

UNDERSTANDING DOCTORAL SUPERVISION: CONCEPTS AND EXPERIENCES OF SELECTED SUPERVISORS AND PH.D. GRADUATES IN UGANDA

Joyce Ayikoru Asiimwe

Worldwide higher education is witnessing an expansion in graduate education, hence, the need to focus on the quality of graduate training and research, especially at the Ph.D. level is of utmost importance. It is widely acknowledged that supervision plays a major role in a graduate student's outcome. In order to increase the efficiency and effectiveness of graduate studies in higher education, there is a need to put graduate supervision as a key focus area in planned reforms. In this paper, the author has reflected the concept of 'supervision' using the social viewpoint, augmented by personal experiences of both supervisors and Ph.D. graduates. The inquiry adopted a largely qualitative approach and data was collected using a self-administered open-ended questionnaire. The data were analysed descriptively using the themes in the questionnaire. The findings indicated that Ph.D. supervision is characterized by a 'complex' mix of factors, hence requiring thorough planning at three levels i.e. supervisor, institutional and individual students.

KEYWORDS: Higher Education, Doctoral Supervision, Uganda

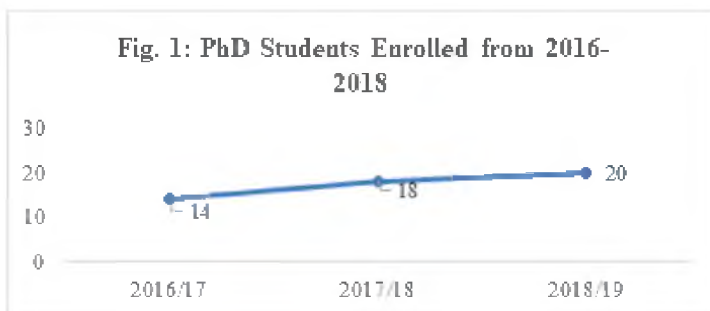
INTRODUCTION

In the 'World Declaration on Higher Education for the Twenty-first Century' (UNESCO, 1998) the core mission of higher education is outlined as 'to educate and train highly qualified graduates, undertake research and, in particular, contribute to the sustainable development and improvement of

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society as a whole'. Reiterating the unique position of higher education, the National Council for Higher Education (NCHE) argues that what distinguishes university education from other levels of education is 'the capacity to generate new knowledge through, mainly, research' (NCHE 2014). In this regard and in view of the 'knowledge economy', doctoral studies have become 'imperative' for many countries (Mouton 2016). MacGregor, (2013b) (cited in Cloete, Mouton & Sheppard 2015) quotes a meeting convened in 2013, supported by the National Research Foundation (NRF) and Carnegie Corporation of New York, as having agreed that, 'Africa needed tens of thousands more PhDs in order to renew an aging professoriate, staff, boost research and generate the high-level skills required by growing economies'.

The above postulation is further supported by the African Union (AU), which projects that by 2063, 'Africa's human capital would be its most precious resource. To facilitate this, the AU calls for an urgent need to expand and strengthen postgraduate education so as to support scientific reforms that underpin the transformation of the continent' (AU, 2015). The renewed interest in the doctorate has led to a massive expansion of doctoral programmes and production of doctorates in many universities across the globe, with some countries like South Africa targeting the production of up to 5000 doctorates by 2030 (CREST, 2009; Louw & Muller, 2014; Cloete, et al., 2015). In other countries like Uganda where no overt doctorate projections have been made, anecdotal evidence in many universities points to a growing enrolment of doctoral students. In my Faculty, for example, the Ph.D. in Education programme was launched in the 2016-2017 academic year and since then, the number of Ph.D. students admitted to the programme has continued to increase. Over a period of three academic years (2016/17 – 2018/19), the faculty has enrolled a total of 52 PhD students, as shown in Figure 1 below:



Source: Faculty Examination records, 2017- 2019

Figure 1. Ph.D. Students Enrolled from 2016-2018.

Some scholars have argued that many of the reforms in higher education, including PhD education, are based on 'a market-driven, consumerist mentality' (Mamdani, 2007). This has led to many universities in developing countries being 'preoccupied by the number of applicants rather than focusing on the quality of internal processes and output' (Cote & Allahar, 2007). This focus on numbers has 'compromised the quality of doctoral education and doctoral graduates' in many countries (Mouton, 2007). Following the above arguments, it becomes evident that increased doctorates per se may not contribute to national development unless the doctoral study programmes 'emancipate' (Lee, 2008) doctoral students by giving them requisite 'research and personal skills and competencies to bring about the much-desired societal transformation' (Feature News, 2011).

In Uganda for example, in 2013, the NCHE recalled the PhD degrees of 66 graduates which were awarded by one of the universities between 2011 and 2012 (22 and 42 graduates in 2011 and 2012 respectively) over suspicion of compromised quality. After reviewing the 66 PhD dissertations, a report of the committee of independent assessors found that eight (8) dissertations (12.1%) required minor corrections; 36 dissertations (54.6%) required major revisions before their PhD awards could be recognized and 22 (33.3%) dissertations were rejected on grounds of serious conceptual, philosophical, theoretical, methodological and new knowledge deficiencies and plagiarism that rendered them irredeemable (Lule, 2013). Lule further reported that the committee also 'faulted the university for appointing supervisors and examiners that did not meet the minimum qualification specifications by NCHE; non-adherence to the four-year accredited programme duration and supervision overload, where two supervisors were found to be supervising 14 and 12 PhD students respectively. This move by the NCHE and the findings of the committee underscores the importance of paying due attention to the quality of graduate education and more specifically, the quality of supervision, which has come under scrutiny in an effort to improve doctoral education (Turner, 2015). This is important because as Lee (2008: 267) acknowledges, "the supervisor can either make or break a PhD student".

SUPERVISION: A CONCEPTUAL OVERVIEW

Supervision is a multi-faceted concept since it is perceived to have 'many forms and meanings' (Grant, 2005). In the most common usage, 'supervision' may refer to 'overseeing' an activity or project (Carroll, 1996). From the 'neo-liberal' framework, supervision is looked at as an intellectual activity between 'rational minds'. The 'neo-liberal' model assumes that once the roles and responsibilities of the supervisor and supervisee have been crafted and work plans agreed

upon, then the supervisory process should proceed without many hurdles (Feature News, 2011). The concept of supervision advanced by this model gives the impression that there is an 'impersonal relationship' between the supervisor and the student, which may be misleading. As emphasized by Boughey and McKenna (2018), it is important to note that 'doctoral students and supervisors enter the supervisory space with "unequal institutional authority and disciplinary expertise", which needs to be well balanced to avoid leading to "uneven power relations" in the supervision process.

My perception of supervision has largely been shaped by the social viewpoint which sees supervision as 'a formal, collaborative, intensive, and interpersonally focused relationship intended to help maintain ethical and professional standards of practice and to enhance the development of competences and creativity in the supervisee' (British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP), 2005). One of the later models of supervision within the social framework was developed by Hawkins and Shohet (2000), who advanced that supervision should be understood as 'a dynamic process consciously involving a supervisor and supervisee, both of whom are either consciously or unconsciously influenced by the organizational/institutional and the larger social context'. From the literature, therefore, my conceptual view of relational supervision model may be expressed as follows (Figure 2):

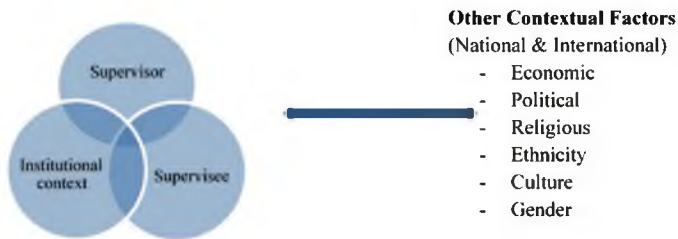


Figure 2. Reconstruction of a Relational Model of Supervision Guided by the Social Framework.

The above framework portrays supervision as a product of two distinctive individuals (supervisor and supervisee), who are themselves operating within a specific institutional context. In addition, the supervisory process is also influenced and shaped by both internal/national and external/international factors (Bernard & Goodyear, 1998: 34). This in effect portrays supervision as a complex activity. This argument fits well within the current discourse of supervision which is projected "as a pedagogical site of both possibility and

complexity", especially when it happens 'across ethnic, cultural and gendered contexts' (Guest Editorial, 2011: 351). Following the forerunning script, in this write up, I considered a broad overview of the concept of graduate research supervision and present results of a mini-survey that sought to document the realities in our context as experienced by both supervisors and Ph.D. graduates.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The findings presented in this paper were enlisted from six supervisors and five PhD graduates, who studied and graduated in the last five years (2014-2018). Four of the PhD graduate respondents are currently teaching in two public universities in Uganda and one works with a government educational agency. Of the five graduate respondents, two studied at the same university and the other three studied at different universities. One of the five respondents' studied at a public university in Kenya, while the other four studied at three different public universities in Uganda.

At a broad level, the inquiry adopted a qualitative approach. A self-administered open-ended questionnaire was used to collect the required information. The questionnaire for the supervisors focused on two areas: the number of Masters and PhD students currently being supervised and how the numbers impacted both the supervisors and the students. For the PhD graduate respondents, three broad areas were asked: their positive and negative experiences with their doctoral supervisors and the factors which in their view impacted graduate studies. The data were analyzed manually using broad themes in the questionnaire. Some of the data were presented verbatim so as to give space for respondents' voices. For the individual verbatim presentations, I used the label Supervisor 1-6 and R1-5 for the first and second categories of respondents respectively. Data on factors that impacted on graduate studies were presented descriptively using frequencies, and a column graph.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The supervision load of the supervisors is given in Table 1:

Table 1
The Supervision Load of Supervisors.

Supervisors	Masters Students	Ph.D. Students
Supervisor 1	6	5
Supervisor 2	8	5
Supervisor 3	4	3
Supervisor 4	6	1
Supervisor 5	4	-
Supervisor 6	12	5

Source: Data from self-administered questionnaire

The negative responses of the supervisors regarding the impact of the supervision load are presented below:

"I am not comfortable with the big number of students I am supervising. Due to this reason, I do not have ample time to adequately read the students' research proposals and/or dissertations and provide the students with timely feedback" (Supervisor 1).

"It's very hard to give the students enough time alongside other office duties and the teaching load" (Supervisor 2).

"The students are not able to write well; therefore, I spend a lot of time on each student, reading one chapter repeatedly without making any progress" (Supervisor 4).

"These students are grossly dependent on the supervisor's input for aspects that should/could be handled by the academics at their level. The workload is grossly heavy on the supervisor who has to double as a technical person and an editor" (Supervisor 5).

From the above responses, it is clear that the supervision load is taking a toll on the supervisors and this may have a negative impact on the students in terms of the time spent on the programme of study. Some of the responses especially that of supervisor 5, point to a lack of appropriate policy to enforce the responsibility of the student to ensure that his/her work is edited by a professional editor.

On the other hand, responses from the Ph.D. graduates regarding the three areas explored were as recorded below:

POSITIVE EXPERIENCES WITH DOCTORAL SUPERVISORS

Some of the positive responses of the supervisors regarding the impact of the

supervision load are presented below:

"My supervisors were very supportive. One time I felt demoralized and contemplated giving up, but they sat me down, shared with me their personal experiences and encouraged me to pick up my broken spirit. They often found articles related to my topic and passed them over to me. They appreciated my problems as an adult learner" (R1)

"My supervisors were competent at research supervision, highly motivated, social, result-oriented, caring and they used to give me timely feedback" (R2 & R3).

"I can term my supervision experience as enjoyable because there was a mutual understanding between me and my supervisors. The supervisors would listen to me as I presented my thoughts. I would also listen to their suggestions until we reached a consensus on what ideas to either include or exclude from the research work" (R1).

"I had three supervisors. They all accepted me without objection. This was the beginning of our good working relationship. They all found time for me when I needed them. They always enhanced my confidence and allowed me to take lead on my own in the project. All four of us met regularly to discuss progress and to make sure we are at the same footing. I am in charge of the meetings. I am the one who drew the agenda and told them when we should meet next. When I am quiet for some time, they "poke" me by sending a text message, an email or give me a call" (R1).

"My supervisors found me opportunities, i.e. they introduced me to a national association related to my project where I have become a member, they identified relevant conferences and encouraged me to attend and this has helped me make more connections" (R4).

"They had time for me and found time to come with me to the field. They sat in my interviews and interacted with my respondents. They therefore have firsthand knowledge of my field experiences" (R1).

NEGATIVE EXPERIENCES WITH RESEARCH SUPERVISORS

"The supervisors never respected timelines agreed upon with students". This is one of the major reasons why students stayed long on programmes (R5).

"I would term the communication with my supervisors as ineffective. Some supervisors just wrote comments on the draft documents and gave it back to students without discussing what they have written in the text with them. Some of the comments were such that one cannot even make sense out of them, for instance, comments like, so what? What does this mean? Are you sure?" (R5).

"My supervisor never encouraged me to publish some papers from the research project before completing the study. This made me lag behind in scholarship" (R3).

"Some supervisors would never respect students' views despite the fact that the project was not theirs" (R5)

“I disliked only one thing: The supervisors have time to meet me and we discuss progress in details but they never had time to read through my work. Only one of them tries once in a while” (R1).

The respondents were also asked what in their view impacted most on Ph.D. studies and their responses are summarized in Figure 3.

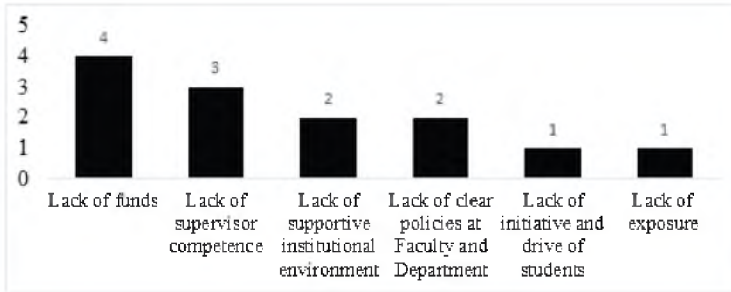


Figure 3. Factors that have an Impact on Graduate Studies.

From the above Figure, the two issues that appeared to have greater impact on PhD studies were funding (mentioned by 4 out of five respondents) and lack of supervisor competence (mentioned by 3 respondents). Further reflections on these findings are presented in the discussion section.

QUALITIES OF AN IDEAL GRADUATE RESEARCH SUPERVISOR

The following attributes were given by the respondents as the qualities of an ideal graduate supervisor:

- Interested and willing to supervise the student. Some Departments simply allocate students to supervisors without seeking the latter's consent.
- Approachable and available for the student. Research is a journey for both the supervisor and student.
- Supportive through all stages of work “both technically as well as personally”. “Knowledge is the domain that the student is interested in. Supervisors today are trying to ‘making the ends meet’ and few are really committed and academic. Most of them are not up to date with current literature in their fields.
- Flexible and willing to listen to the student's line of thought.
- Caring and follows up his/her student and gets concerned with his/her life in a number of aspects. Most adult students at this level have so many challenges ranging from social, family, finances and a host of other

responsibilities.

- Humble and willing to learn from the student. Research is a learning process for both the researcher and the supervisor. Some supervisors become cruel when they realize that the student knows more than them.
- Competent in research and supervision. You can only give what you have. If you are not actively engaged in research, it is difficult to provide appropriate research guidance and supervision.
- An effective communicator and one who gives constructive criticism.
- Fair, ethical and considerate towards graduate students.

In agreement with Lee (2007), results of this study indicated that a good relationship between a supervisor and a graduate student is a key factor for students' resilience as they navigate their doctoral journey (Acker, Hill & Black 1994) through the hills and valleys of the doctorate programme. Therefore, role of the supervisor is deemed to be crucial to a successful doctoral outcome (Delamont et al, 1997 as cited in Vilkanas, 2002). Indeed, as admitted by Lee's supervisor respondent (pure science), "research supervision is a very personal thing. It is about relationships" (p. 275). The findings further augment studies which suggest that a student who works closely and communicates effectively with his/her supervisor(s) is more likely to have better quality research and educational experiences (James & Baldwin, 1999 cited in Chiappetta-Swanson & Watt, 2011; Wisker, 2005; Lee, 2008). This calls for all graduate programme managers to ensure that the process of research supervision is gratifying to all parties involved.

Ives and Rowley (2005) did reveal the need for a positive relationship and revealed that interruptions in supervisor- supervisee relationship caused students problems. Ives and Rowley however, cautioned that in the course of supervision, care must be taken not to mix the concept of a 'good relationship with friendship'. Friendship, they argued, may instead derail the progress of the student as it can potentially obstruct objectivity and critical appraisal of a student's work. In their view, the thought of friendship in supervision may be far-fetched because "the power dynamics between a supervisor and student makes friendship difficult" (p. 536). This argument notwithstanding, we may not conclusively say that the two concepts are entirely mutually exclusive.

From the positive and negative experiences given by the respondents, it was evident that respondent 1 had a much more fulfilling experience with the supervisors, while respondent 5 hardly had a good experience worth remembering. The supervisors of respondent 4 were generally reflected as caring and supportive, although "not necessarily in a task-driven directive

capacity", thus tending towards a 'pastoral management style'. In the case of respondent 5, the supervisor (s) were probably more of the 'Laissez-faire' type, characterized by 'lack of commitment to high levels of personal interaction, low support, and little care' (Gatfield, 2005). The responses also portrayed the supervisor(s) of respondent 5 as over exerting, which may constrain the graduate scholar from developing one of the major objectives of the doctorate programme i.e. of carving out their own research identity" (Boughey & McKenna, 2018). Both the positive and negative experiences, therefore, support the scholarship that 'research supervision should be a facilitative process and not one where the supervisor imposes his/her ideas on a student' (Pearson & Kayrooz, 2004).

Given the context of the respondents, it was not surprising that lack of funds and lack of supervisor competence emerged the top two factors that effect doctoral education. In most African countries, the lack of funding for students pursuing higher education has remained a major challenge. My own experience as an administrator shows that about 98% of the university students who apply to withdraw from their studies give a lack of finances as the reason. This results in 'interruptions in their studies and makes students delay to complete their study programmes, in addition to impacting student's motivation to undertake advanced studies' (CREST, 2009).

The issue of lack of supervisor competence also needs to be understood in the context. In some universities, for example, allocation of supervisors may not necessarily be matched with specific content knowledge in a students' research topic. Given the paucity of academics with PhDs in many universities, it is a common practice to allocate as many students as possible to new PhD graduates. In a recent informal talk with a colleague in one of the universities in Uganda, she was lamenting that she had thirty Masters students to supervise and intimated that her colleagues even had much higher numbers. It is, therefore, not surprising if students questioned the competences of such supervisors. A high supervision load typically weighs down on a supervisor's capacity to critically read both student's work and additional literature related to each student's research topic. The latter is important because a supervisor must equally read literature around a student's research area in order to competently guide each student.

Results of the survey on qualities of an ideal graduate supervisor generally, match those given by Beasley (1999; as cited in Vilkinas 2002). Relating supervisors to "business managers", Vilkinas cautions that "the supervisor must deliver each of these qualities with expertise, ease and care" (p. 130). The onus is, therefore, on the supervisor "to assess which of the supervisory

qualities is required at any particular time; and during the student's journey through the doctoral programme. This can be done through active observation, sensitive analysis and appropriate application of a supervisors' leadership skills" (p. 130).

CONCLUSION

Globally, there is a consensus that higher education is "a vital component of cultural, social, economic, and political development" (UNESCO 1998). From the responses, it is apparent that PhD supervision is characterized by a 'complex' mix of factors, hence requiring thorough planning at the supervisor, institutional and individual student levels. It is pertinent to note that successful supervision comes with experience, which may be accumulated among others, through 'continuous professional development and reflective practice'. It is, therefore, important that Graduate Schools develop frameworks for training graduate supervisors as a key input for improving the quality of graduate studies in their universities.

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