



Postgraduate Supervision: Opinion Based on Personal Experience

Katowa-Mukwato P*

University of Zambia-School of Nursing Sciences, Zambia

Opinion

Background Information

Supervision of postgraduate students at universities is one of the core responsibilities of academics and is considered a measure of academic output.¹ De Gruchy and Holness² described graduate supervision as being “situated at the interface of teaching and research, and having to do with the transference of research and related skills”. Supervisors are tasked with the responsibility to support and guide students to identify feasible research topics and questions, develop study protocols, provide oversight of the research process, complete their projects on time and to integrate candidates into academia.³ In view of the significant role that supervisors play in postgraduate education, Mapasela and Wilkinson⁴ asserted that good supervision is central to successful postgraduate research. Similarly Mothiba⁵ and Igumbor⁶ affirmed that the quality and success of postgraduate education and training largely depend on effective and efficient supervision.

In the recent past, postgraduate education has been hailed as key in providing educational institutions opportunities to build their research capabilities, enhance academic reputations and for financial gains.⁷ Considering the value placed on postgraduate education and the role of supervision in its success, a number of studies have focused on the challenges related to potentially limiting success of postgraduate research students. Such studies have revealed that many postgraduate students drop out or fail to complete their studies within the stipulated time.^{1,8} This situation has been ascribed to numerous factors such as inexperienced or overburdened

supervisors, inadequate preparation of candidates, poor planning and management, methodological difficulties, personal problems outside research, insufficient financial support for students, poor relationship between student and supervisor, and overall ineffective infrastructural support for postgraduate studies.¹

Synopsis of Models of Postgraduate Supervision

Different scholars have suggested a myriad of strategies some referred to as models to address challenges limiting successful graduate studies. From existing literature, four strategies have been noted as outstanding; Postgraduate Supervisors’ Conversations Model, a strategy that gives supervisors an opportunity to learn from each other and share best practices to enhance supervision,⁹ Blended Group Supervision Model (BGS) which is anchored on the principle of connectivism at individual supervision level, group supervision and virtual support sets Siemens (2004). BGS enables the development of supervision skills and overcomes feelings of seclusion which can also be an issue for both students and supervisors.¹⁰ The third being Cohort Supervision which is a process of supervising large groups of students with a focus of motivating students through peer sharing of experiences and feedback, as well as ensuring that students take responsibility for their own academic progress.¹¹ The fourth being the C.O.S.T.A (Concepts, Objective, Situation, Tact, and Assessment of output impact) Model of postgraduate research supervision which is postulated as both an alternative approach to traditional supervision methods and as a pedagogical framework for integrated teaching and learning in research in supervision.¹²

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***Corresponding author:** Patricia Katowa Mukwato, University of Zambia-School of Nursing Sciences, P.O Box 50110, Lusaka, Zambia

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Personal Opinion Based on Experience

Personal experience having supervised postgraduate students for more than a decade as a co-supervisor and principal supervisor, I have noted that success or failure of supervisions is dependent on a number of factors including; balance of dedication between a supervisor and supervisee, strong supervisor foundation of research and having been optimally supervised, adequate preparation of candidates, good time management, planning and capability and dedication to read and understand research and related scholarly literature on part of the supervisee. The strongest attributes for the supervisors is having been optimally supervised coupled with dedication to supervision. I have noted that supervisors who were not optimally supervised usually have challenges to supervise even when given the best of postgraduate candidates. On the other hand, the strongest attributes on part of the supervisee is ability to read and understand the research process, dedication and time management. Candidates who do not possess such attributes still face challenges and delays in completion even when allocated the most efficient and dedicated supervisors. With regards to supervision models, personal experience of supervising large numbers of students compelled me to search for ways to successfully handle large numbers of supervisees without necessarily repeating the same instructions for each and every student. Contrary to the traditional norm of supervisors working on individual basis with their students, I adapted the Blended Group Supervision Model (BGS) which is anchored on the principle of connectivism at individual supervision level and group supervision. As postulated by Siemen, 2004, the BGS model allows for student-to-student peer support, while the group supervision with virtual group interactions, saves on time and relieves the supervisor of the stress and burnout of giving the same instructions, support, guidance or tips repeatedly.

Conclusion

Since the quality of supervisory practice has a demonstrable effect on postgraduate outcomes,^{5,6,13,14} it should be in the interest of universities to improve the efficacy of postgraduate supervision. It is therefore important that each university, school or individual supervisor documents supervision practices as a basis for developing, adopting or adapting contextual models of PG Supervision to improve postgraduate supervision process, quality of PG research and enhance PG outcomes. Contextual and blended models or approaches are the best as “what works” in one context may not necessarily work in another. Similarly, “what works” for one supervisor and student may not work for another thereby requiring blending of models or approaches for supervision.

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Conflict of Interest

None declared.

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