

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Postgraduate retention strategies at higher education institutions: A systematic review

Amasu okugcinwa kwabafundi beziqo eziphakeme ezikhungweni zemfundo ephakeme: Ukubuyekwezwa okuhlelekile

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ABSTRACT

Postgraduate retention is key for ensuring postgraduate success and the capacitation of the higher education sector. Retention is a complex and multifaceted issue, requiring interventions at various levels and stages in the postgraduate lifecycle. A systematic review was conducted to synthesise evidence of postgraduate retention strategies used in higher education institutions internationally. The review followed the PRISMA framework, including identification, screening, eligibility and appraisal, ensuring methodological rigour and transparency of reporting. A total of 1,719 peer-reviewed, published articles were identified, and after screening and appraisal, 32 were included in the synthesis. Various retention and success strategies were reported. The findings identified supervision as a key area of support for retention, noting the importance of supervisor selection, mentorship within the supervisory relationship, and collaborative supervisory approaches in supporting postgraduate success. Various supplementary support initiatives were noted, targeting academic and socio-emotional development, such as academic coaching, writing camps, peer mentorship and counselling. It is recommended that institutions consider implementing multiple interventions, embedded within institutional practices, targeting the needs and stages of the postgraduate lifecycle, to ensure that postgraduate students are well supported. Interventions are also needed for stakeholders providing key support, specifically supervisors, to ensure that the support provided is effective and aligned with best practice evidence.

KEYWORDS

Doctoral education, higher education, mentorship, peer-mentorship, postgraduate studies, postgraduate education and training, postgraduate supervision, retention and throughput, student success, student support services, supervisory relationships, writing support

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ISIFINYEZO

Ukugcinwa kwabafundi beziq eziphakeme kubalulekile ukuze kuqinisekiswa impumelelo yabo kanye nokuthuthukiswa kwemfundo ephakeme. Nokho, lokhu kuyindaba eyinkimbinkimbi edinga izindlela ezahlukene zokweseka abafundi ezigabeni ezihlukahlukene zokufunda kwabo. Lolu cwaningo lwenze ukubuyekwezwa okuhlelekile ukuze kuhlanyanyelwe ulwazi mayelana namasu asetshenziswa emhlabeni jikelele ukugcina abafundi ezikhungweni zemfundo ephakeme. Ucwaningo lulandele indlela ye-PRISMA, okuhlanganisa ukuhlonza, ukuhlunga, ukuhlola ukufaneleka kanye nekhwalithi yezifundo, ukuze kuqinisekiswa ukuthembeka nokucaca kwemiphumela. Kwatholakala izihloko eziyi-1,719 ezibuyekwezwe ontanga, kanti ezingama-32 kuphela ezagcina zifakiwe ocwaningweni. Imiphumela ikhombise ukuthi ukuqondiswa kwabafundi (supervision) kubalulekile kakhulu ekubasizeni bahlale ezifundweni zabo. Lokhu kufaka phakathi ukukhethwa kahle komqondisi, ubudlelwane obuhle phakathi komqondisi nomfundi, kanye nokusebenza ngokubambisana. Kutholakale nezinye izindlela zokweseka abafundi, njengokuqeqeshwa kwezifundo, amakamu okubhala, ukwesekana phakathi kwabafundi, kanye nokwelulekwa ngokwengqondo. Kunconywa ukuthi izikhungo zemfundo ephakeme zisebenzise izindlela eziningi zokweseka abafundi, ezihambisana nezidingo zabo ezigabeni ezahlukene zokufunda. Lokhu kungasiza ekuqinisekiseni ukuthi abafundi bathola ukwesekwa okwanele. Kubalulekile futhi ukweseka labo abahlinzeka ngosizo, ikakhulukazi abaqondisi, ukuze umsebenzi wabo ube nempumelelo futhi uhambisane nezindlela ezinhle ezisekelwe ocwaningweni.

AMAGAMA ASEMQOKA

Imfundo yobudokotela, imfundo ephakeme, ukwelulekwa, ukwesekana kwabafundi, izifundo zeziqu eziphakeme, ukuqondiswa kwabafundi, ukugcinwa kwabafundi nokuphuthula, impumelelo yabafundi, izinsizakalo zokweseka abafundi, ubudlelwane bomqondisi nomfundi, ukwesekwa kokubhala

Introduction

Postgraduate students are a strategic focus area for higher education institutions (HEIs), as key knowledge producers and for capacitating the higher education (HE) sector, particularly in the African context (AUC, 2015). South Africa is a hub of postgraduate education in Africa (Kahn & Oghenetega, 2021). A substantial number of international students, primarily from sub-Saharan neighbours, are enrolled at South African HEIs (Kahn et al., 2019). Student dropout is a global concern, both at undergraduate and postgraduate levels (Paideya & Bengesai, 2017). Various factors are linked to student retention and success, including funding and financial support (Lindley et al., 2020), the supervisory relationship (Matheka et al., 2024), mentorship (Benzon et al., 2020), institutional support (Lehan et al., 2021), sense of belonging (Collier & Blanchard, 2023), and peer support (Debray et al., 2024). Retention is therefore complex and multifaceted.

Student retention needs to consider the individual student, their supervisor, and the HEI as stakeholders in postgraduate development (Albertyn et al., 2018). The thesis or

dissertation is a key component of postgraduate degrees; thus, the research supervisor has a central role (Senekal et al., 2025). The rapport and trust in a supervisory relationship are pivotal for the postgraduate experience and student success (Belavy et al., 2020; Matheka et al., 2024). Approaches to supervision, which traditionally followed a master-apprenticeship model, are shifting towards collaborative models, such as the cohort model, as these models allow for greater reciprocal support (McKenna & van Schalkwyk, 2024). The HEI itself supports and develops postgraduate students through various initiatives, including writing retreats and supplementary skills training (Frantz et al., 2021). Beyond the transfer of knowledge, institutional support also facilitates peer networking and socialisation (Senekal et al., 2025). Peer support enhances success and sense of belonging (Matheka et al., 2024). Socialisation during postgraduate studies exposes students to the academic community, preparing them to become academic staff (Aarnikoivu, 2023). Students and graduates attribute their persistence to social and intrapersonal factors, not just cognitive competence (Senekal et al., 2024). Therefore, support from various role-players within the HEI environment is essential for addressing student retention.

Retention is multifaceted, requiring agile strategies based on ongoing learning (Beer & Lawson, 2017). Interventions for postgraduate retention may include various approaches, such as peer-learning, alternative access programmes, curriculum-based interventions, and professional discipline (Paideya & Bengesai, 2017). With many possible interventions, consolidation of empirical evidence of what initiatives have been implemented is needed in order to make feasible recommendations. The study aimed to synthesise international evidence of the strategies used to retain postgraduate students in HEIs.

Methodology

A systematic review was used to answer the question: What strategies are used to retain postgraduate students in HEIs? The Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) framework (Page et al., 2021) was used to guide the study, ensuring methodological rigour and transparent reporting.

Inclusion criteria

The following inclusion criteria were considered:

- Articles published between 2020 and 2024;
- Qualitative, quantitative, mixed methods or review methods;
- Postgraduate student populations;
- Interventions or strategies for retention and/or student success;
- International HEI contexts;
- Published in English; and
- Peer-reviewed.

Articles that did not meet all the inclusion criteria were excluded. Articles without full-text access, despite reasonable efforts, were excluded.

Search strategy

The search was conducted via the University of the Western Cape’s online library platform, uKwazi. uKwazi allows for the composite search of all subscribed electronic databases, enhancing the systematic nature of the review. The PICO (Population, Intervention, Context, Outcome) framework was used to develop the research questions, keywords and Boolean phrases for the search (Table 1). Boolean phrases were entered into uKwazi, using “AND” operators between the strings, in a single, composite search of all databases. Filters were applied for publication date (2020-2024) and peer-reviewed status.

Table 1: Search term development

PICO	Keywords	Boolean phrases
Population	Postgraduate	“advanced degree” OR “doctoral degree” OR “doctorate” OR “master’s” OR “master’s degree” OR “PhD” OR “Postgraduate students” OR “graduate student” OR “grad student” OR “Honours”
Intervention	Strategies	“plan” OR “game plan” OR “plan of action” OR “policy” OR “proposed action” OR “programme” OR “procedure” OR “approach” OR “schedule” OR “Intervention” OR “strategies” OR “support” OR “initiative”
Context	HE sectors (internationally)	“Higher education” OR “University”
Outcome	Retention	“retention” OR “throughput” OR “student success” OR “attrition” OR “drop out”

Study selection

The review followed the PRISMA levels of identification, screening, eligibility, and inclusion (Page et al., 2021). Articles identified in the search were extracted to Covidence, an online systematic review platform. Titles and abstracts were evaluated against the inclusion criteria for relevance, and reasons for exclusions were captured. The eligibility of each remaining article was assessed through full-text review for relevance. The remaining articles were evaluated for methodological quality using the Smith, Franciscus and Swartbooi (SFS) critical appraisal tool, Version E (Smith et al., 2015), which is inclusive of various study designs. A minimum threshold score of 60% was set for inclusion, to ensure that only high-quality research was included (Smith et al., 2015). Articles that scored less than 60% were excluded. Each level of screening, eligibility and appraisal was conducted independently by two reviewers, and disagreements were resolved through discussion.

Data extraction and synthesis

Data were extracted from articles selected for inclusion, using a data extraction tool that was self-developed for the review in alignment with the research objectives and inclusion criteria. The data extraction template was piloted on three articles to ensure clarity, accuracy and completeness. The review findings were analysed using thematic synthesis (Gough et al., 2017).

Ethics

Ethics clearance was obtained from the UWC Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee (HSSREC) (HS24/6/7). As staff members, the authors had legal access to articles through the UWC Library. The review upheld ethical research practice through adhering to the rigour of the review method and appropriately citing all sources used.

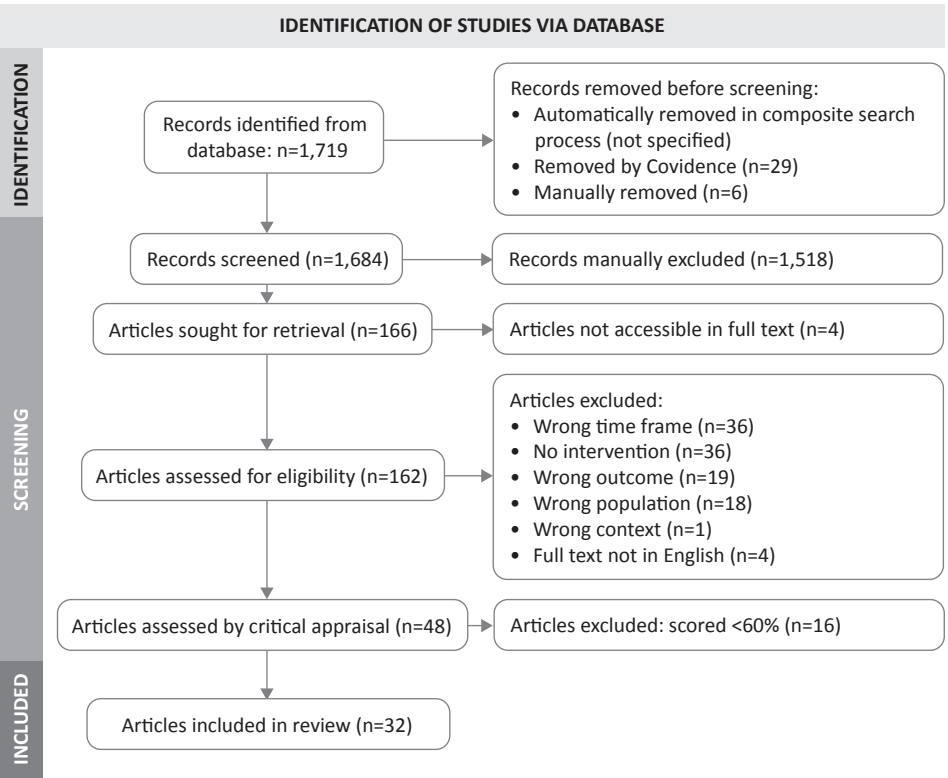
Findings

The process results of the review itself are presented first, followed by an overview of the studies included. Lastly, the synthesis of the interventions and strategies is reported, focusing first on supervision and then supplementary related support and interventions.

Process results

The search yielded 1,719 articles, 35 of which were flagged as duplicates (Figure 1). After removing irrelevant articles, 162 remained for full-text eligibility appraisal. Four articles could not be retrieved in full text, and 114 did not meet the inclusion criteria. The remaining 48 were appraised for methodological quality, and 16 were excluded as they did not meet the 60% threshold. This left 32 articles for synthesis.

Figure 1. PRISMA flowchart of data collection and screening (Adapted from Page et al., 2021)



Study characteristics

The 32 included studies reflected a range of retention and support strategies across 12 countries and many universities (Table 2). Studies were primarily from countries in the Global North, including USA (n = 12), Australia (n = 4), New Zealand (n = 1), Canada (n = 1) and across Europe (n = 6). Studies from the African context included South Africa (n = 5) and Kenya (n = 1). A single study was from Qatar, and two were review articles. Most studies focused on single HEIs (n = 26), four studies implied multiple institutions, and the remaining two were reviews. Many studies identified specific disciplines where intervention or support took place (n = 17), and others were multidisciplinary (n = 13). The study populations included doctoral students specifically (n = 20), doctoral and master’s students (n = 5), master’s students specifically (n = 2), postgraduate students generally (n = 4), or both under- and postgraduate students (n = 1). Overall, the studies reflected interventions and support strategies for postgraduate retention, from diverse disciplines across international HE systems.

Table 2: Overview of articles

Author(s) (Year)	Country	Student population	Discipline	Intervention or area of focus	Overview
Acquaye & Pownall (2021)	UK	Doctorate ¹	Business	TIPS workbook (Time, Image, Plan and Summary)	Activities in a practical staged approach: support development of organisational and project management skills, improved thesis success.
Bedersdorfer & Lohse- Bossenz (2023)	Germany	Doctorate ²	Multiple	Integrated support systems	Professional, emotional, network integration and career planning support, that together support resilience, progression and future success.
Belavy et al. (2020)	Australia	Doctorate ¹	Multiple	Supervisor	Selection of supervisor and obtaining a scholarship: predictors of positive outcomes and future success.
Benzon et al. (2020)	Croatia	Doctorate ¹	Medicine	Supervisors - mentorship	Mentoring in supervision: strong predictor of retention and future success.
Cardwell et al. (2024)	Australia and New Zealand	Doctorate ²	Nursing	Supervision framework	Framework to guide supervisors on how to effectively support students throughout their journey.
Collier & Blanchard (2023)	USA	Master’s and Doctorate ¹	STEM	Supervision - mentorship	Positive mentorship experiences with supervisors and other staff supports progress, wellbeing and sense of belonging.
Debray et al. (2024)	USA	Doctorate ¹	Biological Sciences	Supervision - mentorship, communities of practice (CoPs)	Mentoring in supervision supported wellbeing, sense of belonging and research productivity. Peer-support compensated where this was lacking. CoP as additional space for support.

Author(s) (Year)	Country	Student population	Discipline	Intervention or area of focus	Overview
Delaney et al. (2023)	Ireland	Under-graduate and Postgraduate ¹	Multiple	Third-party online learning support platform	Flexible, online academic support: accessible, prompt and unbiased. Asynchronous support preferred for writing feedback.
Diaz-Elsayed et al. (2023)	USA	Doctorate ¹	Engineering; Marine Science	Supervision - mentorship, within CoPs	Transdisciplinary CoPs, with integrated mentorship model, to facilitate a more personalised and responsive supervisory approach.
Emekako et al. (2024)	South Africa	Master's and Doctorate ¹	Multiple	Academic writing camps	Target academic writing development, not outputs.
Fanshawe & Barton (2023)	Australia	Doctorate ¹	Education	Learning management system	Collaborative tools for students and supervisors to organise, access and store information.
Frantz et al. (2022)	n/a	Postgraduate	n/a	Support for non-cognitive skills and retention	Mentoring and coaching, peer mentoring, CoPs, skills training, programme activities and student support services.
Gallagher & Hamed (2022)	USA	Master's ¹	Occupational Therapy	Peer-mentorship program	Provided academic, professional and social support throughout degree programme.
Handford et al. (2021)	Canada	Postgraduate ¹	Multiple	Graduate writing centre	Positive impact on writing skills, confidence and social support.
Ju et al. (2020)	USA	Doctorate ²	Counselor Education and Supervision	Mentoring, peer mentorship, workshops, and tutoring	Intentional mentoring relationships with faculty, peer mentorship or buddy systems: tailored academic and emotional support for new students; workshops and tutoring to support academic and skills development.
Kent et al. (2020)	USA	Doctorate ¹	Counselor Education and Supervision	Mentoring and peer-mentors	Protective factor: space for processing multiple roles/ identities, academic guidance, empathy. Peer mentors: informal support, reduced isolation, accountability. Need for formalised mentoring programmes.
Lehan et al. (2020)	USA	Postgraduate ¹	Multiple	Academic coaching	Personalised support focusing on building academic skills competence (writing, statistics); resource materials, synchronous and asynchronous coaching.
Lehan et al. (2021)	n/a	Doctorate	n/a	Factors impacting persistence for online students	Integration (supervisory relationship) and institutional factors (support services, curriculum, instruction) are key factors impacting persistence.

Author(s) (Year)	Country	Student population	Discipline	Intervention or area of focus	Overview
Lindley et al. (2020)	Australia	Doctorate ¹	Law	Institutional factors that influence completion rates	Supervisory relationship and quality of supervision (clear expectations, pastoral care), formal and informal mentoring relationships; funding and financial support.
Matheka et al. (2024)	Kenya	Doctorate ¹	Multiple	Supervision, peer support	Quality supervision and sense of belonging are directly linked to success. Sense of belonging enhanced by peer support.
Mbati & Mphahlele (2024)	South Africa	Master's and Doctorate ¹	Multiple	Multimodal open distance e-learning supervision practices	Eight-phase model from pre-registration to research publication. CoP as space to share experiences and strategies related to research.
Mohangi & Olivier (2023)	South Africa	Master's and Doctorate ¹	Educational Psychology	Open distance e-learning counselling services	Career guidance counselling, learning skills and academic support, psychological counselling (email, telephonic, in-person); digital self-help resources.
Murphy (2021)	USA	Postgraduate ¹	Education and Nursing	Online open access mindfulness course	Online self-study course (3 weeks), on mindfulness and personal wellbeing, learning, and culture and community.
Newsome et al. (2023)	Qatar	Master's and Doctorate ¹	Multiple	Hybrid approach to postgraduate writing support	1-1 consultations (in person, phone, online), online webinars, grad student Blackboard community (resources).
Panayidou & Priest (2020)	UK	Doctorate ¹	Multiple	PhD support groups	In person, closed groups of 90 minutes weekly over 8 weeks. Focused on sharing experiences through open discussion.
Sosibo (2024)	South Africa	Doctorate ¹	Education	Supervision - virtual CoPs	Online cohort (co)supervision, creating virtual CoPs. Reciprocal learning: both supervisor(s) and peers contributed to success.
Stevens & Caskey (2023)	USA	Doctorate ¹	Education	Seminars	Held in first year, on academic writing skills and knowledge of research methods, with low stakes formative assessments.
Tanga et al. (2021)	South Africa	Doctorate ¹	Multiple	Supervision, mentoring, departmental / support services	Supervision (variations in approach with differing impact); departmental/faculty/library support for proposal writing; mentorship for seminar presentations. Challenges: lack of funding and financial support.
Tuma & Dolan (2024)	USA	Doctorate ²	Life Sciences	Supervision - mentorship	Mentoring in supervision through an apprenticeship model.

Author(s) (Year)	Country	Student population	Discipline	Intervention or area of focus	Overview
van Rooij et al. (2021)	Netherlands	Doctorate ¹	Multiple	Supervision	Choosing the right supervisor: rapport/fit, and quality of supervisory relationship.
Verostek et al. (2024)	USA	Doctorate ¹	Physics	Research groups	Finding and joining a research group, while challenging, is important for building a sense of belonging and reducing isolation.
Wilkinson (2022)	USA	Master's ¹	Education	Interactive peer-review tool kit as part of structured peer evaluation system	Eight modules complemented by cognitive tools designed to enhance higher-order knowledge and problem-solving skills; fosters confidence, collaborative engagement, and focused learning.

Note. ¹Single institution, ²Multiple institutions

Retention strategies

Various interventions and support strategies aimed at enhancing retention and postgraduate success at HEIs were reported (Table 2). Some articles detailed formalised interventions, while others described embedded strategies related to student success and retention. The areas of support were categorised as supervision related or supplementary support.

Supervision related support

The first category was that of support provided through supervision, and interventions related to supervision. The quality of supervisory relationships was identified as a key factor for supporting postgraduate retention (Lehan et al. 2021; Lindley et al., 2020; Matheka et al., 2024). The impact of the relationship starts with the intentional selection of the right supervisor, in terms of rapport, fit and research alignment (Belavy et al., 2020; van Rooij et al., 2021). Studies focused on the importance of mentorship within the supervisory relationship (n = 5). Positive experiences of mentorship, with supervisors in particular, supported student progress, wellbeing, and sense of belonging (Collier & Blanchard, 2023; Debray et al., 2024), predicting retention and future success (Benzon et al., 2020). The mentorship component took place within traditional apprenticeship supervision models (Tuma & Dolan, 2024), and in collaborative supervisory approaches (Diaz-Elsayed et al., 2023).

Collaborative practices included CoPs (n = 6), with various formats: transdisciplinary CoPs with an integrated mentorship model (Diaz-Elsayed et al., 2023), virtual CoPs (Mbatlali & Mphahlele, 2024; Sosibo, 2024), and more structured research groups (Verostek et al., 2023). Benefits of CoPs included a more personalised approach, space to share experiences, reciprocal learning, reduced isolation and a sense of belonging, that supported improved retention and success. Tools to support effective supervision are noted, including a framework for supervisors on how to effectively support students throughout their postgraduate journeys (Cardwell et al., 2024), collaborative tools for students and supervisors on learning

management systems (Fanshawe & Barton, 2023), and the TIPS tool, which is a practical workbook that students may use, with supervisor oversight, to improve project management and thesis success (Acquaye & Pownall, 2021). As such, support and intervention at the level of the supervisory relationship is important, particularly in the provision of mentorship, and the sense of community fostered through collaborative approaches, that support the retention of postgraduate students.

Supplementary support

Supplementary support, outside of the supervisory relationship, promotes postgraduate retention and success. Approaches to supplementary academic support included institutional support services' initiatives (Frantz et al., 2022; Lehan et al., 2021), such as writing centres (Handford et al., 2021), centres for teaching and learning (Emekako et al., 2024), third party online platforms (Delaney et al., 2023), and departmental initiatives (Stevens & Caskey, 2023). The format of support included individual consultations (Lehan et al., 2020; Newsome et al., 2023), using synchronous and/or asynchronous approaches. The flexibility of online support was beneficial (Delaney et al., 2023; Lehan et al., 2020; Newsome et al., 2023), and asynchronous writing support was preferred in one study (Delaney et al., 2023). Group support was also available through skills training and workshops (Frantz et al., 2022; Ju et al., 2020; Tanga et al., 2021), online webinars (Newsome et al., 2023), in-person seminars (Stevens & Caskey, 2023), and writing camps (Emekako et al., 2024). Learning management systems were also utilised for resource repositories (Lehan et al., 2020; Newsome et al., 2023).

Socio-emotional support initiatives were also evident, as this is crucial for postgraduate student success (Bedersdorfer & Lohse-Bossenz, 2021). Socio-emotional support was provided through institutional support services, such as the Directorate of Counselling and Career Development (Mohangi & Olivier, 2023). An online self-study mindfulness course supported overall wellbeing and learning (Murphy, 2021). Mentorship with other academic staff, outside of the supervisory relationship, was beneficial (Frantz et al., 2022; Ju et al., 2020; Lindley et al., 2020), particularly around shared experiences, for example, motherhood (Kent et al., 2020). Peer-mentorship, whether formal or informal, provides academic and socio-emotional support, enhancing sense of belonging and reducing isolation (Frantz et al., 2022; Gallagher & Hamed, 2022; Ju et al., 2020; Kent et al., 2020; Matheka et al., 2024). However, formalised (peer) mentoring programmes are needed to ensure increased accessibility (Kent et al., 2020). Formalised peer engagements in CoPs enhance reciprocal learning and a sense of belonging, as noted above. In-person support groups focused on shared experiences and were facilitated by staff (Panayidou & Priest, 2020). Another more formalised peer-related intervention was a peer-review tool kit as part of a peer evaluation system (Wilkinson, 2022). This tool supported problem-solving skills, but confidence and collaborative appreciation as well. As such, there are various approaches to supporting postgraduate students' outside of the supervisory relationship, to enhance their academic skills and support socio-emotional wellbeing, towards retention and success.

Discussion

The review study reveals that while formalised interventions exist, many successful practices remain embedded in supervisory relationships and institutional support systems. The findings of the review highlight the role of supervisor support in the postgraduate journey, in alignment with previous research (Albertyn et al., 2018). The approach to supervision is important, and the review findings identify the benefit of collaborative approaches to supervision, in particular, the benefits of CoPs for reciprocal learning and support. The move away from the master-apprentice model towards more collaborative supervisory practice is evident in the literature (McKenna & van Schalkwyk, 2024). The supervisor's role includes that of academic support, together with the socialisation and development of the student (Aarnikoivu, 2023). The review findings emphasize how the supervisory relationship necessarily includes a mentorship component, which is a key factor in supporting postgraduate student retention. However, it is not the supervisor alone who is responsible for supporting the postgraduate student. Supplementary support for both academic and socio-emotional support is also evidenced in the review findings. Previous studies have identified the interconnected roles of institutional support, peer support and the supervisor in doctoral student development (Senekal et al., 2025), and in postgraduate students more generally (Albertyn et al., 2018). The review findings demonstrate that academic and psychosocial support in various forms and modes is beneficial, typically provided through institutional support services, and that both formalised and informal mentorship and peer mentorship are needed.

Recommendations

The supervisor plays a key role in supporting postgraduate retention; thus, HEIs need to provide sufficient training and support for supervisors. Novice and experienced supervisors need to be trained to engage with pedagogical shifts (i.e. to more collaborative approaches), and the importance of mentorship within the supervisory relationship. Structural shifts within certain HEIs may be needed to support collaborative supervisory approaches. Ongoing investment in support services, such as the library, postgraduate support offices, counselling services and writing centres, is needed to continue providing vital supplementary academic and socio-emotional support. Formalised peer-mentorship and departmental mentorship programmes are needed to foster a sense of belonging and reduce loneliness. Training and writing camps that are focused on skills development, rather than outputs, are needed to overcome skills gaps. Learning management systems can be strategically utilised to provide flexible access to asynchronous services and resources.

As awareness is a significant barrier to the utilisation of support (Senekal et al., 2025), support must be provided at multiple levels. The onus remains on the student to make use of available support. The strategic use of existing institutional support units is recommended in the context of resource construction. HEIs should design support and training initiatives in alignment with their respective postgraduate student needs. HEIs should strategically utilise capacity development grants and/or collaborations with other local and international HEIs, to ensure greater reach and sharing of best practice.

Research on the efficacy of retention strategies within HEIs is recommended, particularly in the Global South, where initiatives may be taking place but not published. Evaluation of support services is needed to demonstrate evidence-based practice and impact. Explorations of pedagogical approaches within supervisory relationships is needed to support improved practice and stakeholder awareness. Comparative studies of interventions across HE contexts would also be beneficial, to explore context-related factors and differing best-practice approaches.

Strengths and limitations

The review considered evidence of postgraduate retention and success strategies, not just formalised interventions. This allowed for the consideration of strategies that are being used within HEIs and embedded in educational practice. By necessity, the review was limited to specific criteria; therefore, relevant strategies and initiatives may have been excluded.

Conclusion

Interventions and support for postgraduate retention need to be responsive to the complex and multifaceted challenge of retention. Supervisors play a pivotal role, guiding postgraduates academically in their research, but also through mentorship and facilitating collaborative engagements. Intervention to strengthen supervisory practice, will in turn support postgraduate retention. Supplementary academic and socio-emotional support should be strategically embedded within departmental and institutional support services. Existing practices and services can be enhanced by aligning with evidence-based practice, to support postgraduate retention. Through strategic investment in postgraduate retention and success, the HE sectors in the South African and broader African context may be strengthened.

Ethics statement

Ethical clearance (HS24/6/7) for this work was provided by the UWC's Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee.

Potential conflict of interests

There are no conflicts of interest to declare.

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