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Postgraduate Supervisory Relationship: Experiences at an Open Distance Learning Institution

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ABSTRACT The paper presents the findings from a qualitative study on a range of relationship challenges experienced by postgraduate supervisors and students. The objective of this paper is to enhance quality research through positive relationship experiences. The researcher explored the experiences of postgraduate students and supervisors of postgraduate students at an open distance learning institution through one-on-one interviews with postgraduate students and supervisors. The students and supervisors responded both positively and negatively regarding their relationship experiences with postgraduate supervision. The oral and written submissions of the students and supervisors were descriptively analysed. The researcher concludes with recommendations to enhance open distance postgraduate supervision.

INTRODUCTION

Although universities are doing a great deal to improve the quality of supervision and experiences of students through workshops, seminars and technological advances, there are still many relationship challenges for postgraduate students and supervisors at open distance learning institutions (Horn 2016).

Dye (1994) states:

In its broadest sense the term "relationship" refers merely to the manner in which the supervisor and student are connected as they work together to meet their goals, some of which are common and some of which are idiosyncratic. Within the context of particular supervisory orientations, however, the nature and function of the relationship must be defined in specific terms.

For purposes of postgraduate supervision, three dimensions of relationships: the relative importance of the relationship within the total supervision process, variables which influence the relationship and how the relationship differs when working with experienced versus inexperienced supervisors (Dye 1994). When something happens to a supervisor or a student, when he or she personally sees or experiences something, it is accepted as a true reflection of their relationship experience. Personal experience has a strong impact and is a powerful source of knowledge. It can also mislead people through propaganda or stereotyping, and can lead to overgeneralisation. This typically happens when a person has some evidence that can be believed and then assumes that it applies to all or many other situations (Neuman 2003).

Open distance learning (ODL) institutions have to supervise a diverse group of postgraduate students with different learning styles. This poses challenges to both postgraduate students and supervisors at these institutions. One of the main problems is that most students are permanently employed, with work commitments. For supervisors, completion rates are statistics which are used to measure their performance. Although it is a prerequisite to pass Research Methodology prior to doing a master's dissertation, very few master's students seem to apply this knowledge of methodology when doing their dissertation. Consequently, lecturers have to supervise a large number of postgraduate students who are unable to conduct independent research. In distance education, regular meetings between supervisors and students become a problem due to work commitments and students living far away from the ODL institution where the supervisor is based. It is unfortunate that although the popularity of the internet has grown worldwide, online supervision and teaching of master's and doctoral students

has not been fully implemented at the same pace at many ODL institutions. Student and supervisor responses in this study offer valuable information about their expectations and the extent to which these expectations are being met. This research focuses on some aspects of the promotion of responsible research conduct within an African research context and also highlights some of the challenges encountered in this context. Universities and institutions of higher education that are funded by Higher Education in South Africa are becoming more aware of the need to have systems in place to detect breach of research ethics and research integrity. Although workshops and seminars are presented by universities on the mentoring of students, scientific writing of research proposals and research reports, research methodology and the avoidance of plagiarism, the quality of research still poses a problem (Horn 2016).

Objectives

This research was aimed at exploring the experiences of postgraduate students and supervisors at an ODL institution. The objective of this paper is to enhance quality research through positive relationship experiences.

METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this paper is to enhance ODL postgraduate supervision. The researcher explored the relationship experiences of both students and supervisors by asking two research questions. In the first question the researcher explored the positive and negative postgraduate supervisory experiences of students and supervisors. In a follow-up question, the researcher explored the understanding the respondents formed about these experiences.

During 2014, qualitative data was purposively collected in person from ten postgraduate students and five supervisors using one-on-one interviews at a postgraduate supervision workshop held at University 'U' in Pretoria, Gauteng, South Africa. During 2015, three doctoral students who were also supervisors of master's students were purposively invited to participate in this study from University 'K' in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa, and two doctoral students who were also supervisors of master's students were purposively invited to participate in this study from University 'P' in Pretoria, Gauteng, South Africa. Another five students were randomly selected from a list of second- and third-year postgraduate students registered for their master's and doctoral studies from University 'U' in Pretoria, with the help of the postgraduate coordinator. The participants showed an interest in participating in the research. They gave permission for their data to be published, with confidentiality and anonymity. The one-on-one interviews were used to gain an understanding of the participants' lived experiences of supervision (Henderson 2010; Fouché and Schurink 2011). The students and supervisors were interviewed face-to-face. The ages of the research participants ranged from 25 to 65 years. Most had completed their studies and were involved in supervision at the time of the study; others were in different years of study. All aspects of the research design are consistent with the ethical guidelines of the researcher's university.

RESULTS

The qualitative data was descriptively processed. Interviews were transcribed and the data was interpreted to reveal the participants' supervisory experiences. The interpreted information was coded and clustered under the specific research questions and by identifying patterns in the text. The themes identified from the patterns were confirmed and sorted into main themes and sub-themes. The themes were further clustered into storylines common to the majority, if not all, of the interviews. This also helped to identify variations within themes. The participants' storylines revealed three main understandings:

- The role of the supervisor should be to guide and advise the students.
- Learning styles of students should be considered during supervision.
- Master's and doctoral supervision should be part of teaching and learning.

The Role of the Supervisor Should be to Guide and Advise the Students

Part of the supervisor's plan should be to initiate a discussion with the candidate on a research plan, requirements in respect of ethical clearance for the research, appropriate deadlines and timetables and other relevant matters concerning the research, so that the research can be

completed successfully. The supervisor should provide prompt feedback on work submitted for assessment by the student and indicate such feedback on the learning management system (LMS). The supervisor must treat the student with courtesy and fairness at all times and should suggest appropriate developmental goals and provide assistance towards achieving those goals by directing the student to workshops or lectures designed for this purpose. This includes training in the use of data analysis software and techniques such as SPSS, ATLAS.ti and others (University of South Africa 2014).

Students felt that many supervisors did not have the knowledge and experience to supervise their topics, as they did not understand their area of research. This often resulted in too little guidance and harsh criticism. Many supervisors were not available to provide guidance as required by students. Students mainly wanted supervisors to provide support and guidance and give comments without criticism. The feeling was that supervisors should provide guidance in the form of regular consultation meetings. They felt that supervisors should give advice and guidance in the selection of an appropriate research topic. Some respondents found that the comments given by the supervisors provided cognitive development. Supervisors generally felt that students did not read books but mainly accessed Wikipedia or social media sources of reference for their research proposal and chapters. Both students and supervisors experienced a sense of excitement when a dissertation/thesis was completed successfully. Some of the main responses are as follows:

Student's response: *"supervisor assisted with content, by providing his own knowledge."*

Student's response: *"supervisors on research leave, overseas visits, they are sometimes too busy with other work and take too long to provide feedback on chapters."*

Student's response: *"Turnaround times were not always met. Conflicting messages are received when both the supervisor and co-supervisor send their respective comments to me (without prior consultation among the two supervisors)."*

Supervisor's response: *"It is difficult to work with students who are the know-it-all types, those who want you to do things their way."*

Supervisor's response: *"I experience difficulty if the topic is not in my field of expertise. My co-supervisor and I were personally attacked by a student for our comments that we made on a student's work. The student said that we did not know what we were talking about."*

Supervisor's response: *"Comments are ignored, and feedback is not attended to by student. Advice is not taken. Student wants to rush to complete the study. This results in not addressing the supervisor's comments correctly and not reading additional literature to address the supervisor's comments."*

Student's response: *"My supervisor had an open door policy; he was always available and provided good feedback. My co-supervisor also played a big role in the supervision process and provided a lot of guidance."*

Student's response: *"My supervisor was a professional with a good reputation in supervision; he provided contextual in-depth comments and assisted in editing my work. We also co-published an article from my master's dissertation."*

Supervisor's response: *"I found that many doctoral students already have a greater depth of knowledge on the subject they are researching. Working with doctoral students is much easier than working with master's students."*

Supervisor's response: *"I find that many students who can work independently appreciate their supervisor's perspectives and comments, and take time to address them before they respond to the supervisor."*

The experience and skills level of the supervisor was another factor that was seen by students as contributing negatively to their relationship. Some of the respondents questioned the training of the supervisors as they believed that this had a negative impact on their supervision experience. They felt that new supervisors should be allowed to co-supervise before being given an opportunity to supervise students on their own.

Respondents varied in their explanations as to why they had positive and negative supervision relationship experiences. Some of the students described their supervisors as "autocratic with one-way communication"; some found supervisors to be "very relaxed, friendly and strong"; others found that particular supervisors were "very friendly, good listeners and were good at engaging with their students".

One student related power play in supervision to cultural value system authority. The student believed that her first supervision relation-

ship was poor not only due to unclear expectations and understanding of supervision, but also because of cultural dynamics.

Learning Styles of Students Should be Considered during Supervision

The key to quality supervision is in understanding the student. Several students spoke about their lack of knowledge of what supervision was or how to use supervision to their advantage. Many master's students admitted that they did not have a good understanding of what supervision was when they first started their master's qualification. Some of the supervisors also admitted that they lacked experience and knowledge when they first started to supervise students. They were also afraid to provide guidance in specialised disciplines in which they lacked experience and knowledge.

Student's response: *"I did not have a grasp of what supervision really meant. It became frustrating when I was given comments on work that I produced. I did not understand my supervisor's teaching style and my supervisor did not understand my learning style. I also did not know what I wanted from my supervisor. There was a clear misunderstanding of each other's role."*

There is no teaching provided on supervision, on what supervision is, how it will take place and expectations of the supervisor and the student. Some students stated that they might have attended a workshop on supervision but could not recall any teaching on how this supervision would take place. It was only when they experienced supervision that they began to understand the concept and its application more clearly. A comment made by one student was also highlighted by several other students regarding their inability to understand the concept of supervision.

Student's response: *"Initially, I was curious to know how is this supervision going to take place in distance education, when I am so far away from my supervisor, 'what is this supervision?' and 'are we expected to be at the university every day?' and 'what we actually supposed to be doing here?' It took some time before my supervisor learnt who I was, my learning style and I got to know her teaching style and what distance education supervision included."*

This reinforces the need for preparation of both the supervisor and the student and the need for experience-based learning about supervision and the learning styles of the students being supervised.

Student's response: *"I think more time should be spent preparing students for supervision. I am not aware if it was only me, or others as well, but I feel that I was not well prepared to meet with the challenges of supervision."*

In essence, these comments capture the feeling of respondents and their readiness for supervision.

The following comment from one supervisor corroborates the need for an understanding of learning styles:

Supervisor's response: *"I find that postgraduate students' learning styles differ from person to person. We as supervisors need to become aware of their learning styles."*

Master's and Doctoral Supervision Should be Part of Teaching and Learning

Lessing and Lessing (2004) write as follows:

Postgraduate supervision in South Africa currently takes place in a much more problematic context than a decade ago. This context includes the following: (1) South African higher institutions are engaged in rapid transformation processes. (2) An increasing proportion of the postgraduate student body is from previously disadvantaged backgrounds with limited experience of library facilities and independent research work. (3) Most lecturers are grappling with the demands of increased student numbers as well as rapidly changing curricula and modes of delivery.

The value of open educational resources in distance education centres on content delivery (Butcher 2011). The importance of teaching and learning in supervision is a consistent theme in the literature studied. According to Robinson (1978), a seminal author on social work education in America, supervision needed to be seen "as a unique teaching process, which has grown up inside of case work, indigenous to it, but different in important ways … a distinct and unique educational process".

Supervisor's response: *"Inherent in literature study are the notions of reflective practice and critical thinking. Students can be made*

aware of specific models and theories and new developments through online teaching and learning, rather than supervisors going through the process of explaining developments through email and making comments on the specific chapter under assessment. Supervisors may link specific websites to the additional resources link and open discussion forums for specific topics under supervision. Announcements may also be added on the learning management system."

Student's response: *"If you are a working class student, one cannot attend workshops at the University. It is important to have web links to these workshops on the learning management system."*

A response by a postgraduate supervisor from University 'U' was: *"I supervised students from the United States of America, University of Atlanta and from parts of Africa. If the learning management system at University 'U' provided for online teaching of master's and doctorate students I would have interacted more frequently with the students."*

DISCUSSION

There has to be quality supervision for students as well as greater support for the preparation of students embarking on their fieldwork and those busy with their report writing (Moorhouse et al. 2014). Students often struggle with their fieldwork and writing their research reports when doing dissertations and theses. When students find that their supervisors are unable to assist them in doing their fieldwork and doing the academic report for them, they look for ways of outsourcing and paying for these tasks. This happens mainly among students who receive continuous comments on academic writing from their supervisors and those who are not accomplished academic writers, and whose arguments are difficult to understand (Singh and Remenyi 2016).

The supervisor and the student must trust each other. Obtaining each other's trust is an integral part of developing that trust. The supervisor should be a transformational leader who creates a favourable environment to build on collegiality with the student and gives recognition for work done by the student (Yin-king Lee and Kok-long Lee 2015). The ODL postgraduate supervisory relationship is subject to the influence of personal characteristics of the participants and by a great many demographic factors such as gender, race, supervisor's style, age, ethnicity and personality characteristics. The personality of the supervisor and student, who must trust each other, is an integral part of developing that trust (Sicora 2014). Relationship dynamics are those which may exist at only certain stages of the relationship or which are always present but in varying degrees or forms, for example resistance, power, intimacy, and the like (Borders et al. 1991). Ronnestad and Skovholt (1993) present an extensive description of effective supervision of master's and doctoral students. They conclude, "There is reasonable validity to the perspective that what is good supervision depends on the developmental level of the candidate."

Dye (1994) writes:

Conflict, the nature and magnitude of which is likely to change across time, can have a significant influence upon the relationship. In 1992, Bernard and Goodyear pointed out that conflict occurs in all relationships, and in the supervisory relationship, specifically, some common origins are the power differential between the parties, differences relative to the appropriateness of technique, the amount of direction and praise, and willingness to resolve differences. These influences can be moderated to some extent by mutual respect. Because of the greater power inherent in the role, the supervisor should take the lead in modeling this attitude if it is to be attained by both parties.

A supervisor must be mindful of the relevant policies and associated documents governing postgraduate supervision at an ODL institution. The primary responsibility of the supervisor is to prepare a postgraduate student for a research or academic career by assisting the student in building knowledge and research skills that make it possible for the student to start developing a publication record; by introducing the student to the relevant academic and professional networks through conferences, seminars and events; and lastly by leading by example and communicating appropriately through both words and actions (University of Pretoria 2012).

The relationship cannot be built on one-way communication and will require the students to accept full responsibility for their own learning and development, and the successful and timely completion of their qualification. Effective

communication between postgraduate students and the supervisor is a key element of successful postgraduate study. While supervisors have specialised knowledge and experience in the field of study, they also offer invaluable guidance on how to approach the study. Postgraduate students, in turn, need to remain available for discussion and open to guidance (University of Pretoria 2012). They must treat the supervisor with courtesy and fairness and communicate with the supervisor about any specific needs or circumstances likely to affect the postgraduate study. They must undertake research with commitment, develop initiative and independence and keep a thorough record of all data, research findings and relevant research meetings/discussions. They should keep copies of all submitted work and comments by the supervisor and keep backups of all electronic data and documents. They must adhere to the principle of academic integrity and ethical standards in research. They must critically engage with all relevant information as pointed out by the supervisor. They should investigate and attend relevant workshops or lectures, including training in the use of data analysis software and techniques such as SPSS, ATLAS.ti and others (University of South Africa 2014).

According to Ferreira and Venter (2011), the introduction of ODL "has changed the face of higher education worldwide. The Learning Management System (LMS) at ODL Institutions provides the opportunity to undergraduate and postgraduate students, excluding masters and doctoral students, to communicate easily with their lecturers and tutors. It has overcome many barriers to learning that were experienced with traditional distance education, as it is more practical, flexible and effective, especially in an age of easy multimedia access". The first generation of distance education began with the development of printed correspondence as the mode of communication and the mail system as a delivery option. The second generation of distance education introduced a number of new multimedia technologies. The third generation introduced a flexible learning model that incorporated audio and video conferencing. The fourth generation introduced interactive multimedia online, internet-based access to www resources and computer-mediated communication. The fifth generation introduced automated response systems and campus portal access to institutional processes and resources. These technologies enable content to be delivered to students wherever satellite coverage is available, while at the same time requiring minimal equipment (Heydenrych and Prinsloo 2006). The incorporation of information and communication technology into teaching and learning is one way to combine distance and proximity, and has become part and parcel of ODL in many countries. However, learning has gone through various generations as indicated above. The effective evolution from one generation to another is crucial to the success of a particular delivery system.

The researcher was concerned mainly with the positive and negative relationship experiences of postgraduate master's and doctoral students. It was found that communication is key in supervisory relationship experiences. In supervision there is sharing of information, knowledge, values and skills, and it is necessary to communicate in such a way that any misunderstanding is avoided at all costs. In postgraduate supervision the real challenge is to know how to communicate with students effectively, especially with students at a distance (Ferreira and Venter 2011). Although ODL institutions make numerous efforts to improve the student throughput rates, many master's and doctoral students still do not complete their studies, possibly because they cannot cope with the workload. Quality supervision results in quality research. It is important for supervisors to have the knowledge and skills to supervise postgraduate students and produce high quality graduates for the job market (Lessing and Lessing 2004; Hussin and Ismail 2009; Lues and Lategan 2004). A memorandum of understanding (MOU) on consultative meetings, progress reports and periods for submitting chapters should be developed in consultation with the student (Mouton 2001; Dillon and Malott 1981). Web-based tools for postgraduate supervision of master's and doctoral students should be part of the LMSs at ODL institutions so that teaching and learning can be made easier for both the supervisor and the student (Govender and Govender 2014).

Students must be able to select the correct topic, understand and use appropriate research techniques and present their findings accurately. It is not the task of the supervisor to write the dissertation or thesis, edit the language, or find solutions to research problems (Lessing and

Schulze 2002). Supervisors should assist students in acquiring technical competence, analysing data, managing time and personal responsibilities and accessing a network of peers and academics and the correct literature from the library (Pearson 1996; Sayed et al. 1998). The successful completion of a dissertation/thesis is just as much a function of a student as that of a supervisor (Lessing and Schulze 2002).

Postgraduate master's and doctoral students should be assisted in overcoming intellectual and psychological barriers such as internal and external conflicts which have an influence on the study. Students also need determination and perseverance to complete their research (Binns and Potter 1989; Lessing and Schulze 2002). A master's dissertation should demonstrate the student's ability to work independently, and a doctoral thesis should show evidence of original work and constitute a decided contribution to the knowledge of and insight into the subject. Particular attention should be paid to the scientific and academic quality of the research by ensuring the use of correct research procedures and techniques, methodology, demarcation and scope of research, with theoretical substantiation, exploration of relevant literature and a grasp of the field of research. More importantly, emphasis should be on the scientific and academic quality of the processing, presentation and analysis of data, structure and logical development/arrangement of content (internal coherence and classification), critical findings and recommendations. Last, but not least, the language and editing, technical presentation and layout to be done on the dissertation/thesis should be proficient so that a reader may have a clear understanding of what the author intends to convey (University of South Africa 2014).

According to Beddoe (2000), "the supervisory relationship is at the heart of fieldwork education. The field educator requires skills and personal attributes - warmth, genuineness, sensitivity, the ability to facilitate another's learning and the capacity to model good practice." These observations on fieldwork education apply equally to postgraduate supervision in general.

ODL institutions need to provide students with the knowledge to enable them to identify positive and negative supervision and to handle unsatisfactory supervision relationship experiences positively. Students ought to know how to negotiate an MOU with their supervisors that will help in the supervisory relationship. Supervisors are the key person in their students' achievement of their qualifications and as such have considerable influence in helping them achieve their full potential academically, intellectually and professionally. To be an effective master's and doctoral supervisor, the supervisor must first recognise the responsibilities that come with this role, and ensure that these are met to the best of their abilities with each student (University of British Columbia n.d).

The relationship a postgraduate master's or doctoral student has with the supervisor is one of the most important factors in the success of their qualification, and the most positive outcomes for supervisors depend on mutually open, committed and respectful relationships with their students. According to Ronnestad and Skovholt (1993), "supervisors of new students should provide high levels of encouragement, support, feedback, and structure ... the relationship with advanced students is typically more complex because students at this stage tend to vacillate between feeling professionally insecure and professionally competent. The supervisor should take responsibility for creating, maintaining, and monitoring the relationship which serves to provide structure and a mediating role while students are in turmoil."

Whether the type of relationship experience is positive or negative will determine the confidence of the student and supervisor in each other. The supervisory relationship may be influenced by incompatibility between the student and supervisor regarding their level of communication and practical experience and their different world views on the topic under supervision.

Supervisors, in the words of Moorhouse et al. (2014),

need to understand: the purpose and process of supervision, including the essentials of positive supervision; the importance of relationship and of experiencing positive supervision and of students forming a positive mental pattern of supervision …; how to appropriately manage power…; giving and receiving feedback … and; having expectations of supervisees appropriate to their level of professional development.

The researcher's own experience as a master's and doctoral student and supervisor has shown that students do not consider these qualifications as being part of education and day-to-

day teaching and learning. The relationship between the supervisor and student is not considered as an educational journey, but rather a formal requirement towards completion of a specific educational qualification. There seems to be a belief that on registration for a master's or doctoral qualification, the candidate has to complete it speedily with little or no consideration for learning from the literature study, the empirical study and from the experience, knowledge and skills of the supervisor. There is little concern for the quality assurance of the dissertation and whether the specific outcome and assessment criteria have been met for the specific National Qualifications Framework (NQF) level.

Although many ODL institutions have implemented their ODL policy, master's and doctoral students still receive education based on an asynchronous exchange of materials. The student receives material in a written format and responds in a written format. The supervisor gives feedback in a written format. Email is used as a vehicle for speedy communication of the written feedback. Although synchronous forms of education such as via the internet, social media, satellite broadcasting and video conferencing have opened doors for undergraduate and certain postgraduate qualifications, this is not the case for many master's and doctoral students at this stage. According to Davys and Beddoe (2009), postgraduate master's and doctoral supervision is a forum for learning and the main vehicle for reflection on the learning.

A Myers-Briggs personality inventory test should be undertaken by every new master's and doctoral student, so that supervisors understand the learning styles of each student they will be supervising. The Myers and Briggs Foundation (2015) elaborates as follows:

The essence of the theory is that much seemingly random variation in the behaviour is actually quite orderly and consistent, being due to basic differences in the ways individuals prefer to use their perception and judgment. Perception involves all the ways of becoming aware of things, people, happenings, or ideas. Judgment involves all the ways of coming to conclusions about what has been perceived. If people differ systematically in what they perceive and in how they reach conclusions, then it is only reasonable for them to differ correspondingly in their interests, reactions, values, motivations, and skills.

CONCLUSION

This paper presented the positive and negative research findings of ODL postgraduate supervisory relationship experiences. It is evident from the literature study and the experiences of respondents that there are still many relationship challenges that supervisors and postgraduate students have to overcome. Negative supervisory relationship experiences should be dealt with positively and amicably. To improve throughput rates, the expectations of students and the supervisors as set out in a memorandum of understanding should be followed and deadlines met in practice. The successful completion of a dissertation/thesis brings joy to both supervisor and student. In conclusion, this paper highlights the importance of supervisors listening to students' experiences of supervision, and having the vision to understand and respond to the students' learning and development needs.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In summary three recommendations are made:

- The role of the supervisor should be to guide and advise the students, ensure scientific quality and provide them with emotional support. As experienced researchers, supervisors should assist students in conducting independent research.
- Development workshops should be held for supervisors and postgraduate students, which should take into consideration relationship experiences and the learning styles of both students and supervisors. There is a definite need for supervisors and students to be educated in academic supervision. Teaching new postgraduate master's students about supervision should be encouraged.
- ODL institutions should include a web link on their LMS and have supervisors post podcasts and other course material for postgraduate students. Chapters should also be sent online for assessment. Improving master's and doctoral supervision through the use of online learning would lead to a more effective and enjoyable educational experience that many students and supervisors would want to repeat.

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