

A Survival Guide for Every Postgraduate Journey

***30 Things You Need to Have Peace With
Before You Get Frustrated***

as a Master's or Ph.D. Student 🎓

With Reflections

for

Supervisors 🗣️ *Institutions* 🏛️ *and Peers* 👥

by

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Publisher's Note:

Ascension Publishers is proud to support impactful and transformative academic works that speak to the heart of research, learning, and personal growth. At the core of our mission is a commitment to amplifying voices that offer both academic depth and human insight. This book, *A Survival Guide for Every Postgraduate Journey*, exemplifies this commitment. It goes beyond the traditional framework of thesis writing or research methodology to address the often overlooked psychological, emotional, and existential dimensions of the postgraduate experience. The work of Dr. Farai Mlambo reminds us that post-graduate education is not merely a technical process, but a deeply human one filled with uncertainty, breakthroughs, growth, and resilience. We believe that this guide will serve as an indispensable companion for students who navigate the complex and nonlinear terrain of advanced study. It offers not only practical wisdom, but also empathy, encouragement, and a sense of solidarity that will resonate with readers of all disciplines and continents. We are honoured to bring this work to print and hope it finds its rightful place on the desks, in the hearts, and throughout the journeys of many postgraduate scholars.

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Foreword:

Professor Sibusiso Moyo

DVC - Stellenbosch University

“It always seems impossible until it’s done.” — Nelson Mandela

I am honoured to write the foreword for *A Survival Guide for Every Postgraduate Journey* by Dr. Farai Mlambo. This guide is a much-needed resource for everyone involved at various stages of the research journey: the student, the supervisor, the institution, and what Dr. Mlambo insightfully calls the fourth pillar - peer supporters.

In both my past and current roles at institutional, national, and international levels, I have worked with a range of stakeholders in postgraduate education, an area that continues to demand ongoing rethinking and re-engineering. If we consider Dr. Mlambo’s four pillars as units of analysis, we can begin to map out how each interacts with a complex web of systems, stakeholders, and processes. Often, these systems and procedures can be daunting, not just for students but also for supervisors who must navigate them alongside their candidates.

The postgraduate journey can be deeply rewarding, but its success is highly dependent on preparedness, responsiveness, and the institutional ecosystem. A critical partner in this journey is the network of support systems, from supervisory capacity and research support units to digital platforms that reduce administrative burden, to libraries, laboratories, high-end equipment, training facilities, and, crucially, funding mechanisms. Institutions must also clearly articulate postgraduate attributes so that students understand the intended outcomes and potential impact of their chosen degrees. Equally important is the role of peer support, coupled with an institutional culture that prioritises accountability, ethics, and excellence.

The South African Council on Higher Education’s National Doctoral Review (2020–2021) offered several important insights into postgraduate education. The review examined trends in enrolment and participation, notably the growing number of black South African doctoral students between 2005 and 2020, and highlighted systemic challenges affecting student progression. One key concern remains: while student numbers have grown across all levels, the academic staff complement has not increased at the same pace.

Dr. Mlambo responds to a long-standing call echoing through lecture halls, supervisor meetings, and library corridors, a call for a guide that is not only methodologically sound but emotionally resonant. This is not just a book; it is a mirror, a map, and a lifeline for students navigating the often isolating and ambiguous terrain of postgraduate study.

As an academic leader and long-time advocate for transformative post-graduate education in Africa, I have encountered many technical manuals and research guides. What sets this book apart is not just its treatment of research methodology or academic processes but its unwavering focus on the human experience behind the research.

With humility and clarity, Dr. Mlambo gives voice to the often-silenced struggles of postgraduate students:

- The part-time student writing late into the night after caregiving responsibilities, “trying to fit research into the cracks of life.”
- The first-generation scholar bearing the dual weight of pride and pressure from their community, often questioning whether they truly belong.
- The student facing constant rejection, who learns that “rejection is part of the process, not a verdict on your worth.”
- The doctoral candidate, talented yet paralysed by impostor syndrome and the fear of disappointing a supervisor.

Dr. Mlambo speaks to all of them, and to us.

One of the most compelling aspects of this book is its honest invitation to supervisors and institutions to reflect, re-calibrate, and rethink how we support post-graduate students. In South Africa, national and institutional efforts have been made to enhance the postgraduate experience, including joint initiatives and collaborative doctoral programmes. However, many students still face challenges that demand serious reflection from those of us entrusted with shaping and supporting their academic journeys.

To every student, supervisor, and institutional leader: this is a book you will return to, not just for its insight but also its empathy. It reminds us that the postgraduate journey, with all its complexities, is worth undertaking. You are not alone. Your struggle is seen. And your journey, though imperfect, is deeply meaningful.

Professor Sibusiso Moyo (Ph.D. Mathematics)

Deputy Vice-Chancellor: *Research, Innovation and Postgraduate Studies*
Stellenbosch University

Foreword:

Prof Lynn Morris

DVC - Wits University

As someone who has walked the postgraduate path as a student, a supervisor, and now as an institutional leader, I can say with conviction that this book is essential reading for anyone involved in postgraduate education.

A Survival Guide for Every Postgraduate Journey is not a conventional manual. It will not tell you how to undertake your research or how to write your thesis step by step. There are many other books that do that. Instead, it offers something unique and deeply valuable: the lived experience of a dedicated teacher. This book is a companion for those difficult moments when you feel stuck, overwhelmed, uncertain, or simply in need of a voice that understands what you are going through.

I am especially proud that this book has been written by one of our very own accomplished academics. Dr. Farai Mlambo brings over a decade of experience as a teacher, supervisor, and mentor. His academic credentials in data science, artificial intelligence, and statistics are impressive. But what truly sets him apart is the thoughtfulness with which he approaches the postgraduate journey. He understands that success is not just about intellect. It is about perseverance, self belief, and navigating a system that can be both inspiring and unforgiving.

Each of the thirty chapters offers a short reflection. Sometimes these are practical, sometimes philosophical. Each invites you to pause, take stock, and most importantly, keep going. You can read the book from start to finish or dip into the chapters as needed. Alongside the reflections are practical tools such as checklists, planning templates, supervisor perspectives, and institutional insights. All of this is structured around the complex realities of postgraduate life rather than just its formal milestones.

This book does not shy away from the hard parts. It speaks openly about the pressure of perfectionism, the grip of impostor syndrome, the sting of rejection, and the exhaustion that comes with sustained intellectual effort. But it also reminds us that the goal is not perfection but progress. You do not need to be the best. You simply need to finish with your wellbeing and your sense of self intact. If you are a supervisor, this book is also for you. Too often we

frame supervision in technical terms like feedback, timelines, and drafts. But at its core, supervision is relational. It is about creating space for growth and supporting another person's development without taking over. Done well, it is a powerful form of mentorship. And like all meaningful mentorship, it is a two way process. Dr. Mlambo reflects on how some of his best students have also been some of his best teachers, something I can relate to.

For institutions, this manual offers a timely reminder that postgraduate success is an imperative and requires constant attention. Students need systems that are fair, policies that are clear, supervisors who are supported, and processes that help them stay on track. In South Africa, where postgraduate completion rates remain far too low, we cannot leave student success to chance. The institutional reflections in the appendix provide a valuable call to action for higher education to create more humane, responsive, and equitable academic environments.

At Wits, we are responding to this challenge by building enabling systems such as the Graduate Online Learning and Development (GOLD) Programme, and by providing academic and social support through initiatives like the Wits Doctoral Academy. These efforts reflect our commitment to producing socially engaged postgraduate thinkers and innovators equipped to solve local and global problems. I recommend that all postgraduate students read this manual at the start of their journey and, just as importantly, keep it nearby for those moments when they need strength and reassurance to keep going.

Professor Lynn Morris

Deputy Vice-Chancellor: Research and Innovation

University of the Witwatersrand

Ps. The author declares having used ChatGPT to support readability

Acknowledgements

This book was never just about writing. It was about remembering. Remembering the quiet conversations, the unfinished drafts, the late nights filled with questions and doubt. It was about trying to tell the truth about a journey that is often walked in silence. I did not write this alone. I could not have.

The students with whom I have worked over the years are the true heart of this book. You may have seen me as the supervisor, but in so many ways, I was the one learning. Your questions, your resilience, your honesty and your hope have shaped how I teach, how I guide, and how I walk this academic life. You reminded me that research is not just about ideas, but about courage. Thank you for letting me be part of your journeys and for leaving traces of yourself in mine.

I owe much to my colleagues and peers, especially at Wits Business School, the School of Statistics and Actuarial Science, and the broader Wits community. Thank you for the conversations, the gentle challenges, the encouragement and the faith in what this book could be. You helped me believe in its worth when I was too close to see it clearly.

To the incredible scholars and professionals who reviewed the manuscript and offered endorsements, thank you for reading with care, with insight, and with generosity. Your reflections didn't just affirm this work, they deepened it. You reminded me that this is not just my story to tell, but a collective one, shared across disciplines, institutions, and borders.

I am especially grateful to Professor Lynn Morris and Professor Sibusiso Moyo. Your forewords were more than kind introductions, they were powerful affirmations of what is possible when academic leadership is grounded in empathy, vision, and service. Thank you for lending your names, your voices, and your integrity to this work.

To Ascension Publishers, thank you for seeing the humanity in these pages and giving this book a home. You allowed it to be what it needed to be, without compromising its soul.

To friends and collaborators who checked in, asked hard questions, reminded me to rest, and kept faith when I lost momentum, thank you. You knew when to nudge and when to leave space. I am deeply grateful for your presence.

And always, behind every page, there was home. To my wife, Mama Dokotela,

thank you for your strength, your patience, and your unwavering belief in what I carry. You kept everything together so I could write. To our three boys, thank you for the joy, the noise, and the grounding. You brought life back into the room when the screen became too large. And to my wider family, thank you for the prayers, pride, and reminders that no dream is too far when love surrounds it.

For every reader who holds this book in his hands, I want you to know that this was written with you in mind. Whether you are a student, a supervisor, a peer, or someone trying to make sense of the journey, I hope these words make you feel heard. I hope they give you language for what you have felt and a little more strength for what lies ahead.

And finally, to God. For grace that carried me, for clarity when the words got lost, for strength when I had none left. Thank You for being the centre of it all. May this book reflect not only what I know but who I am becoming.

With all my heart,
Farai

Book Endorsements and Peer Academic Reflections

1. Professor Paida Mhangara - Head of School, Geography, Archaeology and Environmental Studies, Wits University

"This book fills a critical gap by preparing the reader's mindset, not just their methodology, for the postgraduate journey."

2. Professor Zenixole Tshentu - Professor of Chemistry and Acting Dean, Faculty of Science, Nelson Mandela University

"The message is clear, and the sobering realities it presents are hard to ignore."

3. Rebecca Coetzee - Associate Lecturer, Family Medicine and Primary Care, Wits University

"A compassionate companion that speaks honestly to the emotional realities of postgraduate life."

4. Dr David Mhlanga - Teaching Professional & Research Expert, ACAP University College, Australia; Associate Editor, Springer

"A timely contribution that blends empathy, practice, and global relevance, poised to become a transformative resource."

5. Lerato Monyatsi - Group Skills Development Manager, ABSA Group

"This heartfelt guide offers both academic clarity and emotional support for navigating study and self-doubt."

6. Victor Chidongo - Ph.D. Candidate, Head of PMO, Harvard Alumnus, PiMP

"With empathy and insight, this book transforms isolation into connection, a must-read for students and supervisors."

7. Dr Goitsione Emily Olifant - Postdoctoral Fellow, African Energy Leadership Centre, Wits Business School

"A clear and accessible guide that bridges academia and industry to connect with future leaders."

8. Professor Costa Hofisi - NRF-rated Professor and Research Director, North-West University

"Though the postgraduate journey may be lonely, this book offers companionship on the road to success."

9. Professor Glen Nwaila - Deputy Head, School of Geosciences & Director, CORES, Wits University

"Empathetic, essential, and practical, this guide offers holistic support to students, supervisors, and institutions."

10. Itumeleng P. Mogopodi - LLM Candidate, Assistant Manager: Secretariat Services, Rand West City Local Municipality

"A deeply practical and inspiring guide that empowers scholars to pursue excellence with integrity."

11. Dr Palesa Natasha Mothapo - Director: Research Support and Management, Nelson Mandela University; Founder: Pan-African Postdoc Network

"A timely and essential guide that highlights the shared responsibility of students, supervisors, institutions, and peers in navigating the postgraduate journey."

Dedication

To my many students who taught me to supervise.

You were my teachers long before you were my mentees. In your questions, I learnt how to listen. In your drafts, I learnt to guide gently. In your struggles, I learnt the value of patience. In your triumphs, I discovered the quiet joy of walking alongside you. Each of you shaped not just my supervision style, but my understanding of what it means to lead with empathy, to teach with humility, and to believe, even when belief came hard. Thank you for your trust, persistence, and grace. This work and much of what I have become in academia carry your fingerprints.

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instructing from a distance but about standing beside someone as they develop their thinking. Some of you came into my life briefly, others stayed for years, but each encounter left something behind: a question that challenged me, a conversation that lingered, a breakthrough that brought joy. In witnessing your growth, I too grew. You taught me that supervision is not a transaction but a relationship; not a ladder to be climbed, but a journey to be shared. If this book helps even one of you feel seen, supported, or strengthened in your path, then its purpose is fulfilled.

As you continue your journeys in academia, industry, or in other walks of life, I wish you the very best. May you carry forward not just the knowledge gained, but the resilience forged in moments of uncertainty, the confidence earned through perseverance, and the wisdom born of reflection. Whatever path you choose, may you remain curious, kind, and committed to growing, not only as professionals but as thoughtful, ethical, and compassionate human beings. You have my deepest admiration and I will always root for you.

This book is also dedicated to the many individuals I mentor through platforms such as LinkedIn (30,000+ followers as of July 2025), academic networks, and informal communities, people I may never meet in person, but whose messages, questions, and quiet perseverance inspire me deeply. You remind me that mentoring knows no borders and that wisdom can be shared even across digital spaces. May this book serve as a companion on your journey, a reminder that you are not alone and that your growth matters.

“We are all apprentices in a craft where no one ever becomes a master.”

— Ernest Hemingway



About the Author

Dr. Farai Mlambo holds a Ph.D. in Mathematical Statistics from Nelson Mandela University, where he also earned his MCom Statistics (Research) *Cum-Laude*, BCom Hons Mathematical Statistics *Cum-Laude*, and BCom Economics and Statistics *Cum-Laude*. He serves as a Senior Lecturer in Digital Business (*Data Analytics and Artificial Intelligence*) at the Wits Business School, University of the Witwatersrand. He is also the Programme Director for the Postgraduate Diploma in Digital Business and a Research Fellow of the Machine Intelligence and Neural Discovery (MIND) Institute at Wits University. Dr. Mlambo is also a Co-Chair of the South African Statistical Association (SASA) Statistics Education Interest Group and an Associate (Statistics) of the National Institute of Theoretical and Computational Sciences (NITheCS).

With more than a decade of experience teaching and supervising undergraduate, master's, and doctoral students, Dr. Mlambo is known not only for his academic expertise in data science, machine learning, and statistical modelling, but also for his empathetic, clear, and empowering approach to research mentorship. He has taught and coordinated numerous courses in statistics, data science, research methodology, artificial intelligence, and data analytics across faculties and disciplines. He has supervised, taught, and mentored more than 100 postgraduate students to successful completion, many of whom have gone on to publish, pursue doctoral studies, or lead data-driven initiatives in business, healthcare, and public policy. As someone who has navigated the highs and lows of postgraduate research, Dr. Mlambo understands that the journey is as emotional as it is intellectual. He wrote this book not as a distant academic, but as someone who has lived the frustrations, breakthroughs, delays, doubts, and triumphs that define the Master's and Ph.D. experience.

Dr. Mlambo is also a passionate advocate for accessible, equitable education. He actively mentors young scholars across the continent and beyond, serves in academic leadership roles, and speaks at conferences and workshops on research development, artificial intelligence, and higher education transformation. When not teaching, writing, or supervising, Farai finds joy in faith, family, mentoring emerging researchers, and empowering students to believe in their worth beyond any grade, title, or thesis.