

The Lived experience of doctoral students journey

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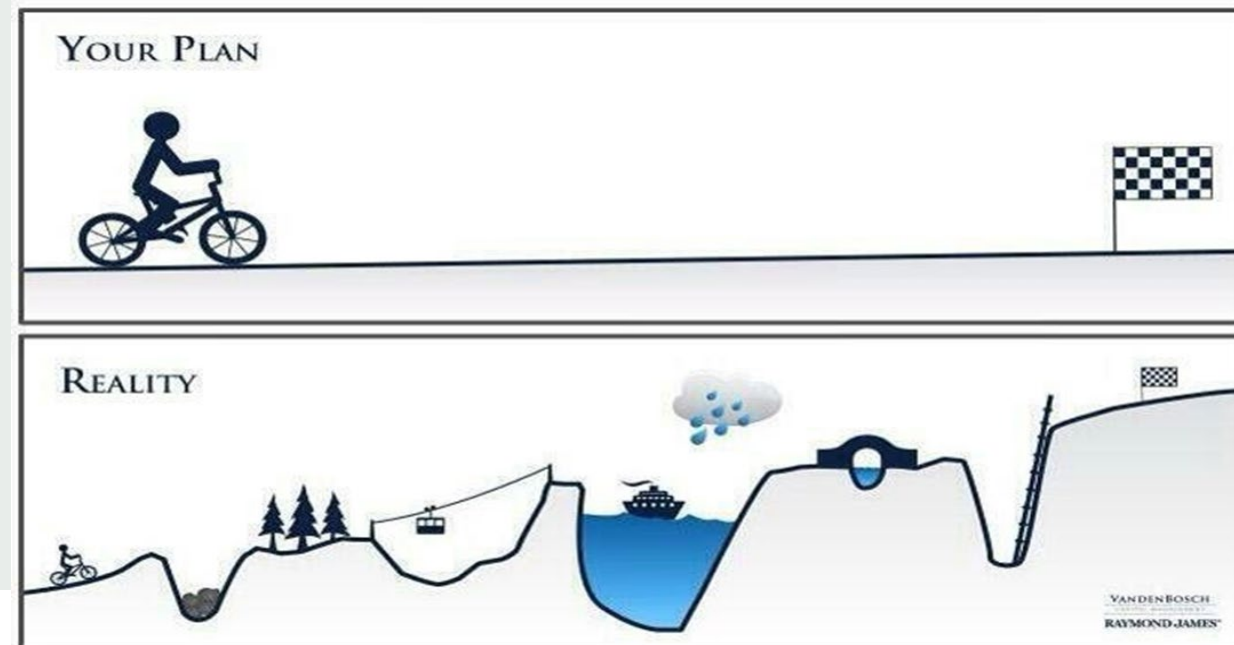
Doctoral study is a **transformative and demanding yet exciting journey**.

Requires students to **balance work, family, and other commitments** while pursuing academic growth.

Involves **emotional, psychological, physical, and social adjustments** throughout the process.

Key **challenges** include:

- Negotiating identity
- Building resilience
- Managing isolation
- Overcoming imposter syndrome





Research Gap

Existing studies* focus on measurable aspects (completion rates, supervision, performance)

But a gap and limited understanding of the **lived experiences** of doctoral students

*Baptista, 2013; Cotterall, 2013; Pretorius et al., 2019

Background

Navigating Identity, Purpose, and Resilience

Doctoral students must balance personal identity, sense of purpose, and resilience while engaging with research, institutional systems, and changing life circumstances (Sverdik et al., 2018)

Emotional States and Challenges

Common struggles include loneliness and financial stress, which impact emotional well-being.

Influence of Contexts

Personal, social, and cultural contexts significantly shape learning experiences and overall well-being (Frick & Pyhalto, 2020)

Daily Realities and Internal Struggles

The doctoral journey involves everyday challenges, internal conflicts, and moments of insight that collectively define the experience (Young, n.d.)

Role of Support Systems

Institutional and peer support are critical for enhancing psychological well-being and academic engagement.



Significance of Doctoral Learning



Balanced Well-being for Success

- Doctoral success depends on maintaining mental effort, emotional engagement, and physical well-being.
- Lack of balance can lead to burnout.

Inclusive, Student-Informed Policies

- Policies should incorporate the voices of past, present, and prospective students to ensure relevance and inclusivity (Borod, 2000; Cordova et al., 2023)

Responsive Systems

- Aligning institutional policies and support structures with students' lived realities fosters systems that address challenges to success and well-being. (Pretorius et al., 2019)



Significance for Institutional Responsiveness in education

Student success: Responsive policies reduce attrition and foster achievement.

Equity: Listening to student voices creates fair, inclusive environments.

Wellbeing: Timely support prevents burnout and builds resilience

Quality: Feedback improves supervision, curriculum, and resources

Engagement: Acting on concerns strengthens trust and motivation.

Mahsood et al.(2025)



Study

Aim/objectives/Recruitment

Aim

To explore and interpret the lived experiences of doctoral students throughout their academic journey.

Objectives

Identify key themes in the emotional and intellectual journey of doctoral students.

Examine the influence of supervision, institutional culture, & personal circumstances.

Understand how doctoral students derive meaning from their experiences.

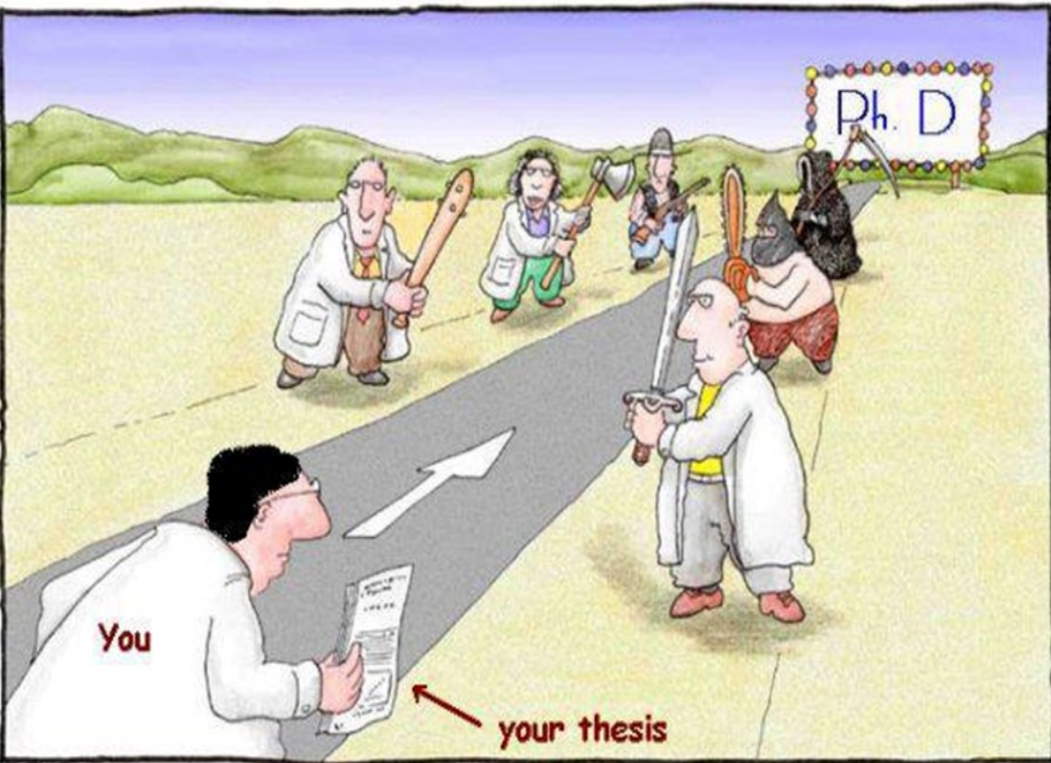
Provide recommendations to enhance support for future doctoral student success.

Recruitment Strategy

Participant recruitment will rely on snowball sampling, and there's a request to share information to help with this.

Advertise in all tertiary institutions

Research questions (sample)



1. What are the core experiences that shaped your doctoral journey?
2. How did you navigate challenges such as social isolation, family pressure and academic challenges?
3. In what ways do institutional and supervisory relationships influence your doctoral experience?
4. How do you reflect on your learning journey and its impact on personal and professional identity?
5. What factors contributed to the completion of your degree or withdrawal due to stress and burnout?
6. What institutional challenges, such as bureaucratic hurdles, resources, and rigid policies, contributed to your journey?
7. How do academic integrity pressures, such as advanced writing requirements, high expectations for thesis quality, and heavy workloads affect your well-being and academic progress?

Research design



Methodology: An **interpretive descriptive approach** (Sally Thorne) will be employed to capture the essence of qualitative lived experiences.

Aim: To deeply explore the emotional, social, and academic dimensions of doctoral students' journeys.

Participants: A purposive sample of 10–15 doctoral students from diverse disciplines and backgrounds, including past, current, and withdrawn candidates at various stages of study.

Data Collection: Semi-structured, in-depth interviews and/or questionnaires will be used to gather rich qualitative data.

Data Analysis: Themes will be analysed using qualitative analysis software, following Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis framework

Ethics

Maintaining ethical integrity is crucial for this study, given its focus on students' personal and sensitive experiences and the potential for institutional or individual bias. To safeguard and respect participants, the following measures will be implemented:

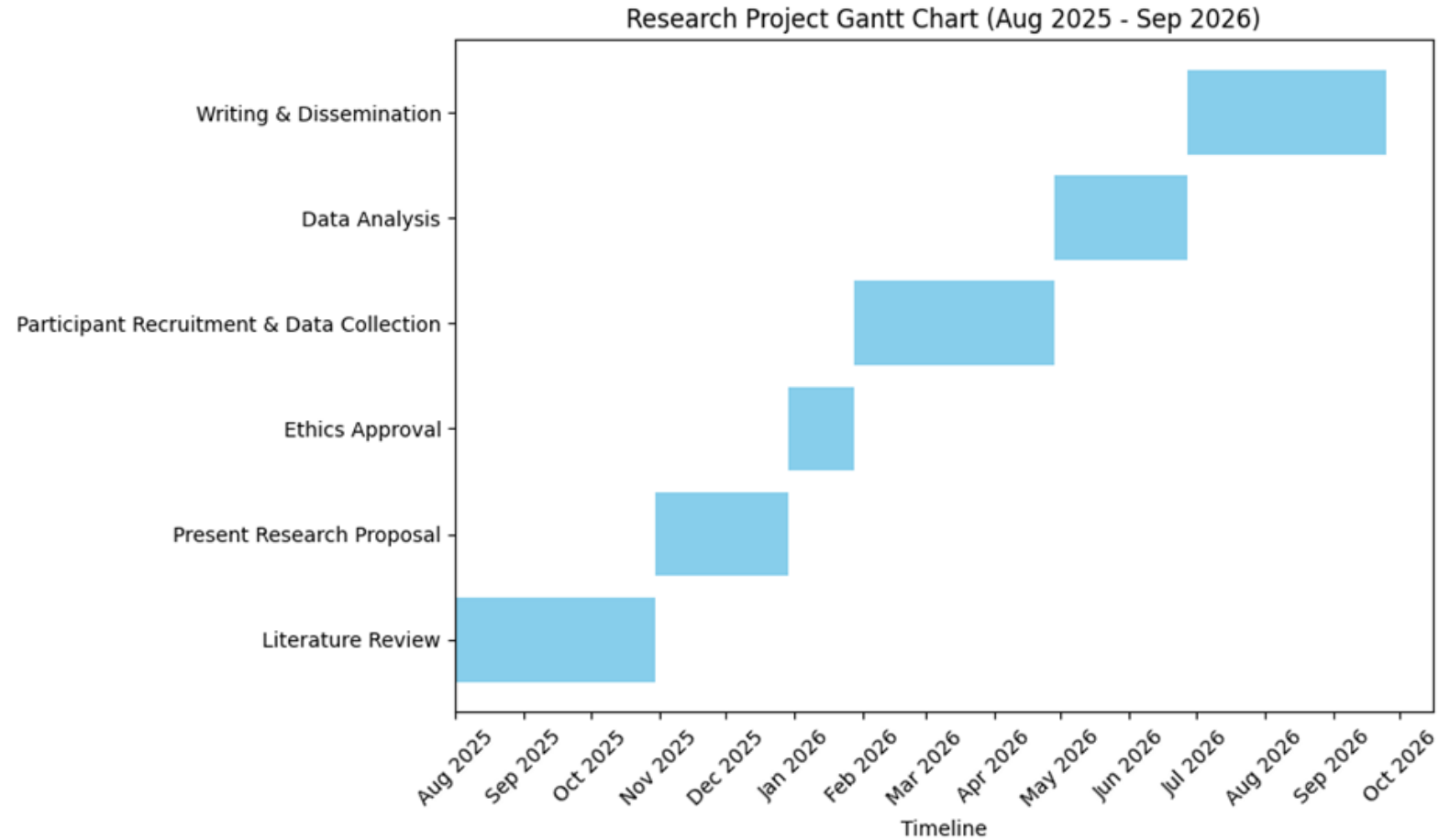
- **Informed Consent** – Participants to be informed of the study and voluntarily agree.
- **Confidentiality & Privacy** – Protect their personal data and maintain anonymity of institution
- **Cultural Safety** – Recognise cultural protocols.
- **Avoid Harm** – Minimise physical, psychological, and social risks to all.
- **Right to Withdraw** – Participants can withdraw at any stage without penalty.
- **Transparency** – Clearly explain purpose, methods, and use of data.
- **Ethics Approval** – Obtain approval from UREC.



Budget and resource

- Koha for participants @ \$50/participant
- Travel cost TBC
- Transcribing X 15 scripts approx \$2700
- Staff FTE: TBC
- Data analysis (Tuapapa Rangahau – Research resources)

Timeline



Conclusion

Looking forward to start process in feb 26

We rely on snowballing to get participants, please share

Support and help with data analysis from **Tuapapa Rangahau - Research**