IMPROVING POSTGRADUATE SUPERVISION IN AN OPEN AND DISTANCE LEARNING ENVIRONMENT: A CASE STUDY AT THE COLLEGE OF EDUCATION, UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH AFRICA

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ABSTRACT
In an open and distance learning (ODL) environment, postgraduate students, in the main, study part time and are often far removed geographically from the university and their supervisors. There is thus very little face-to-face contact between the students and their supervisors and supervision takes place from a distance. Postgraduate students are unable to complete their qualifications in the minimum time required. The purpose of this article was to examine how supervision of postgraduate students can be improved in an ODL context so that students may complete their qualifications in the minimum time required. A qualitative approach was used to collect data from postgraduate ODL students.
The results indicated that students are generally satisfied with the supervision that they receive; however, the following areas need to be considered in order to improve postgraduate supervision: proposal writing, research methodologies, data analysis, and the appropriate allocation of supervisors. The author makes the following recommendations: supervisors need to have more face-to-face contact with students; supervisors should be allocated to students on registration; and regional workshops conducted by the university should specifically address the issues of proposal writing, research methodologies and data analysis.

**Keywords:** feedback, support, postgraduate, communication, supervisor

## INTRODUCTION

The University of South Africa (Unisa) is a comprehensive university, dedicated to open and distance learning (ODL). The College of Education is one of six colleges, consisting of ten departments that offer postgraduate studies in a wide variety of fields or focus areas in education. The college is dedicated to increasing the number of postgraduate qualifications in line with national strategy. Increasing postgraduate qualifications remains a challenge, since South Africa has a graduation rate of less than 15 per cent, one of the lowest in the world (DoE 2001). According to the Academy of Science of South Africa (ASSAF 2010) consensus report, the state of postgraduate studies within South Africa at the time was as follows:

- South Africa produced an average of 1,039 doctoral graduates per year from 2000 to 2007.
- South Africa produced an average of 7,163 master’s graduates per year from 2000 to 2007.
- The average time taken to complete a PhD was 4.8 years.
- Twenty-six PhD graduates were produced per year per million people of the South African population.

According to Kritzinger and Loock (2012, 2), these statistics ‘depict the poor state of postgraduate supervision in South Africa’. Although dropout and throughput rates are high in South Africa, studies carried out in Australia indicate that when completed dissertations and theses are evaluated, 60 per cent are accepted as is or with minor revisions; 36 per cent are accepted with major changes; 3 per cent are required to be revised and resubmitted for further examination; but only 1 per cent fail outright (Bourke 2008, 1040).

ODL as defined by Unisa is a multi-dimensional concept aimed at bridging the time, geographical, economic, social, educational and communication distance between students and institution, students and academics, students and courseware and students and peers. ODL focuses on removing the barriers to access learning,
flexibility of learning provision, student-centerdness, supporting students and constructing learning programmes with the expectation that students can succeed (Unisa 2008, 2). Postgraduate students who study at ODL institutions often experience challenges, difficulties and delays that prevent them from completing their studies (Lessing and Schultz 2003, 169). Helm (1989, 79), Jacobs (1994, 33−34), Mouton (2001, 2), and Sayed, Kruss and Badat (1998, 279 in Lessing and Schultz 2003, 159) attribute some of the difficulties faced by students to supervision issues as allocation of supervisors and the quality and frequency of feedback. Lessing and Schultz (2003, 159) point out that results from their 2001 research project on postgraduate supervision indicated that postgraduate students’ expectations were not entirely met regarding some aspects of supervision. Hence, this article examines what the supervision expectations of postgraduate students are and what, from a student’s perspective, needs to be done to improve such supervision.

Supervision of postgraduate students needs to be improved so that throughput rates are improved. The National Plan for Higher Education (DoE 2001, 23) has benchmarked the graduation rate for distance education institutions at 25 per cent for master’s and 20 per cent for doctoral students. In 2004 the target for the master’s graduation rate was lowered to 22.5 per cent and the doctoral graduation rate was unspecified and therefore remained unchanged at 20 per cent (DoE 2004). Throughput rates in the College of Education have decreased steadily from around 8 per cent in 2006 to below 6 per cent in 2010. This is in sharp contrast to Unisa’s aim to have a 25 per cent graduation rate for postgraduate qualifications (master’s and doctoral degrees) by 2015 (Unisa 2008). An improvement in supervision is also needed so that it can improve the high dropout rate; reduce the completion time; improve the quality of dissertations and theses; motivate students to progress well through their studies by giving them support and guidance (Lai 2012, 913); and enhance the reputation of the higher education institution (HEI) as one that provides high quality supervision to its postgraduate students. Throughput and dropout rates cannot be solely attributed to poor supervision. HEIs should also ensure that they do not recruit students who do not have the potential to pursue further studies or retain those who have no chance of success (DoE 2001, 25). Supervision is, however, a key component of student engagement in ensuring success (Brydon and Flynn 2013, 6).

Halse and Mallfroy (2010 in Brydon and Flynn 2013, 6) describe the key role of supervision as the development of a learning alliance where there is an agreement between the student and the supervisor to work towards the common goal of developing the thesis. They further argue that mutual respect, flexibility in the accommodation of respective personal and professional circumstances, mutual commitment to the development of the thesis and clear strategies and timelines for achieving the mutually agreed goals are features of the learning alliance. The concept of a learning alliance as a teacher/student relationship is further elaborated by Brew (2006 in Brydon and Flynn 2013, 6) as one that works towards the vision of
higher education, which presumes that the academic and postgraduate student work together as members of a knowledge building community to create new knowledge and new understandings. This is in line with the objectives of the doctoral studies. Nulty, Kiley and Meyers (2009, 695) suggest that effective supervisors play a variety of roles, and that they adapt their approaches to guiding individuals rather than assuming a one size fits all model. This is an important aspect that supervisors need to consider to improve postgraduate supervision. Brydon and Flynn (2013, 9) use the Kadusian Model (1976), namely: education (e.g. about methodology), administration (e.g. about the process) and support (e.g. about other aspects of the student’s life) that affect their participation in a postgraduate programme to identify the supervisor’s key roles, namely:

- guidance and support from supervisor to manage other issues as they impact on the postgraduate project;
- collaborative problem solving;
- development of self-awareness and independence as a researcher;
- project monitoring (student and supervisor);
- presenting issues of concern about the programme;
- supervisor providing feedback on the student’s work/progress;
- supervisor providing education about the postgraduate process;
- supervisor providing education about the methodology;
- supervisor providing education/information about the thesis topic.

Brydon and Flynn (2013, 9) found that the most common activities that supervisors engaged in were providing feedback to students on their progress and guidance on the methodological aspects or the thesis topic. The least common activities that supervisors engaged in were those concerned with the students’ personal lives or guidance and support for their personal lives. Nulty et al. (2009) note in Brydon and Flynn (2013, 9) that the best supervisors are those who can identify and act upon cues indicating that their students are experiencing difficulties. Shultz (2012, 4) explains that every supervisor and student is different and their relationships are unique. Hence, Nulty et al. and Schultz’s comments may be critical in improving postgraduate supervision.

**IMPROVING POSTGRADUATE SUPERVISION**

Copley and Daniels (2005) contend that there is a reasonable body of literature that directly addresses the issue of improving postgraduate supervision; however, they are of the opinion that many supervisors need a motivating force to become aware of this body of knowledge/information in order to use it to improve postgraduate supervision.
supervision. They suggest that this motivator can only come from a formal policy requirement. Before formal policy requirements for postgraduate supervision are formulated and implemented by universities, supervisors of postgraduate students need to ‘up their game’ to improve postgraduate supervision. This can be done by examining literature on improving postgraduate supervision and taking heed of findings on how to improve postgraduate supervision.

The Higher Education Academy (HEA 2013, 2) outlines the following suggestions to supervisors on providing feedback and support to students:

- Provide more support and feedback at the beginning of candidature, especially in the first six to 12 months; encourage students to start writing to assist in structure and organisation; give feedback on the early writing pieces initially mainly about overall ideas and structure.
- Suggest other theses in the area for the students to read and get them to pay particular attention to format, language, style and methods of expression.
- Do not attempt to correct all spelling and grammar mistakes but focus on smaller sections to provide progressive direction and ideas for improvement and explain that you are doing this, refer students to academic skills or language support units if necessary.
- Alert students to faculty university information or support sessions, and notify students about seminars, lectures or conferences either in their own or a related area to learn about concepts, theories and discourses within the discipline.
- Establish either small group or whole faculty postgraduate support networks or groups; encourage students to present their work to peers, in the faculty or at student or academic conferences, for feedback and networking opportunities.

The HEA (2013) also suggests the following possible solutions to address the issue of improving postgraduate supervision:

**Workshops/group sessions**

These sessions can include information about: general rules and procedures, what supervisors and students should expect of each other, how to make the most of supervision, literature searching and literature review skills, expectation from written work, how to avoid plagiarism, the examination process, other sources of support and what to do if things go wrong.

**Setting ground rules**

Supervisor and student need to agree early on ‘ground rules’ about expectations on both sides. These include:
methods of contact (e.g. by appointment, email, office telephone);
frequency of contact (e.g. every week, two weeks, only when written work has been done);
forms of appreciation (e.g. no gifts);
any personal aspects that they feel comfortable to raise that may hinder their progress;
reading and writing requirements for each session.

Scaffold learning

Scaffolding in a postgraduate supervision environment involves building on and progressively improving the student’s research skills. Supervisors are encouraged to follow the guidelines outlined by the HEA (2013):

- Investigate the student’s previous experience of using research databases, literature searching or critical analysis.
- At first provide feedback on main ideas and structure.
- Gradually work on different aspects of the student’s writing.
- Do not bombard the student with large amounts of reading at the beginning; identify a few core works and relevant sections and then discuss main ideas.
- Model and make your language explicit so that the student learns the key concepts and language of the discipline and topic.
- Summarise and record decisions and future tasks.
- Suggest help with proof reading of the final thesis.

Copley and Daniels (2005) are of the view that Action Research can be used to improve postgraduate supervision as it allows for an incremental approach to improving practice in teaching (including postgraduate supervision) and suggest a five-step Action Research cycle that Johnston (1995, 16−19) presents for this purpose, namely: Step 1 – Analyse practice (identify problem/s); Step 2 – Formulate changes to practice (to solve problem or improve practice); Step 3 – Implement changes (to solve problem or improve practice); Step 4 – Monitor effects of changes/action; and Step 5 – Evaluate, reflect and repeat. They suggest that through the incorporation of Action Research in postgraduate supervision, attrition rates and timelines of research students can be reduced.

Seagram, Gould and Pyke (1998) indicate that a good supervisor-student relationship is the key factor in the success or failure of students’ studies or research work. As an effective supervisor, there are certain important practices that should be trained in a supervisory system in order to complement research and supervision.
needs. Lack of information and guideline in the supervisory system brought this issue out.

Research on students’ views of what they consider to be the ideal supervisor indicated that the following are the most important qualities of the ideal supervisor: support, availability, interest and enthusiasm; knowledge and expertise in the field; interest in the student’s career; good communication; constructive feedback; direction and structure; approachability and rapport; experience and interest in supervision; encouraging, reliable and punctual at meetings; responds to student as an adult; and advocates a peer-to-peer model of supervision (Kumar and Huat 2011).

POSTGRADUATE STUDENTS’ EXPECTATIONS

Schultz (2012, 3) outlines the following aspects of postgraduate supervision that may be characterised as these students’ expectations: communication, support, feedback and critical disclosure. Schultz (2012, 3) describes communication in an ODL environment as a form of faceless encounter via telephone, cell phone and email or the myUnisa platform. MyUnisa is an online platform where postgraduate information is available to students. Although students have their supervisors’ contact details, two-way communication is difficult to sustain. Mouton (2001, 22) sees communication as the postgraduate student’s responsibility. Students also expect to be supported by their supervisors, which can be the most empowering or disempowering aspect of supervision (Schultz 2012, 4). Students need to be supported in planning their study, setting objectives and completing the study within agreed upon time frames. Students may also need emotional support in the form of pastoral care.

The supervisor, according to Kumar and Huat (2011), has the right to expect the HEI to ensure that its policies and practices do not put the quality of supervision at risk. For example, supervisors should not be given too large a volume and range of responsibilities or be forced to cope with excessive numbers of students or supervise outside their areas of expertise. The supervisor also has the right to expect the students to fulfil their side of ‘the contract’. They are also responsible for ensuring that those they supervise perform to the best of their ability, and for involving them in activities which help them to enhance the knowledge and skills they possess. Postgraduate students, according to Kumar and Huat (2011), have the right to expect the supervisor to provide quality supervision and for the HEI to facilitate this by creating and implementing appropriate policies. The students are responsible to the supervisor for the quality of the research they are conducting and to the institution (e.g. the university) to abide by the regulations it has set for the proper conduct of research. Students also have a personal responsibility for their own learning by, for example: developing research skills and techniques; gaining a deeper awareness of the social and professional implications of the research; enhancing appropriate research management practices; becoming increasingly self-disciplined, motivated,
thorough, independent and self-reliant; improving communication and information technology skills; learning to use cooperative networks; and developing project management, time management and self-management skills.

Supervisors and postgraduate students relate to each other in ways that are unequal and constantly changing as the project progresses. Typically, this development is marked by four overlapping stages, namely: the supervisee is dependent on the supervisor; the supervisee becomes increasingly independent as the supervisor takes on the role of coach; the supervisee becomes independent supported by the mentoring of the supervisor; and finally the supervisor and supervisee become interdependent in a peer-peer relationship.

Students expect prompt and constructive feedback from their supervisors. This aspect of supervision needs to be incorporated into the supervisor/supervisee agreement that both parties agree upon before undertaking the research journey. In an ODL environment almost all the feedback is given to students electronically. De Beer and Mason (in Schultz 2012, 6) point out that electronic communication has disadvantages that include the fact that there can be misunderstandings. It is therefore important for supervisors to check with students if they understand the comments that they have made. Students also expect to be able to debate matters with their supervisors so that they can construct knowledge, find their own voice and thereby make a meaningful contribution to their field of study.

POSTGRADUATE PROGRAMME IN THE COLLEGE OF EDUCATION

Students are required to complete the Master of Education degree in one of two modes. The first being the completion of five theory modules, followed by a dissertation of limited scope. The second format involves doing a full dissertation by research. This has to be completed within four years. Doctoral degrees are done by means of a full research thesis and have to be completed within five years. Students who register for research master’s and doctoral studies are required to submit a research proposal, and are allocated supervisors by the departmental higher degrees committees within the College of Education. On having their research proposal accepted, students proceed to complete the dissertation or thesis. Each department within the College of Education has a higher degrees committee that attends to all matters relating to postgraduate studies. Supervisors are required to guide the students through the process of completing their postgraduate studies. In the ODL environment, there is limited face-to-face contact between supervisor and student, hence, students’ reflections on their supervision experiences can assist supervisors and the university in overcoming the challenges that they experience in completing their studies.

The preceding sections serve as a background to this study. The aim of the study was to ascertain what the postgraduate students’ expectations are and what they...
believe needs to be done to improve postgraduate supervision. The focus of the next section will on the research design, followed by the findings and a discussion of the findings, and then the conclusions and recommendations.

RESEARCH DESIGN

A qualitative approach was used to conduct the research. A survey was conducted using a questionnaire as the tool to collect data.

DATA COLLECTION AND SAMPLING

The data was collected from a random sample of 42 master’s and doctoral students, who were attending a master’s and doctoral workshop. They responded to a questionnaire that had two sections. The first section consisted of three-point Likert-type questions and the second section consisted of open-ended questions. The purpose of the Likert-type questions was to ascertain what the critical factors for completing their studies within the stipulated time are; supervision challenges; and areas of supervision with which students were satisfied. Open-ended questions were used to obtain information regarding students’ views on what needs to be done to improve supervision as well as their expectations regarding supervision. Students were required to reflect on the challenges and problems they have experienced; the issues that they thought were critical in completing their studies within the required time; and suggestions on how supervision could be improved. The strength of the research is that it has provided new insights into students’ expectations of postgraduate supervision; what aspects of supervision students are satisfied with; and what aspects need improvement. The limitations of the study pertain to the sample size that was relatively small and the fact that supervisors’ views have not been considered.

DATA ANALYSIS

Data from the Likert-type questions was analysed using descriptive themes, namely: critical factors for completion within the stipulated time, supervision challenges and areas where students were satisfied with supervision. These results were presented in tabular form followed by a discussion. The open-ended questions were analysed using the two main categories or themes pertaining to the research, namely, the expectations of students regarding postgraduate supervision and aspects of supervision that needed improvement. The data also revealed positive aspects of the supervision process and these aspects were dealt with as areas with which students were satisfied.
FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Completion of the research within the required time

Receiving timeous feedback from supervisors, according to the majority of students (32), is a crucial factor for them completing their dissertation or thesis within the required time. Responses from students indicated that the ideal time that they would prefer to get feedback from supervisors is two weeks from the initial time of submission. In an ODL environment where there is limited face-to-face contact between students and supervisors, workshops and seminars relating to master’s and doctoral research need to be organised by the institution or the faculty. Delays in appointing supervisors to students is seen by students as a major drawback in them completing their studies timeously. This is an administrative matter that needs serious attention.

Table 1: Critical factors for competing the research within the stipulated time

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factor</th>
<th>No. of students who agree</th>
<th>No. of students who disagree</th>
<th>No. of students who are uncertain</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Timeous feedback from supervisors</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Workshops and seminars</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appointing supervisors on time</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Supervision challenges faced by students

The data in Table 2 suggests that the challenges faced by students seem to emanate from the initial stages (allocation of supervisor, proposal writing and research methodology) of the supervision process when the student and supervisor are trying to establish a relationship with each other and ‘finding their feet’ with each other. The issue of supervisor allocation was once again mentioned by students and hence needs to be highlighted as an area of concern. Supervisors need to be alerted regarding the issues of proposal writing, research methodology and data analysis so that they can pay more attention to these areas when supervising students.
Table 2:  Supervision challenges faced by students

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Area of challenge</th>
<th>No. of students who agree</th>
<th>No. of students who disagree</th>
<th>No. of students who are uncertain</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Research methodology</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Data analysis</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Proposal writing</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Allocation of supervisor</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Positive aspects of supervision

Once initial challenges are overcome and the student and supervisor engage with each other, they can establish a working relationship with each other. Students, according to the data in Table 3, are generally satisfied with the key areas of supervision such as getting feedback timeously, the quality of the feedback and both parties abiding by the supervision agreement that they mutually agreed upon. Twelve of the 42 experienced difficulties in getting timeous responses to their email queries from their supervisors.

Table 3:  Areas of supervision with which students were satisfied

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Aspect</th>
<th>No. of students who agree</th>
<th>No. of students who disagree</th>
<th>No. of students who are uncertain</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Supervisors giving feedback timeously</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Having a good relationship with supervisors</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Satisfied with feedback</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feedback is detailed</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supervision agreement in place</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Response to email queries timeously</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Generally satisfied with supervision</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Students’ supervision expectations

The data revealed that students are aware of the services with which their supervisors are expected to provide them, namely: promoting their study; assessing the work
submitted; providing feedback on time (‘Frequent feedback, directing students to relevant literature, inform students of policy changes that may affect study and time, timeous feedback, suggestions on how to improve my write-up’); providing guidance and advice; and motivating them (‘To give me hope in my journey and open me up to other new ideas in my area to consolidate my focus’). The majority of students are satisfied that their expectations are being met by supervisors. Students also expect supervisors to mentor them through the research process. More than 50 per cent of the students in the survey reported that they were not mentored by their supervisors. In an ODL environment this is expected as there is minimum face-to-face contact between student and supervisor (‘Guide me, respond to e-mails on time, and mentor me’). Students also expect to complete their studies on time. The following quote illustrates this expectation: ‘I am expecting to finish my studies in the set time and supervisors responding promptly to uncertainties’. Students also expect to have a good relationship with their supervisors (‘Maintain a good relationship between student and supervisor’). Supervisors should to be experts in their field (‘My supervisor should be an expert on research – which I realise, is not necessarily the case’). Students also expect to ‘meet periodically if possible, and give information if ever there are academic resources and professional guidelines and journals in the field’.

Students’ suggestions on how to improve postgraduate supervision

Although the aforementioned discussion indicates that ODL students are generally satisfied with supervision, the state of postgraduate studies in South Africa, as described by Kritzinger and Loock (2012, 2), is of concern, hence supervision needs to be improved. The following are the main suggestions that students have made on what needs to be done to improve postgraduate supervision in an ODL environment, thereby addressing the issue of low throughput and high dropout rates:

- Allow a wide scope in the field of theories and paradigms. The student should be allowed the freedom of coming up with innovations and changes in the academic and professional field.

- Perhaps all departments/supervisors can give their students a tutorial letter setting out the basics such as: information to consider e.g. paradigms, concepts, role of theories, etc., process e.g. submits, review, at which stage ethical clearance is applied for, etc.

- There should be a clear terms of reference from the beginning. Communication and accessibility should receive priority.

- Allocate supervisors as soon as possible. Students draw up an agreement form as soon as possible with the supervisor.
Getting a supervisor initially is very cumbersome especially for those who reside far from the main campus. Unisa should therefore put guidelines in place for all prospective students who need supervisors.

There should be (safety) measures from administration to communicate direct to students to find out how they are faring with their supervisor.

Improve student supervisor relationship by constant monitoring of student progress. Open a forum/site for students to post progress reports. Give updates to students regularly concerning their progress.

More service should be rendered to enhance early completion of students. I am almost 6 years in masters because of delay in allocating supervisor.

Supervisors and the department higher degrees committees in the College of Education at ODL universities need to take heed of the suggestions made by students. Addressing these suggestions will lead to improvements in postgraduate supervision.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The research findings indicate that postgraduate students in the College of Education at Unisa are generally satisfied with the key areas of the supervision which they receive from their supervisors. Challenges experienced by students are encountered during the early stages of their research project, including: appointment of supervisors; writing of a proposal; research methodologies; and data analysis. As students proceed with their research, they develop a working relationship with their supervisors and begin to familiarise themselves with the university requirements and the research process, and the supervision challenges eventually diminish.

The following recommendations are made: supervisors need to have more face-to-face contact with students; the use of technologies such as ‘Skype’, blogs and on-line discussion forums should be encouraged to address the issue of limited face-to-face contact between students and supervisors; supervisors should be allocated to students on registration; and regional workshops conducted by the university should specifically address the issues of proposal writing (clear guidelines should be provided to students), research methodologies and data analysis discussed in detail. A forum, in the form of an institutional community of postgraduate students, should be created for student reporting (to the university) on challenges that they face.

REFERENCES

ASSAF see Academy of Science of South Africa.


DoE see Department of Education.

HEA see Higher Education Academy.


Unisa see University of South Africa.