

Research Supervision: Postgraduate Students' Experiences in South Africa

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ABSTRACT The study sought to establish post-graduate students' experiences with regards to research supervision in South Africa. A purposive sample of 32 (11 male and 21 female), part-time Master of Education students registered for their dissertation at a South African University, participated in the study. A qualitative design was employed in this study. An open-ended questionnaire was used to collect the data. Data were analysed thematically. Participants identified good and bad supervision experiences. The study found that students viewed good research supervision experiences as hinging around the personality/characteristics of the supervisor. The study found that good supervision experiences were associated with knowledgeable, friendly, supportive, available, time conscious, informative and patient supervisors. On the other hand, the study found that bad supervision experiences included supervisor not always available, not receiving research guidelines, delayed feedback, continuous change of instructions, harassment by supervisor, supervisor losing student's work and receiving 'feedback' without supervisor comments. Participants believed that research supervision would be improved if: supervisors received training in research supervision; all supervisors employed a guiding attitude; the university adopted a common research supervision guideline; student and supervisor met/communicated regularly; students chose their own supervisors and if the university could have regular postgraduate research related seminars. Recommendations to improve postgraduate research supervision were made.

INTRODUCTION

Research shows that universities are known as knowledge producers (Delany n.d; Zhao 2001; Evans 2004). The key functions of universities are teaching, research and community service. Research informs the teaching and community service activities hence its centrality in universities (Chireshe 2010). As a result of research's centrality, many universities put much emphasis on it. One way to sustain the research function of universities is developing research capacity among postgraduate students (Mutala 2009a). Delany (n.d) views postgraduate students' research as a vital component of a university's research effort. Postgraduate research is promoted through research supervision. Connel (1985) views research supervision as the most advanced level of teaching in the education system. In a similar vein, Laske and Zuber-Skerritt (1996) define research supervision

as a process of fostering and enhancing learning, research and communication at the highest level. The process has a supervisor and a research student. The supervisor acts as the facilitator enabling the research student to adapt to his or her research project (Lee 2007). Zhao (2001) sees the supervisory process as crucial to the success of postgraduate students. He adds that central to research supervision is how to achieve quality, effectiveness and productivity of the process. Research supervision requires a range of skills that underpin good practice (Evans 2004). Pearson and Kayrooz (2004) views research supervision as a facilitative process involving a range of educational tasks and activities. It is broadening from the traditional focus of 'expert' and 'apprentice' to include support for the students. The quality of the research outcomes depends on the quality of the supervision process (Evans 2004) and may be measured by the subsequent productivity of the supervisee (Ruane and Tol 2008).

There have been reports on low throughputs rates among postgraduate students (Mutala 2009a; Khan 2009; Council on Higher Education (CHE) 2009). CHE (2009) reports of a huge challenge of making substantial inroads into an in-

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creasing overall postgraduate output in South Africa. There is a significant pile-up of both Masters and Doctoral students (CHE 2009). Students remain enrolled for their degree for much longer than expected thus straining university resources.

Lessing and Schulze (2002) cite researchers like Sayed et al. (1998) positing that only 10 % of Masters students completed the Masters research component in three years at the University of Western Cape. Armstrong (2004) also cites literature for example, Rudd (1985), Moore (1985), Dunkerly and Weeks (1994) and Malott and Brethower (1988) which reveal poor postgraduate completion rates. Lee (2007) argues that there are conflicting pressures in research supervision. There is pressure to produce quality research versus the pressure to complete. Some emphasise research supervision as a process of developing people who will have a career in research rather than those who will just complete their studies.

Other studies show that research supervision is viewed differently by its stakeholders (Zhao 2001). The conception of research supervision held by supervisors affect the way they supervise, the way their research students operate and the type of researcher who emerges at the end of process (Lee 2007). In a similar vein, the conceptions students have about research and research supervision affects their perception of the whole process. Emerging supervisors view supervision in relation to their own experiences as research students. They repeat their own supervisors' approaches or react against them with limited awareness of the different ways of being a supervisor (Mckenzie 2000; Lee 2007, 2008). Hence the habit of research supervision where practice is based on previous experience ensues (Evans 2004).

To the knowledge of this researcher, not much research has been conducted on how postgraduate students perceive their present supervision experiences in South Africa. Armstrong (2004) reports that there is a general dearth of research on the nature of supervision while Leong (2010) states that the voice of postgraduate students on research supervision has not received the attention it deserves. Zhao (2001) recommends carrying out research to achieve quality, effectiveness and productivity in research supervision. Internationally, some researches on postgraduate research supervision

have been carried out. For example, in the UK (Lee 2008; Trigwell and Dunbar-Goddet 2005), in Malaysia (Abiddin 2007; Krauss and Ismah 2010) and in Australia (Leggat and Matnez 2010). Most of these studies focused on full-time PhD students' research supervision experiences except for Lee (2008) who focused on supervisors' views. The present study would want to establish the research supervision experiences of part-time Master of Education students. The little relevant research in South Africa the present researcher has come across include that of Lessing and Schulze (2003) who looked at lecturers' experiences of postgraduate supervision. Lessing and Schulze (2002) and Schulze (2011) also investigated the perceptions of postgraduate students who had completed their studies towards the research supervision they had experienced at a South African University. The present study focused on students who were still under research supervision. The participating students still had fresh memories of their supervision experiences unlike those in previous studies who had successfully completed their studies and might have forgotten some of the experiences because of the excitement from the success.

An understanding of postgraduate students' experiences in research supervision may highlight some of the challenges perceived to be contributing to low throughput rates and poor quality products in South African universities. The highlights may significantly contribute to supervisory practices in universities and colleges.

Goal of the Study

The study aimed at establishing postgraduate students' experiences in research supervision. The study sought to answer the following question: What are postgraduate students' experiences in research supervision?

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

A qualitative design was used. Qualitative research is usually concerned with the participants' perspectives and experiences (Best and Kahn 2006; Slavin 2007). Since this study fo-

cused on postgraduate students' experiences in research supervision, the qualitative design was seen as the most suitable.

Sample

Participants were 32 (11 male, 21 female) part-time South African Master of Education postgraduate students who were registered for their dissertation at a South African university. Their ages ranged from 28 to 54 years. The participants were purposively sampled. The researcher chose them because they had fresh memories of research supervision experiences.

Instrument

An open ended questionnaire developed by the researcher was used to collect data for this study. The questionnaire had items requesting students to write and explain their supervision experiences. An experienced postgraduate supervisor was asked to check on the relevance and usability of the items of the questionnaire.

Procedure

The permission to carry out the study was sought from the university authorities. The researcher personally administered a questionnaire to Master of Education part-time students registered for a dissertation during one of the postgraduate students' research seminars session. The purpose of the study was explained to the participants. Participation was voluntary and the participants were free to withdraw from the study. Participants were asked not to write their names on the questionnaires for anonymity purposes.

Data Analysis

The data were thematically analysed. Responses/descriptors pointing to the same experience were grouped together.

RESULTS

The results are presented under themes that emerged from the participants' responses.

Good Supervision Experiences

The respondents revealed good supervision experiences that had to do with the characteris-

tics of the supervisor and how he or she managed the supervision process. Some of the students had enjoyed working with knowledgeable, friendly, informative, good listeners and motivating supervisors. They liked being encouraged by their supervisors who were always available and time conscious. They enjoyed receiving clear research guidelines. The following extracts demonstrate the students' good supervision experiences:

My supervisor is knowledgeable and informative.

The supervisor always motivates me.

I am happy the supervisor listens to me.

Bad Supervision Experiences

Like the good supervision experiences, the respondents gave bad supervision experiences that had to do with the characteristics of the supervisor and how he or she managed the supervision process. Some of the respondents did not enjoy the lack of expertise in their research areas displayed by some of the supervisors. The respondents had difficulty carrying their research work because of lack of guidelines from the supervisors. They were also uncomfortable with unapproachable supervisors, supervisors who harassed (verbally and sexually) and discouraged them and supervisors who were not supportive. Respondents had also experienced nightmares with supervisors who were not always available for them. Some of the supervisors provided delayed feedback, continuously changed instructions, lost students' work and sometimes returned students' work without comments. Other students received conflicting feedback from co-supervisors. The following extracts demonstrate the students' bad supervision experiences:

The supervisor is not competent in the area and is not always available for us.

I have not received any guidelines from the supervisor.

The supervisor has no respect for students at all.

Most of the time we are harassed by the supervisor.

There is no support provided. The feedback is delayed

Changing of Supervisor

Because of the bad supervision experiences, 15 (46.9%) students indicated that they would

change supervisors if given an opportunity. As indicated earlier, they would change the supervisors because: they were not getting advice and support from the present supervisors, their supervisors were not always available for them and some supervisors had bad attitudes towards students. Those who would not change their supervisors indicated that their present supervisors were knowledgeable, available and supportive. The following extracts demonstrate the students' intention to change supervisors:

I would prefer to change the supervisor because she is not always available.

Changing to someone who likes students is better.

Improving Research Supervision

The respondents felt a number of measures should be put in place to improve research supervision. Their suggestions included the following: supervisors receiving training in research supervision, supervisors employing a guiding attitude, university adopting a common supervision guideline, having regular postgraduate research supervision seminars, supervisors only supervising in their area of expertise, students choosing their own supervisors, where applicable, students and supervisors meeting regularly and the cooperation of co-supervisors. The following extracts demonstrate the students' views on improving supervision experiences:

Some of the supervisors need training in research.

There is need for a common guideline from the university.

One should supervise in his area of expertise.

We should be given the opportunity to choose our own supervisors.

DISCUSSION

The study revealed some good and bad supervision experiences by the students. These centred on availability, knowledgeability, supportiveness, friendliness, receiving guidelines and delayed feedback.

The findings focusing on the need for a positive relationship concur with literature cited by Armstrong (2004). Harrow and Loewental (1992) for example, posted that the relationship stu-

dents have with their supervisors determines the extent of satisfaction students have with the supervision. Kilminster and Jolly (2000), Zhao (2001) and Abdelhafez (2007), argue that the relationship between the student and supervisor is vital in the process of research supervision. In the process, an effective working relationship is usually associated with positive results. Leong (2010) also cite a study by Waghid (2006) indicating that postgraduate students required close relationship with their supervisors. As such, successful postgraduate supervision requires not only being knowledgeable in the field but establishing an effective professional relationship with the student (Kandlbinder 2000 cited in Evans 2004). The role of supporting research students has been observed to outweigh supervisors' expertise in the research area (Fraser and Mathew 1999). In a similar vein, Ruane and Tol (2008) view excellence in research by the supervisor as a necessary but not a sufficient condition for satisfactory research supervision. How the supervisor manages the relationship is more important. In an effective relationship, students are most likely to approach the supervisor freely and happily, implement his or her suggestions while the supervisor can also easily accommodate the student's views. However, the relationship may not produce the desired results if the student lacks commitment. The positive relationship between supervisors and students is most likely to be enhanced if a criterion for supervisor-student matching was in place (Schulze 2011).

The finding on students requiring supervisors to provide support and guidance concurs with Lessing and Schulze (2002) who had similar findings. Students are most likely to be satisfied by the supervision process if they get emotional and moral encouragement from their supervisors. The findings on delayed feedback, no comments on students' work and harassment experiences are also in line with Lessing and Schulze's (2002) finding that students complained about delayed feedback, too little guidance and harsh criticism. Khan (2009) noted that postgraduate students were comfortable with considerate, sensitive, approachable and fair supervisors.

Mutula (2009b) also established that delayed supervision feedback was a challenge to postgraduate students. Delayed feedback may be attributed to the number of students each supervisor is working with. For example, CHE (2009)

reports that South African academics are increasingly burdened with an unrealistically high number of postgraduate students to supervise while Mutula (2009b) states that supervisors are always too busy to meet students. Earlier on, Lessing and Schulze (2002) established that students felt that the less students allocated to a supervisor, the more likely the supervisor is to provide quick feedback.

The situation of shortage of supervisors is most likely to persist unless new supervisors are capacitated and there is an increase in the throughput rate especially at PhD level.

Armstrong (2004) also cites Hockey (1991) who revealed that students were dissatisfied with the research supervision process. The dissatisfaction negatively affect the research outcome as Evans (2004) argues that a research process positively perceived by students result in significantly better outcomes than one which is perceived as unsatisfactory.

Because of the bad supervision experiences, some students in the present study contemplated changing supervisors. This may be an indicator of how unsatisfied students may be with the supervision they receive. Unfortunately, some students may not have the courage to say this or there may not be alternative available supervisors for those who want to change. Schulze (2011: 801) recommends that postgraduate students should be provided with guidelines containing information that includes "how to request a change of supervisor or lodge a complaint".

Some students even suggested being given the opportunity to choose their own supervisors. This suggestion may result in the overload on those supervisors students believe to be good. If one has too many students, this may result in delayed feedback and compromised quality. In addition, some universities do not have research data bases from which students can be able to access the profiles of academic staff and identify possible supervisors based on research interests.

The finding that the students suggested the need for supervision training and mentoring for supervisors concurs with literature (Fraser and Mathews 1999; Lessing and Schulze 2002; Lee 2007; Leong 2010; Schulze 2011), which advocates for training and mentoring of supervisors to improve students' satisfaction with the su-

perision process and increase the research throughput and research quality.

Students would have preferred regular postgraduate seminars so that they could share their experiences. Sharing of experiences may result in the students discovering that they are not alone in the challenges they encounter and this may be a source of motivation.

CONCLUSION

Postgraduate students experienced good and bad supervision. The supervisor's personality and how he or she managed the supervision influenced how the students perceived the experiences. The bad experiences demotivated the students and resulted in the students delaying to complete their studies while the good experiences made them enjoy the supervision. The students valued supervisors' knowledge, availability, support and timely feedback.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are made:

Supervisors should try as much as possible to be human beings and act professionally. Supervisors should accept to supervise a manageable number of students and not to accept any students they are allocated or who approach them. Institutions of Higher Learning should come up with supervisor training workshops. These workshops should focus on aspects of good and bad research supervision. Supervision mentorship programmes should also be mounted in universities. Realistic supervisee allocation should be considered. Regular postgraduate research seminars should be mounted. This study was carried out at one institution. There may be need to look at the views of a number of students from different institutions on this aspect of postgraduate students' experiences. Further studies may also capture supervisors' experiences of postgraduate research supervision so that a clearer picture of supervisor-supervisee relationship emerges.

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