

Exploring Brookfield's Lens on Evaluation: The Use of Student's Evaluation to Improve Supervision Proficiency of Novice Supervisors in the Postgraduate Studies of South African Rural University

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ABSTRACT The aim of the study was to investigate possible challenges experienced by postgraduate students with the aim of improving supervision proficiency of novice supervisors. The researchers used mixed methods in this study, but the study was predominantly on qualitative approach with case study research design. With regard to data collection, 8 students from 2 faculties were given evaluation forms to fill in. Data from close ended questions was presented statistically but analysed in a qualitative approach. Moreover, data from open-ended questions was analysed thematically. The results of the study have revealed that students' evaluation is the most relevant tool to improve supervision competencies of novice supervisors. The study therefore, recommend that novice supervisors conduct an evaluation after the completion of each student they supervised and this will assist them to identify areas that need attention in their supervision.

INTRODUCTION

The first step for postgraduate or any research project in the postgraduate studies is choosing a supervisor or being allocated a supervisor. A supervisor is usually someone an expert in the area that the study has focused on. In some other universities, students are sometimes given the names of few supervisors to choose from who are experts in their field. Sometimes supervisors are allocated by the department/school in consultation with the student and depending on availability of senior staff. Communication is essential in any relationship. It is crucial for student to maintain constant communication with supervisor throughout the study period (Singh 2012: 14). It is through communication whereby the supervisor may know areas that the student need more support. However, the use of student

evaluation is one of the important lenses that supervisor may look upon their supervision proficiencies and be able to improve. The norm that students become anonymous during evaluation sessions makes students to be fair in their responses and provide valuable responses about the supervisors.

Supervisor and student will meet on a regular basis to discuss about the research project according to their work plan. However, some of the meetings may be requested by student if he/she needs to be clarified about certain aspects that may appear to be urgent. For record sake student should have research portfolio whereby all document related to the research project can be filled. The purpose of research portfolio is to track student's progress and be able to make reference from previous versions of the work for improvements. Some documents that can be stored in student's portfolio include:

- ♦ MoU between student and supervisor;
- ♦ Record of meetings with supervisor;
- ♦ Work plan for each year;
- ♦ Official schedule of meetings of the year;
- ♦ Records of course/workshops/conference attended for the year;

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- ♦ Departmental seminars attended or presented;
- ♦ Progress reports-annually;
- ♦ Approved proposal;
- ♦ Contact details;
- ♦ Other relevant documents.

The relationship between students and supervisors are clearly critically for the professional well-being of a supervisor and academic progress of a study. Positive relationship between students and supervisors often centred on supervisor making student comfortable and welcomed, of being a friend and of being personally available. According to Singh (2012: 14); a memorandum of understanding between students and supervisor has to be concluded after initial consultation process. Memorandum of agreement is regarded as a formal agreement between supervisor and student with the aim of outlining the basic principles of the relationship between the two. This includes a schedule of consultations and meetings, progress reports, time lines for submitting of each chapter and the mode of communication between the two. The purpose of the memorandum of understanding is to ensure a professional relationship between supervisor and student and also to confirm the rights and responsibilities of both parties (Singh 2012: 14).

The Rationale of the Study

This study sought to examine the experiences and challenges of post graduate students with research supervisors with the aim that the results would be used to improve supervision proficiency of all supervisors but in particular novice supervisors. The study has been necessitated by the low completion rate at the university under study which in most cases has been linked to supervisor in-effectiveness. This was also a follow up to a study conducted in South Africa by Wadesango and Machingambi (2011) on the same theme which found that students are not getting enough time with their supervisors because the supervisors are overworked. As a rule of thumb, an overloaded supervisor, even though well-intentioned, is unlikely to be an effective supervisor. In the above study, it also emerged that there was an acute shortage of qualified supervisors. Students in this study mentioned that some supervisors have an out-

dated approach and they were also incompetent thereby derailing their progress.

In another study on experiences of post graduate students, Golde and Dore (2001) noted that more than 40 percent of the postgraduate students reported that they would pick a different topic if they could start all over again, while 46 percent stated that they would select a different supervisor if they were given the opportunity to do so. About a third of the respondents noted that they would select a different field if they had to redo their post graduate studies (Lubbe et al. 2005). Clearly, the selection of the right topic and the right supervisor are crucial because post graduate study is supposed to optimise a candidate's future career and research options.

Research also suggests that up to half of the students who begin post graduate studies do not complete their studies at all (Golde and Dore 2001). This is because there are a wide variety of problems that students face top of the range being supervisor-supervisee relationship. Little discussion is taking place, and little research is being done about the low completion rate of post graduate students, possibly because it is an embarrassment to supervisors (Lubbe et al. 2005).

Brookfield's Four Critical Lenses

Stephen Brookfield argues that excellent teachers are those who reflect on their practice regularly and give others a chance to reflect on their practice. Brookfield regards student reflection as one of the critical lens of evaluation. Student evaluations of their learning experience, particularly those garnered during the course of the module rather than as end of module reviews, provide invaluable insights into the effectiveness of the learning being offered. Student's evaluation also occurs through every encounter in the form of natural feedback and responsiveness to learning opportunities and attentive teachers draws on this unconscious evaluation to inform their practice. For Brookfield, it is this student perspective that reveals "those actions and assumptions that either confirm or challenge existing power relationship in the classroom" (Brookfield 1995: 30). For the purpose of this study, student responses were used to serve two purposes. First, to identify possible challenges experienced by students during their

postgraduate studies; secondly, to assist novice supervisor to know areas that need to be improved.

Theoretical Framework

Gibbs' (1998) reflective cycle consists of six stages: (1) Description of the situation; (2) Analysis of feelings; (3) Evaluation of the experience; (4) Analysis to make sense of the experience; (5) Conclusion with other considerations; and (6) Action plan for a similar situation. It is more descriptive than Kolb's model to the extent that each stage has been extended to include a student's relevant reaction to each stage. In particular, Reflective Observation and Abstract Conceptualization of Kolb's model have been extended in Gibbs' model so that the former is split into Feelings and Evaluation and the latter into Analysis and Conclusion. In comparison with the process of Kolb's model, the benefit of the Gibbs' model is that the stages can be readjusted according to the purpose of reflection.

Application of the Model to the Study

Description of the Situation

In the context of this study, students were given a chance to give description about their experience of the entire research programme. These include their experience and challenges throughout the study of that particular qualification. Moreover, students were given a chance to give description about their relationship with supervisor.

Analysis of Feelings

In this stage of evaluation, students were given a chance to comment about their feelings based on their experience in their project. The feelings also include how they feel about lecturer's supervision skills.

Evaluation of the Experience

Students were given a chance to evaluate on their experience. The experiences include both challenges and success in their research project. The students were also given a chance to evaluate supervision proficiency of their supervisors.

Analysis to Make Sense of the Experience

By analysis to make sense of the experience, include the opportunity for students to give suggestions on how things can be done better. In this stage of evaluation, students are also students analysed strengths and weaknesses of their supervisor.

Conclusion with Other Considerations

In this level of evaluation, students were given a chance to recommend on how things can be improved in the future purpose. Hence the main purpose of evaluation is to improve the practice. In the context of this study, supervisors' skills in supervision were evaluated by students with some conclusion on how students consider things to be done.

Action Plan for a Similar Situation

In this study, students were given a chance during evaluation to suggest action that particularly aimed at improving supervisor skills on postgraduate supervision.

Statement of the Problem

Supervision of students is meant to assist students to overcome challenges in their postgraduate studies. Due to lack of evaluation, it becomes a problem for supervisors to know areas that students need more support. Furthermore, lack of evaluation result in to novice supervisors unable to identify areas that need to improve in their supervision proficiency.

Research Questions

How can Brookfield's model on evaluation be used to assist to improve supervision proficiency of novice supervisor students?

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Paradigm

The paradigms used in this study were mixed methods, but predominantly on qualitative paradigm. The advantage of mixed methods is that the results of the study can be presented both quantitatively and qualitatively. The study is

predominantly on qualitative because the study was conducted in a natural setting in which students were asked questions to answer based on their views on the supervision of their supervisors. Furthermore, data collected emanated from questionnaire, whereby majority of questions were based on qualitative approach. Authors such as De Vos et al. (2013) presented the following benefits for mixed methods:

- ♦ Mixed methods research provides strengths that offset the weaknesses of both quantitative and qualitative research, and therefore has the potential to provide better inferences;
- ♦ Mixed methods research provides more comprehensive evidence for studying a research problem that either quantitative or qualitative research alone;
- ♦ Mixed methods research eliminates different kind of bias, explains the true nature of a phenomenon under investigation and improves various forms of validity or quality criteria.

Research Design

The research design used in this study is explanatory mixed methods design. According to De Vos et al. (2013: 441), explanatory design is a two-phase mixed methods design. This design starts with the collection and analysis of quantitative data followed by the collection and analysis of qualitative data. The advantage of using this research design is that the qualitative data helps explain or build upon initial quantitative results from the first phase of the study (Creswell 2007). Another advantage of this research design is the fact that its two-phase nature makes it uncomplicated to implement and to report on. In the context of this study, students Masters Students were given questionnaire that consisted of both closed-ended and open-ended questionnaires. Participants were given questionnaire to fill only the quantitative questions. Thereafter, they were given open-ended questionnaires to fill in their responses in a qualitative approach.

Population and Sampling

The population consisted of Masters Students from two faculties at an institution of higher learning. During data collection, 8 Masters Students were given questionnaire that

consisted of both closed ended and open ended questionnaires.

Data Collection and Instruments

In order to undertake any research investigation, data should be collected. There are different types of data collection tools. To collect data in this study, the researcher used questionnaire that consisted of closed-ended and open-ended questions.

Data Analysis

According to De Vos et al. (2013) data analysis consists of analysing the quantitative data using quantitative methods, and the qualitative data using qualitative methods and procedures. It involves the processes whereby quantitative and qualitative data analysis strategies are combined, connected or integrated in research studies. Johnson and Onwuegbuzie (2004: 22) describe data analysis stages that a researcher should follow in analysing mixed methods data namely: data reduction, data display, data transformation, data correlation, data consolidation, and data comparison and data integration.

Ethical Issues

In order to carry out this study with respect and dignity, the researchers formulated the following ethical considerations:

- ♦ This concerns the importance of both accurately informing the participants as to the nature of research and obtaining their written consent to participate (Caidrehead 2006).
- ♦ Compulsion was not to be used to force people to participate and the participants were granted a right to terminate their involvement in the research at any time.
- ♦ Participation of the participants was voluntary, the real truth about the supervision of postgraduate students.
- ♦ The researchers assured participants that the information they provided was only for research purposes and that their information was to be treated with confidentiality.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Looking at Table 1, one will realise that level of satisfaction from student side was at maximum level. Students were happy about the avail-

ability of supervisor for consultation. Furthermore, 100 percent of students were happy about supervisor's communication and support provided to them. This is a good practice because one of the core duties of supervisor is to support student by communicating ways that enables them to complete their research projects. Considering complexity of research, students need to be motivated throughout their project. In the context of this study, 100 percent of students were happy about the motivation they received from their supervisors and that it encouraged them to complete their projects.

For one to carryout supervision duties effectively, subject knowledge about the topic is important. The study has revealed that supervisor has displayed high level subject knowledge and students were also assisted on choosing the relevant literature. Statistically, 100percent of students were happy about supervisors' general knowledge on research according to Table 2.

Research Project Evaluation Responses

Students were asked question if supervisor was always available for consultation. In their responses they mentioned that considering the fact that he has other students they were happy about his availability. It was also mentioned that if the lecturer was not going to be available for appointment, he does communicate with students prior the appointment date. This is a good practice because some students are coming far away for an appointment with their supervisor. Research has repeatedly shown that constant, thoughtful supervision and availability is the

key to successful graduate programme completion (Bak 2004; Toncich 2006). Time set by the supervisor was also convenient to students, and he was considering the fact that other students are not staying within the campus. With regard to communication, students were happy that the supervisor was using emails to communicate with them and phone call sometimes. The support of students from the supervisor was sufficient enough for both academic and socially. Furthermore, the support of the supervisor went beyond academic to assist student financially by arranging supervisor-linked bursary.

At the beginning of the research project, the supervisor met with the student to draft the work plan that served as memorandum of understanding (MoU). At the beginning of the research project, students were a bit unclear. However, the supervisor has provided students with enough information that assisted them to have a clear picture of what is expected of them. With regard to readings, students were searching information by themselves, but the supervisor was also prescribing some sources at times. With regards to feedback of student's work, the supervisor was taking reasonable time to respond to students' work. At times the supervisor was taking only two days to respond, and this is a good practice. Supervisors need not to take long time to respond to student's work because this can also affect the momentum of the students.

Supervisor's feedbacks to students were also very constructive and helpful to students. Supervisor's feedbacks that are not constructive and helpful to students can delay student to complete in record time. Students acknowledged that having supervisor was very helpful to their

Table 1: Supervision

#	<i>Poor</i>	<i>Fair</i>	<i>Good</i>	<i>Excellent</i>	<i>Satisfaction index (in percentage)</i>
Consultation (availability)			2	2	100
Communication			2	2	100
Support provided			4	-	100
Motivation				4	100

Table 2: Subject knowledge

<i>Knowledge</i>	<i>Poor</i>	<i>Fair</i>	<i>Good</i>	<i>Excellent</i>	<i>Satisfaction index (in percentage)</i>
Lecturer's understanding of the topic			2	2	100
Knowledge of relevant literature			4	-	100
General knowledge about research			2	2	100

research project, because he (supervisor) guided them and corrected their mistakes. The student sentiments above tally with Mouton's (2007) comments that students see an ideal supervisor not only as one who provides prompt feedback but also constructive criticism of their work. However, 50 percent of the students felt not happy about social support, especially when one of the international students was applying for study permit and supervisor linked bursary. With regards to research chapters, students enjoyed chapter 5 and chapter 6 of their work because the chapters enabled them to present the results and give their own insight about the problem.

Students found it difficult to write chapter 2 and chapter 3. Therefore, there is a need for supervisor to provide more support on such chapters. The supervisor was described as someone who is patient and supportive to student. Furthermore, he is someone whom is easy to approach with good communication skills. He (Supervisor) also displayed a caring character by continuously checking on student's progress. However, supervisor need to improve his approach on how to handle supervisor linked bursary. Generally students rated supervisor's skills of supervision 9 out of 10 which translates 90 percent of satisfactory and this is a good practice as a novice supervisor. Other comments from the students, is that 50 percent appreciated the supervisor for his extra efforts of working even during the holidays.

CONCLUSION

Reflecting on the findings of the study one will realise that there is a need for a good relationship between the student and supervisor. The relationship should be that of professional and should last until the project is completed. Therefore, communication becomes core to sustain a good professional relationship between the supervisor and the students. It is important for supervisor and student to sign memorandum of agreement (MoU) at the initial stage of the research project, and that should be accompanied by the work plan that is discussed and agreed by both the supervisor and the student.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The results of the study have revealed that students' evaluation is the most relevant tool to improve supervision competencies of novice supervisors. Furthermore, the study found that student's evaluation assist novice supervisors to know areas that they need to improve in their supervision. The study therefore, recommend that novice supervisors conduct an evaluation after the completion of each student they supervised and this will assist them to identify areas that need attention in their supervision. Furthermore, the study recommend Brookfield's four lenses on evaluation in a way of triangulating their evaluation.

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