnaire was piloted on the postgraduate students of the School of Nursing.

The following measures were taken to ensure the reliability of the questionnaire, as proposed by De Vos et al, (De Vos, 2005):
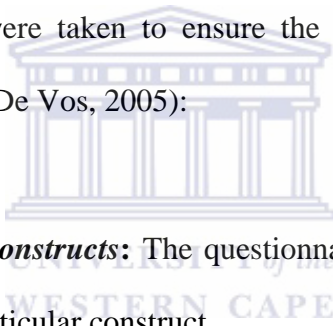
*Clearly conceptualise all constructs***:** The questionnaire was divided into four sections, each section addresses a particular construct.

*Increase the level of measurement***:** Indicators were measured at the most precise level of measurement. The higher or more precise the measures are, the more reliable measurement will be.

*Use of multiple indicators of a variable***:** Where possible and appropriate two or more indicators (for example two or more questions) were asked to measure each aspect of a variable. For example: Question 1 under section 3 in the questionnaire asked participants

to list the main reasons why they enrolled for postgraduate studies. Question 2 asked them what do postgraduate studies mean to them.

Use of pre-test, pilot studies, and replications: The Commencing Post Graduate Course Survey questionnaire of Symons, 2006 was modified and adjusted to fit the objectives of this study. A preliminary questionnaire was developed and piloted on a group of postgraduate students and adjusted appropriately.

Data analysis was performed by using SPSS. SPSS allows the researcher to calculate mean, standard deviation and display findings graphically in tables and graphs.

3.13 Ethical considerations

The ethical considerations for this particular study are stated below: The ethical principle of beneficence was used during the research where potential benefits of the research to individuals and society had been maximised and potential harms had been minimized (Ross & Deverall, 2004)

This study project posed no threat to the safety and dignity of participants. Confidentiality was ensured by ensuring easy and safe participation, confidentiality of participants as well as their responses. Raw data have been secured and will be destroyed according to the legal requirements of UWC.

The participants had the right of self-determination. Participation in the research is voluntary and the participants had the right to withdraw at any stage. Inappropriate or coercive incentives were not utilized.

Informed consent to participate in the research was requested personally during the January/February 2009 registration period (Addendum C) and electronically during the July/August 2009 data collection period. Participants were informed that if they return the completed questionnaire, they would have automatically given consent to participate. Information about the study was in an understandable language and included the purpose of the research and duration of participation. (Addendum: B)
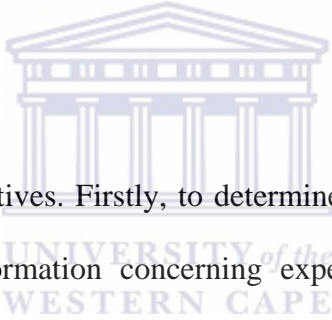
Permission and ethical clearance were obtained from FCHS, Head of the Department and the Registrar (Academic) of UWC. The researcher also obtained consent from the registrar to conduct data collection during the registration January/February 2009. (Addendum: A)

Chapter 4

Presentation and discussion of findings

4.1 Introduction

A Quantitative research methodology was used as the basis for this study. The researcher investigated the academic transitional issues that challenge postgraduate students' experience in the Faculty of Community and Health Sciences (FCHS) at the University of the Western Cape (UWC).

This study had three objectives. Firstly, to determine the academic preparedness of the postgraduate students: information concerning experiences, previous participation in research activities, publications and papers delivered prior to postgraduate enrollment were gathered. Secondly, to determine if FCHS postgraduate students make use of the services offered by the institution to facilitate a smooth transition. Lastly, to determine the primary motivations why FCHS postgraduates enrol for studies.

This chapter will present and discuss the results of the study.

The population under study consisted of 374 postgraduate students that were registered during the 2009 academic year. All postgraduate students in the FCHS who met the inclusion criteria for this study had the opportunity to take part in the study. A total

number of 15.2% (N= 57) consented to partake in the study and successfully completed the self-administered computerised questionnaire.

The researcher uses graphic illustrations to present statistics. Discussions will facilitate the presentation of the analysed data in this chapter. The different categories for analysis that were used to collect data are as follows:

• Background information: display a demographic view of the participants.

• Academic preparedness of the postgraduate students.

• Motivations for enrollment.

• Support services utilized by the postgraduates.
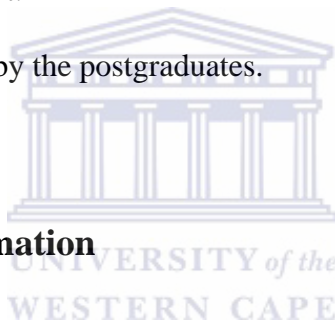
4.2 Background information

4.2.1 Age

Figure 1:Age category of participants
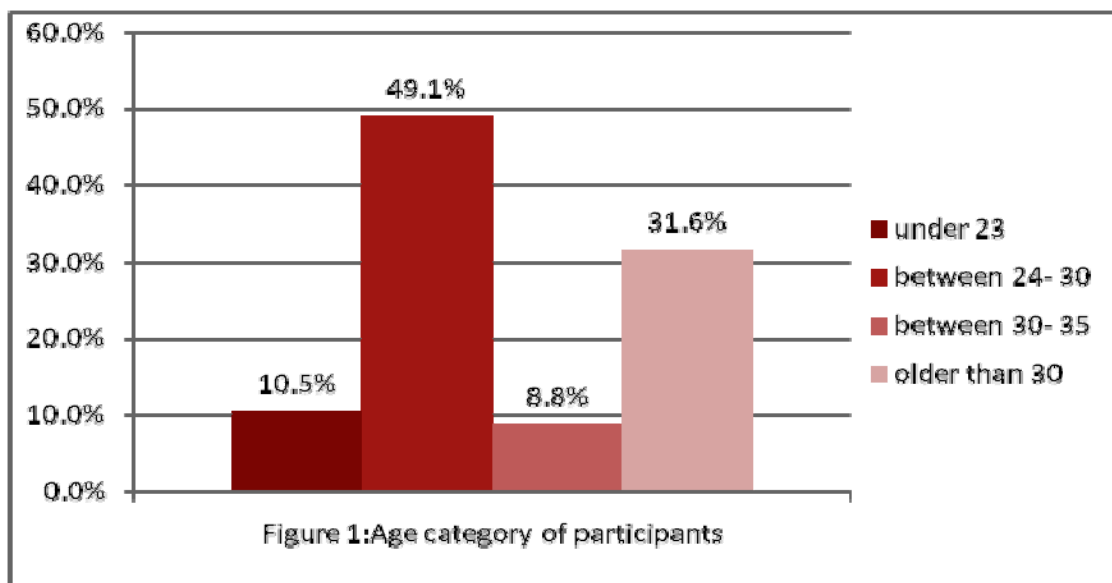
The age of the postgraduate student population of the FCHS is relatively young. Some 10.5% were aged under 23 years, 49.1% were between 23 and 30 years old, 8.8% were between 31 and 35 years old, and 31% were older than 35 years.

Almost identical findings were reported in a study at the University of Newcastle in Australia where 52 % were younger than 30 years of age. This indicates that postgraduates enroll for postgraduate studies soon after completing undergraduate studies, which actually put them in a high risk category for non-completion.

Postgraduate statistics of Australia reveals that postgraduate students in the age group 25 to 29 have the lowest predicted probability of completion (Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs, 2001). However, the South African statistics shows that the average age of enrolment for postgraduate students are 30 years of age (*CHE - postgraduate studies in South Africa: A statistical profile*).

The mean age for postgardutes to enter postgraduate studies at UWC are between the age of 24 and 30, which is consistent with the statistics of CHE that the mean age for enrolment for postgraduate studies is 30 years of age.

4.2.2 Qualifications prior to enrolment

Figure 2: Qualifications participants held prior enrollment
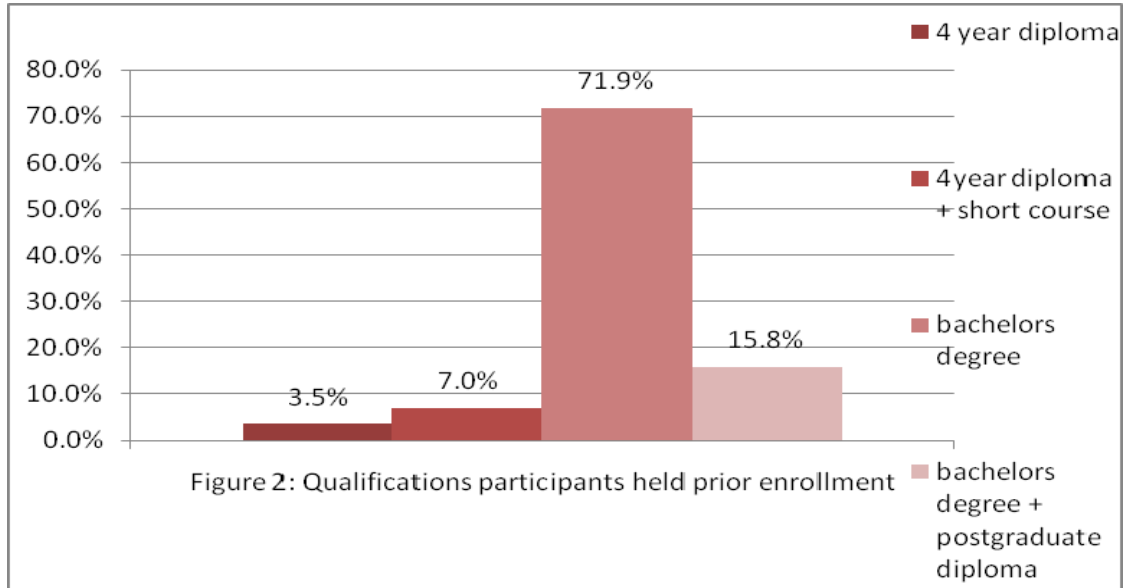
Ofori and Charlton stated that entry qualifications have a direct impact on academic performances (Ofori & Charlton, 2002).

A small percentage of 3.5% (n=2) are in possession of only a 4-year diploma, 7.0% (n=4) are in possession of a 4-year diploma plus an additional short course, 71.9% (n=41) has a bachelors degree and 15.8% (n=9) are in possession of a bachelors plus a postgraduate diploma on enrolment. This means that a total of 87.1% (n=50) postgraduates are in possession of a basic degree and were exposed to research during undergraduate studies. This results confirms that at UWC, RPL is bein taken into account when doing selctions for postgraduate studies. 10.5% (n= 6) of the participants are in possession of at least a 4year diploma, which points to the fact that they gain entry into the university system through alternative means (RPL).

4.2.3 Full-time/part-time students

The majority of postgraduates in the FCHS are registered as part-time students. A significant number of 63.2% indicated that they are registered as part-time students. Over 50% of the population was registered with the School of Public Health (SOPH) (see table 5), which could have influenced the high rate of part-time students. SOPH predominantly offers postgraduate qualifications on a part-time basis (UWC, prospectus 2008). Figure 3 graphically displays the findings below.

Figure 3: Percentage of full-time / part-time students

4.2.4 Home language

Figure 4: Home language of participants
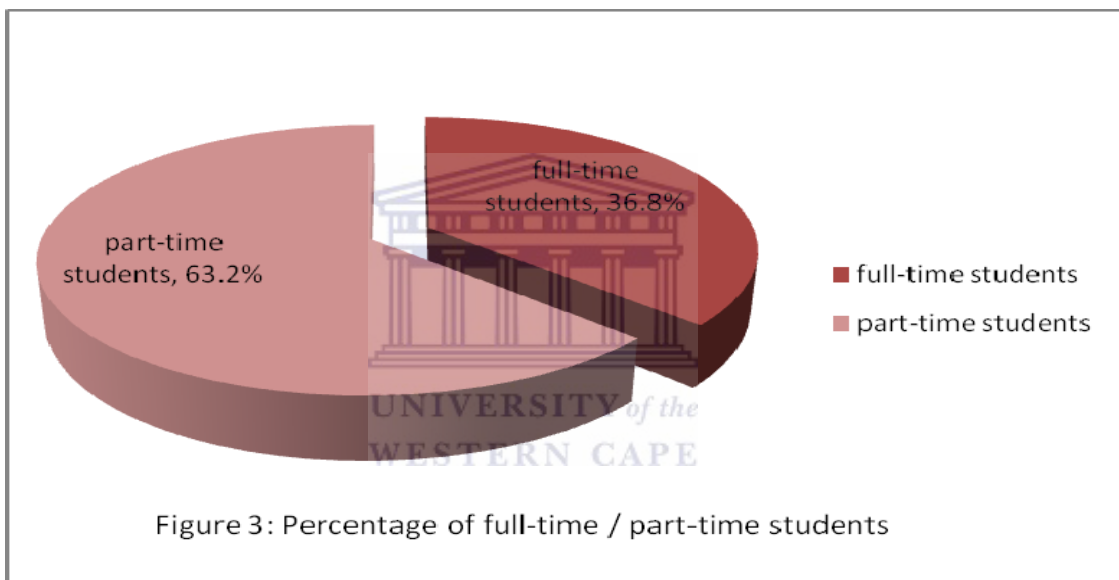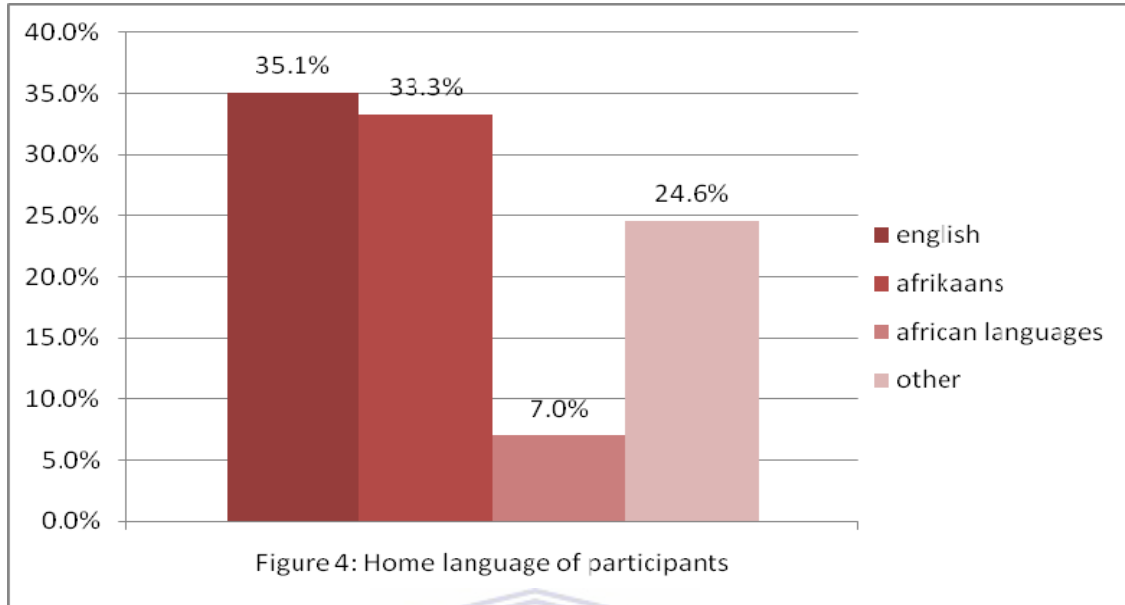
English is the home language of 35.1% (n=20) of the participants. Afrikaans accounts for 33.3% (n=19), African languages, which includes Xhosa, Zulu and Tswana to mention a few, accounts for 7.0% (n=4) of the participants, whereas 24.6% (n=14) accounts for other languages such French.

At UWC the medium of instruction is primarily English. The disparity between languages could have an effect on the transition challenges that postgraduates experience when reading a postgraduate degree at UWC.

According to Poyrazli and Grahame, language difficulties are of special importance for international students as English language proficiency is an important predictor of success at English medium institutions. (Poyrazli & Grahame, 2007). The results of this study reveals that english is not the home language of the majority of the participants.

4.2.5 Marital status / number of dependants / household income

The above-mentioned variables were used in the questionnaire to give the researcher an overview of the demographic profile of the postgraduates, as well as the motivations for pursuing further study and possible factors which could cause some obstacles throughout the postgraduate transition.

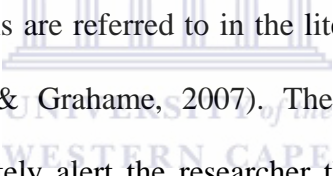**Table1: Marital status, number of dependents, income and employment status**

Marital Status	57	Never Married	25	43.9
		Married	27	47.4
		Divorced	4	7
		other	1	1.8
Number Of Dependants	57	None	24	42.1
		One	14	24.6
		Two	14	24.6
		More than two	5	8.8
Employment Status	57	Unemployed	8	14.1
		Employed	30	52.6
		Employed(part-time)	3	5.3
		Employed(contract)	16	28.1
Combined Household Income	57	R0 – R60 000	17	29.8
		R60 001- R120 000	16	28.1
		R120 001- R150 000	9	15.8
		More than R150 000	15	26.3
Valid N (List Wise)	57			

Table 1 summarises the results of biographic questions and illustrates response frequencies by variable. From Table 1 the profile of respondents can be described as

follows: (n= 57) respondents successfully completed all the questions to be discussed. The majority of respondents were married (n= 27) responses.

This rate strongly correlates with a study conducted by the University of Newcastle wherein they ascertained that the largest part of their sample was married (Humphrey & McCarthy, 1999).

In this study the largest part of the respondents had between 1 and 2 dependents (n= 28); (n= 24) of the respondents earned more than R120 000 per annum. It is also noted that (n= 8) respondents were unemployed and another n= 19) had part-time employment or were contract workers.

Different types of transitions are referred to in the literature (Brown & Holloway, 2008; Laboone, 2006; Poyrazli & Grahame, 2007). The abovementioned findings of the variables in Table 1 definitely alert the researcher that there might be challenges that impacts academic transition. Laboone, 2006 affirm that different types of transition are found for example personal, emotional and social transition. Laboone concurs that these different types of transition interweaves with academic transition.

4.3 Academic preparedness

The second section of the Postgraduate Transition Questionnaire investigates the academic preparedness of the postgraduate students. It is already known that previous tertiary experiences influence throughput and attrition rates (Darlaston-Jones et al., 2003) Biographical data has already provided barriers to completion of postgraduates students. Further investigation into academic preparedness should provide clarity on factors that influence throughput and attrition rates.

4.3.1 Experiences in field of expertise

Figure 5: Experience in the field of expertise
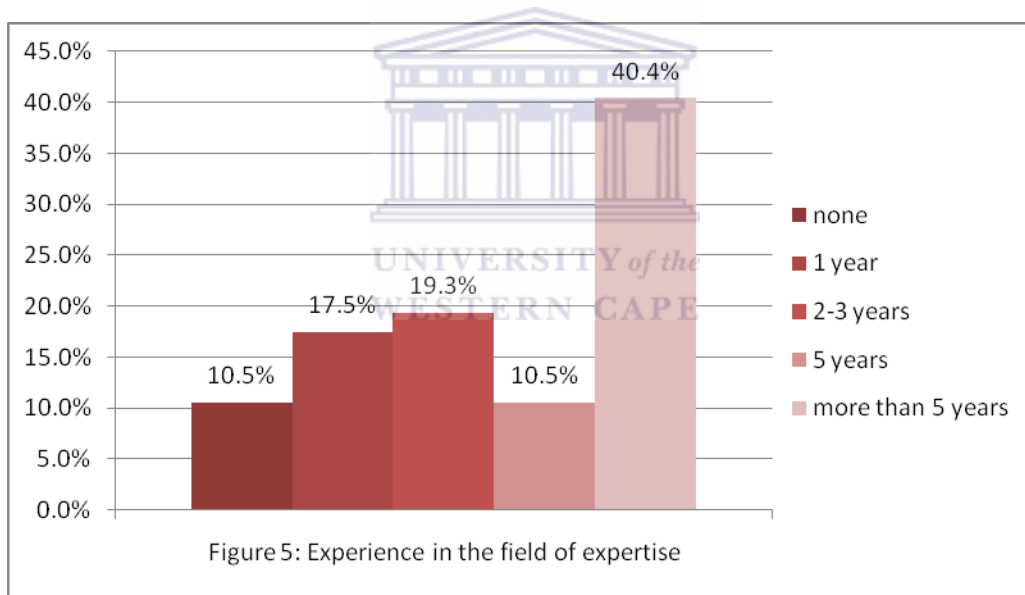
Table 2: Descriptive Statistics of the research activities of respondents

Variable measured	N	Responses	Frequency	%
Research Activities Prior to Enrollment	56	Never	17	29
		Once	17	29
		2 or more times	17	29.8
		Active involvement	5	8.8
Missing	1		56	100
Total	57			
Research papers and publications prior enrollment	57	Yes	6	10
		No	51	5

As previously shown in (Figure 1) the majority of the respondents were in the age category of between 24 and 30 years of age, 49.1% (n=28). The above-mentioned graph tends to point to the direction that the bulk of respondents 57.8% (n=33) had less than 5 years of experience in their field of study. This clearly shows that postgraduate students are indeed not very experienced when enrolling for postgraduate studies and it brings about some concern to the reseacher whether the age group between 24 and 30 years can be classified as a high-risk group for non-completion.

This concern can be perceived as lower throughput and higher attrition rates of these cohorts of postgraduates understudy. A study conducted in Australia declares that

Australian postgraduate students in the age group 25 to 29 have the lowest predicted probability of completion (DOETYA: Australia, 2001).

4.3.2 Research activities

Most postgraduate students in the study enter postgraduate programmes without being intricately involved with research activities. Merely 10.5% (n=6) has produced research papers and publications prior to enrolment.

This number is consistent with the 8.8% (n=5) that indicated that they have been actively involved with research activities and 19.3% (n=11) who attended research conferences prior to enrolment.

Figure 6: Publications and research papers prior enrollment
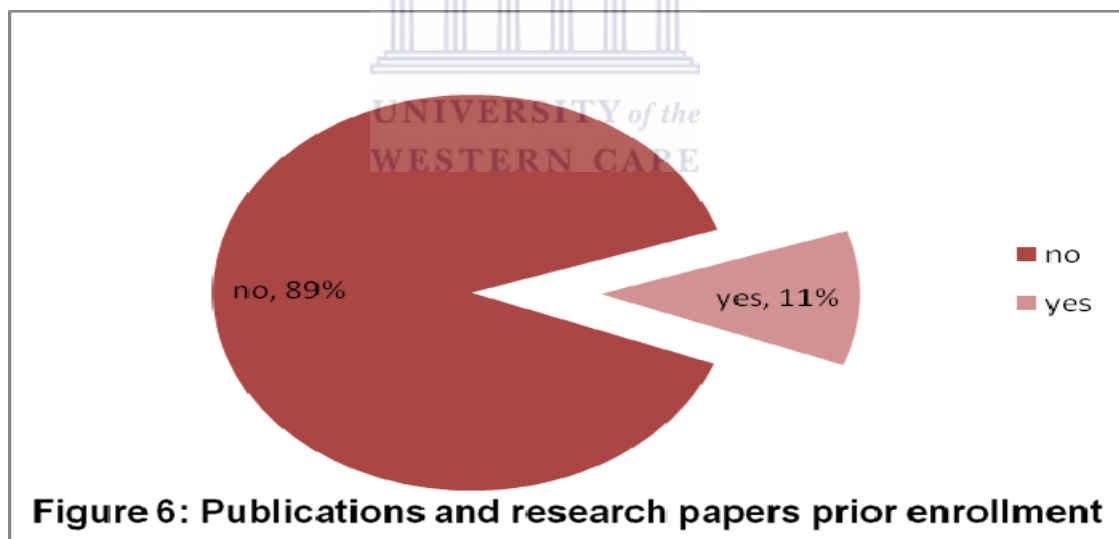
Most participants are in possession of a bachelor's degree. However, Figure 6: Research publications prior to enrolment shows that a large portion of respondents had not published prior to enrollment. This suggests that even though most postgraduate students have been exposed to the research process, they do not really belong to a culture of

research when returning to academia for further studies. Lowe and Cook acknowledged that students identified the gap between prior expectations and experiences particularly wide regarding students' predictions of the level of academic difficulty they would experience and the difficulty that they experienced.

Figure 7: Understanding of research prior enrollment provides evidence that 64.9% (n=37) has a basic understanding of research, which they developed as undergraduate students. The majority of 87.7% (n=50) of respondents are in possession of at least a 4-year bachelors degree (Figure: 2), which could explain the evidence in the following graph (Figure: 7) that 64.9% (n=37) has a basic understanding which they developed as undergraduate students and a further 21.1% of respondents that acknowledge they have an understanding of research prior enrolment.


Figure 7: Participants understanding of the research process
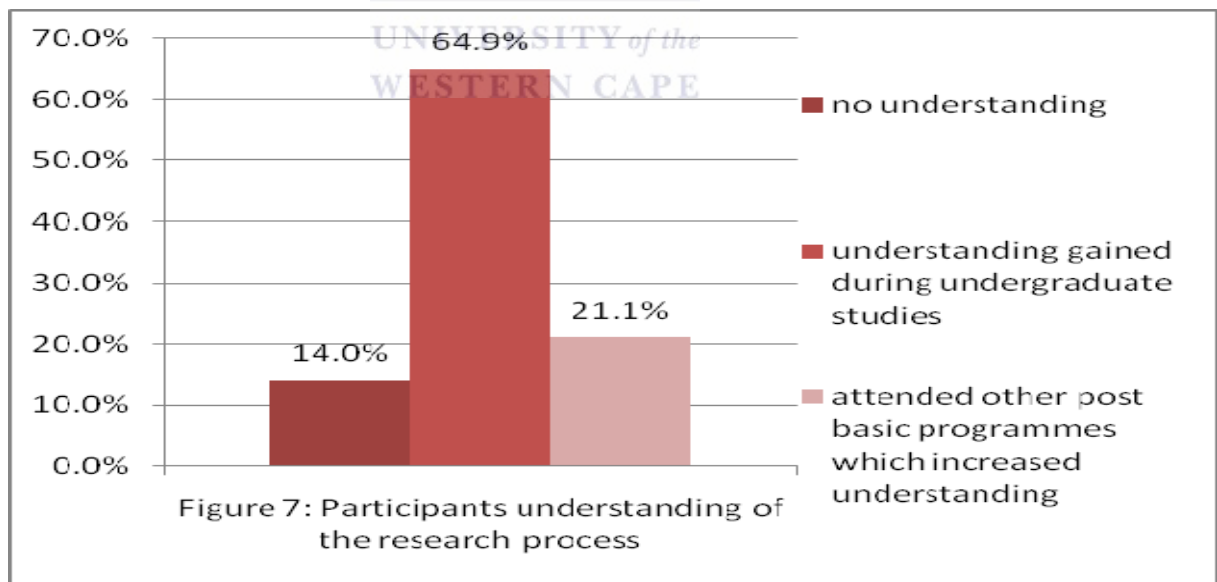
4.4 Motivations for enrollment

According to Moutisios-Rentzos and Simpsom (1997), academics at the University of Warwick propose that intrinsic and extrinsic motivations exist

"The postgraduates maybe more likely to have chosen their route for the sake of interest and be less clear about the pragmatic worth of the qualification."


Figure 8: Main reason for enrolment
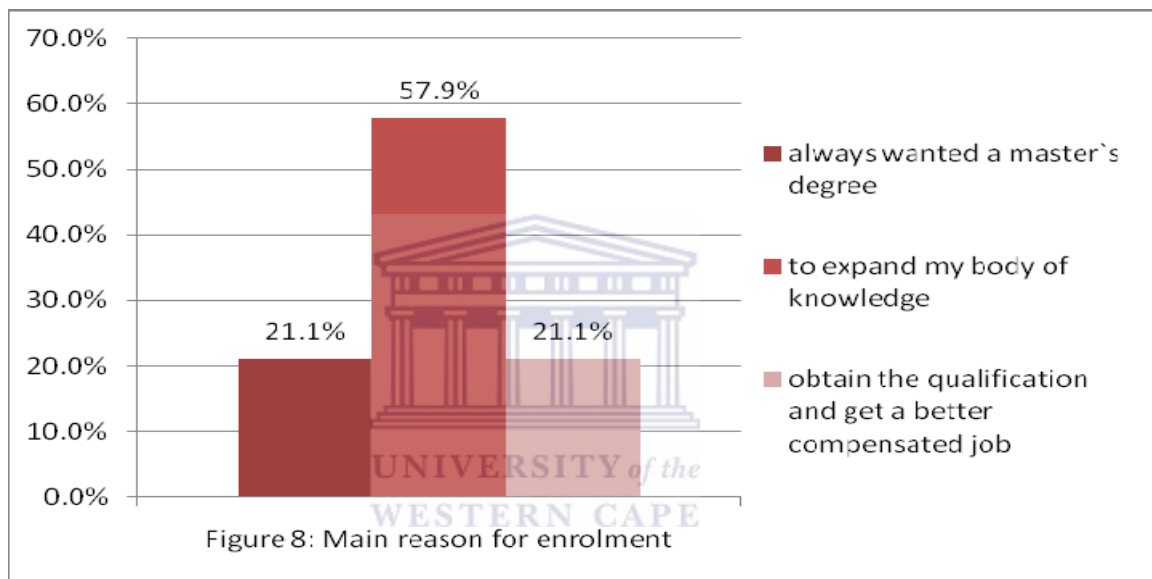
Motivation is also closely linked to students' perseverance and goal commitment (extrinsic and intrinsic motivation). They further state that this is a mixture of extrinsic and intrinsic goal orientations that drive the majority of these students (Byrne & Flood, 2005).

Figure8.1: Response on question: On enrolment were you sure it was what you wanted to do.
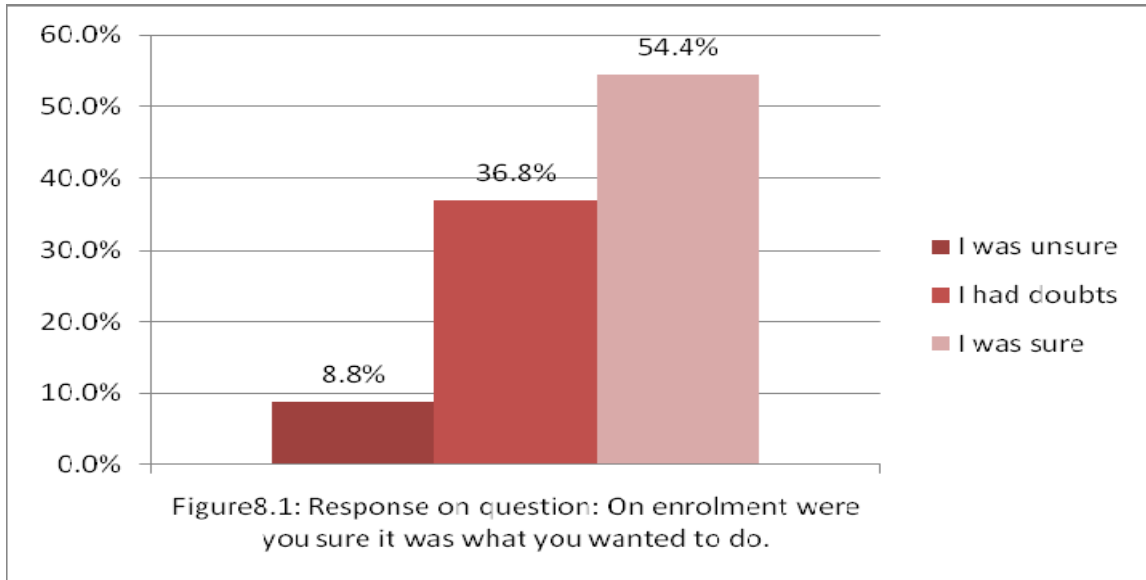
In this study 54.4% (n=31) of respondents were sure on enrolment that it was what they wanted to do as displayed in (Figure 8.1). This means that a mixture of extrinsic and intrinsic motivation exit within the participants as more than 50% of the participants were sure and close to 50% of the participants were unsure or had doubts about their intentions.
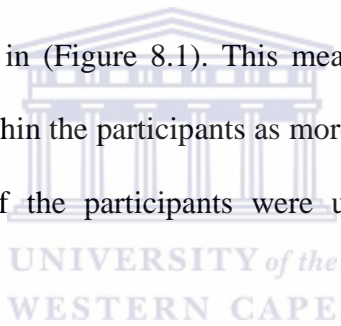
This result is consistent with the study conducted by Byrne and Flood at the University of Dublin that determined that career and educational aspirations are the main reasons why postgraduates choose to return to university after undergraduate studies (Byrne & Flood, 2005). The authors declare that a mixture of extrinsic and intrinsic motivation was found in their study.

Figure 9: The meaning of postgraduate studies to students
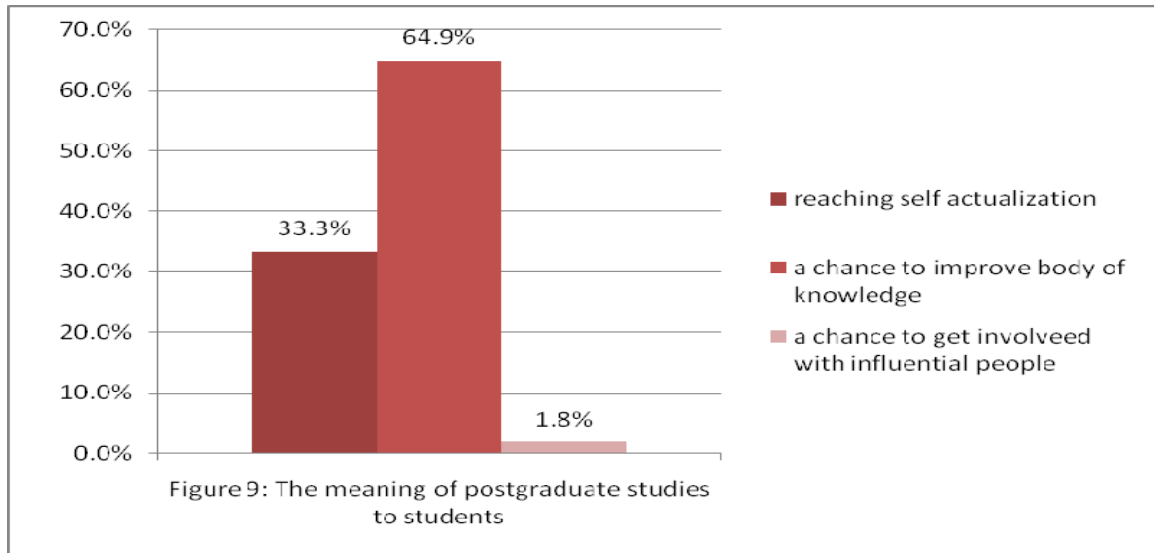
Most of the participants indicated that postgraduate studies mean a chance to improve their body of knowledge. A percentage of 64.9% (n=37) and 33.3% of respondents feel that it means "reaching self-actualization" to them. Only 1.8% (n=1) is more extrinsically motivated (Figure 9).

The primary motivation of postgraduate students appears to be closely related to the intrinsic motivation as discussed earlier. In figure 8 (57.9%) and figure 9 (64.9%) of the participants point towards having intrinsic motives for enrolment.

Table 3: Mean and Standard Deviations of factors that predicts completion

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
How long have you been in the programme thus far (Q4)	57	1	3	1.95	.811
Lost eagerness to complete (Q5)	57	1	4	3.05	.934
Valid N (list wise)	57				

The arithmetic mean average of Question 4 of section 3 of the transition questionnaire was 1.95 and had a standard deviation of .811. This means that on average the majority of participants have been in their current programme for less than two years. Only 29.8 % (n=17) of respondents have selected the most appropriate option for them, being less than 5 years.

According to the CHE (*CHE - postgraduate studies in South Africa: A statistical profile*) showed that the average number of years to complete a masters degree in the Health Sciences is about 3.5 years and 37% of enrolments at South African HEI are historical students (ongoing pile-up students). Education, C. o. (2007). The results of this study are consistent with the statistics of CHE for the above-mentioned reasons.
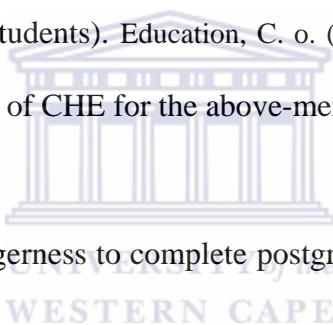
A question asked on the eagerness to complete postgraduate studies the following results were found:

3.5% (n=2) strongly agreed,

29.8% (n=17) agrees,

*42.1% (n=24) disagrees and 24.6% (n=14) strongly disagrees.*

The majority of the participants still has motivation to complete their studies as shown in Figure 10 below. Lovitts state that motivation is the nature and strength of someone's desire to engage in an activity (Lovitts, 2005). However, it has to be taken note that almost 35% of the participants are not motivated at this stage of their studies.

Figure 10: Lost eagerness to complete studies
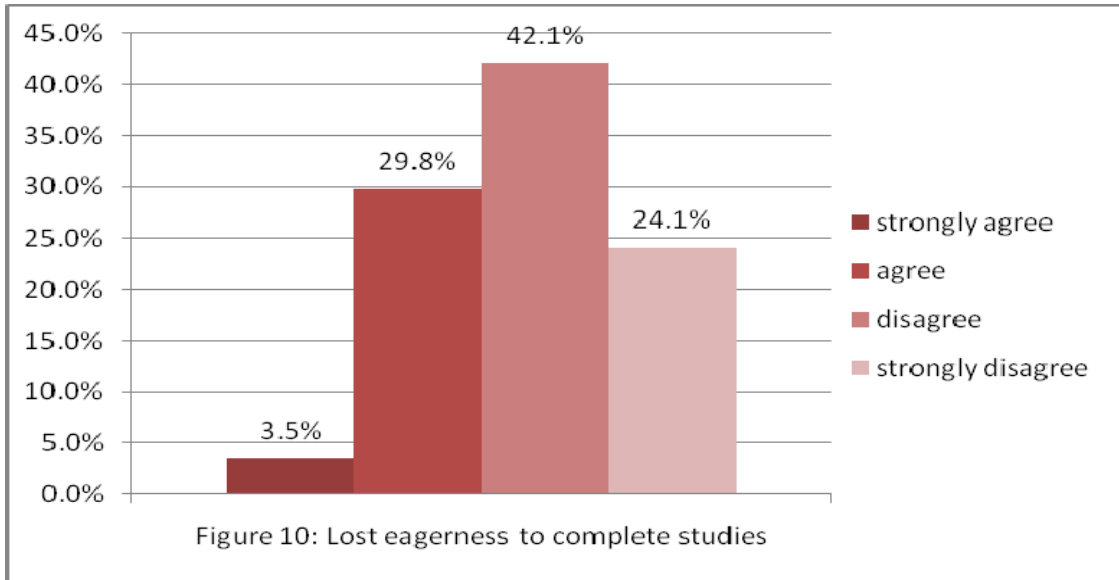
4.5 Support services

4.5.1 Induction
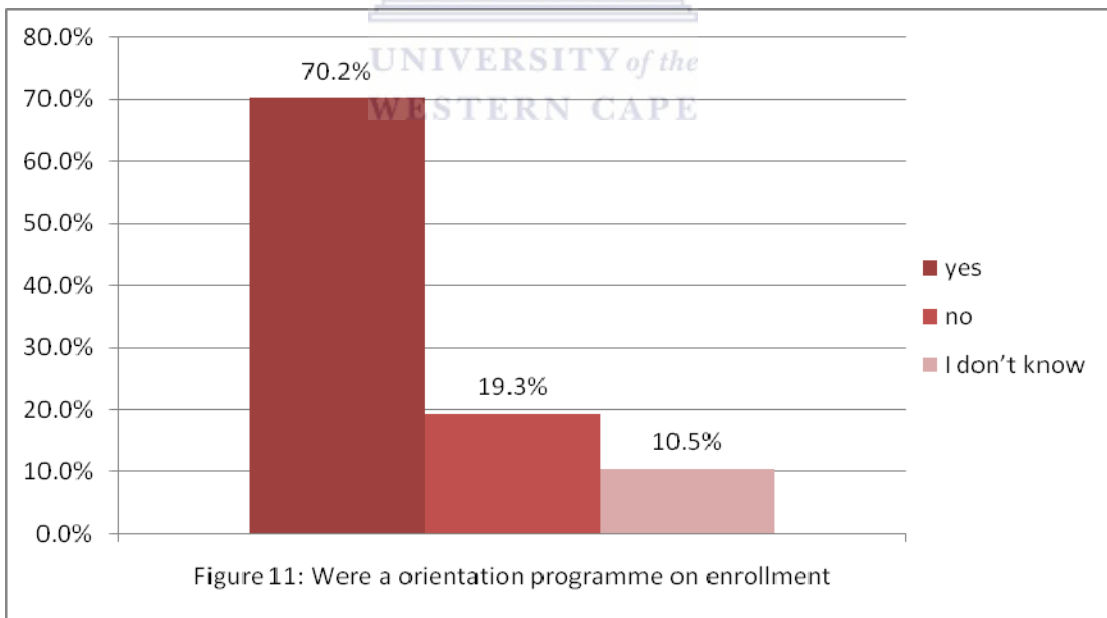
Figure 11: Were a orientation programme on enrollment

Postgraduate students need to be properly inducted, meaning an orientation programme must be available for them as early as possible when they start postgraduate studies.

70.2% (n=40) stated that an orientation programme was in place soon after enrolment (Figure 11). Furthermore, 43.9% (n=25) of them reported that the session was informative (Figure 12). This indicates that UWC is putting systems in place to maximise the output of services offered by the institution. Less than 25% (n=18) of the respondents were not really content with the orientation program that was in place on enrolment, and 26.3% (n=15) of the postgraduates did not attend the orientation program (Figure12). Why these postgraduates did not attend the orientation program was not determined with this study.

Figure 12: Rating of the orientation programme
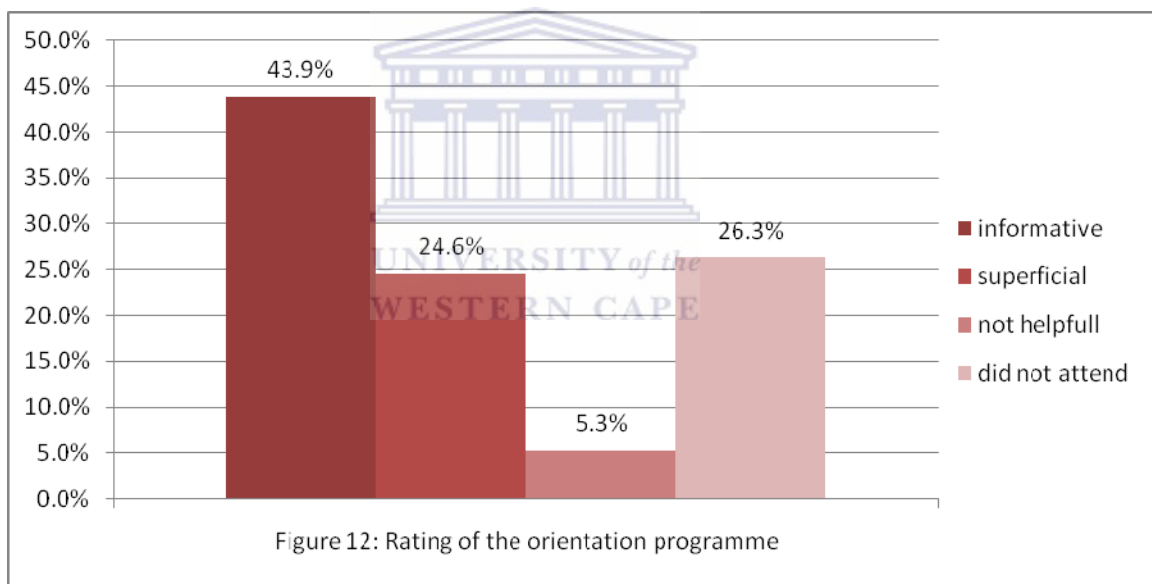
Literature suggests that support services for postgraduates have been somewhat ad hoc (Rumsey, 2004).

At UWC different support systems are in place to assist postgraduate students with adjustment to academia. Walters and Koetsier, two academics at UWC, conducted a study and found that there has been an inadequate distribution of services at systems level.

This study investigated this briefly by exploring what the opinion of postgraduate students are with regards to services offered by UWC. The Postgraduate Enrolment and Throughput (PET) programme and the Academic Writing Centre are just some of the support services available to postgraduates.

4.5.2 Enhanced support services

Table 4: Mean and Std. Deviations of Support Services

Table 4	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Postgraduate enrolment and throughput	57	0	4	2.26	1.142
Library Services	57	1	4	2.95	0.811
Academic writing center	57	0	4	1.72	1.306
Consultations with academic, supervisors	57	0	4	2.79	1.048
Academic counseling	57	0	4	1.75	1.214
Writing Coaches and mentors	57	0	4	1.56	1.35
Information Communication Services	57	0	4	1.86	1.315
Valid N (list wise)	57				

A percentage of 38.6% (n= 22) of the respondents who utilized the services offered by PET rated it as average, 31.6% (n=18) rated it as good, and 12.3% (n=7) rated this service as excellent. 12.3% (n=7) did not make use of this service offered by the institution and a mere 5.3% (n=3) rated it as poor. (Figure 12.1)

figure 12.1: Postgraduate and throughput program
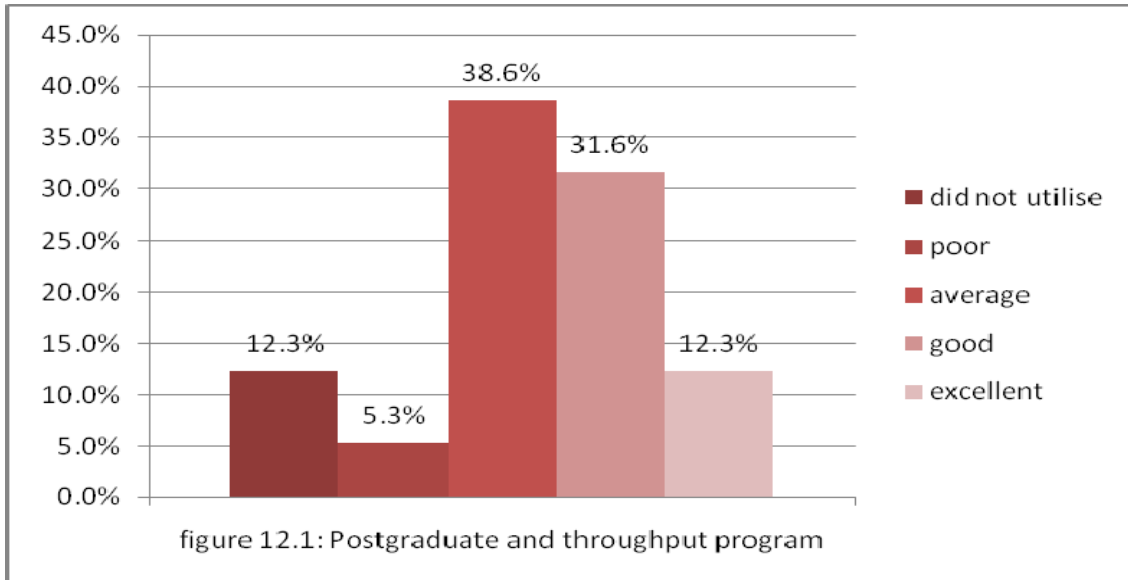
Library Service obtained a mean score of 2.95 from the responses (Table 4), which indicates that these services overall are doing good in meeting the needs of postgraduate students. All participants in the sample used this service offered by the institution. (Figure 12.2) shows the responses of participants.

Figure 12.2: Library Services

The Academic Writing Center, 29.8% (n=17) of respondents did not use this service, and 3.5% rated the service as poor (Figure 13).

Figure 13: Rating of the academic writing center
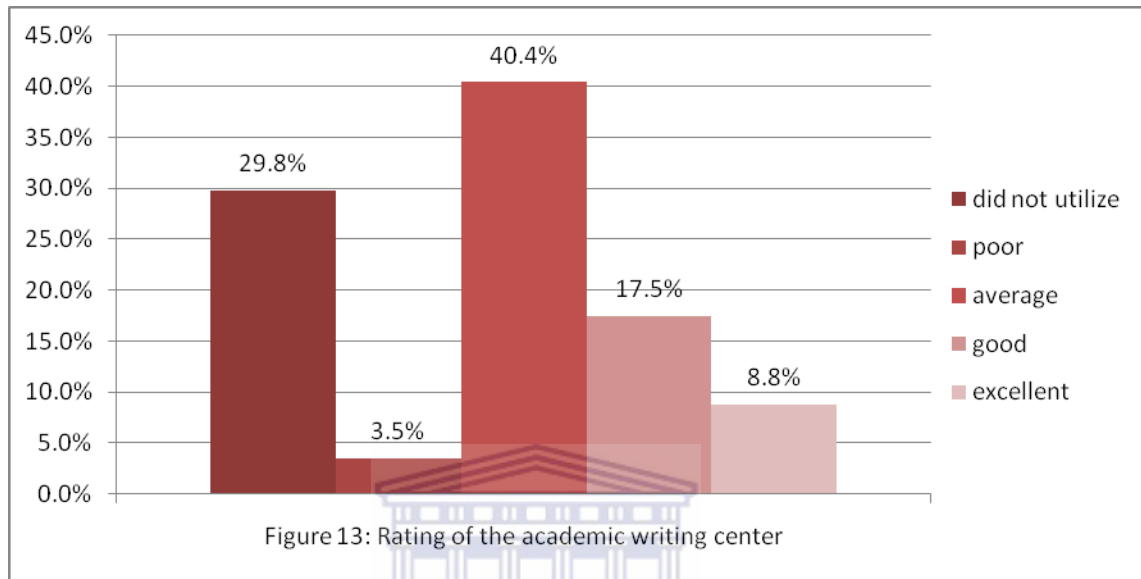
4.5.3 Individual academic support

A study conducted by Ofori and Charlton, (Ofori & Charlton, 2002) hypothesised that the seeking out of one-to-one academic support services and entry qualifications would have a direct positive influence on a student's performance. The outcome indicated that support seeking had a direct impact on performances. The researcher wanted to ascertain whether postgraduates make use of consultations with their research supervisor.
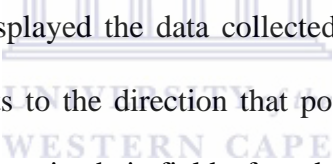
The results in this study revealed that 24.6 % (n=14) of the respondents used this service and rated it as average, 40.4 % (n=23) rated it as good, and 26.3% (n=15) rated it as excellent. These results correlate thus with the findings of the study conducted by Ofori and Charlton that indicated that students do dependent on individual sessions with their supervisors and academics. (Ofori & Charlton, 2002)

4.5.4 Other essential support services

As listed in Table 4, 33.3% (n=19) of the respondents acknowledged that they did not utilise the services of writing coaches and mentors. A number of 21.1 % (n=12) reported that they have not used services offered by the Information Communication Services (ICS) and 17.5% rated this service as poor.

This shows that these services are not likely to be used by postgraduates, and if student do utilised them, students are not very happy. In general all the services utilised by postgraduates were scored between average (2) and good (3) (Table 4)

4.6 Conclusion

This chapter graphically displayed the data collected in this study. Analysis developed through discussion. It points to the direction that postgraduates are relatively young in age and lack some experience in their field of study for postgraduate studies. Most of them are in possession of a bachelor's degree but do not belong to a culture of research prior to enrolment. It has also become evident that the majority of the participants is motivated and are still eager to complete their studies and that they do utilise the support systems in place for them at UWC.

In the final chapter, Chapter 5, main findings and conclusions will be made from the analysed data and at last recommendations for further research will be made.

Chapter 5

Summary of findings, conclusions and recommendations

5.1 Introduction

In this chapter final conclusions of the analysed data will be discussed and recommendations for further research will be made.

Evidence found in the literature review revealed that postgraduate students at UWC experienced difficulties in adjusting to the learning environment as indicated by inconsistencies in the enrolment and throughput rates served as evidence that students experience difficulties in completing their postgraduate studies because of academic transitional issues (Walters & Koetsier, 2006). Transitional issues for some students include concerns about writing (assignments, the research proposal and dissertation), organisation (such as using the library, computers and statistics, the availability of resources and time management), and the supervisory relationship, and other (Symons 2006).

The objectives of the study were as follows:

o To determine the academic preparedness of the postgraduate students of the Faculty Community Health Science (FCHS) at the University of the Western Cape (UWC) as evidenced by experience and previous participation in research activities, publications and papers delivered prior to postgraduate enrolment.

o To determine if the FCHS postgraduate students make use of the services offered by the institution to facilitate a smooth transition.

o To determine the primary motivations why FCHS postgraduate students enrol for studies.

o To compare the characteristics of postgraduate students.

5.2 Main findings of the study

All objectives were met and could be summarized as follows:
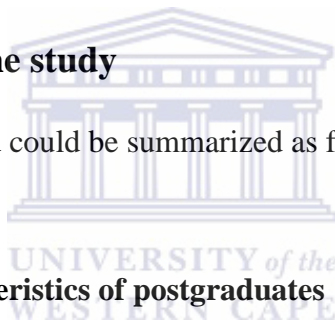
5.2.1 Background characteristics of postgraduates

The postgraduate student population of the FCHS is relatively young in age. Some 10.5% were under 23 years of age , 49.1% between 23 and 30 years old, 8.8% were between 31 and 35 years of age, and 31% were older than 35 years of age.

Almost identical findings were reported in a study at the University of Newcastle where 52% were younger than 30 years of age. They enter postgraduate studies soon after completing undergraduate studies, which actually put them in a high risk category for non-completion.

Postgraduate statistics of Australia reveal that postgraduate students in the age group 25 to 29 have the lowest predicted probability of completion. However, the South African statistics states that the average age of graduates at post graduate level is 34 years of age.

5.2.2 Academic preparedness

The research proved that there is a close link between age and academic preparedness in terms of experience in their respective fields.

Chapter 4 shows that the majority of the respondents were in the category of between 24 and 30 years of age, 49.1% (n=28). Therefor, if the majority of particpants fall between the age category of 24 and 30 it can be concured that postgraduate students are not very experienced when enrolling for postgraduate studies. Furthermore, it has been found that only 8.8% of the respondents had active roles with regards to research activities prior to enrolment. A number of 57.8% are in possession of less than 5 years' experience.

This also brings about some concern to the reseacher that the age group of between 24 and 30 years can be classified as a high-risk group for non-completion.

A study conducted in Australia declares that Australian postgraduate students in the age group 25 to 29 have the lowest predicted probability of completion (DOETYA: Australia, 2001). Lowe and Cook acknowledged that students identified the gap between prior expectations and experiences particularly wide regarding students' predictions of the level of academic difficulty they would experience and the difficulty that they experienced. This concern can be perceived as lower throughput and attrition rates of these cohorts of postgraduates understudy.

5.2.3 Motivation for enrolment

Most of the respondents had acceptable motives for enroling for postgraduate studies. 57.9% of them acknowledge that the main reason why they enroled was to expand their body of knowledge. 54.4% of respondents were sure of their reason for enrolment. Postgraduates are indeed intrinsically motivated when they enrol for postgraduate studies. A similar study conducted by Byrne and Flood revealed that a mixture of extrinsic and intrinsic goal orientations drive the majority of these students (Byrne & Flood, 2005).

5.2.4 Support Services

Postgraduate students often make use of support services at UWC. The results show that they are using services and that they are satisfied with these services. Orientation programmes are in place on enrolment as 70% of the postgraduates indicated that an orientation programme was in place on enrolment. A study conducted by Symons 2006 suggested that a proper orientation programme for students entering postgraduate studies for the first time must be in place to minimise academic transitional challenges.

Postgraduate students need to be properly inducted, meaning an orientation programme must be available for them as early as possible when they start postgraduate studies. 70.2% (n=40) of the participants stated that an orientation programme was in place soon after enrolment (Figure11). Furthermore 43.9% (n=25) of them reported that the sessions were informative. This indicates that UWC is putting systems in place to maximise the output of services offered by the institution. Less than 30% (n=18) of the respondents were not really content with the orientation programme that was in place on enrolment

and 26.3% (n=15) of the postgraduates did not attend the orientation programme (Figure12).

5.3 Limitations

Postgraduate transition is a multifaceted topic, e.g.: academic; personal-emotional and social transition. The researcher narrowed the study to academic transition only due to the fact that this research was done as part of a structured masters programme and time was limitation. This definitely influences the findings of the project as these different kinds of transitions usually interweave.

Due to the nature of the study, the following limitations were experienced. Only one faculty was included in the study. The small size of the study population affected the researcher's ability to generalise findings. Also the qualitative data would have given more depth to study.
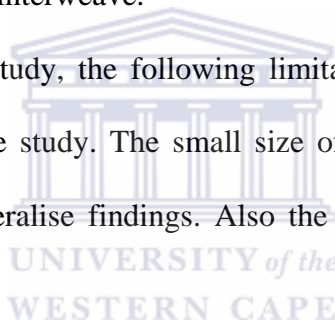
5.4 Recommendations for practice

Postgraduate transition is commonly perceived as rather a lone venture. Support services thus need to be sharpened. Postgraduates need to be informed regarding the different services that is offered by the institution. Informative orientation programmes need to be in place and regularly updated with new knowledge in order to ensure that students are updated with the latest trends of support services.

The supervisory-student relationship is the primary service that the institution offers to the student. This relationship must have its principles based on empowering postgraduates to be autonomous and self-directed.

A research culture needs to be established at undergraduate level, which would give students more exposure to research activities. Formation of research communities between and amongst postgraduate students, which would enable more experienced students to share knowledge with other. Admission criteria for postgraduate students need to be more rigorous in the field of study. Criteria should include a minimum number of experiences in the field of study.

5.5 Implications for research

Further investigation into academic transition experiences of postgraduates with emphasis on background characteristics for example age and language to determine the consequences it has on transition.
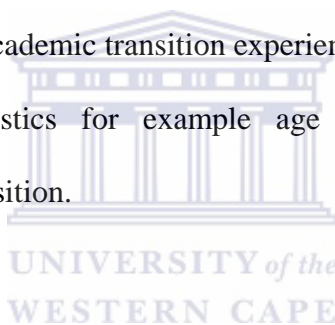
Academic preparedness needs to be investigated as a single dimension in order to really understand it.

Intrinsic and extrinsic motivations in postgraduate transition need to be explored as a separate entity to explore the motivations and motives that coerce the student into enrolment.

Orientation programmes should be targeted at all postgraduate students and the effectiveness should be revisited to enquire if they are indeed effective in informing postgraduates about all the services available at UWC.

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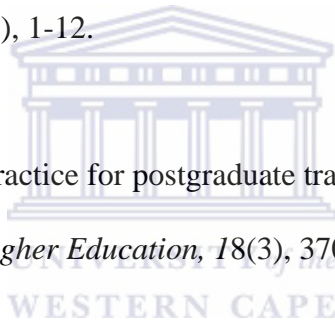
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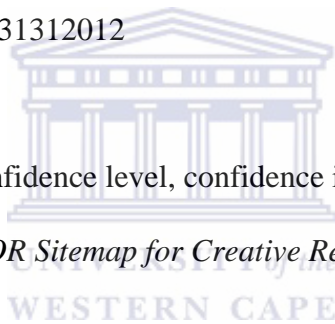
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Addendum A

Addendum B

Addendum C

Addendum D

Transition Questionnaire

This survey has been designed to give you (those who have commenced with Postgraduate studies) an opportunity to tell us about your transition experiences at UWC. We want to know:

- What has been helpful to you in your first year of Postgraduate study
- What has NOT been helpful
- What we need to improve on

I hope that you will take the time to fill out this online survey. It should only take about 10 minutes to complete and will give me valuable insights into your transition experience at UWC.

Thank you for participating. Please try to be open with your answers

Please tick on the most appropriate answer.

Section 1

Background Information		
1. In what age category did you fall when you enrolled for the first time for Postgraduate studies?		
a) under 23	1	
b)between 24 and 30	2	
c) between 31 and 35	3	
d) older than 35	4	

2. What qualifications did you held prior to enrolment		
a) a 4 year diploma	1	
b)a 4yr diploma with additional short courses	2	
c)a Bachelors Degree	3	
d)a Bachelors Degree plus postgraduate diploma	4	

3. Are you a South African Resident		
a) Yes	1	
b) No	2	
4. You are a		
a) Fulltime Student	1	
b)Part-time Student	2	

5. Your Home Language is		
a) English	1	
b) Afrikaans	2	
c) Xhosa or Zulu or Tswana	3	
d) other	4	

6. Marital status		
a) Never married	1	
b) married	2	
c) Xhosa or Zulu or Tswana	3	
d) other	4	

7. How many children do you have?		
a) None	1	
b) One	2	
c) Two	3	
d) More than two	4	

8.Employment Status		
a) Unemployment	1	
b) Employment fulltime	2	
c) Employment	3	
d) Employment (contract worker)	4	

9. Combined Household Income		
a) R 0 – R60 000	1	
b) R60 001- R120 000	2	
c) R120 001- R150 000	3	
d) More than R150 000	4	

Section2:

Academic Preparedness

1. How much experience do you have in your field of expertise?

		Please tick off in the block below
a)None	*1*	
b) 1year	*2*	
c)2-3years	*3*	
d)5 years	*4*	
e)More than 5years	*5*	

2. How often were you involved with research activities since prior enrollment for postgraduate studies?

a)Never	*1*	
b) Once	*2*	
c)Two or more times	*3*	
d)Active involvement research activities time since graduating	*4*	

3. Did you produce any publications and research papers prior to postgraduate studies?

a)Yes	*1*	
b)No	*2*	

4. Prior to enrollment for postgraduate studies did you have understanding of the research process?

a)I had no understanding of the research process	*1*	
b)Only research experience that I gained during undergraduate studies	*2*	
c)I attended other post basic programmes which increased my body of knowledge relating to research	*3*	

5. Did you ever read research articles during spare time before enrollment?		
a) No I never had any interest in research articles.	1	
b) Only when I'm required to do so.	2	
c) Yes, I sometimes read research articles.	3	
d) Yes, I frequently read research articles.	4	

6. Did you previously engage in evidence based practices in your field of expertise?		
a)Always	1	
b)Sometimes	2	
c)At least 1 or 2 times	3	
d)Never	4	

7. The last few years prior to enrollment did you attend any research or any other conferences involving your field of expertise?		
a)Never	1	
b)Once	2	
c)Twice	3	
d)More than 2 times	4	

Section 3:

Motivations for enrollment

| 1. List the main reason you enroll for postgraduate studies?		
a) I always wanted to do a masters degree.	1	
b) I wanted to expand my body of knowledge.	2	
c) Obtain the qualification and get a better compensated position at work.	3	
d) To improve my social status?	4	
e) To overcome boredom	5	

2. What does postgraduate studies means to you?		
a) It means reaching self actualization.	1	
b) A chance to improve my existing body of knowledge	2	
c) A chance to get involved influential people that could be used for networking.	3	

3. On enrollment, were you sure it is what you wanted to do?		
a)I was totally unsure	1	
b)I had my doubts	2	
c) I was sure it was what I wanted	3	

4.) How long have you been in the programme thus far?		
a)Less than one year	1	
b)Less than 2 years	2	
c)Less than 5 years	3	

5. So far I lost some of my eagerness to complete my studies?		
a)Strongly Agree	1	
b)Agree	2	
c)Strongly Disagree	3	
d) Disagree	4	

6. The postgraduate programme I'm attending has a……..		
A)Coursework only	1	
B)Coursework and Research project	2	
C)Research project only	3	
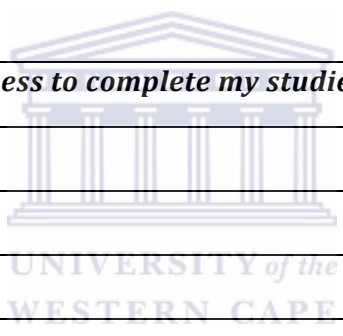
Section 4

Support services

1. Orientation programmes were in place after enrollment for postgraduate studies?		
a)Yes	1	
b)No	2	
c)I don't know	3	

2. How would you rate the orientation programme?		
a)Informative	1	
b)Superficial	2	
c)Not helpful at all	3	
d) Did not attend the orientation programme	4	

3. The following services are available at your institution. If you utilize of the services listed in this table, please take your time and rate the services according to the given scale. [1] Poor ; [2] Average; [3] Good; [4] Excellent				
a) Postgraduate enrollment and throughput program	1	2	3	4
b)Library service	1	2	3	4
c)Academic Writing Center	1	2	3	4
d)Consultations with academics, mentors, supervisors etc.	1	2	3	4
e)Academic counseling	1	2	3	4
f)Writing coaches and mentors	1	2	3	4
g)Information Communication Services(ICS)	1	2	3	4

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PRIVATE BAG X17, BELLVILLE 7535, SOUTH AFRICA

Tel: 021 959 2446

Fax: 021 959 2679

INFORMATION SHEET

Project Title: Academic Transition Experiences of Postgraduates Student at the Community and health Science Faculty, University of the Western Cape

What is this study about?

This is a research project conducted by Jeffrey Corne Hoffman at the University of the Western Cape. I am inviting you to participate in this research project because you're the Post Graduate Student enrolled at UWC, CHS faculty can help me explore your academic transition experiences. The purpose of this research project is to identify why numerous postgraduate students at UWC have difficulty adjusting to their academic learning environment.

What you will be asked to do if you agree to participate?

You will be asked to respond to the questionnaire concerning your academic experiences at CHS faculty, UWC. The questionnaire is comprehensive and will take not more than 10minutes to complete the entire questionnaire.

Would my participation in this study be kept confidential?

Your participation and all personal information will be kept confidential.

What are the risks of this research?

There are no known risks associated with participating in this research project.

What are the benefits of this research?

This research is not designed to help you personally, but the results may help the investigator to understand why some postgraduate students have a difficult academic transition. I Hope that, in the future, the UWC, CHS might benefit from this study through improved understanding postgraduate students academic transition experiences and assist future students more efficiently that will assist them to complete their post graduate studies in minimum time available to them.

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Do I have to be in this research and may I stop my participation?

Participation is voluntary and if you decide to participate in this research you may stop participating at any time, you will not be penalized or lose any benefits to which you otherwise qualify.

Ethical concerns of this research?

This research has been approved by the University of the Western Cape's Senate Research Committee and Ethics committee.

What if I had question?

If you have any questions regarding this study.

Please feel free to contact: J Hoffman @ 0219592446 or email me @ jhoffman@uwc.ac.za

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