Challenges in Quality Control for Postgraduate Supervision

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Abstract: *The role of the universities as engines of knowledge cannot can it be realised with low quality teaching and research output. The underlying assumption is that universities are capable of providing adequate foundation for the complexities of the expected knowledge economy through postgraduate degree programmes in which research is central. However, the quality of higher education and research dimension presents a concern especially in the developing countries. On the other hand, postgraduate studies are expected to play a vital role in contributing to the critical mass of human resources, much need to drive the global economy. This article focuses on the postgraduate supervision which is indeed a high level and complex form of teaching in postgraduate programmes. Although universities have policies and guidelines for their post-graduate supervision, they are confronting a drastically changing learning and teaching environment, characterised by increased demand, complex career expectations from the market and students and a sense of faster completion rate. With the new dynamics in the higher education sector everywhere, there is an obvious need for a paradigm shift to meet the demand, while at the same time maintain quality in postgraduate programmes and supervision. The purpose of this article is to bring into the fore the importance of quality control in postgraduate supervision, the challenges that affect the process and also suggest some strategies for redress.*

Keywords: *Challenges, Quality Control, Postgraduate, Supervision.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Globally, quality higher education is critical in providing the needed foundation for the knowledge economy for any country (Nico Cloete, et. al, 2013). The expected quality higher education with improved research dimension in universities presents a concern on how to improve the worth of the postgraduate students' research in the institutions of higher learning. On the other hand, the role of the higher institutions as engines of knowledge cannot be underrated and neither can it be achieved with low quality of research output. With the underlying assumption that universities are capable of providing adequate foundation for the complexities of the expected knowledge economy through postgraduate research, the quality of postgraduate students' research supervision is critical.

In the context of this article, a clear definition of the supervisor in reference to the postgraduate research is critical so as to appreciate its relevance to quality research production in postgraduate studies. There are several definitions associated with the supervision, among which are foreperson, overseer, coach, facilitator and coordinator. In this context, the role of the supervisor is to ensure that the task is performed well by the junior staff within the stipulated time frame. But in the context of the postgraduate studies programme, the most suitable definition of a supervisor is one in a position of trust, to guide the student in the course of the research work, while being held responsible for the quality of work and performance in line with the research guidelines and expectations of Graduate School/Board and the university (Mutula, 2009). Sally Sambrook (2008) sees the supervisor's main role as to provide leadership and guidance the output of which is judged by the quality of the report in the form of thesis, dissertation or project report.

It is not contestable that postgraduate supervision is a complex style of teaching through research work in the universities. Although the process has challenges, it also presents opportunities for research partnerships between the supervisors and the postgraduate students. Through the supervision, the universities harness the potential of postgraduate students as junior staff, potential

researchers as well as supervisors. On the other hand, production of a quality research often forms a foundation of an academic career for many postgraduate students.

Universities have policies and guidelines for post-graduate supervision. However, where it takes different faculties, for example sciences and humanities there are variations in guidelines due to the diversities in research approaches and methodologies. However, since the world is now a global village, it is critical for the institutions of higher education to consider how to network with each other and the possibilities of adopting relevant practices. Most important in this aspect of bench marking is taking stock on how the institutional practices can affect or benefit each other and also how they can take advantage to improve on the quality of postgraduate supervision.

Supervision involves a focused and intensive guidance, depicted by a genuine concern for students' progress and the provision of quality and timely feedback. The process involves much time, energy as well as professional commitment to every student being supervised, more so because all students are highly individual in many ways. They have unique background and exposures to academic work, abilities, preferences, expectations as well as approaches to research work. Effective supervisors appreciate these individual differences and therefore adjust their expectations on the part of the student under supervision. In quality supervision, postgraduate students are mentored into young and focused scholars as well as reliable future supervisors and teachers. At the same time they are also guided to achieve higher standards than they may have ever anticipated.

Currently, the universities are confronting a drastically changing learning and teaching environment, characterised by increased demand, complex career expectations from the market and students and a sense of faster completion rate, than ever before. Although cultures and approaches to research and supervision differ vastly across the disciplines, faculties and universities, have adopted research undertakings involving empirical approaches, characterised by a systematic process of data collection, analysis and presentation of new knowledge. In postgraduate studies, the process of supervision culminates with the writing of the research project report, in the form of a project, dissertation or a thesis. With the new dynamics in the higher education sector everywhere, there is an obvious need for a paradigm shift to meet the demand while at the same time maintaining quality. The focus of this article is the essence of upholding quality control in research supervision and the challenges involved, in the light of the changing learning and teaching environment in higher education.

2. INDICATORS OF QUALITY IN POSTGRADUATE SUPERVISION

Just like the judgement of the pudding is in the eating, quality supervision is best judged from the perspectives of the postgraduate students in terms of meeting their expectations. The culmination of quality supervision is completion within schedule with a project report or a thesis/dissertation that wins the praise of the examiners and other readers. Quality supervision is a combination of many factors on the part of supervision. The most valued ones being readiness and supportiveness. An approachable and supportive supervisor wins the trust of the student who then is encouraged to consult freely. The fact that the student is able to meet the supervisor regularly adds quality to the supervision process. Equally valued by the students are the supervisors who show interest in students' work and progress. They also are not only knowledgeable but are keen to use the same knowledge to guide the student's research process and future career path by facilitating networking and publication.

Provision of prompt and effectively communicated feedback is critical in quality supervision as it culminates with improved performance as well as completion of the research work within schedule. This means that the supervisor is able to push the student with strict deadlines in case of such needs, while regularly providing direction to the student's research work, criticizing, appraising and evaluating the direction the research is taking. The expectation calls for a supervisor who is sensitive to the unique circumstances and needs of the each student, for instance on the basis of gender and other circumstances such as for international students, married, those with small children, and disabilities. Additionally, quality supervision emanates from availability, thoroughness and timeliness in reading the work, provision of timely feedback to the student, clearly established communication channels and genuine interest in student's career. The lack of these qualities is core to this article as the situation raises serious challenges to the quality of the

research product and thesis. In many situations, Graduate Schools and Boards have had to contend with many challenges in upholding quality supervision.

3. CHALLENGES IN QUALITY CONTROL FOR POSTGRADUATE SUPERVISION

The following are some of the challenges that tend to compromise the quality of supervision.

3.1 Increased Demand for Post-Graduate Studies

The demand for postgraduate courses has been rising year by year. This has resulted in significant increase in postgraduate students' population, with a subsequent demand for more supervisors with PhDs. The increased number of postgraduate students for supervision erodes on the supervisory energy and commitments to the process. This is because with many students under supervision, the quality of time spent with each student is reduced. Quality supervision demands that the supervisor takes time to understand each student in both academic competence and non-academic issues such as family, friends, work, habits and hobbies. This approach complements supervision with mentorship, which is often inseparable with quality supervision.

With the increased demand for higher education, some departments do not have adequate staff at PhD level to supervise postgraduate students. As a result, department end up allocating students to supervisors without adequate disciplinary background to advise the student with a potential challenge of having to offer supervision services in an unfamiliar academic terrain. Worse still is where the supervisor is not well grounded on the research area of focus and methodologies for appropriate data collection. Quality of postgraduate work is also at risk when students are allocated to newly graduated PhD lecturers who needs time to learn how to supervise. While they can learn through apprenticeship/tutelage of a more experienced supervisor, prepared guidelines may be useful in providing some tips and expectations for quality supervision.

3.2 Overworked Supervisors

With the increased demand and subsequent expansion of higher learning, quality of supervision is becoming highly compromised because university senior faculty members are becoming overworked with teaching, marking of examinations; own research, publications as well as management work as section/departmental heads. Recruitment of new qualified staff is a solution to this although this is not always adequately done due to lack of PhD holders in the required areas of specialisation, not to mention the financial constraints in many universities in the developing countries. As a result, many university faculties have resulted to developing own PhDs within the University Staff Development Programmes. Due to the acute shortage of PhD holders, none PhD holders are involved in the supervision of masers' projects and theses in the faculties with few PhD holders. This is especially experienced in newly established faculties and schools. To counteract the challenge, some faculties source for supervisors outside the faculty and university.

In many of these cases, the challenge is that such supervisors are unable to guide the student to grasp the whole essence of the research focus and the entire optimal methodology to bring out the knowledge gap that the research is set to fill. Such is also a supervisor who is not knowledgeable with the current theories and practices in the area of study. This has serious implications for the quality of research output and the thesis. Evidently, such supervisors either delay the students' completion schedule or just allow the student to submit a low quality thesis/dissertation.

To scale up the quality of supervision, orientation seminars may be conducted regularly to enhance the capacity to supervise and also introduce the newly graduated PhDs to the university supervision guidelines and expectations. They could also be restricted to supervise Master's thesis as second supervisors under the tutelage of a more experienced supervisor for the first two students after graduation. Later, they may then be allowed to supervise master's thesis as principal supervisors after successful supervision of at least two (2) master's theses. Thereafter, after successful supervision of one PhD thesis as second supervisor, they may take full responsibility as principal supervisor.

3.3 Guidelines on the Appointment of Supervisors

Appointment of supervisors for each postgraduate student may in itself be not a challenge where departments and faculties have policies guiding the process. However, in the absence of clear

policies and guidelines, there are situations where supervisors are allocated to students without consultations with both parties. In other cases, postgraduate students approach the staff members they think would be good supervisors, many times on advice from the other students or lecturers in the departments. The real challenge to the quality of the supervision comes with the compatibility of the students and the supervisor for ease during the research process. Although it is difficult to predict a perfect match between research students and supervisors, quality supervision thrives on an acceptable relationship between the two, as a prerequisite and a guarantee of ease in communication, trust and mutual respect. Where the matching is regrettably unacceptable by either party, there has been cases of conflicts and resentments, occasioned by strained relationships. These challenges may be more intensified in situations where students are allocated to supervisors in total absence of physical contacts, which sometimes inevitably happens with the international students and Open Learning Mode of Delivery in postgraduate studies.

To increase the level of comfort for the students, some Universities and faculties allow students to choose their supervisors. Where students are supervised by two or more supervisors they may be allowed to choose the first supervisor, while the Departmental Board of Postgraduate Studies makes the second choice of supervisor. The only challenge with this is that popular supervisors are chosen by more students than they can handle, as a result of which some students are allocated supervisors outside their choice.

3.4 Change of Supervisors

There are many reasons that occasion changes of supervisors. Whether or not this can affect the quality of supervision and research product depends on the circumstances and how the process of change is handled. Difficulties in compatibility between the student and the supervisor have resulted with changes of supervisors in the middle of the research process. In other cases, the research may change in scope considerably, occasioning to either having an additional supervisor or withdrawal of the original supervisor. Whether the change happens on the request by the students or the supervisor, the change may be more of a disruption rather than a benefit as a result of which the quality of the research report may be compromised. There may also be unnecessary delay in the student's completion of the study. It rarely works well when a supervisor is appointed in the middle of a research undertaking for a postgraduate student.

3.5 Mode of Supervision

Across the universities and faculties, policies dictate appropriate different modes of supervision joint, panel or single supervision. There are universities where both masters and PhD have single supervisors while in others there is joint/co-supervision. Where there are clear policies and guidelines on the mode of supervision, students and supervisors are clear on what to expect. However, there are faculties within universities that do not have clear policies and therefore the allocation of supervisors to different students depends on the postgraduate studies co-ordinators and heads of departments. There are also situations where especially PhD students have either a joint or a supervisory panel. In joint or co-supervision, a principle or main supervisor is appointed, whose role is to moderate supervision process and oversee the quality of supervision, depending on either the specialised knowledge expected in the research.

The co-supervision has practical advantages in that it exposes students to a wide range of knowledge, experiences and perspectives, which in turn enriches the research work, especially in interdisciplinary research projects. However experiences by the students and supervisors have demonstrated that co-supervision and panel supervision can be problematic due to diversity in views which can be confusing on the part of the student. There are also those supervisors who strive to gain student's favour by discrediting other supervisors. The conflicts can get out of hand to the extent that the main or the principle supervisor is unable to control, unfortunately affecting not only the quality of supervision but also the students' rate of completion.

3.6 Differed Expectations between the Supervisors and Students

Many times there are shared agreements on how the partnership in the research between the student and the supervisor is going to be operationalized. Sometimes the supervisors and the

students work at cross-purposes in the absence of clearly stipulated lines of communication between the two parties. Although the supervisor may be very clear about what is desirable in terms of the guiding role, the student may have unshared expectations, dictated by his/her circumstances, unknown to the supervisor. Some of the areas where the expectations of both the supervisor and the students have been found to differ are the degree of independence for the student, extent of the direction from the supervisor, procedure for consultation, especially where, how often, and nature of feed-back (Phillips and Pugh, 1987).

3.7 Professional Boundary between the Supervisors and Students

The expected desire for the supervisor to see quality research work and its completion according to schedule does not in itself require a close friendship between the two, although this at times develops. Although the professionally acceptable level of friendship and social interaction with students may be difficult to define and perhaps is best left to individual judgment, there is a level that can ruin the quality of the supervision process.

One of the problems is the extent to which the supervisor can get involved with the students' personal challenges that may contribute to delayed completion of the research work, for example financial and family problems. For foreign students, supervisors may need to help them deal with the challenges of adapting to a foreign culture, homesickness, loneliness, and a sense of alienation. In helping the students deal with these issues, the challenge for the supervisors is how to draw the boundaries between personal and academic responsibilities as well as how far to engage in the former.

3.8 Break Down of Relationships between Supervisors and Students

Break down of relationships between supervisors and students slow the supervision process (Bartlett, Mercer, 2001). The situation is occasioned by students who may be dissatisfied with the supervisors' performance in guiding the research work. The conflict can go out of control, especially in the departments and faculties without mechanisms to resolve the difficulties. When this happens, it can result with the change of supervisor, as a result of which the student may have to start the research work all over again. The conflicts can be resolved through either a Post-Graduate Boards or academic advisors as initiators and mediators in conflict resolution.

3.9 Inability to Meet Students' and University's Expectation in Postgraduate Supervision

Quality of supervision is best judged when the supervisors are competent and committed enough to fulfill their obligations. This has not always been the case and has been a challenge in maintaining quality supervision. Unfortunately given the many factors surrounding the supervision, students have been frustrated by unmet supervisors' obligations to an extent of terminating the studies.

Students in postgraduate studies expect to maintain momentum of the study and to complete and acquire the degree within the time schedule. For this to happen, they expect timely, uninterrupted support and regular and quality feedback from their supervisors, throughout the research period. As such, criticism needs to be given sympathetically and with practical and clear suggestions for improvement. Additionally, given the demand of the postgraduate programmes and research, students always expect confirmation of their success. It is therefore demoralizing for a student to realize that his/her supervisor has only skimmed or not read the work. They thus expect extensive written comments, either in the thesis or separately in the form of notes.

Beyond the writing of a quality report/thesis or dissertation, students expect the supervisors to take time to advice, mentor and support them, especially those planning to develop careers in or outside their areas of research or academic work (Dietz et.al, 2006). In this regard, they expect appropriate information on the labour market; job opportunities anticipated challenges and strategies to overcome them. Although not all supervisors may have this advance knowledge, they could refer students to colleagues or departments/centres outside the university with the required information. Students, especially those aspiring for academic careers also expect supervisors to help them to publish their research work in reputable and high impact journals and also guide them in sharing the same in seminars and conferences. In well-grounded supervision, the relationship goes into future collaboration in future research undertakings.

3.10 Low Utilisation of Information Technology in Research and Supervision

There is no doubt that globalization process together with IT has provided the universities with opportunities to develop in global markets with the international students' enrolment growing steadily. Some universities have initiated ways of solving higher education demand problem by introducing various models of e-supervision. The new models do not require physical or face to face contact. Instead, students get in touch with their supervisors through tablets, laptops, phones, Web, HTML, Videos, WIKISPACE, among others. These innovations have ensured that scholarly knowledge is readily available online in workstations, homes and anywhere, (Collins et. al, 2012). Even those students who need laboratories for data collection can adequately be supervised using the technology. The major challenge is not only how fast the supervisors are able to embrace and utilise the available information and the technology but also how to ensure that the technology is available in all the universities to facilitate e-supervision, particularly in the developing countries. In the utilisation of IT to scale up the quality of research supervision for postgraduate students, one challenge is how to change the mind-set of the supervisors, especially those that are used to the traditional ways of supervision of one-on-one/face to face. The other challenge is the poor state and diversity in economic and infrastructural realities in many developing countries. As observed by Nico et.al (2013), many African countries while trying to get integrated into global scientific economy are at the same time struggling to *'fix'* their higher education systems. In the circumstances, the challenge is how to operationalize the e-supervision, improve IT to enhance the quality of postgraduate supervision and at the same time cope with the increased demand.

The universities thus need to commit quality time and resources to train and sensitise supervisors, on skills to utilise new technology in supervision. The aim of the capacity building is to enhance the uptake of IT and scientific advances among individual supervisors. Benchmarking conferences also provide excellent fora for supervisors to engage in dialogue and share some of the best practices in quality research production. On the other hand the benchmarking reports should be widely shared online to enhance quality research through reported success stories, best practices as well as challenges in areas of research and postgraduate supervision.

3.11 Absent Supervisors

The absence in this context is defined as the unavailability of the supervisors to the students in terms of consultations and provision of timely feedback. The absence of the supervisors causes anxieties to students and is one reason for delayed completion of the postgraduate students. Some of the reasons for the unavailability are commitment in activities outside the University for Personal gains or other personal commitments, involvement with management/administrative roles in the university, being on part-time engagement in the faculty, or too many students for supervision.

Whatever the reasons for the *absence,* the solution would be to explore the university's support for none face -to-face modes of supervision through email, teleconference, phone or Skype. While some of these facilities may not be readily available in some universities in developing countries, their use can have high financial commitments for the students and supervisors. The other aspect to improve on the availability and commitment of the supervisors is the provision of incentives to staff for engaging in research uptake activity; perhaps on the basis of the number of students one is able to help complete the theses. An indirect incentive that may work is the consideration of the number of student successfully supervised as a promotion criterion to the next level for the supervisors. Some universities have sought to improve supervisor's commitments by attaching monetary gains for successful supervision, giving PhDs more money, compared to Masters' theses and projects, respectively.

Absence by the students also affects the quality of supervision process. The absence has been caused by laxity after completion of the coursework. Some students even disappear soon after completion of course work and only appear after a long time. Some of the reasons for this are that most students at postgraduate level are on paid employment with some working far away from the Universities. There are also those that disappear soon after conceptualising the research topic or before finalising the proposal. At whatever time they may disappear, the supervision process cannot be of quality, due to disruption.

With a compromised supervision due to the disappearance of either the supervisor or the student, the problem is usually heightened when either party blame the other for the delayed process. Since Graduate school or the unit in charge of postgraduate studies is responsible and accountable to the students and the university for quality assurance in postgraduate programme, the solution can be in the introduction of a form of a *supervision tracking tool*, meant to make the students and supervisors accountable to each other. The tool can be a simple one meant to take stalk of when the student hands in the work to the supervisor, the date when the feedback is provided, mode of feedback delivery (telephone, SMS, email, Skype, among others), nature of the feedback given, remarks and signature of both the supervisor and student. For the sake of accountability and quality control, the duly completed tool can be photocopied and submitted to Graduate School to serve as a form of progress record, on a regular basis, for example once in three months. However the *tool* can serve the purpose only if it has clear guidelines as how often meetings should be held between the student and the supervisor, the expected roles and responsibilities for both the supervisors and the students. At the same time, there should be clarities on the procedure for consultations, the timing of feedback from the supervisor and measures to monitor the completion timeframe for the postgraduate students once admitted in graduate school.

3.12 Retirement, Sabbatical and Other Leave Periods

There are situations, when a postgraduate student may miss regular supervision because the supervisor has retired, is on sabbatical or other forms of leave. This in addition to causing anxiety to the student is likely to compromise quality of research work because either the other supervisor may have to move on singly or another one may be appointed as a replacement. The same scenario may occur when supervisors leave for other institutions. In the latter case, whether the student decides to go with the supervisor in case of single supervision or get another supervisor, the quality of the research product is likely to be affected negatively. On the other hand, to appoint an alternative or temporary supervisor mainly depends on the stage of the research work. Use of e-supervision enables supervisors on sabbatical leave to offer services at a distance while on leave though this may not work at its best, especially in areas of poor internet connectivity or where the supervisors and/or students have set their mind on the ''*traditional*'' or face to face mode of supervision.

4 CONCLUSION

Upholding quality in postgraduate supervision cannot be underrated since it is a specialised form of teaching, recognised and formalised in all universities, globally. It is a task between the student and the supervisor and can therefore be viewed as taking place in private space, between the two. There is no standard mode of application, with each supervisor handling it differently. However, despite the increasing number of postgraduate students and the demand for PhD holders in the universities, the completion rate has not been as promising in many universities. Although many factors contribute to this, the most predominant one is the quality of supervision the student receives. In addition to determining the quality of the thesis and the fate of the postgraduate student in terms of pass or failure, the examination process informs on the quality of the students ability to carry the research and the supervision. In particular, the verdict of the examiner as to whether the thesis is "*adequate in form and content*" serves as an indicator of the quality of the supervision that the student has enjoyed. There are situations where the remarks from the examiner are suggestive that the supervision was found to be wanting.

The obvious challenge to any graduate school or the unit in charge of coordination and facilitation of postgraduate studies is to ensure that the students are effectively supervised so as to produce quality research work which adequately fills the previously identified knowledge gap and satisfies the industry. A student whose thesis is declared by the examiner as inadequate in form and content would never forgive the supervisor who ascended his/her signature to such work. On the other hand, any department or faculty associated with a failure of postgraduate students as a result of low quality theses earns a bad reputation for the faculty and the university. Worse still, the culmination of failure translates into wastage on the part of the student, the university and the state. This should be avoided at all costs by putting in place clear regulations, guidelines and mechanisms to ensure a quality supervision process.

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