

Experiences of Postgraduate Students during Proposal Writing and Defence Period: A Wellness Perspective

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Abstract

The paper discusses experiences of post graduates' students in Open Distance Learning (ODL) Institutions during proposal writing. The study was underpinned by Activity theory (CHAT) Lev Vygotsky (1978) and Wellness theory (Hettler, 1987), which acted as a lens to enable the researcher gain a deeper an integrative lens of transactional distance theory (Moore, 2007), Cultural Historical understanding on postgraduate students' experiences during proposal writing until defence period. The study is located in a constructivist paradigm and it is qualitative in nature. Fourteen participants which include 10 post graduates' students (age range 35-46) and 4 lecturers/supervisors (age range 44-55) were purposively selected from one institution which was purposively selected as well. The main data collection techniques will be observation, in-depth and focus group interviews as well as supplemented by documentary review. Two focus groups of five students in each group will be formed. Trustworthiness to this study was ensured through credibility, transferability, conformability and dependability. In analysing data, narratives were transcribed from the digital recorder and typed. The researcher used the thematic content analysis to analyse her data. Discussion of findings are based on the following sessions: topic selection; supervision; student commitment; communication as an integral part. Furthermore, conclusions based on the findings in this study are given.

Introduction

Proposal writing and defense represent critical milestones in the academic journey of postgraduate students. These phases are particularly complex within Open and Distance Learning (ODL) environments where students often face challenges that differ significantly from those in traditional settings. This study explored the lived experiences of postgraduate students during proposal writing and the defense period through a wellness-oriented lens.

Underpinned by Cultural Historical Activity Theory (CHAT) by Vygotsky (1978), Hettler's Wellness Theory (1987), and Moore's Transactional Distance Theory (2007), the research offers an integrated perspective on how institutional structures, student agency, and psychological wellness intersect to shape academic experiences. By focusing on a single ODL institution, the research aims to shed light on common patterns and unique narratives that define the postgraduate experience in this educational model.

Theoretical Framework

Underpinned by Cultural Historical Activity Theory (CHAT) by Vygotsky (1978), Hettler's Wellness Theory (1987), and Moore's Transactional Distance Theory (2007), the research offers an integrated perspective on how institutional structures, student agency, and psychological wellness intersect to shape academic experiences. By focusing on a single ODL institution, the research aims to shed light on common patterns and unique narratives that define the postgraduate experience in this educational model. CHAT, grounded in the work of Vygotsky, emphasizes the sociocultural nature of learning. The theory posits that learning is mediated by tools and signs within a given context. In this study, the research process (proposal writing and defense) is examined as an activity system involving subjects (students), tools (academic resources, supervision), rules (institutional guidelines), community (academic peers and supervisors), and outcomes (successful proposal defense). Hettler's Wellness Theory introduces six dimensions of wellness—emotional, intellectual, physical, social, occupational, and spiritual. This framework helps analyze the multidimensional wellness challenges and strengths postgraduate students experience during the proposal process. Moore's theory highlights the pedagogical and psychological gap between learners and instructors in distance education. The theory is instrumental in understanding how communication, structure, and learner autonomy influence postgraduate students' experiences in ODL settings.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative, constructivist paradigm which supports the exploration of subjective experiences. A case study design was chosen to deeply examine a single ODL institution. This study employed purposive sampling, a non-probability sampling technique widely used in qualitative research to select participants who possess specific characteristics relevant to the research question (Palinkas et al., 2015; Etikan, Musa, & Alkassim, 2016). The goal of purposive sampling is not statistical generalization, but rather to gain in-depth insights from information-rich cases that can illuminate the phenomenon under investigation (Patton, 2015).

A total of 14 participants were selected from one Open and Distance Learning (ODL) institution in one developing country, which was also purposively chosen based on its high enrolment of postgraduate students and its structured support mechanisms for research supervision. The participant group consisted of:

- 10 postgraduate students, aged between 35 and 46 years, all of whom were actively engaged in proposal development or had recently undergone the proposal defence process.
- 4 academic supervisors/lecturers, aged between 44 and 55 years, all of whom had extensive experience mentoring postgraduate students through the research proposal and defence phases.

This composition ensured a diverse yet focused set of perspectives from both students and supervisors, allowing the study to examine not only the students' internal experiences and challenges, but also how these were shaped and responded to within supervisory relationships and institutional practices.

The inclusion of mature postgraduate students reflects the typical demographic in many ODL institutions, where learners often return to higher education after extended periods in the

workforce or while balancing family responsibilities. Their experiences provided rich insights into how adult learners navigate academic demands within the context of broader life commitments—a key dimension of wellness.

Supervisors were included to triangulate data, verify patterns emerging from student narratives, and provide institutional and pedagogical context. Their perspectives were critical in understanding the structural and relational dynamics that affect students' progress and well-being during the research process. This dual focus supports the study's theoretical underpinnings—Cultural Historical Activity Theory (CHAT), Wellness Theory, and Transactional Distance Theory—by illuminating both individual agency and the socio-cultural systems in which learning and wellness are negotiated.

Participants were recruited through email invitations distributed through the university's postgraduate support office. Selection was based on self-reported involvement in either the proposal writing stage or supervisory roles during the 2023–2024 academic year. Ethical clearance was obtained, and informed consent was secured from all participants prior to their involvement in interviews and focus groups.

This sampling method enabled the researcher to achieve theoretical saturation, the point at which no new themes or insights emerged from the data, thus affirming the adequacy of the sample size for a qualitative inquiry of this scope (Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006). To ensure a comprehensive exploration of postgraduate students' experiences during the proposal writing and defence phases, this study employed multiple qualitative data collection methods. The use of triangulation—collecting data through different sources—enhanced the study's credibility and depth (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Denzin, 2012).

Semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted with all 14 participants—10 postgraduate students and 4 academic supervisors. This method is well-suited for uncovering detailed personal narratives and the nuanced meanings that participants assign to their experiences (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2018). Each interview lasted between 45 and 75 minutes and was guided by a flexible protocol that allowed for follow-up questions and probing, depending on participant responses.

This approach provided participants the space to articulate their struggles and successes, particularly in relation to wellness and academic progression. It was particularly important for mature ODL learners, who often juggle complex life roles, including employment and caregiving responsibilities (Kasworm, 2014). All interviews were audio-recorded with consent and transcribed verbatim. This ensured an accurate account of participant voices, allowing for rigorous thematic analysis and meaningful interpretation.

Two focus group discussions (FGDs) were conducted, each comprising five postgraduate students at similar stages of their research journey. FGDs are particularly useful in uncovering collective experiences, group dynamics, and shared norms (Krueger & Casey, 2015). They allow participants to reflect on and respond to each other's views, potentially bringing out insights that might not emerge in individual interviews. The discussions were guided by a semi-structured question route that explored themes such as supervision experiences, communication practices, emotional wellness, and institutional support. Each session lasted approximately 90 minutes and was facilitated in a neutral academic setting to ensure comfort and confidentiality. Focus groups were invaluable in distinguishing shared concerns (e.g., delays in feedback) from individualized coping mechanisms (e.g., spiritual practices, time management strategies). The

group format also helped foster a sense of solidarity among participants, which is consistent with the social dimension of wellness (Hettler, 1987).

The researcher conducted non-participant observations during three proposal writing workshops and two proposal defence sessions. Observational data allowed for real-time documentation of behavioral patterns, verbal and non-verbal interactions, and institutional processes, complementing self-reported data from interviews and focus groups (Angrosino, 2007; Mulhall, 2003). Field notes were maintained throughout these sessions, focusing on aspects such as:

- Student-supervisor interactions,
- Communication styles and tone,
- Emotional responses (e.g., anxiety, confidence),
- Institutional dynamics (e.g., procedural fairness, time management).

Observations provided context-specific insights into how wellness, supervision, and academic engagement play out in live settings—often revealing tensions not captured through interviews alone (Flick, 2018).

To further contextualize the study and understand institutional expectations and structures, a document analysis was conducted. This included:

- Proposal writing guidelines,
- Proposal review rubrics,
- Supervisor feedback templates,
- Institutional policy documents related to postgraduate research.

Document analysis provided a framework for understanding the formal academic environment, expectations for student performance, and supervisory responsibilities (Bowen, 2009). It also helped triangulate findings from interviews and focus groups, especially when participants referred to institutional policies or guidelines as sources of stress, confusion, or support.

This method was particularly useful for examining the "rules and tools" component of Cultural Historical Activity Theory (CHAT), as institutional documents represent mediating artifacts that shape how research activities are conducted (Engeström, 2015).

Data collected from in-depth interviews, focus group discussions, observations, and document reviews were subjected to thematic content analysis, a widely used method in qualitative research for identifying, analyzing, and interpreting patterns of meaning (themes) within textual data (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Nowell et al., 2017). This analytic approach was appropriate given the study's constructivist paradigm and its aim to explore nuanced experiences of postgraduate students during the research proposal and defence process.

The process began with transcription of all audio-recorded interviews and focus group discussions. Transcripts were read and re-read to ensure familiarity with the content, followed by open coding—assigning initial labels to segments of text that captured key ideas, emotions, or actions (Saldaña, 2021). These codes were then reviewed and organized into broader categories, guided both by inductive reasoning and the deductive structure of the study's theoretical frameworks—specifically, the six dimensions of wellness (Hettler, 1987) and the key components of Cultural Historical Activity Theory (CHAT) (Engeström, 2015).

The integration of theoretical and empirical coding allowed for a theory-driven thematic analysis, where themes were not only grounded in participant narratives but also aligned with conceptual constructs such as emotional, social, and intellectual wellness, as well as the mediating elements of the activity system (subject, tools, rules, community, division of labour, and outcomes).

This dual-level coding strategy enhanced the analytic depth, enabling the researcher to trace how students' wellness was affected by institutional structures, supervisory practices, and personal coping strategies—consistent with the research's holistic focus (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006).

To ensure the trustworthiness of the findings, the following strategies were applied, consistent with the criteria outlined by Lincoln and Guba (1985):

- **Credibility:** The researcher employed member checks by sharing preliminary interpretations and themes with a subset of participants to confirm the accuracy and resonance of the findings (Birt et al., 2016). This feedback was integrated into the final analysis to ensure authentic representation of participant experiences.
- **Transferability:** Thick descriptions of the research context, participant demographics, and thematic categories were provided, enabling readers to assess the applicability of the findings to similar educational or cultural settings (Tracy, 2010).
- **Dependability:** An audit trail was maintained throughout the study, documenting methodological decisions, coding processes, and theme development. Peer debriefing sessions with two qualitative researchers also contributed to consistency in interpretation and decision-making (Nowell et al., 2017).
- **Confirmability:** Reflexive journaling was used to identify and mitigate potential researcher biases. By keeping a record of personal reflections, decisions, and assumptions throughout the research process, the researcher aimed to ensure that the findings were clearly derived from the data and not influenced by personal predispositions (Shenton, 2004).

Findings and Discussion

Topic Selection: Intellectual and Emotional Wellness

Postgraduate students often experience significant anxiety and confusion during the topic selection phase of their research proposals. This process requires aligning personal interests with academic viability and supervisor expectations, which can be particularly challenging in Open Distance Learning (ODL) environments where guidance may be limited. Students frequently report feeling overwhelmed and uncertain about how to narrow down their research focus.

"I felt lost... I changed my topic three times because I didn't know what was expected, and I had no idea how to narrow it down." – Student A

A study by Muneer et al. (2021) highlights that postgraduate students face numerous challenges during research proposal writing, including selecting a research topic, understanding the research supervisor, lack of guidance, and insufficient knowledge about research methodology. These challenges contribute to intellectual and emotional stress, particularly when institutional support is minimal. Similarly, a study by Netshitangani and Machaisa (2021) found that many

postgraduate students felt unsupported and neglected during the topic selection phase. They reported that communication with supervisors was mainly through emails, telephone, WhatsApp, and occasionally through personal meetings, which sometimes led to feelings of isolation.

Supervision: Social and Occupational Wellness

Effective supervision is crucial for postgraduate students' success, but many report experiences of irregular feedback and inconsistent communication, leading to feelings of isolation. This is especially prevalent in ODL settings, where face-to-face interactions are limited. Students often perceive these supervisory gaps as a lack of support, which can negatively impact their social and occupational wellness

"My supervisor would take weeks to respond. I started doubting my ability. It made me anxious and demotivated." – Student B

Conversely, supervisors may express frustration over students' lack of preparation and commitment, highlighting a disconnect in expectations. This interaction gap underscores the challenges in maintaining social and occupational wellness in asynchronous and distant supervisory relationships. Research by Netshitangani and Machaisa (2021) found that while some students felt supported by their supervisors, others experienced neglect, exacerbating feelings of isolation.

Moreover, a study by Wisker et al. (2021) observed that postgraduate students who felt supported by their supervisors reported higher levels of satisfaction and engagement. The use of multiple forms of communication, such as written and audio feedback, supported a more in-depth cognitive presence and helped mitigate the limitations of physical distance.

Student Commitment: Spiritual and Emotional Wellness

Many postgraduate students juggle academic responsibilities with full-time employment, family obligations, and financial constraints, leading to significant stress and emotional strain. These competing demands can hinder their academic commitment and overall well-being.

"Sometimes I just cried. I felt I was failing as a mother and a student." – Student C

A study by Muneer et al. (2021) indicates that postgraduate students face challenges related to time management, balancing family responsibilities, and managing stress, which can affect their academic performance and emotional wellness. Similarly, a study by Alabi et al. (2021) found that female postgraduate distance education students in Ghana experienced stress arising from various demands, including academic, work, and family management. This psychological burden affected their quality of life and led to intentions to quit their studies.

However, some students draw strength from spiritual beliefs and personal motivations, which serve as resilience factors. Engaging in hobbies, clubs, societies, sports teams, or religious communities has been identified as helpful during intense phases of postgraduate studies.

Communication: Integral to All Wellness Dimensions

Effective communication between supervisors and students is essential for fostering a supportive academic environment. Clear and frequent communication can enhance students' confidence, engagement, and overall academic wellness.

"When my supervisor sent voice notes or scheduled short Zoom calls, I felt more supported and less alone." – Student D

Research by Netshitangani and Machaisa (2021) emphasizes the importance of communication in postgraduate supervision, noting that students who felt supported by their supervisors reported higher levels of satisfaction and engagement. Additionally, a study by Wisker et al. (2021) observed that combining different forms of communication, such as written and audio feedback, supports a more in-depth cognitive presence and helps mitigate the limitations of physical distance.

Conclusion

The findings underscore the complex interplay between institutional structures, individual agency, and the multifaceted dimensions of wellness experienced by postgraduate students in Open and Distance Learning (ODL) contexts. Through the lens of Cultural-Historical Activity Theory (CHAT), the research proposal development process emerges as a dynamic system shaped by key components—tools, rules, and community. Technology platforms such as Zoom, email, and WhatsApp act as essential tools for communication but can inadvertently contribute to student isolation if not used effectively. Institutional rules, including submission deadlines and proposal guidelines, provide structure but may hinder progress when rigid or unclear. Additionally, the role of community—comprised of peers, mentors, and supervisors—is pivotal; a supportive and engaged community fosters a sense of belonging and motivation, whereas its absence may intensify feelings of disconnection and stress.

Wellness Theory expands this understanding by asserting that academic achievement is not solely an intellectual endeavor but one deeply rooted in emotional, social, and spiritual wellness. The emotional toll of proposal writing, especially in isolated environments, affects not just academic output but personal resilience. Transactional Distance Theory (TDT) adds further depth by illustrating how reducing the psychological and communicative distance between supervisors and students—through frequent, meaningful interaction—enhances engagement and wellness. Evidence shows that synchronous communication methods, such as scheduled Zoom check-ins, can significantly reduce feelings of isolation and increase motivation. Moreover, integrating collaborative tools like online forums and peer discussion platforms can cultivate a sense of academic community and support, reinforcing both cognitive and emotional dimensions of student success. These insights collectively call for ODL institutions to adopt a holistic, wellness-informed approach to postgraduate supervision and support.

Recommendations

1. For Institutions: Develop wellness-focused support systems, including counseling, peer mentoring, and clearer guidelines for proposal development.
2. For Supervisors: Foster empathetic and responsive supervision practices tailored to ODL students' unique needs.

3. For Students: Engage in self-care practices and seek community support to balance academic and personal responsibilities.

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