

Postgraduate supervision and academic support: students' perceptions

A C Lessing & S Schulze

University of South Africa

ABSTRACT

Postgraduate supervision in South Africa currently takes place in the context of university transformation, increasing numbers of disadvantaged students and appeals for improved completion rates. Thus there is concern for quality. Among others, quality is determined by the extent to which students' expectations are met. Data about students' perceptions of supervision provides important information about their expectations and if these are satisfied. Survey research was employed to determine distance education students' perceptions of their postgraduate supervision in the Faculty of Education, University of South Africa. Students had to rate the supervision they were given regarding the stated outcomes of these degrees. Their judgments of individual styles of supervision were also determined. Finally, students had to describe the most *rewarding* or *frustrating* aspects of their studies and what they would *recommend* regarding postgraduate supervision. The article concludes with suggestions to enhance the quality of supervision. These include the training of supervisors.

BACKGROUND

In higher education, attrition rates and completion rates of postgraduate students are becoming statistics of vital concern. For example, only 10% of master's students completed the masters dissertation in three years at the University of the Western Cape (Sayed, Kruss & Badat 1998:175). This indicates the need to improve completion rates. However, postgraduate supervision in South Africa currently takes place in a more problematic context than a decade ago. According to Holderness (2000:14), this context includes the following:

- South African higher institutions are engaged in rapid transformation processes;
- an increasing proportion of the postgraduate student body is from previously disadvantaged

backgrounds with limited experience of library facilities and independent research work; and

- most lecturers are grappling with the demands of increased student numbers as well as rapidly changing curricula and modes of delivery.

Within this context, concern for quality in higher education is perhaps at an all time high (Nielsen 1997:288; Eaton 1999:26). Being quality minded in education means caring about the goals, needs and interests of the students and other external groups (Whitaker & Moses 1994:76). Moreover, students are aware of their educational rights and are more likely than before to demand competent and accessible supervisors. Clarity about the roles and responsibilities of supervisors and of students is therefore of the utmost importance. Data about students' perceptions offers crucial information about their expectations and to what extent these expectations are met (Ramsden & Dodds 1989:16; Van Niekerk & Herman 1996:44).

THE SUPERVISOR'S ROLE

Rademeyer (1994:94) discusses two different views of postgraduate supervision. The supervisor can treat the student as an independent researcher who takes initiative in proposing and executing the research or the student is seen as dependent on the supervisor. Similarly, Deist (1990:67) uses the terms "rigid control" and "no control", but sees the role of the supervisor as lying between these two extremes. "Too much control threatens the originality of the PhD and the autonomy of the novice researcher; too little can delay completion and even lead to total failure" (Delamont, Parry & Atkinson 1998:157).

The contribution of the supervisor is threefold: expertise in the research area; support for the student and balancing creativity and critique (Fraser & Mathews 1999:5; Hockey 1994:293). Accordingly, Mouton (2001:17) sees the role of the supervisor as to guide, advise, ensure scientific quality and provide emotional support.

Experienced supervisors show a pattern of interaction with students which involves:

- significant effort and time at the beginning in assisting the student to formulate a research question;
- monitoring with less interaction, but being perceptive of difficulties; and
- increased interaction when writing the report (Fraser & Mathews 1999:5–6; Mouton 2001:19; Pearson 1996:308; Rademeyer 1994:93).

Deist (1990:67) sees the task of the supervisor as ensuring that:

- the topic on which a candidate embarks does indeed present a problem;
- the candidate has a clear understanding of the field in which the problem occurs and of the problem itself;
- the candidate uses the correct methods to solve the problem and does an extended literature study of appropriate sources; and
- the problem is solved according to the requirements of the methods employed.

The following support is also suggested: aid with the selection of a research topic and design; entering into a contract; dividing the research into different phases; holding regular meetings; requiring progress reports and concept texts; keeping minutes; holding workshops on research and reading papers and publications (Helm 1989:80–84). Similar recommendations are made by Nerad and Miller (1997:83) as well as Johnston (1996:16). Van Schalkwyk (1994:35) accordingly highlights the importance of the research design since it gives structure to the research and provides guidelines for the supervision.

In line with the abovementioned, Dillon and Malott (1981:195) recommend that the supervisor should provide guidance in the form of regular consultation meetings. They designed a supervisory system with five components, namely specification of research-tasks and performance standards; meetings with the supervisor; deadlines and feedback and incentives. Binns and Potter (1989:213) found that postgraduate students mainly wanted supervisors to provide support and guidance and give constructive criticism.

It should be emphasised that it is not the task of the supervisor to write the thesis, edit the language or find solutions for research problems (Deist 1990:67; Hockey 1994:296).

THE STUDENT'S ROLE

At master's level students are introduced to research and trained as researchers (Salmon 1992:10; Sayed *et al* 1998:278), while doctoral students should make substantial and original contributions to knowledge in the discipline. At master's level, the research may be limited in scope and originality, while at doctoral

level, greater depth, synthesis and critical ability are expected (Phillips & Pugh 2000:21).

To be a researcher implies the mastering of specific skills. Students have to be able to select a topic, understand and use appropriate research techniques and present their findings accurately. Students should also be able to evaluate their own work and that of others in the light of current developments. Completing a dissertation demonstrates the student's ability to research a problem and arrive at conclusions independently. In addition, Shannon (1995:14) mentions that students should be able to write research reports which have clear aims, are coherent and show critical depth and originality. The doctorate entails the need for hypotheses, reworkings, backtrackings and corrections. Besides these aspects a degree of tolerance of ambiguity is important (Katz 1997:5,6; Nerad & Miller 1997:76; Phillips & Pugh 2000:21, 74; Salmon 1992:14; Smith, Brownell, Simpson & Deshler 1993:53).

During their postgraduate studies students should acquire technical competence, the ability to analyse data, manage time and personal responsibilities as well as to access a network of peers and academics (Pearson 1996:306; Sayed *et al* 1998:280).

Phillips and Pugh (2000:1) claim that postgraduate students should take responsibility for their studies. In this regard, they use the term "under your own management" as the key to the nature of postgraduate learning. Students are responsible to determine what is required for their research and to carry it out. Especially on doctoral level they are expected to initiate discussions, ask for assistance when needed and argue about what they should be learning.

FACTORS INFLUENCING THE COMPLETION OF POSTGRADUATE RESEARCH

Postgraduate students often experience problems which delay their studies or prevent them from finishing. According to Helm (1989:79) these problems are threefold, namely problems in the research design, the collecting and processing of information and the writing of the report. The problems could be due to inexperience of the student, to poor supervision or an inefficient system (Helm 1989:79; Jacobs 1994:33–34; Johnston 1996:16; Katz 1997:7; Mouton 2001:2; Sayed *et al* 1998:279). Rademeyer (1994:55), Hockey (1994:294) and Smith *et al* (1993:58) found that the successful completion of a dissertation was just as much a function of the abilities of the student as of the supervisor.

Postgraduate research has an intellectual as well as a psychological component (Binns & Potter 1989:213; Phillips & Pugh 2000:75; Salmon 1992:20; Sayed *et al* 1998:281; Smith *et al.* 1993:57). Rademeyer (1994:53–54) claims that internal conflicts (ever

changing thoughts and feelings) and external conflicts (personal relationships, time and resource constraints) influence the process negatively. Tenacity, support by the supervisor, personal and collegial support and previous experience contribute to psychological survival (Smith *et al* 1993:57). Students also need determination and perseverance (rather than brilliance) to complete their research (Phillips & Pugh 2000:32; Smith *et al* 1993:59). In addition, they need adequate supervision and clear communication with supervisors. They should also be familiar with evaluation criteria (Shannon 1995:11).

Madsen (Katz 1997:10) lists the following as barriers to completing the research:

- too little time;
- the inability to focus on a selected topic;
- the inability to be satisfied with completed work, amongst others, because of fear of failure;
- too much isolation since the research inhibits social activities (Sayed *et al* 1998:276, 282).

Other factors include:

- trying to take short cuts in completing the research;
- not understanding the requirements of a doctorate by overestimating or underestimating what is required;
- not having a supervisor who knows what the research degree requires;
- losing contact with the supervisor when guidance is crucial;
- not being able to argue a position: "At minimum ... the study must have a 'story line', a coherent thrust which pushes along an argument, an explanation, a systematic set of inferences derived from new data or new ways of viewing current data" (Phillips & Pugh 2000:42);
- misjudging the amount of work that is required in the final writing of the research report (Phillips & Pugh 2000:44–45; Sayed *et al* 1998:278).

Significantly, Holderness (2000:16) states that output of postgraduate students is influenced negatively if there is not a research environment of community and collegiality in a faculty; or if supervisors are not actively engaged in research themselves.

Keeping the before mentioned in mind, this research was driven by the following research question: "What are the perceptions of postgraduate students in the Faculty of Education who have already completed their studies, of the academic support and supervision they received?" The research is conducted in a distance education context.

RESEARCH DESIGN

Quantitative and qualitative data

Survey research was employed to determine the

perceptions of students in the Faculty of Education, University of South Africa regarding diverse aspects of their MEd and DEd studies. Both quantitative data (through closed-form items) and qualitative data (through open questions) were obtained by means of a questionnaire. The first two questions determined whether the students had completed either MEd or DEd studies and whether they had used their first language or not. Then followed items on their experience of research methodology courses and seminars and how long they had to wait for reading lists, books or photocopies and for lecturers to return their work.

The abovementioned was followed by 17 statements where students had to rate the support or guidance they received from their supervisors or promoters. In the formulation of these statements, the outcomes of MEd and DEd degrees as formulated for South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA) registration, were considered (Master of Education (MEd) for interim registration with SAQA 2000; Doctor of Education (DEd) for interim registration with SAQA 2000). Another 15 statements determined the students' perceptions of the individual styles of guidance they experienced.

Finally, the questionnaire consisted of three open questions aimed at determining students' perceptions of the most *rewarding* aspects of their studies, the most *frustrating* aspects thereof and what they would *recommend* regarding MEd or DEd supervision in the Faculty.

Peer and student assessments of the questionnaire were done by means of a pilot study which led to numerous modifications. Peer assessment also ensured face validity (the items were relevant) and content validity (there was a representative sample of content) (Schumacher & McMillan 1997:236). Open questions were also used and this produced some qualitative data which ensured triangulation of data. The qualitative data were processed manually by two experienced researchers who agreed on the findings. Since the aim of the research was to generalise with regard to the sample and the population, the qualitative data were also analysed for trends.

Sampling

The final version of the questionnaire was mailed to 111 students who had completed their MEd degrees at least a year before and 74 students who had completed their DEd degrees during the previous three years. After two weeks, follow-up questionnaires were mailed. The questionnaires were completed anonymously. Of the 185 questionnaires that were mailed, 75 (41%) were received back. Generalisations will therefore be made with caution. However, the perceptions described may be similar to

those of the whole sample since the biographical data reveal that the respondents who returned the questionnaires included a cross section of students with regard to significant variables (as indicated in the next section).

QUANTITATIVE FINDINGS

Biographical detail

Of the sample, 53 (70%) had completed their MEd and 22 (30%) their DEd degrees. Only 37 (49%) studied by means of their first language.

Training in research methods

Regarding their training in research methods, respondents indicated the following:

Table 1
Students' training in research methods

Training in research methods	f	%
A course in research methods at Unisa	29	38
A course in research methods at another university	21	28
Did not complete a course in research methods	24	32
Total	74	98

According to Table 1, about a third of the students did not complete any course in research methods before embarking on their studies, thus indicating a need for additional training in this regard.

When asked to indicate how long before embarking on their studies the training in research methods took place, they responded as follows:

Table 2
Time when training in research methods took place

Time lapse	f	%
Less than 2 years before starting with MEd	23	30
2–4 years before starting with MEd	19	25
More than 4 years before starting with MEd	6	8
Before starting with DEd	5	7
Did not complete a course in research methods	22	29
Total	75	99

Table 2 shows that 55% underwent training in research methods less than four years before enrolling

for their MEd studies. However, 37% either did not do a course or did the course more than four years before starting with their research, indicating a need for additional training.

Table 3 displays the students' responses when asked to what extent the courses in research methods prepared them for their MEd studies.

Table 3
Usefulness of the course in research methods

Usefulness of the course	f	%
Prepared student well for MEd studies	22	29
Prepared student moderately well for MEd studies	23	30
Did not prepare student for MEd studies	8	11
Did not complete a course in research methods	21	28
Total	74	98

Table 3 reveals that 39% did not complete a course in research methods or they felt the training did not prepare them for their MEd studies. Only 29% of the students felt that the training in research methods prepared them well for their MEd studies.

Seminars

In the Faculty of Education, four seminars or workshops for interested staff were organised, focusing on skills required for supervision. In addition, research seminars are presented annually during April and September for two days for students who have just embarked on their master's studies. The seminar programmes involve ten sessions of 50 minutes each. During July, an additional one-week workshop is organised for those students who are reasonably advanced in their studies. For two days respectively, the focus is on quantitative and qualitative research skills. An additional day is allocated to writing skills. When questioned if students attended these seminars, 22 (42%) of the MEd students, and 3 (14%) of the DEd students indicated that they had attended. Regarding the usefulness of the seminars, their feedback appears in Table 4.

According to Table 4, 25 of the students attended the seminars. Of the 25 students, 16 (64%) felt that it had helped them a lot and 9 (36%) that it had helped them somewhat. This indicates that the seminars fulfil a need for additional training in research methods.

Response time for students

Students were asked to indicate how long they had to

Table 4

Usefulness of seminars for MEd and DEd students

Usefulness of seminars	f	%
Helped student a lot in MEd /DEd studies	16	21
Helped student somewhat in MEd / DEd studies	9	12
Did not help student in MEd/DEd studies	0	0
Student did not attend seminars	48	63
Total	73	96

wait for reading lists, books and photocopies from the library or for evaluated chapters from their supervisors or promoters. The results appear in Table 5.

According to Table 5, 46% of the students indicated that reading lists, 51% that books and 47% that photocopies were received within four weeks' time. In addition, 55% of the students suggested that they received their evaluated chapters back within four weeks.

Students' perceptions of the support or guidance from supervisors or promoters

In a second part of the questionnaire, the students had to indicate how they experienced the support or guidance they had received with regard to achieving 17 outcomes of research on master's or doctoral level. They could respond with *not applicable*, *unsatisfactory* or *satisfactory*. The results appear in Tables 6 and 7.

Table 6 indicates that 49% of the MEd students were satisfied with the support or guidance they received with *presenting* and *interpreting research results* and 51% with the *planning of the research project in terms of time frames*. Of these students, 59% were satisfied with the guidance they received for deciding on a *theoretical approach only* or a *theoretical approach plus empirical methods*. However, with regard to the

rest of the outcomes listed in Table 6, the students indicated their satisfaction.

In general, DEd students were satisfied with the support they received. However, only 50% of the DEd students were satisfied with the guidance they received in *planning their research in terms of time frames*. In addition, 64% believed that the guidance they received with making decisions about *data collection*, *presenting* and *interpreting research results* was satisfactory.

For both groups of students there thus seems to be a lack of support with some research skills, indicating that lecturers themselves may lack the necessary experience in this regard. When testing (with the Wilcoxon two-sample test) for significant differences between the two groups regarding their satisfaction with the support in achieving all outcomes, no significant differences were found, except with regard to *editing*, as indicated by Table 8.

According to Table 8, DEd students were significantly more satisfied than MEd students (on the 5%-level of significance) with the editorial support they received, probably because they needed less guidance in this regard, having already completed a dissertation.

Students' perceptions of supervisors' or promoters' individual styles of guidance

Students were requested to respond (by means of *not applicable*, *no* or *yes*) to statements focusing on lecturers' individual styles of guidance. Tables 9 and 10 depict the results.

Table 9 demonstrates that only 47% of the MEd students' supervisors *referred them to knowledgeable people* to consult, 53% *enquired when they had not heard from the students for some time*, and 62% made the students aware of evaluation criteria for dissertations. Independent work was encouraged, work was evaluated thoroughly and the students were always encouraged (as indicated by 93%, 89% and 89% of the MEd students respectively). Most, (70%) of the

Table 5

Response time: library and lecturer

Time lapse	Reading lists		Books		Photocopies		Chapters	
	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%
Less than 4 weeks after request	35	46	39	51	36	47	42	55
4-6 weeks after request	18	24	16	21	23	30	22	29
7-8 weeks after request	4	5	6	8	6	8	3	4
More than 8 weeks	5	7	4	5	3	4	2	3
Did not request the item	12	16	9	12	6	8	5	7
Total	74	98	74	97	74	97	74	98

Table 6

MEd students' rating of the support and guidance they received from their supervisor regarding outcomes they had to achieve

Statement: Rate the support and guidance received from the supervisor to do the following successfully:	Not applicable		Unsatisfactory		Satisfactory	
	f	%	f	%	f	%
design an acceptable proposal	8	15	6	11	39	74
plan the sequence of the chapters of the report	3	6	2	4	48	91
achieve a balance between chapters	8	15	4	8	41	77
plan the research project in terms of time frames	10	19	16	30	27	51
deciding: theoretical and/or empirical approach	11	21	11	21	31	59
present literature review critically	8	15	8	15	37	70
present literature review logically	8	15	7	13	38	72
present literature in an integrated manner	11	21	7	13	35	66
deciding: quantitative, qualitative or combined	11	21	6	11	36	68
decisions about data collection methods	12	23	8	15	33	62
present research results	17	32	9	17	26	49
interpret research results	16	30	10	19	26	49
substantiate conclusions	13	25	11	21	28	53
research in an ethically responsible way	7	13	6	11	39	74
attend to editorial aspects	10	19	3	6	39	74
ensure bibliography and references correspond	7	13	3	6	42	79
ensure dissertation is scientifically rigorous	5	9	3	6	44	83

Table 7

DEd students' rating of the support and guidance they received from their promoter regarding outcomes they had to achieve

Statement: Rate the support and guidance received from the promoter to do the following successfully:	Not applicable		Unsatisfactory		Satisfactory	
	f	%	f	%	f	%
design an acceptable proposal	4	18	2	9	16	73
plan the sequence of the chapters of the report	1	5	3	14	18	82
achieve a balance between chapters	0	0	2	9	20	91
plan the research project in terms of time frames	6	27	5	23	11	50
deciding: theoretical and/or empirical approach	3	14	2	9	17	77
present literature review critically	2	9	4	18	16	73
present literature review logically	2	9	3	14	17	77
present literature in an integrated manner	1	5	3	14	18	82
deciding: quantitative, qualitative or combined	4	18	2	9	16	73
decisions about data collection methods	4	18	4	18	14	64
present research results	4	18	4	18	14	64
interpret research results	4	18	4	18	14	64
substantiate conclusions	2	9	4	18	16	73
research in an ethically responsible way	3	14	3	14	16	73

attend to editorial aspects	1	5	0	0	21	96
ensure bibliography and references correspond	1	5	0	0	21	96
ensure dissertation is scientifically rigorous	0	0	1	5	21	96

Table 8

Significance of difference between masters' and doctoral students regarding support with editorial aspects

Group	N	Mean score	Significance
MEd students	52	35,278846	
DEd students	22	42,750000	p < 0,05

Table 9

MEd students' perceptions of the individual style of the supervisor

Statement: The supervisor:	Not applicable		No		Yes	
	f	%	f	%	f	%
encouraged independent work	4	8	0	0	49	93
encouraged creative thought	4	8	3	6	46	87
allowed contact at home after hours	7	13	2	4	44	83
sent sources or indicated relevant sources	4	8	10	19	39	74
referred student to knowledgeable people	12	23	16	30	25	47
made evaluation criteria available	9	17	11	21	33	62
enquired if student was unproductive	11	21	14	26	28	53
evaluated work thoroughly	3	6	3	6	47	89
always encouraged the student	2	4	4	8	47	89
gave constructive criticism	3	6	4	8	46	87
encouraged dialogue	7	13	4	8	41	77
was knowledgeable about research topic	2	4	7	13	43	81
understood empirical research methods	6	11	4	8	43	81
gave consistent instructions	4	8	8	15	41	77
would be student's first choice as supervisor	5	9	11	21	37	70

MEd students would choose the same supervisor for their studies.

According to Table 10, promoters enquire less often than supervisors when they have not heard from their students for some time – only 36% of the DEd students recall that their promoters contacted them after some time had elapsed. Moreover, 59% indicated that evaluation criteria were made available to them and 50% that the promoter referred the student to knowledgeable people. Of the promoters, 95% encouraged independent work as well as creative thought, and 77% would prefer the same promoter if they could repeat their studies.

A comparison of MEd and DEd students with the Wilcoxon two-sample test, demonstrates that the two groups do not differ significantly in their perception of the personal styles of guidance of their lecturers,

except with regard to allowing after hours contact at home, as illustrated by Table 11.

According to Table 11 promoters are significantly more inclined than supervisors to allow doctoral students to contact them at home after hours. This may be due to the fact that DEd students are able to work more independently than MEd students. Moreover, lecturers generally have less doctoral than master's students.

QUALITATIVE FINDINGS

Three open questions determined the students' perceptions of the most *rewarding* and *frustrating* aspects of their studies and what they would *recommend* regarding postgraduate supervision in the Faculty of Education. They responded as follows:

Table 10

DEd students' perceptions of the individual style of the promoter

Statement: The promoter:	Not applicable		No		Yes	
	f	%	f	%	f	%
encouraged independent work	0	0	1	5	21	95
encouraged creative thought	0	0	1	5	21	95
allowed contact at home after hours	0	0	0	0	22	100
sent sources or indicated relevant sources	2	9	5	23	15	68
referred student to knowledgeable people	5	23	6	27	11	50
made evaluation criteria available	2	9	7	32	13	59
enquired if student was unproductive	8	36	6	27	8	36
evaluated work thoroughly	0	0	2	0	20	91
always encouraged the student	0	0	1	5	21	95
gave constructive criticism	0	0	3	14	19	86
encouraged dialogue	0	0	2	9	20	91
was knowledgeable about research topic	1	5	4	18	17	77
understood empirical research methods	3	14	0	0	19	86
gave consistent instructions	1	5	3	14	18	82
would be student's first choice as promoter	0	0	5	23	17	77

Table 11

Significance of difference between masters' and doctoral students regarding allowance for after hours contact

Group	N	Mean score	Significance
MEd students	52	36,132075	
DEd students	22	42,500000	p < 0,05

The most rewarding aspect of the students' postgraduate studies in the Faculty of Education

When asked to indicate the most rewarding aspect of their studies, most of the MEd students' responses focused on the *supervisor*. In this regard students referred to the *encouragement and support* they received as well as the endorsement of *independence and creativity*. Examples include: "My supervisor was always encouraging, understanding and helpful. Our relationship was a source of motivation ..." and "... to work with a supervisor that allowed me to, within limits, do my own thing". However, other university staff, such as librarians were also mentioned: "... the help I got from the subject librarian ... was out of this world".

Other students perceived *personal enrichment* as a source of satisfaction, especially the *cognitive development* they underwent or the satisfaction of making a contribution to education. This included the devel-

opment of knowledge, understanding and critical thinking as well as the development of research skills. For example: "It ... allowed me to understand the diversity and richness of knowledge" and "... a new problem that was unique to Indian schools emerged and I was able to make my contribution".

Accordingly, most of the DEd students mentioned the support received from their *promoters*, the development of *cognitive abilities* and the satisfaction of making a *contribution*. For example a student wrote, "I was enabled to provide my perspectives of the research in order to make a profound contribution to education which is critical to ameliorating the miasma of education in South Africa at present".

Thus both MEd and DEd students identified the following as most rewarding: (i) the supervisor or promoters' support and guidance; (ii) the development of their own cognitive skills; and (ii) the opportunity of making a contribution in the field of Education.

The most frustrating aspect of postgraduate students' studies in the Faculty of Education

When required to indicate what frustrated them most during their studies, most MEd students referred to aspects that concerned themselves, for example, lack of time or time frames to adhere to. Lack of knowledge or experience was also mentioned several times: "In the beginning. Lost! Confused!" and "I was not prepared for the enormity of writing a dissertation. Although I continued working right through, I always felt as if I would never finish". "Feelings of isolation" were mentioned numerous times as were financial problems related to their studies. An individual mentioned that he/she had no access to a computer.

Apart from the abovementioned personal problems, *poor supervision or guidance* was often mentioned, especially time delays, too little guidance and harsh criticism. To illustrate: "My supervisor going on study leave, long leave, going overseas, late return of chapters submitted ..."; "Little supervisor guidance because of material development and new department"; "The MEd supervisor was extremely harsh in criticism – and it was easy to consider giving up if it were not for my sheer determination". Lack of support with *statistical analysis* was also mentioned as was *poor library support* with regard to the fact that some sources could not be obtained. "My sources were always outdated. The library did not always have recent info! ... struggled to get recent sources".

A university system where students get *no feedback after examination* was also a source of frustration.

Amongst the DEd students, mention was mostly made of the promoter. This included not encouraging independent thought, insufficient criticism of work submitted and lack of interest in the theme of the research. One wrote: "I initially had to work with a person who did not encourage independent intellectual thought; who intended to impose research methodology which was inappropriate for the research undertaken and who showed little respect for the initiative and experience of a candidate who was already an experienced researcher. Dictatorial and grossly superficial attitude."

Several responses mentioned lack of time, difficulty in obtaining appropriate, recent literature and lack of support with statistical analysis. A student stated: "The person I approached to analyse my empirical findings nearly caused me to drop my studies".

In summary: For MEd students, the most frustrating aspects of their research related to aspects concerning themselves (lack of time, knowledge and experience, feelings of isolation, financial problems) and to inadequate guidance by supervisors. Ineffective support and time were also the most frustrating aspects for the DEd students. In addition, both groups

mentioned their inability to obtain updated material from the library. However, a considerable number of MEd and DEd students professed to experiencing no frustrations at all.

Students' recommendations for postgraduate supervision in the Faculty of Education

Most recommendations by MEd students centred around the *supervisor*. In this regard more *contact* between supervisors and students was suggested. This included "... keep regular contact with the students, eg arranging for progress meetings or reports, say, bi-monthly, and enquire when not hearing from the student for some time". Some students also recommended that supervisors be more *supportive*. One wrote: "Supervisors and promoters must be encouraging in approach. They must show interest in the work of students without forcing their thinking into it. They must be empathetic enough in order to genuinely understand problems students encounter." Individual students also wanted supervisors to help them with funding, statistical analysis, research techniques and publication of their findings. Some students also advised that supervisors should be monitored.

Several MEd students suggested that supervisors help students *plan* their research within time frames and that less time should be wasted. For example: "Students should be given supervisors who are not in new departments which have a lot of work such as material development ... the assigned supervisors ... should assist students in record time."

Some students advocated that students be provided with a list of professionals and other students dealing with similar fields of study to alleviate feelings of isolation. Finally, individuals mentioned greater availability of recent literature and also of providing students with examination feedback.

Accordingly, most of the DEd students' advice centred around the *promoter*. For example, it was recommended that criticism should be given "to avoid disappointment at the end" but that the criticism should be constructive. Students also mentioned encouraging independent thought. One declared: "It must be categorically stated that ... at the doctoral level recognition must be accorded to the researcher's ability and independence of thought with respect to research. The promoter should be a guide rather than a megalomaniac academician who, because of his/her own inexperience, tends to be inflexible. At this level inane comments from a promoter are ... unacceptable". One student recommended that there be "less students per promoter so that he can respond quicker – I wasted a whole year because of slow communication."

Some students also felt that "some form of written evaluation" feedback should be given after completion of the research.

To summarise: Most students' recommendations focused on the supervisor. The MEd students especially required more contact and support with the planning of their studies (also in terms of time frames) and with research skills. DEd students desired constructive criticism and more independence. However, a considerable number of students made no recommendations.

CONCLUSION

Postgraduate students' expectations are not entirely met regarding some aspects of supervision. Among others, they want guidance with regard to the overall planning of the research in terms of the approach to follow (theoretical, quantitative or qualitative) and planning the study in terms of time frames. Most students, especially at master's level, want supervisors to help them decide on due dates for chapters to be submitted. Students (particularly master's students) also desire that supervisors refer them to other students or informed people in their research fields and to contact them frequently to alleviate feelings of isolation. However, doctoral students want the freedom of working relatively independently.

During their research, the students do require criticism, but they want it to be *constructive* and they also want the feedback as quickly as possible. In this regard overburdened supervisors may cause delays and their workloads could be reconsidered.

Both master's and doctoral students want support

with regard to statistical analyses as well as the interpretation and presentation of research results. However, many supervisors themselves may be inadequately trained or unwilling to be instructed in these areas, preferring to direct students to others who are more knowledgeable. In such circumstances *interactive* seminars for students and staff are crucial.

The inability to obtain the required literature from libraries (that do not have sources or cannot find them), is an important hurdle that needs to be overcome.

Finally, when their research has been completed and evaluated, students desire written feedback. This is an important aspect that faculties need to consider since it may be of particular importance to master's students who wish to continue their studies, although there may be some resistance from supervisors.

Overall, the findings indicate a need for supervisors to be trained. For example, inexperienced supervisors can be teamed up with more experienced staff to learn about supervision through mentoring processes. Recommending that supervisors be trained, echoes proposals by other authors. These include Cryer (2001) as well as Johnston (1996:16).

One important question remains: *How do supervisors feel about postgraduate students' expectations?* Without this knowledge we may never be able to find clarity about the responsibilities of supervisors and students. Hence the study reported on in this article will be followed by a subsequent research endeavour to answer the aforementioned question. Ultimately the aim is to enhance supervisory practices in order to promote fine research while improving the completion rates of students.

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