



# Supervisors' lived experiences in advancing postgraduate research: From access to success at a South African university

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## ABSTRACT

This article investigates how supervisors contribute to epistemic justice by promoting postgraduate research from the point of access to eventual academic success. Fricker's theory of epistemic justice underpins the research, guided by an interpretive paradigm. A qualitative methodology with a phenomenological design was employed, and data was collected through interviews with two purposively selected supervisors. Key findings highlight that supervisor motivation and candidates' strong academic backgrounds significantly influence timely completion. Constructive supervisor-supervisee relationships foster effective progress, while institutional support through a conducive learning environment enhances research productivity. The personal traits of postgraduate students also play a pivotal role in determining the duration of study. Recommendations include promoting balance between academic and personal commitments, increasing supervisory capacity, improving infrastructure, and enhancing academic writing and research mentorship to improve completion rates. This study contributes to scholarship by deepening the understanding of supervisors' roles in promoting epistemic justice within postgraduate education, particularly in the South African context. The study adds to the limited body of research that explores the lived experiences of supervisors from an epistemic justice perspective, moving beyond purely administrative or pedagogical concerns to ethical and relational dimensions of supervision. Furthermore, it offers practical insights into how supervisor motivation, institutional support, and student attributes intersect to influence postgraduate research success. These findings inform policy, training, and institutional reforms aimed at improving postgraduate throughput and enhancing the quality of research supervision in higher education.

**Keywords:** Postgraduate success, knowledge advancement, supervisor support, epistemic justice, supervisor-supervisee dynamic.

## INTRODUCTION

Postgraduate education is a critical component of national development, innovation, and knowledge production. In South Africa, universities are under increasing pressure to improve postgraduate throughput rates, largely driven by government funding incentives that reward timely graduations.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> S. Zulu, "Key Factors Influencing Graduation on Time among Postgraduate Students: Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis" (Zulu University of KwaZulu-Natal, 2023).

However, achieving successful and timely postgraduate research completion remains a complex challenge, particularly within historically disadvantaged institutions (HDIs). These institutions often face systemic obstacles such as insufficient supervisory capacity, inadequate infrastructure, and limited financial and academic support for both students and supervisors. Several studies have identified key factors that influence postgraduate research completion. These include financial resources,<sup>2</sup> the quality of supervision and institutional support,<sup>3</sup> and project feasibility and alignment with supervisors' expertise.<sup>4</sup>

In the South African context, the lack of sustainable financial models, such as postgraduate research endowment funds, has been flagged as a barrier to progress.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, a quality research environment and access to adequate resources are essential for academic success.<sup>6</sup> Beyond structural and institutional factors, intrinsic characteristics of students, including motivation, resilience, and personal circumstances, also significantly affect research progress and completion.<sup>7</sup> While much research has focused on the challenges faced by postgraduate students, there is limited scholarship on the lived experiences of supervisors and how their roles and practices contribute to epistemic justice in postgraduate education. Fricker's theory of epistemic justice, concerned with the fair distribution of knowledge and the recognition of individuals as credible knowers, offers a critical lens through which to examine supervision.<sup>8</sup> Despite a growing body of literature, few studies focus specifically on the lived experiences of supervisors and how they navigate institutional and student-related challenges to support success. There is also limited research examining how supervisors promote epistemic justice within the postgraduate journey, particularly in historically disadvantaged South African institutions. This study addresses these gaps by focusing on supervisors' perspectives in facilitating access and success in postgraduate research. It explores how supervisors promote access and success in postgraduate research within a South African university context, especially under the constraints faced by HDIs. The objective of this study is to explore supervisors' lived experiences in supporting postgraduate students from the point of access to the successful completion of their studies. The study is guided by an interpretive paradigm and draws on a qualitative, phenomenological design to capture in-depth perspectives. Data were collected through interviews with two purposively selected supervisors at a South African university.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

The timely completion of postgraduate research is a persistent concern in higher education, with implications for students, institutions, and national development goals. Delays in completion not only impact students' academic and professional trajectories but also affect institutional efficiency, as extended enrolments limit the intake capacity for new candidates.<sup>9</sup> While a broad range of factors contribute to these delays, the supervisory relationship, institutional support, and broader systemic structures play critical roles in shaping postgraduate research outcomes.

<sup>2</sup> Staphanie C Nevill, *Path through Graduate School a Longitudinal Examination 10 Years after Bachelor's Degree* (DIANE Publishing, 2007).

<sup>3</sup> Jaquiline Amani, Helena Myeya, and Mariana Mhewa, "Understanding the Motives for Pursuing Postgraduate Studies and Causes of Late Completion: Supervisors and Supervisees' Experiences," *Sage Open* 12, no. 3 (2022): 21582440221109584.

<sup>4</sup> Els Van Rooij, Marjon Fokkens-Bruinsma, and Ellen Jansen, "Factors That Influence PhD Candidates' Success: The Importance of PhD Project Characteristics," *Studies in Continuing Education* 43, no. 1 (2021): 48–67.

<sup>5</sup> M. Sondlo, "A Comparative Study of Student Retention and Throughput in a Postgraduate Distance Education Programme" (University of Pretoria, South Africa, 2016).

<sup>6</sup> Supriya Kumar Ghatak, Balagopal G. Menon, and Biswajit Mahanty, "Identifying, Prioritizing and Ranking of Factors Influencing the PhD Milestones' Completion Delays," *Quality & Quantity* 55, no. 4 (August 2021): 1457–76, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11135-020-01068-5>; Rachel Spronken-Smith, Claire Cameron, and Robin Quigg, "Factors Contributing to High PhD Completion Rates: A Case Study in a Research-Intensive University in New Zealand," *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education* 43, no. 1 (2018): 94–109.

<sup>7</sup> Liz Thomas, "Developing a National Approach to Improve Student Success in Higher Education: New Insights from a Comparative Analysis of England and the Czech Republic," *Hungarian Educational Research Journal* 9, no.2 (2019): 165–88.

<sup>8</sup> Miranda Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing* (Oxford university press, 2007).

<sup>9</sup> J. Mdiniso and L. Kosi, "Factors Contributing to the Delayed Completion of Postgraduate Students" (University of Zululand, 2023).

### Supervisory Quality and Capacity

A recurring theme in the literature is the centrality of supervision in postgraduate success. Effective supervision entails more than subject matter expertise; it includes mentorship, communication, timely feedback, and emotional support. Motshoane emphasizes that many South African institutions face shortages of qualified and experienced supervisors, especially in resource-constrained universities.<sup>10</sup> The Council on Higher Education also highlights this issue and recommends models such as co-supervision and structured mentorship programmes to build supervisory capacity and ensure continuity in supervision.<sup>11</sup> Internationally, Zhang found that successful PhD completions in Australian and Asian universities were strongly associated with supervisor accessibility, mutual respect, and alignment of research interests, reinforcing the importance of interpersonal dynamics in supervision.<sup>12</sup>

### Institutional Structures and Cultures

Institutional culture and structural support mechanisms significantly influence postgraduate progress. Boughey and McKenna argue that many South African institutions, especially those historically disadvantaged, still operate within rigid academic structures that fail to accommodate the diverse needs of postgraduate students, many of whom are employed full-time or come from underprivileged backgrounds.<sup>13</sup> These structures often lack the flexibility, resources, and inclusive cultures needed to support diverse student populations. This concern is echoed by Mdiniso and Kosi, who note that bureaucratic inefficiencies, outdated administrative processes, and limited digital infrastructure further frustrate students' academic journeys.<sup>14</sup> In the African context, Ndlovu and Wambugu explore how institutional reform in Kenyan and Zimbabwean universities has improved postgraduate support services through policy innovation and digital learning platforms, though these successes remain uneven. They argue that student success hinges on a synergistic relationship between supervision and institutional responsiveness.<sup>15</sup>

### Financial Constraints and Student Preparedness

Financial limitations continue to be a dominant barrier to postgraduate success, particularly in South Africa. Many students lack sufficient funding to support their studies, which can extend the duration of enrolment and increase dropout rates. While the National Research Foundation (NRF) and other agencies provide some support, demand far exceeds supply.<sup>16</sup> Financial insecurity also impacts student preparedness and ability to focus on research. A lack of funding can result in students taking on employment, which limits time for research and reduces engagement with supervisors. International studies, such as that by Smith and O'Connor, highlight similar trends in UK and Canadian universities, noting that part-time or working students face higher risks of attrition due to competing demands and reduced access to academic support.<sup>17</sup>

### Epistemic Justice and Supervisory Practice

Underlying many of the structural and interpersonal challenges in postgraduate supervision is the issue of epistemic justice. Fricker's theory posits that knowledge practices must be inclusive and recognize the credibility of all knowers.<sup>18</sup> In postgraduate education, this means creating equitable spaces where

<sup>10</sup> Prudence Motshoane, "Epistemic Agency and Supervisory Practice in South African Postgraduate Education," *South African Journal of Higher Education* 37, no. 4 (2023): 88–105.

<sup>11</sup> Council on Higher Education, *Annual Report 2022* (Pretoria: CHE, 2022).

<sup>12</sup> Olivia Yan Zhang, "Multi-Formed Power and Coordinated Responses in Academic Supervision," *International Journal of Applied Linguistics* 35, no. 2 (May 25, 2025): 782–95, <https://doi.org/10.1111/ijal.12660>.

<sup>13</sup> Chrissie Boughey and Shae McKenna, *Understanding Higher Education: Alternative Perspectives* (Cape Town: African Minds, 2021).

<sup>14</sup> Mdiniso and Kosi, "Factors Contributing to the Delayed Completion of Postgraduate Students."

<sup>15</sup> Mthokozisi, Ndlovu and James Wambugu, "Postgraduate Success in African Universities: Institutional Reform and Supervisory Practice," *African Journal of Education and Development* 12, no. 1 (2025): 45–63.

<sup>16</sup> Council on Higher Education, *Annual Report 2022*.

<sup>17</sup> Spronken-Smith, Cameron, and Quigg, "Factors Contributing to High PhD Completion Rates: A Case Study in a Research-Intensive University in New Zealand."

<sup>18</sup> Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing*.

students' voices are heard, valued, and supported. When supervisors fail to engage students as equal partners in knowledge production, whether through neglect, bias, or over-direction, it undermines students' confidence and academic development. Recent South African studies emphasize the role of epistemic agency in supervision, arguing for relational and dialogical models that empower students to contribute meaningfully to scholarly discourse.<sup>19</sup>

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Fricker's theory of epistemic justice offers a powerful lens through which to understand the dynamics of power, knowledge, and recognition in postgraduate supervision.<sup>20</sup> The theory distinguishes between testimonial injustice, where a speaker's credibility is unfairly downgraded due to prejudice, and hermeneutical injustice, where individuals or groups lack the interpretive resources to make sense of their experiences in dominant discourses. In the context of postgraduate research, these injustices can manifest when students, especially those from historically marginalized or non-traditional backgrounds, are not seen as credible knowers or when their intellectual contributions are undervalued. Recent scholarship has emphasized that such epistemic injustices often occur subtly within supervisory relationships through unequal power dynamics, silencing, or the dismissal of culturally situated knowledge.<sup>21</sup> Moreover, the lack of inclusive academic cultures and limited epistemological diversity in research spaces can perpetuate hermeneutical gaps that hinder students from fully participating in the meaning-making process.

## METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a qualitative approach grounded in phenomenology to understand the lived experiences of supervisors in facilitating postgraduate success. This design enables a deep exploration of the meanings participants ascribe to their experiences. An interpretive paradigm guided the research, emphasizing the construction of reality from the participants' perspectives. Interviews with two supervisors provided detailed narratives, and the researcher's role was interpretive, analysing the subjective insights shared during these discussions. The interpretive paradigm shaped this article, aligning with the aim to understand supervisors' personal experiences in navigating and promoting access to and success in postgraduate education.

**Population and Sampling:** The study focused on postgraduate supervisors at a South African university. Using purposive sampling, two supervisors were selected based on their experience and relevance to the study's focus.

**Data Collection:** Semi-structured interviews were used to gather rich, descriptive data on supervisors' perspectives. Interview schedules guided discussions, and data were collected in participants' offices.

**Data Analysis:** Discourse analysis was employed to interpret how language reflects power, knowledge sharing, and ideologies in the supervisory relationship. This method enabled the exploration of how communication contributes to knowledge construction, identity, and inclusion within research supervision. Themes related to power dynamics, support structures, and research navigation were identified and examined.

**Trustworthiness:** Following Creswell, the study ensured trustworthiness through:

- **Credibility:** Achieved by validating findings with participants through transcript reviews.
- **Confirmability:** Ensured through data audits and checks against original recordings and notes.

<sup>19</sup> Motshoane, "Epistemic Agency and Supervisory Practice in South African Postgraduate Education."

<sup>20</sup> Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing*.

<sup>21</sup> Simphiwe Kumalo, "Reimagining Supervision through an Epistemic Justice Lens: A Decolonial Approach to Knowledge in Higher Education," *Critical Studies in Education* 65, no. 2 (2024): 198–213; Sipho Daniels and Naledi Radebe, "Supervision as a Site of Power: Recognizing Epistemic Injustice in Postgraduate Research," *South African Review of Education* 29, no. 1 (2023): 15–32.

- **Dependability:** Strengthened by thorough documentation of research processes, allowing for replication.
- **Transferability:** Addressed by providing detailed contextual information and participant selection rationale.<sup>22</sup>

**Ethical Considerations:** Ethical guidelines were strictly followed. Participants were informed about the study's purpose, and consent was obtained. Confidentiality was maintained throughout the research process.

## PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS

Interviews with two supervisors provided detailed narratives, and the role of the researcher was interpretive, analysing the subjective insights shared during these discussions. The following themes emerged.

### Theme 1: Possible barriers to accessing success in postgraduate studies

#### Participant Supervisor 1

*“To ensure that a prospective student does not encounter challenges in accessing and succeeding in postgraduate studies, proper consideration must be given. If the topic the student intends to research does not align with the faculty’s designated research focus areas, the student may be denied admission. Applicants must submit a concept note outlining their research interests. If the university lacks supervisors who are knowledgeable in the proposed area, the student may not be admitted.”*

#### Participant Supervisor 2

*“Funding and appropriate supervision.”*

### Theme 2: Quality Research

The process of guiding students into independent research enables them to generate new knowledge, which contributes to their personal and professional development, as well as national progress.

#### P 1

*“Admission into postgraduate research programs typically requires prior completion of a research methods module appropriate to the level of study. This module introduces students to research proposal writing, helping them gain confidence as they begin their research journey. The quality of supervision and the student’s dedication are critical and may determine whether the research process succeeds or fails. Through this journey, especially at the doctoral level, students are expected to produce original knowledge that benefits their communities. A well-executed thesis or dissertation provides advantages to both the student and the supervisor, including opportunities for academic presentations and publications in reputable journals and conference proceedings. This enhances the student's personal and academic growth, boosts confidence, and strengthens the research reputation of the supervisor and the institution, thus promoting national research development.”*

#### P 2

*“Workshops on proposal and academic writing are necessary, covering areas such as referencing, constructing paragraphs and sentences, time management, and acknowledging students' personal lives.”*

### Assurance of promoting postgraduate access to success

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<sup>22</sup> John W Creswell, *A Concise Introduction to Mixed Methods Research* (SAGE publications, 2021).

A key aspect of the initial meeting is to identify and examine the motivations behind students' decisions to pursue postgraduate studies. Typically, students aim to progress academically from Honours to Master's and eventually to Doctoral degrees for both personal fulfilment and career advancement. Postgraduate qualifications elevate individuals' status in society and academia and often lead to better job prospects and promotions. Once students achieve a Master's degree, they often become supervisors themselves, thereby enhancing their academic standing.

**P 2**

*"I am not always aware of their reasons, except for those in my immediate circle whom I personally encourage to pursue further qualifications."*

### **Theme 3: Management of Postgraduate Studies**

Both the student and supervisor must be equally committed to managing the postgraduate process effectively to ensure timely completion and high-quality output.

**P1**

*"Success in research is dependent on the mutual commitment of both parties. A formal agreement outlining the research plan should be signed and followed strictly. The student must actively drive the study by submitting work regularly; the supervisor, in turn, must provide timely feedback. Students should then revise their work accordingly and resubmit for further review. This cycle helps streamline the research process, making completion more efficient and manageable. Mutual dedication results in high-quality research outcomes."*

**P 2**

*"I ensure quality supervision by thoroughly reviewing their work and providing meaningful feedback."*

### **Theme 4: Outcomes Achievement**

Achieving intended research outcomes requires the student's commitment and perseverance.

**P 1**

*"The supervisor must encourage students to submit their work regularly and offer consistent feedback. This creates a productive cycle of submission, feedback, revision, and resubmission. Such a process enhances the commitment of both parties and drives the study toward successful completion within the required timeframe."*

**P 2**

*"Regular motivation and timely feedback. Motivating and orienting students is vital for timely completion. Establishing mutual understanding between the supervisor and the student is important. Encouragement and support from the supervisor - especially through consistent feedback - can inspire students to stay focused and work harder. A clear supervisor-supervisee contract that outlines timelines and meeting schedules is essential."*

**P 2**

*"Being aware of their personal circumstances helps motivate them to finish."*

### **Theme 5: Supervisor-Supervisee Relationship**

A strong and respectful working relationship between supervisor and supervisee significantly impacts postgraduate success.

**P 1**

*"My view is consistent with what I have already shared."*

**P 2**

*"Maintaining regular communication through social media, introducing research as a*

*lifestyle, having informal discussions about general research topics, and helping students appreciate the broader purpose of research are all key strategies.”*

## DISCUSSION

### Theme 1: Barriers to Postgraduate Success

The findings revealed that institutional culture and structural support mechanisms play a pivotal role in shaping the postgraduate student experience and determining academic outcomes. However, in many contexts, particularly within historically disadvantaged institutions, these structures often act as barriers rather than enablers of success. This study fully concurs with Boughey and McKenna, who highlight that many South African universities continue to operate within rigid and exclusionary academic frameworks that are misaligned with the evolving needs of a diverse postgraduate cohort.<sup>23</sup> These institutional cultures often fail to accommodate students who are employed full-time, financially constrained, or who come from under-resourced educational backgrounds. Such inflexibility manifests in limited course delivery options, inflexible timelines, and a lack of tailored academic and emotional support. Mdiniso and Kosi further elaborate on the structural inefficiencies that compound these challenges, citing bureaucratic delays, outdated administrative systems, and insufficient digital infrastructure as significant impediments to progress.<sup>24</sup> These obstacles create a frustrating environment for students, who must navigate cumbersome processes for research approvals, funding disbursements, and access to academic resources—often without adequate institutional guidance. From a broader continental perspective, Ndlovu and Wambugu examine reform initiatives in Kenyan and Zimbabwean universities aimed at improving postgraduate support. Their study illustrates that institutional responsiveness—through policy innovation and investment in digital learning platforms—can enhance student experiences.<sup>25</sup> However, they caution that these reforms remain unevenly implemented and highlight the critical need for sustained institutional commitment. They argue that the success of such initiatives depends on the synergistic interplay between effective supervision and responsive, student-centred institutional structures. Collectively, the literature underscores that institutional barriers—manifested through rigid cultures, administrative inefficiencies, and inadequate digital and academic support—continue to hinder postgraduate progress. Addressing these challenges requires not only structural reform but also a shift in institutional ethos towards inclusivity, adaptability, and proactive student engagement.

### Theme 2: Postgraduate Access to Success

The findings revealed that access to postgraduate education is not solely about entry into a programme; it encompasses the conditions and supports necessary for students to progress and succeed throughout their research journey. A growing body of literature emphasises that access must be conceptualised holistically, beyond admission criteria to include equitable access to supervision, financial resources, academic support structures, and enabling institutional environments.<sup>26</sup>

### Theme 3: Admission Criteria and Gatekeeping

One of the initial barriers to postgraduate success lies in restrictive and often opaque admission criteria. These criteria can serve as gatekeeping mechanisms that disproportionately affect students from historically disadvantaged backgrounds. Rigid selection processes, particularly those not aligned with principles of transformation and equity, can prevent otherwise capable candidates from accessing postgraduate opportunities.<sup>27</sup> Furthermore, misalignment between students' undergraduate preparation and postgraduate expectations further complicates successful access and progression, particularly in under-resourced institutions.

### Sub-theme 3.1: Supervision as a Gateway to Success

<sup>23</sup> Boughey and McKenna, *Understanding Higher Education: Alternative Perspectives*.

<sup>24</sup> Mdiniso and Kosi, “Factors Contributing to the Delayed Completion of Postgraduate Students.”

<sup>25</sup> Ndlovu and Wambugu, “Postgraduate Success in African Universities: Institutional Reform and Supervisory Practice.”

<sup>26</sup> Mdiniso and Kosi, “Factors Contributing to the Delayed Completion of Postgraduate Students.”

<sup>27</sup> Mdiniso and Kosi, “Factors Contributing to the Delayed Completion of Postgraduate Students.”

It is evident that the central theme in the discourse on postgraduate success is the supervisory relationship. Supervision is not only critical for academic guidance but also functions as a key determinant of student retention, motivation, and timely completion.<sup>28</sup> In this regard, access to experienced and supportive supervisors constitutes a form of "academic capital" that can either enable or inhibit success. However, in many South African institutions, there is a persistent shortage of qualified supervisors, especially in rural and historically disadvantaged universities.<sup>29</sup> This shortage limits students' access to quality mentorship, regular feedback, and intellectual engagement.

### **Sub-theme 3.2: Financial Accessibility**

Financial support is another determinant of access to success. While access to postgraduate programmes may be granted, students frequently encounter financial instability that undermines their ability to complete their studies. This includes inadequate funding for tuition, living expenses, research-related travel, and data collection.<sup>30</sup> Unlike undergraduate students, postgraduates often find themselves excluded from comprehensive financial aid schemes. The lack of dedicated and sustainable postgraduate funding models, such as research endowments or targeted scholarships, remains a significant barrier to both access and success.

### **Sub-theme 3.3: Institutional Support and Infrastructure**

Access to success also depends on the extent to which institutions provide enabling environments. This includes access to academic writing support, research methodology workshops, mental health services, and functioning administrative systems.<sup>31</sup> In institutions where such support structures are underdeveloped, students—especially first-generation and part-time postgraduates—are less likely to complete their studies successfully. Furthermore, bureaucratic inefficiencies, such as delays in research proposal approvals and ethics clearance processes, disproportionately affect those with limited institutional knowledge or support networks.<sup>32</sup>

### **Sub-theme 3.4: Systemic and Structural Inequities**

Broader systemic issues further complicate access to success. These include historical inequities in the higher education system, geographic disparities in institutional capacity, and the legacy of exclusion that continues to shape research cultures in South Africa. For example, English-language dominance in academic discourse may marginalise students who are not proficient in academic English, thereby limiting their ability to engage fully in scholarly activities.<sup>33</sup> Moreover, traditional academic cultures often fail to accommodate diverse epistemologies, research topics, and methodological approaches, which can alienate students from marginalised communities.

## **Theme 4: Strategies to Improve Access and Outcomes**

In response to these barriers, the Council on Higher Education recommends several structural interventions to promote equity in postgraduate success. These include:

- Developing sustainable funding models tailored for postgraduate students.
- Institutionalising co-supervision and structured mentorship models to build supervisory capacity.
- Establishing postgraduate support units to offer academic, emotional, and administrative assistance.
- Promoting inclusive research cultures that value diverse ways of knowing and being.

<sup>28</sup> Nevill, *Path through Graduate School a Longitudinal Examination 10 Years after Bachelor's Degree*; Amani, Myeya, and Mhewa, "Understanding the Motives for Pursuing Postgraduate Studies and Causes of Late Completion: Supervisors and Supervisees' Experiences."

<sup>29</sup> Motshoane, "Epistemic Agency and Supervisory Practice in South African Postgraduate Education."

<sup>30</sup> Sondlo, "A Comparative Study of Student Retention and Throughput in a Postgraduate Distance Education Programme."

<sup>31</sup> Van Rooij, Fokkens-Bruinsma, and Jansen, "Factors That Influence PhD Candidates' Success: The Importance of PhD Project Characteristics."

<sup>32</sup> Amani, Myeya, and Mhewa, "Understanding the Motives for Pursuing Postgraduate Studies and Causes of Late Completion: Supervisors and Supervisees' Experiences."

<sup>33</sup> Motshoane, "Epistemic Agency and Supervisory Practice in South African Postgraduate Education."

Collectively, these measures aim to transform the notion of access from a point of entry to a sustained pathway toward success. Ensuring that all students, not just those with pre-existing advantages, can thrive in postgraduate education is not only an institutional imperative but also a societal one, particularly in contexts marked by historical inequality.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

To address the institutional barriers that hinder postgraduate success, universities must implement a multi-level strategy focused on structural reform, capacity building, and inclusive academic cultures. First, institutions should modernise administrative systems and reduce bureaucratic inefficiencies by adopting streamlined, digitised processes that improve access to services and research support. Flexible programme structures—such as part-time pathways, blended learning, and modular course designs—should be introduced to accommodate working students and those with diverse life circumstances. Investment in supervisor development through co-supervision models, mentorship training, and workload management is essential to improve the quality and consistency of postgraduate guidance. Additionally, institutions must foster inclusive and student-responsive cultures that actively support underrepresented and financially disadvantaged students through targeted funding mechanisms, research support services, and integrated wellbeing programmes. These interventions, collectively, can contribute to more equitable and effective postgraduate outcomes.

## CONCLUSION

Testimonial justice is realised when knowledge is exchanged in ways that are free from identity-based prejudice, thereby affirming both the credibility and the humanity of the knowledge-bearer. It entails an ethical imperative in which the speaker not only conveys knowledge but also supports the listener's comprehension, ensuring that epistemic power is distributed fairly and responsibly. As both a moral and epistemic standard, testimonial justice serves to guard against exclusion and domination in the processes of knowledge production and dissemination. Crucially, achieving such justice necessitates the intentional inclusion of marginalised and historically underrepresented voices in epistemic spaces. By recognising and legitimising their epistemic agency, the collective understanding of human experience is enriched, and the production of knowledge becomes more representative, equitable, and socially transformative.

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