

You Don't Have To Do It Alone:

An Overview of the Staff PhD Capacity Enhancement Programme

This Friday will mark the final module of the Staff PhD Capacity Enhancement Programme. From 27th to 28th January, our candidates will present and defend their dissertations to a group of assessors, supervisors, peers and academic representatives from various Universities. As an initiative launched by the Technological Higher Education Network South Africa (THENSA) and the Tshwane University of Technology (TUT) in June 2019, this customised programme was funded by the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) with the intention of increasing the number of staff with doctoral qualifications at Universities of Technology. Despite the notable strides in making Higher Education accessible in South Africa, pursuing a graduate degree remains difficult, especially at universities of technology where a Masters and PhD were only offered in the last decade. The Staff PhD Capacity Enhancement Programme not only provides staff members with an opportunity to develop the skills necessary to produce excellent research and publish in well-esteemed journals, but it also provides a sense of community that is usually absent in the pursuit of a doctoral degree.

As a lecturer in the Public Sector Finance Department at TUT, Sindi Mokgopa was warned that enrolling in a PhD would be an isolating process. “I [had] always heard from those who did their PhD that it is a lonely and challenging road to walk”, she said, via email correspondence. “But with THENSA, I knew that if I became demotivated for a few days the other week, I’d be working [during the others]”. Henra Muller, a lecturer in radiography at the Central University of Technology (CUT) in the Free-State, agreed with Mokgopa. “Being a part of [the Staff PhD Capacity Enhancement Programme] promoted a feeling of collegiality amongst [other] candidates”, she said in an email. “The busy schedules of an academic can be very overwhelming, but knowing that you are in the same boat as others helped”. In addition, Muller credited the pre-set timelines and structure of the programme which ensured that she was able to make consistent progress.

“There was also specific expert guidance for every step which helped,” she added.

Like all the candidates in the Staff PhD Capacity Enhancement Programme, Mokgopha and Muller had to strike a balance between writing their thesis, attending to her duties as lecturers, and maintaining a stable family life. Both admitted it was a challenge to juggle between professional and personal responsibilities. “My Head of Department and Grant Officer made this road smoother for me,” Mokgopha said. “They funded my lecturer relief which allowed me to concentrate more on my PhD and my husband also provided support by doing most of our household chores, which gave me the time to focus more on my research”. In addition, the arrival of the COVID-19 pandemic presented a new set of challenges to our cohort, with Muller admitting to the difficulties of having to work life and home life which were now located in the same place. “[It] was quite challenging”, she stated. “Especially adapting to the new online environment. Homeschooling your child whilst working from home full-time was a particular challenge, [but] hard work, supportive supervisors, colleagues and family members assisted with this. Sometimes innovative plans were needed to deal with roadblocks”.

As Higher Education Institutions migrated to remote learning and online teaching, many lecturers found themselves overwhelmed by what seemed like an even heavier workload. “Personally, it was challenging, and my progress was affected badly”, said Emily Mabote, Director: Quality Promotion Emily Mabote at TUT. “My workload at the office doubled due to remote multimodal teaching, learning and assessment. I could not progress much with my studies, but fortunately, my supervisor was understanding,” she said. Despite these difficulties, Mabote said that “access to experts in various aspects of the research process” and “learning materials via Google Drive” after workshops were highly beneficial to her. “The programme offers good foundational and advanced knowledge of the various aspects of the research process, starting with the Research proposal up to data analysis and reporting”, she said. “I met new peers from other universities and it gave me a sense of belonging to a community of doctoral scholars”.

The advantages of the Staff PhD Capacity Enhancement Programme were also championed by Baphiwe Daweti, who currently serves as the Acting Head of Department for Human Resources at the Durban University of Technology (DUT). “As a result of attending this programme, I enrolled at the Gordon Institute Business Science at the University of Pretoria, a top institution in the country”, he said. For Daweti, one of the primary benefits of the programme was how much it helped him shape a “comprehensive research proposal”. Additionally, Daweti believed the pressures of the COVID-19 pandemic taught him how to work around new stressors, teaching him “how to use technology and remain engaged with work colleagues”.

Perhaps the most distinguishing part of this programme is that approximately 70% of the candidates nominated by the Universities for this programme have been black women. In a country where transformation has yet to be realised in Higher Education, this is a remarkable achievement that will not only promote those from an underrepresented demographic, but also provide hope to women and girls wishing to pursue their doctoral studies. In closing, we would like to congratulate the inaugural candidates for the Staff PhD Capacity Enhancement Programme and wish them the best of luck for their presentations. Their resilience and fortitude during these troubling times is testament to the brilliant potential within our Member Institutions.

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "A. Padayachee", enclosed in a thin black rectangular border.

Dr Anshu Padayachee]

CEO: Technological Higher Education Network South Africa (THENSA)