Helicopter view of postgraduate research supervision at school of education: A critical reflection

Ksaveria Tuukamuwo Hambabi, M. ED
Department of Intermediate and Vocational Education,
University of Namibia, Ongwediva, Namibia
Rachel Ndinelao Shanyanana-Amaambo, PhD
Department of Applied Educational Sciences,
University of Namibia, Ongwediva, Namibia
Lukas Matati Josua, PhD
Department of Higher Education and Lifelong Learning,
University of Namibia, Oshakati, Namibia

Abstract

The University of Namibia has been committed to ensuring quality, equitable and just education opportunities for all students. However, there have been criticisms regarding the duration, processes and quality of student supervision in postgraduate studies. Students who enrol for coursework complete it with success, yet when it comes to research there has been a slow progression to successful completion. Therefore, this paper explores the landscape of postgraduate research supervision to gain a reflective understanding of concepts and related constraints. It is hoped that the review of the literature on research student supervision may assist role players to understand the supervisory process and identify strategies to mitigate potential constraints, towards effective postgraduate research. We adopted Schön's reflection-in-action approach to review the postgraduate policies, documents and practices in the School of Education at the University of Namibia. The preliminary findings revealed that the supervision of postgraduate research is cumbersome, the proposal approval process is bureaucratic and unclear to students, and supervisors are slow to provide

feedback. These hindrances lead to a prolonged stay in the programmes, which puts financial strain on students and ultimately affects progress towards completing the degree.

Introduction

The University of Namibia (UNAM) entrusts the Research, Innovation and Development and Postgraduate Office with overseeing research, innovation and supervision. Numerous efforts were made to transform postgraduate research strategies, policies and practices. According to UNAM (2023), the mission of Postgraduate Support Services is "to promote excellence amongst postgraduate staff and students through responsive teaching, postgraduate studies research and supervision, scholarship, and instructional pastoral support" (p. 1). Its mandate is "to coordinate the University of Namibia's Postgraduate Programmes in a manner that uniform quality control regulations and procedures are strictly adhered to, and high academic standards are maintained" (p. 2).

To achieve the mission and mandate stated above, different policies and documents were developed to guide the postgraduate research processes. The recent Higher Degree Policy 2023, alongside the Handbook for Postgraduate Studies, has articulated steps and imperatives that should be implemented by students, supervisors and administrative officials. It is evident that effective postgraduate research supervision requires the involvement of all role players and serves as an underlying enabler towards the realisation of quality higher education. The purpose of this paper is to explore the panorama of postgraduate research supervision to gain a reflective understanding of the concept and related constraints. In order to do so, the following objectives were set out:

> To understand the constraints of the supervisory process and the enabling mechanisms that result in effective postgraduate research supervision.
> To identify strategies to mitigate potential constraints to effective postgraduate research.

Methodology

Boyer (1990) suggested continual reflective intellectual inquiries as one of the strategies to enhance effective teaching and learning in an educational context. Boyer's claim applies to the higher education sector, as it has been indicated that teachers should conduct continual reflective inquiries to improve teaching and learning. Schön (1996) proposed that

critical reflection on a context enhances transformative learning. In this study we employed a critical reflection on the current practices, a method involving self-evaluation to improve a system. This approach allowed for a practical and contextualised analysis of the challenges faced by postgraduate students. Furthermore, Iqbal (2017) referred to reflection-in-action as an "active evaluation of thoughts, actions a practice during action" (p. 66). Supervisors of postgraduate students should continuously reflect on the context in which they operate. Schön elaborated that reflective practice requires the agents to learn from their experiences within the environment of practice to transform their practice for the better.

Over the years, there has been an increase in student enrolment in postgraduate programmes, in which research supervision can be either an enabling or constraining factor towards the successful completion of studies and ensuring epistemic access. Several studies have cited challenges experienced in the process of postgraduate student supervision (see, e.g., Cekiso et al., 2019; Cyster, 2019). This reciprocal relationship between student/supervisee and supervisor is an avenue for enabling teaching and learning. Therefore, it is expected that agents in the process of postgraduate student supervision in research use critical reflectivity to analyse the context to identify prospects and challenges. Stierer (2008) posited that once the constraints have been identified, an enabling strategy could be developed to improve the process. Critical reflective practitioners should go beyond the common-sense approach and should engage in critical introspection aimed at creating self-awareness. Confronting the challenges that may arise during the process of postgraduate student supervision in research through critical introspection moves the critical practitioner beyond complacency and stagnation, while providing new insights.

Schön's (1996) reflection-in-action underpins the critical analysis of postgraduate student supervision at UNAM's Hifikepunye Pohamba Campus's School of Education in the research context. Shandomo (2010) stressed that reflection enables agents to make a critical self-examination that enhances student academic performance and knowledge acquisition.

In the present research, the observation of structures, culture and agents was used to extract the challenges experienced and the enabling mechanisms towards effective teaching and learning through postgraduate students' research supervision. This has the potential to enable corrective interventions to tackle the identified challenges that hinder effective postgraduate student supervision in research.

Literature review

Quality higher education is a necessary driver towards the knowledge-based economy of any country (Kimani, 2014). The demand for

access to higher education institutions, specifically for postgraduate qualifications, has increased overwhelmingly. As a consequence, there has been a high enrolment of students in postgraduate programmes.

Student supervision is an effective teaching and learning process and inseparable from the teaching process (Khene, 2014). In addition, Kimani (2014) defined student supervision as a task carried out by a senior academic to ensure that a student performs well in research within a stipulated time frame. The supervisor provides academic, emotional and personal guidance, with a degree of leadership, to a student under supervision (Cyster, 2019).

The postgraduate student supervision is not always completed without any impediments, however. According to Cekiso et al. (2019) and Cyster (2019), postgraduate student supervision has become a challenge. It is generally acknowledged that supervision is a difficult, multifaceted process. Research student supervision is defined by Ballard and Clanchy (1991) as combining academic proficiency with the adept management of interpersonal and interpersonal relationships. In the context of the present research, it is recognised that competent supervision of research students during their master's degree programme is a key component in ensuring that those individuals successfully complete their PhD. The manner in which they decide to fulfil their function is probably related to how well they are overseen. In order for the parties involved, such as students, supervisors, and schools, to analyse what they should do and how they should go about carrying out their responsibilities ideally, this kind of experience is incredibly interesting and meaningful.

Kiley and Austin (2000) researched the mobility of postgraduate students in Australia. The students' decision to attend the university was influenced by a number of factors, including supervision. The responsibilities of an effective supervisor, the responsibilities of research students, and their relationship with their supervisors are three of the most crucial factors that the student and supervisor should consider in order for the student to succeed in their PhD. The one-to-one or student–supervisor connection and their obligations are the main topics of this article.

Even though a recent tendency is to argue that the interaction between the student and the supervisor could be better understood by taking into account broader social factors, there remains much emphasis on one-on-one supervision because it is likely that both parties will put a lot of effort into developing a deep bond of trust. Mahlangu (2021) posited that postgraduate students who study via open and distance learning are mainly working professionals, sometimes geographically far from their supervisors. They do not have immediate access to their supervisors as the undergraduate students do. This presents a distance and space challenge between supervisor and supervisee. Both students and supervisors may have family and (other)

work commitments, which may sometimes encroach on the supervision calendar. Mahlangu (2021) indicated that, in some instances, the supervisor may be a gatekeeper to a qualification, a situation that emerges from power dynamics.

The high number of students enrolled in postgraduate studies has led to inadequately experienced staff supervising postgraduate students. In some cases, supervisors are allocated to supervise students in disciplines in which they may not have sufficient experience (Mahlangu, 2021). Therefore, continuous training and development are needed to support and improve the knowledge and skills of academic staff and equip them with new tenets of student supervision (Cyster, 2019). According to Mahlangu (2021), novice supervisors need time to learn the terrain of student supervision. Some supervisors have never been offered training on supervision; they rely merely on their own experience of being supervised (Mhlahlo, 2020). They may make mistakes and engage in the same unfair practices that they were subjected to by their supervisors. The lack of quality supervision negatively affects the quality of the output and delays the progress of students (Cekiso et al., 2019; Kimani, 2014).

In the context of Namibia, a lack of experienced supervisors creates a system in which students are passed between supervisors, sometimes repeating work that they have already corrected (Lilemba, 2021). Another challenge is related to conflict between students and supervisors or between supervisors. The conflict that arises between student and supervisor may derail the supervisory relationship (Cyster, 2019; Kimani, 2014). There are instances in which a student may be allocated to more than one supervisor. Some supervisors may, out of a wish to garner favour from a student, discredit a co-supervisor (Mahlangu, 2021). Lilemba (2021) stated that conflict may also arise between supervisors who fail to meet on a regular basis to discuss the postgraduate research project with their students. Academics who may have obtained their qualifications from different institutions have a tendency of deviating from the institutional standards and procedures. Therefore, they place their energy on criticising other supervisors and other postgraduate institutional structures. It is essential that the student and their supervisors form a harmonious relationship for supervision to be effective (Mahlangu, 2021). If the current situation continues without being addressed, it may hinder the progress of students under supervision.

A positive student–supervisor relationship enhances good progress, which leads to the completion of the research project within the scheduled time frame. The effectiveness of the working relationship between students and their supervisors determines the quality of postgraduate student

supervision (Cekiso et al., 2019). It dictates whether the student's research is a success or failure.

Furthermore, students' readiness and poor academic literacy is a challenge that may delay postgraduate students from completing their theses or dissertations within the scheduled time frame (Mhlahlo, 2020). This is also captured by Ungadi (2021), who postulated that "students' abilities constituted a major challenge to their work" (p. 12) because some students are not adequately prepared for postgraduate studies.

Some supervisors are overburdened owing to the high workload and constant demand to meet deadlines. Their high workload contributes to delays in the completion schedule of postgraduate students. Kimani (2014) indicated that the increased demand for postgraduate studies is a result of the knowledge-based economy. This has culminated in a high workload among academics, which erodes their energy for and commitment to postgraduate student supervision. A high workload hinders timely and quality feedback (Cyster, 2019; Kimani, 2014). Delayed feedback frustrates students and makes them disoriented when attempting to implement feedback comments. The feedback should highlight both the positives and negatives of the research process. Feedback should be constructive and educative. A high workload impedes a supervisor's sense of care for their students (Mhlahlo, 2020).

Another challenge or shortcoming is the absence of a supervisor or student from a research project. Some students take a leave of absence or place their studies on hold, to recommence work only much later. The student's absence may be a result of many factors such as money, work or family commitments.

According to Lilemba (2021), some supervisors fail to honour appointments with their students. Furthermore, Bacwayo et al. (2017) added that the unavailability of supervisors is a challenge to postgraduate student supervision. Despite the challenges in student supervision, the process also presents opportunities between the agents.

Analysis of postgraduate research supervision: UNAM School of Education

The researchers reflected on the process of student supervision at UNAM's Hifikepunye Pohamba Campus and found that there are structures, culture and agency to spearhead the process of student supervision. However, when one consults the Higher Degree Policy as a structure, there are some constraints, such as the procedures detailed in the annexures, of which there are 22 in total. This could be demoralising to students and supervisors because many of the processes in these annexures seem to be repeated or redundant. For instance, the Decentralised Ethical Committee

(DEC) approves the ethical clearance, after which a research permission letter is issued by the Head of Postgraduate Research Support Services. The two can be combined so that the ethical clearance certificate and the research permission are issued by one structure in order to reduce the bureaucratic delays normally experienced by postgraduate students. These two – ethical clearance and research permission – should be appended to the final thesis or dissertation in this order: first, the ethical clearance certificate and then the research permission letter, followed by other appendixes.

Another constraint is the (lack of) feedback that students are provided on the status of their application for admission. Students do not receive feedback on the status of their application and are normally sent from one office to another when they enquire about their applications.

Furthermore, the PhD examination verdicts are contradictory. For instance, when two examiners pass the dissertation and one fail it, the department is advised to seek an independent external examiner to arbitrate. On the contrary, when two examiners fail the dissertation and one passes it, then the student has failed the dissertation. It would be more reasonable to pass a dissertation on the basis of majority examiners.

Conclusions and recommendations

The supervision process is a challenging educational activity that requires a significant time, energy and commitment from both the supervisor and the student. According to the results of this reflective study on postgraduate studies, collaboration and mutual understanding between lecturers and students are two essential components needed for students to graduate on time and create high-quality academic and research work.

From the outset, supervisors need to work with their students to set shared expectations for, obligations for, and advantages of working together. The supervisor must be diligent at both a departmental and individual basis. Some ideas for the supervisory framework to support and define the graduate programme include establishing regular meetings between the student and the supervisor, establishing a written plan that outlines the department's view on good supervisory practice, and establishing adequate procedures for evaluating coursework, thesis or dissertation supervision record-keeping, and project advancement. This will most likely differ for each department.

This study recommends additional research that concentrates on individual, group and committee meetings by examining elements such as the organisation and format of the meetings, the purpose of the meetings, the topics or content of the meetings, the frequency of the meetings, the structure of the sessions, the contributions and the characteristics of the meeting feedback. Among other aspects, the research questions should investigate how the series of sessions for student supervision benefitted postgraduate

students' studies and what each arena's potentials, challenges and unique contributions were. Because there has been a greater emphasis on enhancing supervision techniques, this kind of research could increase the effectiveness of the supervision.

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