BOOK REVIEW

How to succeed in your master’s and doctoral studies: A South African guide and resource book by Johann Mouton

Reviewed by Terry Calmeyer, Caitlin De Kok, Jeantel Hardy, Jo-Anne Rogers and Lian Taljaard
MA Research Consultation Programme
Department of Psychology
University of South Africa
terrycalmeyer@gmail.com

This book is relevant for students who want to complete a master’s dissertation or doctoral thesis. It is written within the South African context, and its purpose is to inform students about the challenges that they are likely to face during their postgraduate studies, and provide them with the necessary tools to complete their degree.

The author, Johann Mouton, has produced several works on methodologies in the social sciences, and holds the position of Professor in the Department of Sociology at the University of Stellenbosch. His work focuses on philosophy and methodology, research design and programme evaluation, research management and research ethics, and research evaluation and science policy. Other works by this author include The practice of social research (with E. Babbie) and Theory and method in
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_South African human sciences research: Advances and innovations_ (with J. Muller, P. Franks, & T. Sono).

Overall, the book identifies common struggles that are encountered by master’s and doctoral students, and takes a practical approach to solving these challenges. The book is comprised of two main parts. The first is divided into four subsections. These deal with the preparation, planning, research process, and research product of theses and dissertations. The flow of these chapters is designed to mirror the real-life activities that students have to undertake in order to produce a final research product. The book creates a logical framework that students can follow as a step-by-step guide. The first part of the book is therefore a practical and comprehensive “how-to” guide for post graduate studies.

The first subsection provides comprehensive information on how to prepare for post graduate studies. This section is divided into three chapters. The first chapter covers the reasons why students undertake post graduate study as well as the foremost reasons many fail to complete their degree. The author explains why students need to carefully consider their motives for undertaking post graduate studies before deciding to commence their studies. He also illustrates how each step in the decision-making process should be approached. In chapter two the author describes the nature of supervision, how to select a suitable supervisor and what students can expect from the supervision process. He also explains the student’s responsibilities with regard to the relationship between student and supervisor. Chapter three gives a multitude of helpful resources and information on where to access ideas for research, especially within the South African context. The author also includes a few practical guidelines on the selection of a research topic. Mouton provides comprehensive information that will enable students to sufficiently prepare for their studies, to assimilate and incorporate information about the various stages in the research journey (information without which students could find themselves lost along the way).

The second subsection is concerned with planning the research and consists of two chapters. In the first, the author guides the student in understanding the nature and structure of a research proposal and gives practical suggestions on how to improve the chances of the proposal being accepted. The author emphasises that the structure of the proposal should embody the logic of the research project. Other issues discussed in this chapter concern the nature of the research design, research problems and varieties of research design. The author includes some very descriptive, helpful diagrams and tables that outline the processes and structure of a research proposal. The second chapter in this section focuses on the resources students may need throughout the research process, emphasising that the most important resources for master’s and doctoral studies are the students themselves. Furthermore, the author provides key principles of time management before and during the research process, such as setting clear outcomes right from the start and even planning for rest and spare time. Helpful tips are given on managing primary
and secondary information and data. Mouton also directs the student to software programs that can be used for project management and time scheduling. He also provides a helpful list of sources of funding for post graduate students. This chapter concludes with a valuable resource checklist template.

The third subsection focuses on the research process itself, detailing the literature review and data collection. Chapter six explains how to conduct a good literature review. In this chapter, the author provides the reader with information on where to search for academic literature as well as how to structure the review. With the use of good examples Mouton provides a clear understanding of the different ways to organise the review. Chapter seven focuses on the data collection process, providing the reader with information about the various methods of data collection. Unfortunately a thorough description of each method is not given; however, a list of references is provided for further reading.

The last subsection is concerned with the final product, the thesis. Chapter eight orientates the students as to the basic outline of the thesis. The author provides a useful breakdown of the chapters and paragraphs typically used in writing a thesis. This is a valuable template that can be used across disciplines, with minor adaptations where necessary.

The second part of the book, “Resource Chapters”, is concerned with the various resources that post graduate students are likely to require during the course of their studies. These resources are applicable not only to students from the social sciences, but from a wide range of disciplines, including medical science and law.

Chapter nine discusses the different frameworks within which research can be conducted. A brief outline of these frameworks is provided and visually represented to explain how these frameworks interlink. This might, however, be difficult to understand for students who have not been exposed to the various research frameworks. A more detailed explanation might be necessary to improve understanding of the concepts. Chapter ten provides the reader with a detailed list of different research designs, including the differences between designs and the appropriateness of each considering the research purpose. Chapter eleven provides two real-life examples (one good and one bad) of research proposals. Often the theory sounds easy enough, but problems are experienced when put into practice. Mouton works through the two proposals step by step. He highlights what works and what does not and the reasons for this, thus giving students concrete examples that they can apply to their own style of writing. Chapter twelve focuses on understanding basic computer terminology. Some of this information is useful, but for the most part it is somewhat superfluous. It would have been more relevant if Mouton had focused on research-specific aspects and referred readers to other books on computer issues. In addition, computer technology information tends to become quickly outdated and new sources need to be referred to for the latest developments. Chapter thirteen lists some resources used for conducting literature reviews. It is a comprehensive
chapter with the names of databases and a short paragraph describing each. Many of the databases are available on CD-ROM, but most of these information sources are also available online. The APA (4th edition) referencing system is summarised in the fourteenth chapter. This is a very useful feature of the book, which will ensure that students keep it close by throughout their master’s and doctoral studies. It is an exhaustive chapter and includes website, CD-ROM and even video referencing guidelines. The concluding chapter is concerned with ethics in scientific research. It serves to remind students of the perils of unethical practices. Given the importance of ethical research, this chapter does a great job of highlighting this issue and making it salient in the minds of students.

In our opinion, part two of the book is very comprehensive and practically orientated. The only criticism we can raise for this section is the relevance of the aspects of computer history dealt with in chapter twelve.

Overall, this book is an easy read as it has a very clear structure and uses simple and practical explanations to convey information about the research process. The reviewers are all master’s students and can attest to the fact that the topics are relevant to post graduate studies. The book deals with issues directly related to the research writing process and aims to inform students about more general aspects that could impact the process. The clear structure also allows students to use the book throughout their studies as they can easily refer back to the relevant sections.

In summation, we recommend this work as a useful and comprehensive addition to almost any student’s library collection. Even though it is a 2001 edition, it has not become outdated and much of the information is still relevant as demonstrated by its continuous reprinting and publishing.

Title: How to succeed in your master’s and doctoral studies: A South African guide and resource book
Author: Johann Mouton
Publisher: Van Schaik Publishers
Date: 2011
ISBN: 978 0 627 02484 9
Pages: 280
BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES

The reviewers are Psychology Masters’ students specialising in Research Consulting (MA[RC]) at Unisa. Even with this common goal, they have a range of interests. Terry Calmeyer’s interests lie in market, medical and social research. Caitlin de Kok has a keen interest in market, media and psychometric research, and would love to one day complete her PhD in psychology. Jeantel Hardy is interested in cognitive, emotive and behavioural psychology and market research. Jó-Anne Rogers is a registered Psychometrist and her fields of interests are psychometrics, assessment, the development of assessment instruments, and market research. Lian Taljaard’s interests include neuropsychology, developmental psychology, philosophies of science and individual/social behaviour.