
Exploring challenges faced by PhD Supervisors and Candidates in Social Sciences in the African Context

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ABSTRACT

Postgraduate supervisors and their candidates experience a myriad of challenges during their journeys to reaching to PhD. This study explores challenges encountered by doctoral supervisors and candidates in Social Sciences in the African context. The study employed qualitative methodology informed by the interpretivist philosophy and convenience sampling was employed to generate data. Focus group discussions were used to generate data from twenty-five PhD supervisors who had gathered at a workshop in one of the African countries. For data presentation and analysis, emergent themes that were generated hinged on supervisor challenges, student challenges, methodological challenges, infrastructural challenges, and policy challenges. The study recommends intensive training of PhD supervisors. The study also recommends the need for universities to run workshops with doctoral supervisors to provide them with the fundamentals of doctoral thesis coaching and mentoring. Candidates need workshops from the onset of the PhD journey. Universities need to up skill their PhD supervisors so that they guide their candidates to produce quality work.

Keywords supervision, postgraduate; PhD supervisors, candidates

1 INTRODUCTION

PhD supervision requires craft competence by the supervisors and full baptism of the candidates from face to face to online learning not only in Africa but globally (Maposa, 2021). Effective and efficient supervision of PhD candidates is the foundation upon which the quality of the thesis is based (Mothiba et al., 2019) and requires connoisseurship or some art on the part of the supervisor in a free environment. Some level of proficiency is required by the supervisors so that they can see over and beyond the process and assist the candidates to complete the thesis as per the expected standard (Tintswalo, 2017). Effective PhD supervision should embrace quality concepts of effectiveness, efficiency, and accountability (Yanli, 2016) to produce quality products.

2 BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

In many African universities, there is poor mentorship and supervision and reduced interaction between students and supervisors (Bacwayo et al., 2017). In addition, several prospective doctoral candidates are largely underprepared for doctoral studies, with limited research skills and inadequate academic writing capacity (Okoduwa et al., 2018; Mouton et al., 2016). OSSREA organised a professional development course on research methodology training in Social Sciences for PhD supervisors in Africa to enhance their coaching and mentoring capacity. The supervisors were drawn from various universities in Africa and the workshop

was run in Tanzania for four weeks. The countries that were invited included Kenya, Uganda, Zimbabwe, Zambia, Rwanda, Tanzania, among others. This was deemed appropriate as it is considered fundamental in doctoral supervision to sharpen the focus of the practice lens of the supervisor (Trowler, 2021) and to ensure sufficient depth and breadth of the supervision process (Tintswalo, 2017).

The research methodology course addressed issues on how doctorateness is developed and was relevant because some supervisors have no experience of what constitutes effective supervision. Students doing PhD in most African countries generally struggle to complete their research endeavor in the specified time (Costa, 2019). Four factors that affect research supervision are workload agreements, time pressures and quality of students and recognition of supervisors' contribution (Askew et al., 2016).

Doctoral level research is the seedbed for ideas and practices of a profession and requires competence, stamina, and a critical mass of experts for effective supervision (Bopape, 2018). Success in postgraduate studies is influenced by the quality of interaction. In a study carried out by Yousefi et al., (2015) issues to do with inaccessibility, provision of poor feedback and not keeping to appointments were seen as challenges in postgraduate supervision.

The academic staff complement in many African universities is not made up solely of senior and experienced academics given the considerable number of novice academics working in them (Maistry, 2017). Experienced supervisors are critical for effective supervision to take place (Bloese et al., 2021). An inexperienced supervisor might lack reliability, is not confident and might fail to encourage the student, lacks knowledge and might not communicate as frequently as is expected (Beddoe & Davys, 2016). Despite the increasing attention to post-graduate supervision, there is limited focus on the challenges faced by PhD supervisors in African universities.

3 STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Despite the growth in access to postgraduate education and the proliferation of doctoral degrees, there are challenges supervisors and candidates are meeting in most African countries. A considerable number of candidates remain deprived of receiving quality supervision based on their needs and capacities (Berruga, 2020) due to lack of effective supervision. In the same vein, despite the central importance of the role played by supervisors of doctoral students in Africa, there has been a relative paucity of data on challenges encountered in supervising postgraduate students in the Social Sciences. Literature about doctoral supervision has concentrated on describing the ever-lengthening lists of functions that must be carried out ignoring the challenges that are faced in PhD supervision (Lee, 2018). The current study highlights PhD supervision challenges faced in the African context. The guiding research question for this study is stated thus: What are the challenges faced by PhD Supervisors and candidates in Social Sciences in the African universities?

4 CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORKS: THE CONCEPT SUPERVISION

Supervision is conceived of as an intensive, interpersonally focused one-to-one relationship between the supervisor and the student (Wood & Louw, 2018; Da Costa, 2016). "Supervision is the act of looking over the work of another person who absences full knowledge of what they are doing, or the concept at hand" (Almusaed & Almssad, 2020, p. 25). Effective supervision is described as "a two-way interaction process that requires both the student and

the supervisor to collaboratively engage each other within the spirit of professionalism, respect, open-mindedness, to promote a favourable supervision environment” (Jude et al., 2020, p. 3). Similarly, effective supervision for PhD candidates is considered as high-quality research training, access to resources, expertise, flexibility and choice of learning and research, opportunity for engagement with experts, and responsiveness to a broader community (Harman as cited in Dimitrova, 2016).

Supervision in this context is conceived of as a process to facilitate the student becoming an independent professional researcher with autonomy and scholar in their field, capable of adapting to various research arenas (Lee, 2018). Supervision is also viewed as a process involving complex, academic and interpersonal skills including guiding postgraduate students towards sound proposal preparation, methodological choices, documenting and publishing their research, maintaining both supportive and professional relationships, as well as reflecting on the research process (Fonn et al., 2016).

In this study, supervision is viewed as pedagogy and the doctoral supervisor is entrusted with the whole process of overseeing the overall research project. Supervision is operationalised as a set of characteristics such as constructive feedback to PhD candidates, availability of supervisor, sufficient time dedicated to candidates, possibility for independent work and creative environment for candidates.

5 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS: VYGOTSKY’S SOCIO-CULTURAL THEORY

This study was undergirded by Vygotsky’s theory on social-cultural learning, a founding theorist who argues that all uniquely human or higher mental functions are transformed social relationships which emerge and are shaped during joint activities with others. The socio-cultural theory provides an integrative pedagogical framework for understanding the multiple factors that bring in challenges in the supervision of PhD candidates. The theory is also compatible with the field of social sciences and offers a more focused explanation of the pedagogical nature of interactions between supervisors and students in the supervision process and thus can show the challenges experienced in the process (Liao et al., 2009). The crux of the matter is that what PhD candidates come to know, that is, how they learn to learn, to think and to act contexts, is constituted in a relationship between the supervisors and the supervisees (Shum & Littleton, 2014).

The justification for using Vygotsky’s theory of socio-cultural learning is that it anchors on the professional development of supervisors, resting on the mental functions, unity of behaviour and consciousness, mediation and psychological systems that help supervisors to do their work effectively. The theory is an influential model of professional development which provides foundation for mentoring, observation, assessment, scaffolding, inquiry, action research, individually guided activities, study groups and involvement in a development process (Shabani, 2016). All these are critical components of PhD supervision that are grounded in Vygotsky’s theory of socio-cultural learning.

6 LITERATURE

Several studies show that the issue of PhD supervision is critical in the global village. In a large-scale national survey that was conducted in Australia, 5450 students and 1032 supervisors were involved (Dimitrova, 2016). The pedagogy of good PhD supervision was associated with supervisors who are more ‘hands on’ in their supervision, actively assist candidates and provide

support and project logistics, institutional quality checks, check project specific milestones and the production of thesis text. In another study that was done by Costa (2016) in Sweden on postgraduate mentorship, it was found that students experienced poor mentorship from supervisors, lacked preparation and confidence related to their research. Students were also found to lack guidance on research culture and language and displayed poor skills of information search.

A study was conducted in Nigeria focusing on barriers to research and training of postgraduate students at the University of Ibadan (Desmennu & Owoaje, 2018). Of the total of 137 sampled population on full doctoral students, 91% percent of the respondents indicated a need for training on proposal development. In Zambia, a study was conducted that comprised postgraduate students and the supervisors regarding postgraduate research supervision (Manchishi et al., 2015). The study found supervision challenges, including but not limited to the following:

- Lack of understanding of the research proposal,
- Lack of critical analysis and synthesis of literature reviewed,
- Poor referencing style,
- Unavailability of supervisors for consultation,
- Negative feedback from supervisors, and
- Limited time by supervisors.

All these challenges that were established reveal that supervisors lack coaching and mentoring skills particularly in making students come up with a sound research proposal.

The Consortium for Advanced Research Training in Africa (CARTA) conducted a study on challenges of PhD thesis writing (Ophey & van Adrichem, 2016; Fonn et al., 2016). A plethora of challenges were raised which include, among others, lack of adequate description of the research problem, the process and nature of a comprehensive and critical literature review, development of the research protocol, execution of the project, awareness of diverse ethical issues. Riding high in the discussions was the issue of not knowing “what range and level of work constitute a PhD” (Manderson et al., 2017:30).

In a study that was carried out in Kenya on supervision challenges and delays in completion of PhD programmes, it was found that supervisors did not give immediate feedback to students on their work and students complained that supervisors took too long with their work without giving them feedback (Mbogo, 2020). It shows that this is not just a Kenyan situation but a reflection of the African continent’s wide reality. The supervisor must not show doubt and uncertainty during the supervision process. Failing to give feedback in time is a sign of lack of competence. Lack of competence by the supervisor is a challenge in the supervision process (Van Rooij et al., 2021).

7 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employed qualitative methodology grounded in the Interpretivist philosophy. The use of the interpretivist paradigm was in line with its central endeavour of understanding the subjective world of human experience (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Convenience sampling of university lecturers who had gathered at a research methodology workshop for supervisors of postgraduate students was used. Convenience sampling describes the data generation process

from a research population that is effortlessly reachable to the researcher (Rahi, 2017). When conducting a qualitative study, convenience sampling is frequently utilised in education and social sciences where researchers have ready access to existing target populations (Nikolopoulou, 2022) and this was the case in this study. The supervisors were divided into six focus groups to generate data. Focus group discussion was used since it is widely used in conversation social science and participatory research (Nyumba et al., 2017). It took three days for the supervisors in their focus groups to come up with supervisor and student challenges. The groups then reported to the whole group after intensive discussions. Thematic analysis was used in this study because it was considered as a systematic and comprehensive process of identifying themes and patterns to address the qualitative data (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017). From the data that was generated, six major themes emerged. These include, among others: supervisor related challenges, student related challenges, methodological challenges, institutional challenges, challenges during the supervision the process and policy challenges.

8 FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The following section addresses findings and makes an analysis of data that was generated from the focus group discussions using the emergent themes.

8.1 Supervisor related challenges

Participants pointed to the issue of overload as a serious challenge in PhD supervision. Supervisors who are overloaded become ineffective in the process particularly in the Covid 19 era. They had this to say:

Some universities overload the post graduate supervisors. Supervisors are over-stretched with supervising so many students and this is affecting one on one interaction with our students online. Supervisors really get over-stretched. Large class sizes at postdoctoral level render it very difficult to give feedback to students in time. Interaction of supervisors with students is limited.

If a supervisor has a substantial number of candidates to mentor, then the frequency of interaction is reduced. It is through personalised one-on-one work that doctoral education can achieve the quality of knowledge generation (Van Rooij et al., 2021). This is in line with Vygotsky's theory which undergirds this study and advances the argument that the pedagogical nature of interactions between supervisors and students in the supervision process is key to quality supervision.

Lack of motivation among supervisors was pointed to as one of the challenges faced in PhD supervision.

Supervisors lack motivation because some universities do not pay them for supervision of postgraduate students taking it as part of their work.

Supervisors who are not motivated might not commit themselves into recording tutorial sessions for students. Manderson et al., (2017) established that poor pay may compel supervisors to multi-task, look for other part time jobs to supplement their income, ultimately limiting their capacity to provide effective student supervision.

Mupa: PhD supervision

Lack of seriousness by supervisors was identified as one of the challenges in PhD supervision. Seriousness in doctoral research rests on the supervisor:

There are situations where one observes laxity and lack of seriousness of purpose while supervising students among supervisors. Laxity results in delays by students to complete the journey.

To meet the supervision challenges with ease, doctoral supervisors should possess five tenets of quality doctoral supervision which are: a functional role (setting milestones); enculturation; critical thinking; emancipation and autonomy (Lee, 2018). Stimulating debate, continuous feedback, high levels of communication and interaction, accessibility, frequent informal interactions and helping students in a timely manner are critical characteristics of effective supervision (Lovitts as cited in Dimitrova, 2016). It is not easy for the supervisor to engage in a debate with a student due to lack of internet and Wi-Fi bundles.

Supervisors who lack competence were reported as one of the challenges faced during the supervisory process. Doctoral studies require competence on the side of the supervisor:

Some supervisors lack competence in supervision. Lack of the foundation of competence removes rigor from the whole process and results in lack of quality.

It is argued that while literature confirms that PhD holders can supervise doctoral candidates, there is need to ensure that they possess the skills that are needed (Fulgence, 2019). PhD supervisors who fail to use a pedagogical approach that is student centred, theorise and do not train students' critical thinking skills (Fonn et al., 2016). This is in line with the theory of Vygotsky which notes that supervisors need pedagogy for them to be effective. In addition, supervisors must develop self-identity, competences, and intellectual depth to deal with challenges that arise from the process (Bloese et al., 2021; Cekiso et al., 2019).

Supervisors influence time taken to complete a PhD thesis, and this is a big worry to students. It was reported that some supervisors fail to manage the online sessions time taken to complete the studies with reasonable limits.

Some students take too long to complete doctoral degrees because some supervisors are clueless on strategies to enhance timely completion.

When a supervisor is clueless in terms of strategies to enhance timely completion in this Covid-19 era, students find it difficult to complete studies in time. In Rwanda, it was found that PhD supervisors who lacked time for meeting with students and discussing with them the research topic, reading drafts and being available to respond to emails and other forms of contact within reasonable timeframe had low completion rates (Cekiso et al., 2019; Ndayambaje, 2018).

8.2 Student related challenges

Students who lack basic research skills pose a big challenge to the supervision process. What students bring to the doctoral process becomes the fountain to their success.

Students' entry behaviour into postgraduate programmes is a big challenge. Some students lack basic research skills and are not well grounded in research. They fail to bring in their own competence and theoretical frameworks that

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work. You really do not know where to start from with candidates who lack basic research skills.

Students who are not well grounded in theoretical frameworks bring a lot of challenges to the supervision process. It is a big challenge where students lack a well-grounded theoretical framework for the study (Devos et al., 2015). For students to succeed in their PhD studies, they need competence in the trajectory to experience mastery (Ryan & Deci, 2017).

Failing to manage criticism from supervisors was identified as one of the challenges among PhD students. It is not easy for students to manage criticism from their supervisors.

Students find it very difficult to manage criticism from supervisors. This results in interactional difficulty within the supervision process. They consider criticism as an attack and as a sign of incompetence. Some universities have defence sessions at various levels like proposal, chapters, and viva-voce. The panels grill students in a bid to maintain the rigor required at postdoctoral level. Students take it otherwise. Managing criticism is not easy for doctoral students.

Criticism in PhD supervision is a teaching and learning component which builds a strong research foundation among students. Students seem to take a negative notion of criticism. In its original sense, "Criticism is conceived of as a generic process aimed at revealing the characteristics and qualities that constitute any piece of work" (Eisner as quoted in Cross, 1977:2). One challenge in postgraduate supervision is that students learn from written feedback and criticism yet before Covid-19, some supervisors were used to talk face to face with their students on areas of weaknesses. If supervisors do not give the feedback, then candidates do not learn anything (Yousefi et al., 2015).

Supervisors pointed out that plagiarism has become a virus that needs to be weeded out. They had this to say:

Plagiarism is one of the biggest challenges students have. They rush to copy almost everything from work they come across on the internet. Skills of paraphrasing have not yet developed.

Students lack skills of paraphrasing work that have been written by other people and plagiarise. Plagiarism is a serious threat plaguing PhD research, and it must be discouraged to ensure a free research environment (Almusaed & Almssad, 2020).

The problem of lack of commitment to research is being pointed out as a major challenge in the PhD research supervision process.

Some students lack commitment to research and fail to come up with valuable work. Lack of commitment is also expressed through laziness displayed by students. They want to get the degree but tend to avoid the rigor that postgraduate studies demand and end up producing shoddy work.

Mupa: PhD supervision

Effective supervision of doctoral candidates is based on supervisee's commitment level (Igumbor et al., 2020; Wanasinghe, 2020). A more prosaic description of the commitment needed in the process of research as has stages where enthusiasm, interest in work, transfer of dependence from supervisor to work, frustration, boredom, determination to finish what they have started are observed. It is not easy in the Covid-19 era for a supervisor to take the candidate through such the process using online comments only without incidences of face-to-face interaction.

Lack of seriousness by students was reported as a challenge in PhD supervision. If students do not value, the research activities, and processes then the whole process is retarded.

One might notice that the student is changing from this topic to another. There is also this practice by students of not valuing research.

It is difficult for the supervisor to assist the student not to change from one topic to another and provide individualised assistance to each student due to lack of Wi-Fi bundles. It becomes difficult to measure the seriousness of the student although it is fundamental for any research process (Uwizeye et al., 2020).

Students' lack of capacity to search for relevant data and in using Information Communication Technology (ICT) was discussed as a major challenge during PhD supervision.

Students lack knowledge and dexterity of searching relevant data. They have challenges in searching for relevant data and just bring whatever they find into the research. Sifting is a big challenge.

The challenge of failing to search for relevant data is being pointed out. It is the individual student possessing the basic skills of ICT research skills that is capable of self-realisation, the creation and use of new technologies and the transformation of social reality (Almusaed & Almssad, 2020). Most students in Africa are rural based and lack basic materials to do research online.

8.3 Methodological challenges

Several methodological challenges were raised in the discussions. The issue of lack of a strong research foundation was raised as a big challenge to the PhD research process.

Students without proper research background are registered for a PhD programme. Their lack of relevant courses at lower levels does not bring any fortunes to them. When such students who have introductory knowledge get to postgraduate studies, they lack the fundamentals. This becomes a very big challenge for the student to catch up.

Students who are not well prepared and lack the foundation of research are difficult to operate with. In South African, it was found out that students experienced problems related to research design, data collection and processing, and/ or thesis writing. It was observed that the problems may be attributed to poor knowledge and guidance skills of the supervisor among other things (Smith et al., as cited in Ungadi, 2021). A supervisor should clear the roadblocks for candidates to conduct their PhD studies with the rigour it deserves in this Covid 19 era.

One of the challenges pointed out is that of lack of data analysis skills. Participants had this to say:

Students lack data analysis skills using both qualitative and quantitative software. They show high level of unfamiliarity. The computation for SPSS software and other software packages are not being done properly by most students.

An effective supervisor needs to instil digital fluency skills in candidates in terms of online tools, networks, ICT skills, among others. It was also found in a South African study that

problems are manifested in students' inability to write scientifically, search the literature, inadequate quantitative and qualitative skills to do proper data analysis for the specific demands of doctoral studies (Bourdieu as cited in Ungadi, 2021). Vygotsky's theory notes that language is the main vehicle of thought so the inability by candidates to write scientifically should be cleared through training.

Participants pointed out that a lot of methodological challenges are being observed among researchers at whatever level. They had this to share:

Methodological challenges widely prevalent include, among others, failing to select a field site, failing to acquire access, lack of skills to get ethical clearance, failing to employ relevant data collection tools and failing to make adequate analysis of data as well as failing to get consent from participants. Students may use qualitative and quantitative approaches in data collection but do not report results on qualitative methods.

Thummapol et al., (2019) concur that methodological challenges are widely prevalent. The quality of guidance given by the guiding professor affects the theoretical and practical knowledge of conducting research and the communication skills used as well as the editing process (Yousefi et al., 2015).

8.4 Challenges during the supervision process

The issue of disjuncture and lack of connectedness in thesis from the title, research questions, theoretical frameworks, literature, methodology, data analysis, research findings, among others, was raised as a major concern and challenge in this study.

Students fail to connect the major issues in their studies. You find no link among issues like the title, background to the study, research objectives and research questions, conceptual and theoretical frameworks, literature, methodology and research findings.

It is noted with concern that the major issues pertaining to the whole thesis are not within the veins of some PhD candidates. It is argued that most PhD candidates face challenges of writing up their theses particularly literature review section. The inclusion of high-quality articles is also seen to be missing (Shahsvar et al., 2020). Such flaws may lead to flaws in the rest of the thesis.

8.5 Policy challenges

Mupa: PhD supervision

The issue of policies was raised as another challenge during the supervision process. They had this to say:

Admission to PhD is not considering the quality of the pass at Masters' level. Also, you find some people with degrees that do not link from undergraduate to masters being accepted for PhD programmes. This is a big challenge because there is no congruence in matter and content. Sufficient depth will be lacking.

Policies regarding what are worth a title, methodologies, structure, and presentation are missing in the higher education landscape. The supervisors would tend to use a school of thought of their best fit. There is lack of clear policy guidelines for supervisors regards expected standards and what is an approval-worthy thesis (Stigmar, 2019).

8.6 Institutional challenges

Participants in this group raised challenges that had to do with institutions. Paucity of adequate resources to conduct the studies was pointed to as impeding factors in the PhD process. They had this to say:

Some universities lack space and equipment to support the research endeavour. Lack of e-resources is a challenge. There is also the problem of inaccessibility to anti-plagiarism software in some institutions. Some institutions lack software analysis tools. The transactional distance caused by the Covid-19 era is creating dearth of information between the student and the resources like the library which students need to access information. Institutions which deprive its candidates from basic tools of research and infrastructural resources jeopardise the whole research process and this brings a myriad of challenges even to supervisors (Igumbor et al., 2020).

9 CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

From the study, it is evident that doctoral supervisors experience multiple challenges as they supervise doctoral candidates. The study concludes that there is a supervisor overload in African universities. To overcome this challenge, universities should engage in capacity building of supervisors through training new supervisors. Grounded in Vygotsky's theoretical framework are issues to do with mentoring, observation, assessment, scaffolding, inquiry, action research, individually guided activities, study groups, and involvement in a development process. These are key principles in developing a quality PhD candidate through professional development. Such professional development programmes would help supervisors to reflect upon their practice and extend their range of skills in supervision. To avoid demoralisation among PhD supervisors, African universities should pay them so that they energise them and thus increase their commitment. Faculties and departments could come up with time schedules for the supervision process so that students can complete in time. Workshops will also go a long way in improving research skills and competences for both students and supervisors. Establishment of supervisory panels would also allow students to access a broader range of skills and expertise. Universities should ensure that they put in place anti-plagiarism software to guard against plagiarism.

Training of supervisors and candidates on research methodologies should be done through symposiums, discussion panels, among others to broaden their horizons of various research methodologies and their practical application. Training students on the issue of connectedness of research components should be done. Students should also be trained on different epistemologies and methodologies to equip them with the necessary skills for the smooth flow of PhD writing. Vygotsky's theory notes that higher mental functions are transformed social relationships which emerge and are shaped during joint activities with others. Universities in Africa should engage in capacity building and provide with powerful internet connectivity, data analysis software, inter alia, so that they produce quality products. Policies that are standard should be crafted on what to look for as valuable material in a PhD thesis.

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