Lecturers' experience of postgraduate supervision in a distance education context

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ABSTRACT

After determining the perceptions of postgraduate students at a distance education institution of the guidance they had experienced, a research project was launched to determine *lecturers'* views on supervision at the same institution. Data collection methods included focus groups, individual interviews and document analysis. Findings indicated that supervisors experienced some aspects of postgraduate supervision as extremely satisfying. However, numerous problems were raised, for example establishing acceptable ground rules, planning the research project, poor language proficiency and design of empirical investigations. In addition, administrative problems were encountered including admission requirements of students, allocation of students to appropriate supervisors and problems relating to the examination process. From the findings, the need for training of students and supervisors; discussion around issues in the supervisory process and written policies and guidelines on postgraduate supervision emerged.

BACKGROUND

Postgraduate research students often experience difficulties which delay or prevent them from completing their dissertations or theses. According to Helm (1989:79), postgraduate research poses three problem areas, namely the *research design*, the *data collecting and processing* and the *report writing*. These problems may be attributed to the lack of research experience of the student. It can also result from poor knowledge and guidance skills of the supervisor. Finally, a system in which allocation of students to supervisors and the quality and frequency of feedback are not efficient plays a role (Helm 1989:79; Jacobs 1994:33–34; Mouton 2001:2; Sayed, Kruss & Badat 1998:279).

A number of research projects has focussed on the roles of the student and the supervisor in postgraduate research. It is clear that the successful completion of a dissertation is just as much a function of the intelligence and training of the student, as the ability of the supervisor. A product of high quality requires bright, dedicated and well-trained students as well as effective supervision (Hockey 1994:294). Smith, Brownell, Simpson and Deshler (1993:58) claim that: ''A successful dissertation experience occurs only through significant efforts by *both* the adviser and the student''. In this regard, Bartlett and Mercer (2001:2) state that none of the manuals on postgraduate supervision ''... include or even imagine the variety of possible situations that may arise between a supervisor and a candidate''.

The abovementioned confirms that there are at least two role players in postgraduate studies – the student and the supervisor. In a previous research project, Lessing and Schulze (2001) determined the perceptions of postgraduate students at a distance education university of the supervision they had received. From the results it was clear that postgraduate students' expectations were not entirely met regarding some aspects of supervision. In this follow-up project the aim was to determine *lecturers'* experience of postgraduate supervision at the same institution. With this knowledge the institution (faculty) may be able to address problem areas and hence improve the output and quality of postgraduate students. This is in line with the National Plan for Higher Education which outlines the framework for realising the policy goals of the Education White Paper 3: A Programme for the Transformation of Higher Education, published in 1997. In the National Plan for Higher Education, the benchmark for graduation rate for a distance education institution is set at 25% for master's and 20% for doctoral students (Department of Education

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2001:23). However, it is also stated that higher education institutions should ''... ensure that they do not recruit students who do not have the potential to pursue further study and ... do not retain students who have no chance of success'' (Department of Education 2001:25).

The remainder of this article will (1) review relevant literature on the respective roles of the student and the supervisor in postgraduate research; (2) describe the research design and findings to illustrate lecturers' views on postgraduate supervision in a distance education context and (3) formulate recommendations to improve postgraduate supervision and enhance student success.

THE STUDENT'S ROLE AND EXPECTATIONS

As postgraduate student, the candidate has certain responsibilities. In the writing of a dissertation/thesis the student fulfills the role of researcher. To be a researcher implies the mastering of specific skills and writing a dissertation/thesis is an opportunity to apply the knowledge and skills gained during the research. Students have to select a suitable topic, apply relevant research techniques and present their findings in a precise way. The most important skill to be mastered is the ability to evaluate and reevaluate their own work and that of others in the light of current developments. Completing a dissertation demonstrates a student's ability to research an intellectual problem and arrive at an appropriate conclusion independently. The research entails the need for guesses, reworkings, backtrackings, corrections and inspiration. In addition, a degree of tolerance of ambiguity is a prerequisite for successful investigation (Nerad & Miller 1997:76; Phillips & Pugh 2000:21, 74; Salmon 1992:14; Smith et al 1993:53).

During the examination of a dissertation the examiner will evaluate whether the student has acquired the necessary skills. Thus, special attention is given to ''... clarity in aims, coherence in approach, critical depth, perspective and originality. They (sic examiners) are annoyed by poor spelling, language which obscures, literature reviews which are mere descriptive lists, unsubstantiated claims, and unwarranted or unrecognised assumptions'' (Shannon 1995:14). Accordingly, Phillips and Pugh (2000:67) emphasise the importance of a student's writing skills to state assumptions explicitly and express ideas clearly.

In writing a dissertation/thesis students should demonstrate professional knowledge and skills which include technical competence, techniques for analysis of data, self-management in terms of time and personal responsibilities, management of others like technicians, supervisors and other academics, strategies for accessing a peer network of other students and experience in mixing with various academics (Pearson 1996:306; Sayed et al 1998:280).

Regarding students' *expectations* of supervisors, students expressed the need for enthusiastic and supportive supervisors. Binns and Potter (1989:213) found that students see the supervisor's main function as a provider of support, constructive criticism and some overall guidance. Students often complain about inadequate supervision and a lack of communication between themselves and the supervisor. Moreover, students often have misperceptions of standards or requirements and of the supervisor's role (Shannon 1995:11).

In addition to the abovementioned, Lessing and Schulze (2002:148) determined that students want guidance with regard to the overall planning of the research in terms of the approach to follow, for example, qualitative or quantitative. Especially on Master's level students prefer a structured way of working and want supervisors to help them decide on due dates for the submission of chapters. They require *constructive* criticism and need support with regard to statistical analyses as well as the interpretation and presentation of research results. Finally, doctoral students indicated that they wanted the freedom to work relatively independently.

THE SUPERVISOR'S ROLE AND EXPECTATIONS

Various authors have highlighted the diverse roles and responsibilities of the supervisor. For example, Fraser and Mathews (1999:5) and Hockey (1994:293) identified three main components of the supervisor's role: to lend expertise in the research area, support the student and balance creativity and critique. Accordingly, Mouton (2001:17) sees the responsibility of the supervisor to guide, advise, ensure scientific quality and provide the required emotional and psychological support.

Bartlett and Mercer (2001:4) define the different roles a supervisor is expected to perform as: ''... confidante, source of intellectual inspiration, resource manager, grant application writer, navigator of institutional tangles, manager of change, personal motivator, writing teacher, editor, career mentor, and net worker ...''. Similarly, Kelly and Ling (2001:74) postulate that the role of the supervisor becomes one of resource person, facilitator, guide, mentor, coach and co-learner. The supervisor should possess some knowledge on the student's topic and is expected to provide insight to the student, but the student retains ownership and controls the outcome of the study.

Experienced supervisors show a pattern of supervisor/student interaction which involves:

- significant effort and time at the beginning in assisting the student to establish and understand the topic or problem;
- ensuring that the candidate uses the correct methods and techniques to address the problem and conducts a thorough literature study in the field;
- ensuring that the problem is addressed according to the requirements of the methods employed;
- planning and outlining the dissertation (preliminary table of contents) which is of great importance to assure that the writer can see the whole as well as the parts of the dissertation;
- monitoring with less interaction, but being alert for warning signals of difficulty; and
- increasing interaction during the stage of writing up the report, which may include regular meetings, submission of progress reports, presentation of concept texts, keeping of minutes, workshops on research, as well as reading of papers and publications (Deist 1990:67; Fraser & Mathews 1999:5–6; Helm 1989:80–84; Mouton 2001:19; Nerad & Miller 1997:85; Pearson 1996:308; Phillips & Pugh 2000:71; Rademeyer 1994:93; Van Schalkwyk 1994:35).

Dillon and Malott (1981:195) recommend that the supervisor should provide structured supervision and guidance in the form of regular (weekly) consultation meetings. They designed a supervisory system with five components: specifying research-tasks and performance standards, meetings with the supervisor, negotiating deadlines, giving feedback and providing incentives. This system produced a greater output of graduates in a shorter time period then traditional supervisory approaches.

Regarding the *expectations* supervisors have of postgraduate students, Phillips and Pugh (2000:1) claim that personal academic initiative is expected from the students. The students should claim ownership of their studies as defined by *under your own management*, which is a key to postgraduate learning. Students are responsible to determine what is required of their research and to carry it out. The student can master these research skills by observing established researchers to determine successful practices. Skills can also be mastered by practising them and requesting feedback. Finally, other related dissertations or theses can be studied and evaluated (Phillips & Pugh 2000:53).

Thus, postgraduate students, especially on doctoral level, no longer wait for lecturers to tell them what to do, but are expected to initiate discussion, ask for help when needed, and argue about what they should be learning. It is not the task of the supervisor to write the thesis, edit the language or think up solutions for problems encountered during the research (Deist 1990:67; Hockey 1994:296).

Working towards a doctorate has, in addition to the intellectual, also a psychological component (Sayed *et al* 1998:281). It is claimed that writing a thesis/dissertation can be an intense affair wherein internal (eg ever changing system of thought and feeling) and external conflicts (eg personal relationships, time and resource constraints) influence the process negatively. Tenacity, support of the supervisor, personal and collegial encouragement and previous experience contribute to the psychological survival of the process (Smith *et al* 1993:57). Psychological manifestations may be negative, including feelings of isolation, depression, frustration and stress or positive, for example, enthusiasm, increasing interest and independence from the supervisor (Phillips & Pugh 2000:84; Salmon 1992:20; Smith *et al* 1993:57).

What follows is the research design of the inquiry to determine how supervisors in a distance education context experience postgraduate supervision and academic support.

RESEARCH DESIGN

Data collection and sampling

Because the research project aimed at an *in-depth understanding* of lecturers' experience of postgraduate supervision, a qualitative research approach was considered suitable. This enabled us to work within a flexible research design, which resulted in four rounds of data collection as follows.

Focus groups

To start with we decided to conduct three focus groups. Time-wise it was more economical than conducting numerous individual interviews; group dynamics work synergically to bring out information (Carey 1994:224) and participants have more confidence to express their honest feelings within a support group of peers than in individual interviews (Folch-Lyon & Trost 1981:445). Our interview guide focussed on (1) what the lecturers experienced as most satisfying and (2) issues in postgraduate supervision. We also listed a number of possible problem areas as identified by the students from our previous research project (Lessing & Schulze 2001&2002). However, during the focus groups we followed the natural flow of conversation.

The key principle in forming focus groups is homogeneity (Kingry, Tiedje & Friedman 1990:124). Hence, for the first focus group we selected seven full professors. The second group comprised twelve associate professors and some experienced senior lecturers and the third group consisted of nine participants who were mainly lecturers.

On each occasion we served refreshments to facilitate a positive atmosphere and indicate our appreciation to participators. We commenced each session by expressing our gratitude for the participants' presence, explaining the aims of the research, assuring participants of confidentiality and anonymity and obtaining permission to tape-record the discussion. Every interview lasted approximately one hour and twenty minutes. At the end participants were invited to present us with any additional information that came to mind.

Individual interviews with management

After tentatively analysing the transcribed data, we realised that we needed to conduct interviews with two of the senior management staff directly involved in postgraduate supervision yet not included in the focus groups. These managers are attached to the Faculty's Institute for Educational Research, which has the overall responsibility for the co-ordination of research proposals submitted by prospective masters and doctoral students and the examination process of dissertations and theses. These functions are operationalised by a Masters and Doctoral committee. The managers also supervise postgraduate research in an individual capacity. For the interviews with these managers, a new interview schedule was developed, based on difficulties lecturers experienced with supervision. Each of the two interviews lasted an hour, were tape-recorded and transcribed verbatim.

Individual interviews with administration

Analysis of the data indicated the need to interview relevant administrative personnel. Therefore, we conducted a one-hour interview with three staff members from postgraduate student affairs who were directly involved in the handling of dissertations/theses. Our interview schedule addressed administrative matters only. Thus, 33 participants were purposefully selected for the research.

Document analysis

Interim analysis indicated the need to scrutinise a number of important documents that had been mentioned by participants. These included: a Postgraduate Information Brochure; general information on master's and doctoral degrees; relevant minutes of meetings of the executive committee of the Faculty of Education; information brochures that were sent to master's and doctoral students; the evaluation criteria for dissertations and theses; South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA) documents for MEd and DEd studies; the research policy of the Faculty of Education; the University of South Africa (UNISA) Research Policy and the Report of the Research and Bursary

Committee (RBC) Task Group on research management at UNISA. This produced an additional 192 pages of raw data.

Trustworthiness

Guba's model for trustworthiness addresses ways of reducing biases in the results (Poggenpoel 1998:349–351). Within this model we used the following tactics: (1) We used focus groups, individual interviews and document analysis to triangulate methods. (2) We obtained feedback from participants if we were uncertain about the meaning of statements. The findings were also circulated among participants so that they could confirm whether we had reflected their views correctly. (3) Our sampling decisions were carefully made. (4) We used a tape recorder, and transcribed the data verbatim. (5) Both of us analysed the raw data and ensured intercoder as well as intracoder reliability.

Data analysis

The data were divided into two broad categories namely *satisfying aspects* and *issues experienced*. Thereafter a bottom-up strategy was adopted as follows (Johnson & Christenson 2000:426–431):

- *Segmenting*. This involved dividing the data into meaningful analytical units by bracketing them.
- *Coding.* The identified units were coded by means of category names and symbols. Facesheet codes that applied to single transcripts were also given to enable us to compare groups.
- *Compiling a master list.* All the category names and codes were put on a master list.
- *Checking for intercoder and intracoder reliability.* To address intercoder reliability we checked for consistency in the use of codes by each of us. One also checked the other for intracoder reliability.
- *Enumeration*. The frequency with which observations were made was noted to identify prominent themes between groups.

FINDINGS

Satisfying aspects

Satisfying aspects relating to the supervisor

Satisfying aspects of supervision included the supervisors' *contribution* to the successful completion of the students' research. ''It is absolutely wonderful to think that I ... could help this student reach his goals'', one stated. Many others mentioned the *intellectual growth* they experienced because of the supervisory process: ''I learn a lot ... especially in my field with therapeutic techniques ... the students expose me to new things ... and different research methods''.

Satisfying aspects relating to the student

Several supervisors mentioned the *intellectual growth of students* during their studies as an extremely satisfying aspect of supervision. One stated: ''... even a weak student ... you can see the change that takes place over a number of years. It is very satisfying to feel that they've grown''. *Good work* or *creativity* and the *diversity* of research interests were also alluded to.

Satisfying aspects relating to the interaction between supervisor and student

The *personal relationships* supervisors developed with postgraduate students were a source of satisfaction. One supervisor observed: ''I think I've become friends with every student, except one. Personal friends in some cases in other cases I really feel I got to know them, their struggles and the circumstances that they have been in and I enjoyed getting to know them''.

The *technology* used for interaction with students also led to feelings of satisfaction. These included the use of audio recordings or submitting and evaluating chapters electronically. One supervisor referred to the *level of interaction* with postgraduate students in comparison with, for example, Honours BEd students, as gratifying.

Issues in postgraduate supervision

Issues entailed in getting started

- Unrealistic student expectations: Many supervisors mentioned students' unrealistic expectations of postgraduate research. One observed: ''I think many of the Master's students have unrealistic expectations. They think they are going to finish this dissertation quickly. For many ... it is the first time ... that they receive work back that says, correct this ... you query the first chapter and sometimes give it back three times that is when you see the frustration.''

  In addition, many of the students rely on supervisors to ''get them through''. Students also tend to underestimate the amount of time needed from completion of the research to final submission of the written report for examination.

- Addressing possible problems by establishing ground rules: When comparing the three groups of supervisors, the following pattern emerged: the more experienced the supervisors, the more they tended to establish ''ground rules'' at the start of the study. Most ground rules focus on the following: technical aspects (submitting typed work, including a table of contents and a bibliography), language (submitting edited work),

phased procedure (submitting one chapter only at a time), framework (committing to a relatively fixed time frame and establishing boundaries, (when and where the supervisor could be contacted). One professor asserted: ''I have ground rules ... the whole issue of how the manuscript is received. The basic ground rule is that it is typed. That is number one. Number two, spelling ... I [am willing to] receive a manuscript but [only if] the language has been edited. I also want the handing in of one chapter at a time and moving on from those three general rules, I then spend a little time looking at chapter one. This includes some idea of the areas that need to be covered ... Then also the understanding ..., if it's a D ... I usually expect in the area of 50 entries per chapter ... I also indicate in that first letter the turnaround time ... it would be in the area of four to six weeks ... those ground rules are discussed very clearly in the beginning as I have found that it is invaluable.''

- Planning the research: In contrast to inexperienced supervisors, experienced supervisors tended to have specific plans in place to help students get started. Five approaches were identified: (1) One professor focussed students' attention on the SAQA requirements for master's or doctoral degrees or the following: ''I like to start with the examination criteria ... I say to the student: let's take them one by one ... The criteria state: language usage should be correct. Then we talk about language. It must be neatly bound ... do you prefer A4 or A5? This will influence diagrams. Thus we talk everything through with the criteria as starting point.'' (2) Other supervisors require students to ''... study a completed, related dissertation from A to Z''. (3) ''I outline the material of the first chapter such as motivation for research, problem formulation, aims of the research, demarcation of the field of study.'' (4) One lecturer said: ''In the first interview I ask students what do they aim for: 60%, 70% ... because then I know ... and somewhere along the road they always say: 'I think my 80% should be a little less!'.'' (5) A final approach was: ''I always point out that they must think of their work loads ... then we plan the research in terms of time frames''.

Challenges during the research

- Writing skills: In all of the groups poor use of language by second-language students emerged as a major challenge. This was thus reflected: ''I think that we should be stricter around the ... minimum quality of the work that is sent to us ... . When the work is grammatically so incorrect that you can't read it properly, I simply do five or six pages and then I give it back to the student ... . If there are a lot of language errors, I say to him 'You must have this read by somebody beforehand but I can't accept it like this'.'' Whereas one manager

feared that language skills could become an overriding issue, the other manager considered this to be so important that it could be used as admission criterion or that struggling students should be required to complete a language course before continuing.

Two additional problems which were identified are that students ''... do not always relate their written work to their main research problem'' and often ''... do not integrate their written work but present it as a compilation of subject matter''.

- Poor work: The inferior quality of some students' work was also mentioned. ''My one student works but it is of such poor quality that you cannot continue'', one stated. On management's side there was disappointment that supervisors did not refer poor students for a course in logical argumentation that was designed for struggling students and provided by the Faculty of Education.
- Technical aspects: Experienced supervisors, in contrast to less experienced supervisors, tended to consider technical requirements from the beginning of the study. This was thus reflected: ''I learnt the hard way to spot-check references and technical aspects from the very beginning, so that I can give that back immediately to the students and say the bibliography is not correct and because I also do editing ... I noticed that it ... must be that lecturers ... concentrate on content so much that they allow extremely shoddy technical [work] ... .'' ''I tell them that we use the abbreviated Harvard technique. I perhaps give them an article ... and say: 'I'd like you to follow that system' ... I insist that the bibliography comes with each chapter and the table of contents too ... I find that if you start checking it from the beginning, by the time you get to the second chapter, they're getting ... the basics correct.''

One experienced supervisor stated: ''I know of colleagues who have accepted handwritten work. I think we have the right to expect typed work.'' Less experienced supervisors were more willing to accept handwritten work. Management indicated that they would accept handwritten work that was clearly legible.

- Turnover time: The time supervisors from all groups took to respond to students' work differed from within a few days to six weeks: ''I think four to six weeks is the kind of criteria that I have. It builds up a momentum in their research.'' Another stated: ''I always try for two weeks ... but I like the idea that one negotiates this with the student'' and ''I try to do it as quickly as possible, usually a couple of days''. Management indicated that a turnover time of about three weeks seemed fair.
- The supervisor's written comments: More experienced supervisors were more aware of the kind of

criticism they gave than the inexperienced group. Observations include: ''I try to comment with great sensitivity. I can remember when I was a student ... how painful the criticism sometimes was'', ''I think there must be *some* positive comments'' and ''I give it to them straightforward ... you can be so tactful that the student does not get the message.''

- Empirical research issues: Not all supervisors required their students to embark on an empirical investigation. Those who did, sometimes recruited students according to their own expertise. One of the managers mentioned the fact that not all supervisors were conversant with both qualitative and quantitative approaches: ''Most people have been trained in quantitative [approaches] and ... studies that should have been qualitative ... are directed [towards a] quantitative [approach] and studies that are qualitative are supervised by people who are not conversant [with qualitative approaches] and then they are not rigorous in assessment.'' In addition, the fact that supervisors who were not skilled in research methods did not always attend the staff-development workshops arranged in the faculty was mentioned.

However, many supervisors stated that they would refer students to knowledgeable colleagues if they did not have the ability to give the guidance needed. ''I try and recruit my students according to my own specialisation and interest ... I do qualitative research. I do not do quantitative research. And I would prefer it that way because I think one should try and specialise. If students want to work quantitatively it is their choice and I have said that I would ask for assistance ... when we get into that part of the research.'' The financial implications of asking another knowledgeable lecturer for support were highlighted by one supervisor.

Another issue entailed in doing an empirical investigation is that of obtaining the necessary permission to enter a research site, such as a school, and use learners as subjects. In this regard some participants emphasised the need for supervisors to help students obtain permission.

- Consulting experts: In comparison, experienced colleagues had the confidence to consult experts for advice when they needed it, whereas the least experienced colleagues thought they were supposed to ''know how''. The following quotes serve as illustration: ''When a student says to me, 'Shouldn't we have a co-supervisor?' I say, 'No, but I can assure you that Dr X or Y is an expert in this area and I will meet with him' ... but I don't want a co-supervisor. ... It slows everything down and it complicates things.'' Another stated: ''I want to ... be able to go to someone and say: 'Listen, is this right, I am uncertain'.'' Thus it was suggested that a list of names of specialisation areas be made

available in the faculty. One of the managers confirmed that such a database could be compiled.

Administrative problems encountered

- Student admission: The associate professors felt that only students who had the potential to complete their studies successfully should be allowed to embark on postgraduate studies. They asserted that students needed to be evaluated by means of a personal interview or by their proposals. ''In Education Management we rely heavily on the student's proposal ... we give a student three chances [for revision of a proposal]'', a participant stated. Both managers agreed that achievement in previous studies was not the way to determine student admission. Testing the students' ability to formulate in English would be more appropriate. One observed: ''We need an instrument that determines the student's cognitive skills ... We would probably have to look at a student's formulation and language abilities'', while the other mentioned the need to determine ''... minimum competence ... like how to use a library, things like that ... language would also be easy [to assess]''.
- Student allocation to supervisors: An experienced supervisor stated that he would not consider agreeing to supervise a student if he was not interested in the topic. None of the experienced supervisors expressed any doubts about the system of student allocation to lecturers via various disciplined based interest groups operative in the Faculty, (such as Psychology of Education, Philosophy of Education, Early Childhood Education, and various others). In contrast, an inexperienced supervisor observed ''... the current system does not work well''. In this regard a manager stated that some of the interest groups did not perform democratically in allocating students to lecturers – some lecturers were excluded while others were allocated too many students. Consequently, it was decided by the Executive Committee of the Faculty that the Master's and Doctoral (M and D) committee should allocate students to those lecturers who were underutilised for postgraduate supervision.
- Specialisation of supervisors: Supervisors from the two most experienced groups emphasised the need for specialisation among lecturers so that only those who were interested in postgraduate supervision be involved. However, both managers disagreed. One stated: ''... even those who say that they are not interested [should do supervision]. It is part of teaching''.
- Problems surrounding the examination process: Problems surrounding examination elicited the most responses. For example, students sometimes pressurised supervisors into allowing them to

submit their work for examination purposes, thereby saving them the cost of re-registration.

Within the most experienced groups numerous problems surrounding the appointment of external examiners were cited. Some supervisors were unhappy with the procedure of appointing external examiners adopted by the Faculty's committee: ''I chose two examiners [who] worked in this area ... I ... sent their names through to the M and D committee. They added more examiners to the list and then ... they pushed mine out ... sometimes I feel offended.'' To this, someone responded: ''The committee sees all the requests and sometimes as many as five or six lecturers request the same external examiners, or commission only white, Afrikaans speaking males. Thus the committee ... recommends alternatives.''

Other supervisors felt that it was difficult to find suitable external examiners and that use should be made of internal staff: ''The Faculty of Education uses two external examiners. Other faculties use one external and two internal examiners. I don't see why we should use *two* external examiners. Some lecturers do not get the chance to ... learn how to do this.'' Both managers agreed that the appointment of two external examiners was necessary for quality control and that supervisors should not continuously nominate the same, small group of like-minded examiners. One manager added: ''I would be more comfortable, having people from a different culture, from a different language background. I'd like a balanced thing.'' They also agreed that only the non-examining chairperson (not the supervisor) should contact external examiners for appointment: ''I think the process shouldn't be seen to be compromised.''

Another problem regarding the appointment of examiners was the view that retired lecturers should not be asked. In addition, different universities had different requirements for length of a dissertation. At this faculty, a dissertation of limited scope could be 80 pages as opposed to 40 pages required by other universities. Thus examiners were occasionally reluctant to be involved.

Ignorance on the part of supervisors about the examination process were illustrated by the fact that some were not aware of the evaluation criteria used for examination purposes. Moreover, statements revealed that many (even experienced) supervisors were not aware that the reports of external examiners could be studied, although lecturers agreed on the importance of providing feedback to supervisors and students ''to give a sense of closure''. However, some lecturers were apparently not interested in reading the reports.

A supervisor commented on the time external examiners had to wait before getting paid. Another mentioned that students could not receive their

results before all administrative matters (eg outstanding fees or library books) had been resolved. These issues were confirmed by administration.

Occasionally external examiners did not receive their copies for examination. This caused serious problems and occurred in spite of a system of acknowledgement of receipt. Finally, one manager mentioned the issue of non-examining chairpersons who would sometimes indicate that required changes to the dissertation had been made before this had actually been done.

- Supervisors' administrative tasks: Different supervisors had their own methods of record keeping. Some supervisors made photocopies of evaluated work, others summarised their comments in writing and kept copies on file or diskette, while others requested students to resubmit previous work together with improved chapters. However, some supervisors kept no record at all.
- Financial issues: There was great awareness of the cost involved in postgraduate research. Supervisors referred to trying to help students complete their studies as quickly as possible to prevent re-registration and appreciation of the financial implications of quantitative data analysis, technical requirements (eg editing) and attending seminars for students presented in Pretoria. Thus, many tried to help students obtain bursaries.

The distance in distance education

The most experienced supervisors did not experience the context (distance education) in which supervision took place as a problem. ''One does not have to see students to give good guidance'', one commented.

The others mentioned the following strategies to take the ''distance'' out of ''distance education'': (1) requiring students to visit the university personally for some time during the research: ''I require that students ... must come [to the university] for at least three weeks. We discuss the work and they sit in the library and do research'', one stated; (2) using electronic media (eg audio recordings, electronic mail) with students that had such access; (3) requiring that students phone regularly and making their own home telephone numbers available, for instance: ''I like students to call me once per month, even if they had done nothing''; (4) letting students know when they would be on leave and (5) by biannual seminars for postgraduate students.

The need to train students and supervisors

- Training students: A supervisor commented that the students' research training on Honours BEd level did not prepare them adequately for master's

or doctoral studies and should be improved. This was confirmed by management. Another attempt to train students included biannual seminars arranged by the Institute for Educational Research in the Faculty. Many supervisors commented on how worthwhile these seminars were. ''I try to make it compulsory for my students'', one said.

- Training supervisors: Training of lecturers as supervisors was discussed at great length in all three groups. One experienced supervisor expressed the following thought: ''Study guidance is similar to driving a car – you learn by doing it.'' Others felt that training could enhance supervisory skills. Recommendations included:(1) presenting compulsory workshops on postgraduate supervision. (2) Mention was also made of consulting experienced mentors on a voluntary basis. ''We must teach one another.'' However, being a mentor to others is time consuming. One professor stated: ''I am involved in about eight of these. ... Eventually I have to neglect my own work to be able to help less experienced colleagues.'' (3) Supervisors could also be trained by means of a system of co-supervisors and co-promoters but not all lecturers were interested in such a system: ''I just refuse to have a co-supervisor'' one said, while another experienced this as ''extremely enriching''. However, there was confusion regarding the exact roles of supervisors/co-supervisors and hence the need for policy formulation was broached. In response, one manager stated that it was difficult to formulate such a policy as there were different reasons why co-supervisors were appointed: sometimes it was because of special expertise, while in other instances it related to the one's inexperience. Mentorship also needed to be a spontaneous ''buddy-buddy system''.
- Colloquia: The possibility of regular colloquia for students and supervisors was broached. The two most experienced groups were enthusiastic. However, from the least experienced group there were reservations since this was, after all, a distance education institution. One manager also expressed concern about the effective functioning in practice in order to ensure that not only experienced supervisors attended and students' expectations could be met.
- Written guidelines for postgraduate supervision: The need for written guidelines for postgraduate supervision was expressed in the least experienced group. The only guideline on supervision they had was the supervision they had experienced themselves and ''How do you know that the person who has guided you was doing it the right way?'' Management supported the idea of written guidelines enthusiastically.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The research identified some significant patterns.

How lecturers experienced postgraduate supervision, was influenced by three main variables: (a) the lecturers' level of *experience* in postgraduate supervision; (b) their *attitudes and beliefs* about postgraduate supervision and (c) their *supervisory actions*. The more experienced supervisors were inclined towards an individual style of doing supervision that developed over time and with experience. The relationship between *experience* and *actions* was not a simple relationship but one that was influenced by the lecturers' attitudes and beliefs about postgraduate supervision. Thus, experienced supervisors differed in, among other things, how willing they were to work with co-supervisors, the way they handled feedback to students, how they saw the responsibilities of the student versus that of the supervisor and what they saw as a reasonable turnover time. Experienced supervisors also tended to consider consciously the context (distance education) in which supervision took place. Thus, many had specific measures to overcome the ''distance'' between supervisor and student.

Inexperienced supervisors had not yet developed a set way of doing supervision and many struggled with uncertainties. Once again the relationship between experience (or lack thereof) and action was not simple. Some inexperienced supervisors actively sought mentors to guide them and attended workshops. Others stumbled along with only their own previous experience as students as guidance. It was also discovered that experienced supervisors, in comparison with their inexperienced colleagues, more readily consulted experts when they needed them.

Experienced and inexperienced supervisors tended to differ in a number of ways. Among other things, the more experienced supervisors tended to have higher expectations of students. For example, they were more inclined to accept only material of a certain minimum language and technical standard.

Some level of ignorance about various aspects of supervision was evident among both experienced and inexperienced supervisors. This not only related to knowledge and skills of various research methods, but also to administrative matters. For example, some lecturers were not aware of the criteria used for examination or that they and their students were entitled to feedback from non-examining chairpersons after the examination process.

Consequently, it is recommended that the following should be addressed:

1. There is a need for more discussion about issues in postgraduate supervision raised by this research. One of the most important areas is that of *examination.* Others include *student admission* and the *allocation* of students to supervisors.
2. There is also a need for training of postgraduate supervisors, especially in research methods. For this, the role of management is vital. Such *compulsory* and ongoing training of supervisors could be done by means of workshops and/or colloquia. This could enhance the research climate in the faculty. It may also improve attitudes about research in general and postgraduate supervision in particular.
3. Interaction with supervisors from other universities on issues in postgraduate supervision could be enriching.
4. The need for written guidelines to lecturers on postgraduate research is also highlighted by this research. Such guidelines should, among other things, describe the roles of the non-examining chairperson, the supervisor and the student. All relevant material mentioned in this report (eg evaluation criteria, general administrative information) should be considered. Recommendations from administration on how to streamline administrative procedures, should be given consideration. With a positive attitude and effective training, postgraduate supervision could be a satisfying and rewarding experience for everybody concerned.

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