

Wanted: PhDs -- sans laptops

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In their race to lure more postgraduate students, some universities are stopping just short of offering students a free semester to Jamaica where they can sip cocktails and finish up their research thesis.

Postgraduate students are cash cows because they bring with them high government subsidies, more than for undergraduates. Each master's graduate is subsidised to the tune of R130 000 and for each doctoral graduate, the university receives about R270 000. Tuition fees for master's and PhD students are significantly less, between R10 000 to R25 000.

Universities receive an annual subsidy based on student intake and research outputs -- the number of journal publications produced plus the number of students they graduate. The publication of an article in accredited journals brings a R90 000 subsidy.

Thus the postgraduate student package wars have developed, with universities offering discounted tuition fees coupled with generous bursaries and fee refunds in order to entice desirable students.

The *Mail & Guardian* has learnt that the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN) is footing the tuition costs for this year's full-time research master's and PhD students, regardless of which part of the planet they hail from, provided they complete their qualifications in the stipulated time.

Durban University of Technology says its master's students will receive awards of R60 000, paid in tranches, with the option of a laptop. "An amount of R100 000 is given to doctoral degree students whose proposals have been approved and also includes a laptop," which could be swapped for cash, according to Raveen Naidoo, acting director: Postgraduate Development and Support.

If you complete your research master's at North West University in one year, you pay R4 000 instead of R12 000 in fees. You'll get a bursary of up to R35 000 for a PhD, says vice-chancellor Theuns Eloff.

The higher education sector is an undergraduate one, with 85% of students (630 000) enrolled for such courses in 2006, according to Education Department figures. Of the 124 671 graduates and "diplomates" produced in total, only 7 879 had masters degrees and 1 100 PhDs.

UKZN vice-chancellor Malegapuru Makgoba said the aim of such incentive schemes was "to make a greater contribution to scholarship nationally and globally. South Africa's contribution to global research is falling and the quality of research is declining."

Along with the carrot is the stick. UKZN students must complete their master's in one year and PhD in three years. If they do not, continuation fees will be charged for subsequent semesters. Similar financial penalties are also imposed by other universities.

"This will mean improving [student's] work ethic and ethos. We can't have them hanging around for eight years," said Makgoba.

Lauding UKZN's move as "brave and fantastic", UJ's research head, Adam Habib, said his institution will refund master's and PhD graduates registered this year if they complete their qualifications on time.

"We'll pay them back if it's not a government bursary. We want to grow our postgraduate student numbers and respond to a major national need for increased research outputs," Habib said

"This is not about generating increased profits but meeting national imperatives and reinvesting in university research."

For Rolf Stumpf, former vice-chancellor of Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University, "This is what you do in an environment of survival -- you look at ways of optimising income. You need the money to start this and you will only reap the benefits later on and must be able to survive in the interim. The very poor universities have to think twice before they do it and you must have excellent management information systems to track your student inputs and outputs."

For Eloff, these initiatives "might strengthen some universities. But when students pursue postgraduate studies they go to universities with academics who are the best in their field. If you have good academics, students will come to you."

Source: Mail & Guardian Online

Web Address: <http://www.mg.co.za/article/2009-02-10-wanted-phds-sans-laptops>

