

# **RESEARCH ONLINE SUITE OF MODULES SET TO SHAPE THE FUTURES OF POSTGRADS**

## **BACKGROUND**

As Africa's largest university, Unisa, through the College of Graduate Studies (CGS), has conceptualised an online suite of modules in post-COVID 19 contexts. Through its extensive experience in capacity development, CGS offers a specified curriculum with a focus on developing research capabilities via a state-of-the-art online programme that trains postgraduate learners to become very competent postgraduate researchers, with a specific focus on working within the new COVID-19 regulated environment. These assertions underpin the objectives contained in the college's 2020 operational plan in support of the vision, mission and strategic objectives as set out in the Unisa Strategic Plan 2016-2030 and the first framework 2016-2020. They are informed by and support the 2020 Annual Performance Plan as well as the Compact with Council.

## **THE CURRENT CONTEXT**

The year 2020 has seen the most catastrophic societal and public health emergency that the globe has been faced with in more than a century. First reported in January 2020, the corona virus (causing the disease known as COVID-19) has in four months established itself as the deadliest modern-day virus, infecting over 3.5 million people and causing 243 000 deaths globally in 120 days. Beyond its health impact, the epidemic has caused serious disruptions in the provision of education globally and has also exposed serious disparities in educational provision, especially between marginalised rural populations and their more connected urban counterparts. The virus has been shown to be highly contagious and in the absence of vaccine and/or effective treatment, its risk of human to human transmission has been described as the most deadly after Ebola – so much so, that all activities that involve human contact must be revisited in line with COVID-19 social distancing best practices (WHO, 2020).

This scourge has necessitated the need for an aggressive overhaul of postgraduate research support, so much so that students must now be given access to a comprehensive online support programme that has reconceptualised the tenets of human involvement needs, with COVID-19 risks at the center of methodological choices. Critically, this development has holistically placed an urgent and non-negotiable emphasis on the development of innovative online teaching options that are in compliance with the restrictions that now exist.

## **CGS'S ONLINE POSTGRADUATE RESEARCH METHODOLOGY, ACADEMIC AND GRANT WRITING PROGRAMME**

The project aims to advance strategic partnerships across the institution by incorporating the expertise and mandates of various portfolios for expansive impact on accelerating the transformation agenda. To that end, because of its unique position of working across all the colleges of the university at postgraduate level, the College of Graduate Studies is well-situated to cascade some of the critical projects of transformation in the university and impact on all postgraduate students, who mostly do research, as well as the academics who drive high-impact research in the respective colleges. Cognisant of the fact that the university has entered a season of developing and owning new knowledges epistemologies centred on Africa, the CGS's proposal is to forge a strategic partnership with the Department of Leadership and Transformation and the Curriculum Transformation Unit (in the Teaching and Learning portfolio) on Scholarship Transformation and conjointly work toward leading the development, critiquing and implementation of a new pool of Africa-centred epistemologies.

The is a year-round master's and doctoral research development programme, which will have six separate but simultaneously delivered pathways, each lasting between three and six months, as follows:

- (i) Online Master's Proposal development (6 months)
- (ii) Online Doctoral Proposal development (6 months)
- (iii) Online Master's Dissertation development (6 months)
- (iv) Online Doctoral Thesis development (6 months)
- (v) Online Academic Writing and Writing for publication (3 months)
- (vi) Online Grant Writing (3 months)

Direct spin-offs of the programme will include the following key deliverables:

- a. Supporting the online training of postgraduate students
- b. Offering online support in academic writing for postgraduate students
- c. Supporting postgraduate students by transforming the platform of training from face-to-face and migrate to online blended support training such as webinars, podcasts, etc
- d. Promoting the use of African epistemologies by academics and graduate students and supporting indigenous knowledge research

The programme will be open to all of Unisa's postgraduate students at different stages of their postgraduate study and will facilitate the development of skills and academic competencies needed to excel in postgraduate study, within the current context where COVID-19 infection control practices play a center-stage role in the design, implementation and facilitation of research projects. The online learning design allows for cost-effective enhancement of research skill sets in ways that maximally support adherence to COVID-19 risk reduction measures.

The proposed programme is an intensive online rolling programme designed to train all registered Unisa master's and doctoral students in proposal writing; thesis development; research methodology, writing for publication and grant writing within a post-COVID-19 context. This programme will also provide students with additional training on social-distancing methodology development practices and is directly aligned to UNISA's strategic imperative of Enhancing Research on the African Continent and Globally but does this within a post-COVID-19 educational context (as extracted from Unisa's 2016-2030 Strategic Plan).

Postgraduate research performance and the generation of innovative outputs by Unisa's postgraduate students represent a critical performance area, which requires highly targeted attention especially within a post-COVID-19 environment. The current milieu requires the development of new student support modalities that will benefit and be available to all the university's postgraduate students to ensure that the university continues its progression towards world-class research competence in the conceptualisation and implementation of research that complies with COVID-19 infection control guidance; at the same time maximally utilising effective online pedagogies.

The proposed online master's and doctoral research methodology, online proposal writing, online thesis development and online grant writing and originality verification programme is a dynamic one-stop online package that is based on a vision by the College of Graduate Studies at UNISA to accelerate transformation initiatives to become a fully-fledged world class ODeL space in line with the notion entrenched in Strategic Focus Area number 1. The latter would accelerate Unisa's mandate of being a leading student-centred ODeL comprehensive university producing quality graduates and will provide the ability to service all of the university's colleges in supporting students currently embarking on master's and doctoral studies. The programme will be a rolling programme and will have separate streams for master's, doctoral, proposal and thesis-development phase students across all the disciplines offered at UNISA. The College of Graduate Studies has expressed a specific priority related

to capacity-building activities closely linked to research and the growth of all of the university's students on postgraduate programmes.

Beyond an acceptance of the importance of developing competence in research, there is wide acceptance that the world's most socially progressive and economically self-sustaining nations have working populations that are predominantly comprised of employees educated to master's and doctoral levels, and most significantly, individuals with advanced research leadership competencies. The United Kingdom (UK), United States of America (USA), Germany and Switzerland are among those nations where more than 50% of their employee population in white-collar occupations have obtained master's level education or higher (ILO, 2018).

Notably, these higher proportions of research-competent employees within a nation's economy have been correlated with positive impacts across wide-ranging socio-economic determinants including crime, unemployment risk, rates of absolute poverty, perceived job satisfaction, per-capita productivity and participation in social development initiatives. In the context of university performance, competence in research leadership has been associated with increased master's and doctoral outputs, increased innovation, more engaged scholarship, greater societal impact and increase in all areas of knowledge production and teacher development (DHET, 2016).

Related to this, is the growing global acknowledgement that knowledge and innovation have critical importance to national wealth and welfare. In this respect, South Africa postgraduate education initiatives have the potential for greater significance in the broader national strategy to accelerate human capital development (NDP, 2013). The National Development Plan further acknowledges the importance of leadership in research and capacity building as catalysts for socio-economic development and global competitiveness. These observations concur with views held by other agencies, including the Department of Higher Education and Training, The National Research Foundation and other funding agencies that note the need for developing a critical mass of research leadership amongst university academic and postgraduate students.

Fostering academic integrity, especially in master's and doctoral projects by providing training in academic writing and originality verification software, is crucial for the improvement of throughputs and completion rates. This online training in academic writing and originality verification should form part of a longer chain of training "programmes"; for example, it also includes the high-impact teaching of a Proposal Writing Module online to scale back on

physical visits to the regions locally and on the continent, especially in the era of the current and post-COVID-19 pandemic, with a view to (i) accelerate excellence in postgraduate research support, (ii) improve learner support by promoting an enabling a postgraduate support system, (iii) foster online academic support/programmes to promote lifelong higher education for all and knowledge creation that is nationally responsive and globally relevant and (iv) inculcate an African perspective in postgraduate support.

Further, it is envisaged that the proposed online programme can be the precursor to the full master's and doctoral studies, as implemented by Melbourne University in Australia, Thomas Edison University USA and the University of Maryland Baltimore, USA. This would significantly improve postgraduate student support and increase effective and efficient service to students to promote a quality student experience, in line with the values of the College of Graduate Studies.

For more details regarding this exciting online programme, please join the future by visiting the College of Graduate Studies website at: <https://www.unisa.ac.za/cgs>.

For more on the colleges research activities, you can follow us on the following Social Media platforms:

Facebook – [@unisaresearch/](https://www.facebook.com/groups/UnisaTrainingWorkshops) [www.facebook.com/groups/UnisaTrainingWorkshops](https://www.facebook.com/groups/UnisaTrainingWorkshops) for research training workshops and Twitter – [@UnisaRandl](https://twitter.com/UnisaRandl) .

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