

CHAPTER 5

A Supervisor-led Cohort Model of Supervising Postgraduate Students: A Reflective Account

Labby Ramrathan

ORCID iD: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9963-0675>

Tohida Cassim

ORCID iD: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9714-979X>

Indran Pather

ORCID iD: <https://orcid.org/0009-0004-4536-9124>

Abstract

Located within national concern about the quality, quantity, and low capacity of doctoral supervision and the National Development Plan's goal to enhance postgraduate studies within South African public Higher Education Institutions, this chapter presents a descriptive and reflective account of a supervisor-led cohort postgraduate supervision model. Using a case study of a supervisor-led supervision process and reflections to generate data, the reflections of the supervisor and the sample of graduated students illuminate how this model can contribute to increasing the supervision capacity of public Higher Education Institutions, promote high-level teaching and learning within postgraduate studies and improve the quality of postgraduate research supervision. The chapter concludes that this is a promising approach to meet demand for postgraduate education while emphasising quality outcomes as anticipated by the National Development Plan.

Keywords: Supervisor-led supervision model; Postgraduate research supervision; Doctoral supervision; Research supervision capacity; Quality postgraduate supervision.

1 Introduction

Two crucial findings from the most recent review of doctoral education within South Africa (CHE 2022) frame this chapter. The first is the recognition that both public and private Higher Education Institutions have limited research supervision capacity to serve the growing number of doctoral candidates and, indeed, provide postgraduate supervision in general. The second relates to concern about the quality of doctoral graduates given the rapid increase in enrolment for doctoral studies and the targets set by the National Development Plan (NDP) 2030 (National Planning Commission 2012). The current number of PhD graduates per million South Africans stands at 28, a figure considered very low by international standards. The NDP sets a target of 100 PhD graduates per million people by 2030. In 2010, 1 421 PhD candidates graduated from Higher Education Institutions, with the number expected to increase to 5 000 by 2030. While the number of doctoral graduates per year increased twofold over the past decade, the NDP's goal is unlikely to be met. The constraints are not restricted to enrolment numbers, but also pertain to the quality of doctoral degrees and capacity to supervise. Achieving the NDP's target will require that institutional factors be addressed. These include the fact that in 2010, only 34% of academic staff held PhDs. The NDP aims to increase this to 75% by 2030. Against this background, this chapter examines how institutions can improve their supervision capacity while increasing the number of staff with doctorates. Other imperatives for a transforming and developing country include addressing critical socio-economic challenges and the need to address historical imbalances in terms of access to Higher Education and research opportunities.

The National Research Foundation (NRF) has placed significant emphasis on the importance of doctoral degrees, recognising their value in enhancing South Africa's development. Indeed, Lange, Pillay and Chikoko (2011) note that increasing the number of researchers has become a national priority. This chapter presents a cohort model of research supervision that could assist in achieving this objective. Motshoane and McKenna (2014) add that the postgraduate sector is a significant driver of knowledge production and innovation that will enable South Africa to compete in the global knowledge economy. This requires that the quantity and quality of doctoral students be increased. Apart from their contribution to the economy (Maistry 2022) and society (Lange, Pillay & Chikoko 2011), doctoral programmes contribute significantly to upholding academic standards, imparting academic expertise,

enhancing student development, and venturing into unexplored spaces through a collaborative research agenda (Bruce & Stoodley 2009).

Human and financial investment will be required to grow South Africa's postgraduate Higher Education sector. While this may be possible, as noted in the Council on Higher Education's (CHE) recent review of doctoral education across public and private Higher Education Institutions (CHE 2022), the greater challenge is the quality of postgraduate supervision. As such, supervision of postgraduate students in the country is a critical area of research. This chapter contributes to ongoing discussion on enhancing supervision capacity to accommodate the growing number of postgraduate students in Higher Education within South Africa and in other contexts. It does so by presenting a reflective account of a supervisor-led cohort model of postgraduate supervision with the aim of illuminating how such a model can offer collaborative supervision processes with quality outcomes.

2 Postgraduate Supervision Processes

Face-to-face, one-on-one supervision has historically been the dominant form of supervision. This was based on the traditional master-apprentice model of knowledge transmission (Harrison & Grant 2015). Furthermore, in the late 1990s, few South African academics held Masters and Doctoral degrees and as such, supervision capacity was extremely low. At the same time, few students sought to pursue postgraduate studies. With the increase in the number of academics having completed Masters and Doctoral degrees and a larger pool of students interested in postgraduate studies, the traditional model of master-apprentice supervision practice has evolved into collaborative supervision models. Opportunities and challenges within traditional and emerging models have come to light, providing opportunities for innovation. For example, one-on-one supervision provides opportunities for real-time feedback, immediate problem-solving, and relationship-building between the supervisor and supervisee (Lovitts 2008). However, one of its key limitations is the potential for power dynamics between the student and the supervisor (Kiley & Wisker 2009). Boud and Lee (2005) argue that effective supervision requires a balance to be struck between support and autonomy; students need the space and agency to develop their own ideas and approaches to learning, an opportunity that is lacking in the one-on-one supervision process.

Collaborative approaches to supervision emerged in response to these concerns. Samuel and Vithal (2011) reflected on a cohort model of supervision of doctoral students, which they conceptualised within a historically disadvantaged South African university with a high number of postgraduate enrolments and low supervisor capacity. They argue that alternative models of doctoral research teaching and learning pedagogy are possible and that the cohort model can also address the under-productivity of doctoral graduands due to limited supervision capacity, as noted in the NDP 2030 (National Planning Commission 2012). Collaborative team-based supervision models such as the cohort system have the potential to reduce power dynamics between student and supervisor by offering a diverse range of perspectives and expertise, providing a supportive and collaborative environment that encourages peer learning and feedback, and enriching the student's research journey (Bovill *et al.* 2015). This model has since expanded from a year-cohort grouping to other forms of groupings, including discipline-based, supervisor-based, and inter-institutional-based cohorts.

While innovations and new framings for research supervision of postgraduate students are unfolding, deeper insight is required into teaching and learning processes (pedagogies), the quality of engagements and quality research outcomes within supervision processes. Macro factors such as neo-liberalism, transformation, and decolonisation discourses that impact postgraduate studies also need to be considered.

3 Neoliberalism and its Influence on Postgraduate Research Supervision

Higher Education Institutions have been under increasing pressure to submit to a neoliberal agenda focused on competitive engagement in the information economy (Adkins 2007). One of the challenges universities face is students enrolling for postgraduate degrees and not completing within the specified time (CHE 2016). The demand of time to completion potentially creates tension and conflict between the supervisor and the postgraduate student and is an unnecessary drain on university resources, either through the loss of state subsidies or inefficient use of human resources (supervisors working with students beyond the minimum period of study). Low throughput rates also negatively impact universities' ranking (Masek & Alias 2020), which itself is part of the overall neoliberal architecture of universities, reflecting excellence

and efficiency. Masek and Alias (2020) assert that effective doctoral programmes and effective thesis supervision are imperative to mitigate dropout from doctoral programmes. The cohort model of supervision, with its strong focus on a collaborative and community-of-learning approach, could play a significant role in developing and enhancing students' research capabilities and in creating an enabling research space to prevent dropout, hence improving doctoral student throughput. Time to completion, reduced dropout, and increased throughput (efficiency) are all part of universities' neoliberal agenda.

The quality of students admitted to postgraduate programmes is also linked to issues of neoliberalism. Institutions that are highly ranked or have substantial infrastructure, including resources, tend to attract a larger pool of applicants from which selection can be made based on merit. Hence, meritocracy contributes to improved throughput rates (Shawa 2015), with resultant benefits for institutions. The marketisation of institutions through university rankings, resources, competition and outputs furthers the neoliberal agenda within Higher Education Institutions.

Cohort supervision does not exclude the numerous hours that supervisors spend supervising individual postgraduate students that require personal engagement. This resonates with Apple's (1986) workload intensification thesis, whereby, as part of the neoliberal agenda, educators are expected to perform an increasing number of tasks for which they have insufficient time and resources. Apple (1986) adds that workload intensification erodes the development of collegial relationships and affects educators' private lives; the same is true of supervisors. It is possible that personal and moral reflection, which are part of a supervisor's repertoire, could be negatively impacted due to workload intensification. The cohort supervision process, therefore, has workload implications for individual supervisors and contributes to workload intensification.

4 Transformation's Implications for Postgraduate Supervision

The White Paper 3 on Higher Education Transformation (Department of Education 1997) in South Africa spells out the plans for transformation within the Higher Education system. A clear goal is a change in demographics from a predominantly White student population to one that is representative of the national racial profile. Read together with the NDP and the White Paper for Post-School Education and Training (DHET 2013), it implies that postgraduate

students, emerging researchers and academics require more support and development. Thus, building research supervision capacity within Higher Education Institutions calls for a national support system. This would involve the CHE, the NRF, the Department of Higher Education and Training and other funding bodies supporting the emerging generation of qualified and competent academic staff to meet South Africa's growing transformation agenda. Given the current status of academic mentors within Higher Education Institutions, building the next generation of competent academic staff within an accelerated process (see NDP targets) requires innovative mentoring processes. Collaborative methods, including the cohort supervision process could contribute to this transformation imperative. Graduates of such a cohort system would be exposed to supervision processes and develop as supervisors who then contribute to the growing pool of potential supervisors.

5 Decolonisation Discourses in Relation to Postgraduate Research Supervision

Initiated by the #FeesMustFall student protest action of 2015-2016 across South African Higher Education, the second wave of decolonisation (le Grange *et al.* 2020) emerged as a strong discourse, targeting Higher Education curriculum and calling for a more relevant curriculum experience. What decolonised education is and how it is to be implemented within Higher Education Institutions remains a subject of intense debate and scholarship abounds in this area of intellectual engagement. Institutions have initiated interventions to decolonise the curriculum and programmes are being reviewed through a decolonial lens. At postgraduate level, a national association, the Higher Education Learning and Teaching Association (HELTASA), has initiated a national doctoral programme drawing students, supervisors and advisory teams from across institutions into a single doctoral programme, which it claims is a decolonised one (see the chapter on **Exploring Decolonised Doctoral Supervision Pathways**). While the notion of quality is complex, relative, and contextually bound (Sayed & Ahmed 2011) what constitutes a quality doctoral programme finds expression in various programmatic attempts within institutions within the decolonisation discourse. This chapter presents an example of a programmatic attempt that uses collaborative supervision processes to respond to contextual challenges (a decolonisation discourse), which could shed light on notions of quality research supervision.

6 Pedagogies of Supervision within Collaborative Supervision Models

McCallin and Nayar (2012) regard the pedagogy within doctoral supervision as a specialist form of high-level teaching. While this descriptor signals a sophisticated form, it is important to understand what constitutes high-level teaching and learning. Manathunga (2006) suggests that the private pedagogical space within a one-on-one supervision process constitutes high-level teaching. Hence, specialist forms of teaching and learning within supervision processes could vary from interactive social learning to spatial learning moments. Lee (2008) identifies various aspects of supervision, from functional aspects to parenting and developing relationships, suggesting that supervision pedagogies are far more complex than the generic description of a specialist form of high-level teaching and learning. This chapter contributes to the literature by suggesting some characteristics of this high-level teaching and learning within post-graduate research supervision.

Trusting relationships among doctoral students as well as between them and their supervisors and co-supervisors are a core aspect of the pedagogy of supervision within a cohort group. Malone (2017) and Chapman *et al.* (2016) argue that professional collaboration establishes solid, trusting relationships, which are key to the success of the cohort model of supervision. This model plays a very significant role in enabling and sustaining relational trust (trust that the doctoral student puts in other groups or an individual); self-trust (the doctoral student's confidence in his/her capabilities and judgement); and structural trust (trust in the university) (Harris *et al.* 2013). Care and trust are essential components that underpin the relationship's success and sustainability. Pastoral care is an integral part of the cohort supervision process that enables a solid community of relationships within the cohort. Despite the neoliberal constraints of throughput and time-to-completion, research supervisors find ways to overcome these challenges with the use of attentive care as part of a humanising pedagogy (Maistry 2022). When a supervisor displays an authentic, sincere attitude, students feel a sense of care and belonging, which contributes significantly to their self-belief and self-worth and also strengthens the relationship of trust between the student and supervisor (Maistry 2022). Many students that are part of a doctoral programme may not possess the agency required to make independent decisions; a trusting, empowering environment within a cohort can have significant outcomes for the doctoral student. Lee's (2008) model of supervision, which includes five elements - functional aspects,

partnership, teaching and learning, parenting and developing a relationship - alludes to the power of critical thinking and emancipation as factors that inspire students to find their own voice and enable personal meaning-making, thinking and development, which are core to augmenting doctoral students' agency.

7 Research Design

This chapter contributes to the scholarship of postgraduate research supervision. It adds to discourses on building supervision capacity for increased enrolment of postgraduate students across Higher Education Institutions within South Africa and beyond, while maintaining quality research supervision and outcomes in line with the NDP's goals. It presents a reflective account of a supervisor-led cohort model of postgraduate supervision to illustrate its potential to offer collaborative supervision processes with quality outcomes. A case study design was adopted, with the case study constituting a supervisor-led cohort offered by a supervisor (one of the authors of this chapter) at a public Higher Education Institution in KwaZulu-Natal. Data was generated by the supervisor who led this cohort through reflection on setting up the cohort, the activities included within the supervision processes, the process of learning and the outcomes. The reflective account is supported by vignettes of reflective accounts by a purposive sample of five graduates of the cohort. This data was generated through a reflective writing process guided by three broad areas of engagement: their experiences of coming into the cohort, their learning journey and their interactions within a collaborative learning space within the cohort and beyond. Reflections as a means of generating data in participatory and self-study research are well established in the literature (Burke 1998; Koster & van den Berg 2014) to illuminate learning, historical accounts and group dynamics related to the focus of research. Given its ability to enhance self-understanding and track developments, this method was deemed most appropriate to elaborate on this supervisor-led cohort model of postgraduate research supervision. Five graduated students who joined and exited the cohort at different times were purposefully selected to reflect on their experiences of this form of research supervision. These experiences are presented as vignettes to holistically capture the insightful moments of their reflection. The description of the supervisor-led cohort model of postgraduate research supervision was achieved through a self-reflection process that conceptualised the cohort group through what happened across the group gatherings and an analysis of the key aspects of a supervisor-

led postgraduate research supervision cohort.

8 Reflections on the Supervisor-led Cohort Model of Postgraduate Supervision

Having located supervision of postgraduate research studies within the broader context of research development in terms of capacity development to cater for the increasing enrolment of postgraduate students within Higher Education as well as the need to address the quality of postgraduate research, this section presents the reflections on the supervisor-led supervision model at a public Higher Education Institution in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. The self-reflection by the *supervisor* is presented in italics (shaded grey), while the reflections by the *graduates* of this supervision process are presented as vignettes in boxes. Both sets are presented in the first person so that assertions are located in the respective reflections rather than in an interpretation of the supervisor and graduates' experiences of the cohort system of supervision.

8.1. Soon after obtaining my reports on the examination of my Doctor of Education degree, I began leading cohorts of doctoral students within a cohort supervision model that emerged when I commenced with my doctoral studies in the late 1990s. Doctoral students were taken on a study-year programme (year 1; year 2 and year 3 progression through the cohort model of supervision) within this cohort supervision model. All first-year students focused on their research proposal development; all second-year students focused on their field work; and all third-year students focused on their data analysis and report writing. Since then, I have led several cohorts of doctoral students. Simultaneously, my supervision of master's and doctoral students increased far beyond the norms of a productive academic, and my uptake of supervision had to be curbed and occasionally reduced, resulting in asking my prospective students to wait until I had supervision capacity that I could manage with. This stalling resulted in a growing group of potential doctoral students waiting to be supervised by me. In 2014, I made the decision to start a supervisor-led cohort supervision process and I invited my potential students to join this cohort. Immediately, 12 new PhD students enrolled in this cohort supervision programme and this marked the commencement of the supervisor-led cohort supervision process. Initially, only doctoral students formed the cohort group, but soon thereafter I brought in my masters' students. Progressively, the group grew in size, with masters' gra-

duates re-joining the cohort for their doctoral studies, new entries into masters and doctoral studies and more recently, some doctoral graduates of the programme becoming part of the supervision team. The graduate output from my supervision process increased. Before 2015, my graduate output was on average three per annum. Since 2015, my graduate output has increased, with some years exceeding six graduates per year. In 2019 and 2021, there were eight graduates respectively, six of them at the doctoral level, and in each of these years they were produced under my supervision (Source: university records).

So what was this supervisor-led cohort supervision process? Five key aspects defined the supervisor-led cohort supervision process. The first was finding a suitable place to meet. We explored the use of one of the venues on the campus where I was located, but that was deemed to be not comfortable. I then booked an executive seminar room at a campus near my home and this became the home of the cohort. The room was booked every Saturday and made available to students on Sundays when requested. Students were able to access this venue every Saturday and could work in this space alone, in smaller groups, or in the larger group outside of the formal cohort sessions that I led. Accessibility, a sense of belonging, being comfortable and feeling safe enabled the students to work on their studies at a pace they felt manageable.

The nature of the cohort required care, support, commitment, sharing and extra hours of joint working together beyond supervision. Students in the cohort voluntarily took on the responsibility of fostering group cohesion, logistical arrangements for the venue and refreshments. The choice and suitability of the study venue served as a huge benefit to the group for travelling purposes and as a conducive learning environment. The tea station became an assembly point for dialogue and informal discussions. This engendered trust, cohesion, and support for the members of the group. The supervisor played a significant role in establishing and maintaining healthy group relations and dynamics. The commitment, dedication and academic prowess of the supervisor carried every student to completion of the process and the learning journey. (Graduate A)

The cohort sessions provided an environment that was conducive to learning, and development of myself as a person. I remember the sessions started in dusty classrooms at Edgewood campus to one of the best boardrooms at Westville campus. When the cohort session started around March 2014, I took a conscious decision that I will attend all of them. My plan was to have more attendance

than absenteeism. I am positive that I did just that. At some stage, I would be alone in the boardroom from 9h00 to 15h00 every Saturday. These sessions provided unintended spaces for socialisation. I would meet my fellow members, share thoughts about life, work, politics, sports, families, and many other life aspects. We would constructively engage about anything. I remember that I had one space to sit at. I still have memories of where I always sat. Every one of us had a spot that ended up creating a safe working space. (Graduate B)

The tea station initiated by RXXX was another opportunity and platform for him to display his love and care for us. It was a beautiful time to engage informally with him about other aspects that bothered us in life as well as collaboratively engage with fellow students about issues relating to the PhD and personal issues as well. (Graduate E)

8.2. The second key aspect was a sustained focus on theory and theoretical frameworks. Having attended some very inspiring sessions on theory and theoretical framings at the American Education Research Association's annual conferences, I made a conscious decision to foreground theory within the cohort sessions. The initial cohort of students was introduced to two theories: Bourdieu's (1986) key constructs of capital, habitus and field and Bronfenbrenner's spheres of influence. The students were encouraged to read about these theories and to explore the possibilities of framing their research study within either or both of these theories. They were also given the option of not using these theories as their theoretical framing for their particular study. Collectively and individually, the students engaged with theory, understood the value of theory within their study design, and became intimate with the key constructs of their theoretical frameworks to the point where they could visualise these key constructs within their daily lives. The fluency in the knowledge of and the use of these theoretical key constructs were the goals.

The joint supervision sessions were constructive and robust. The session created much contestation, avenues for critical thinking, and incisive questioning. There were opportunities for insights into paradigms, philosophical underpinnings, the theorising of concepts and constructs, and the generation of new ideas. The way forward through this academic quagmire was for me to record the sessions, listen and re-listen, and to transcribe. Thereafter, further supervision was necessary and the transcriptions were brought back for re-supervision and the feed-

back loop became the basis for clarity, reconstruction, and sifting of content. Reflecting on the feedback and contestations enhanced the clarity of thinking, sifting of essential concepts, ideas, and constructs, and further conceptualisation. At the end, the final two chapters came to fruition with the inputs, supervision and feedback from the main supervisor. (Graduate A)

It forced me to have a plan. It forced me set weekly targets as the supervisor would ask us to present on key aspects of our thesis. I believe learning happened most when ‘the other was presenting’. The quality of feedback from the supervisor on the structure of what was being presented immediately shaped my thoughts. If five students presented on a day, you would have literally five versions of, for example, theoretical frameworks. (Graduate B)

8.3. The third key aspect of this supervision process was the on-going seminars on research design issues. Appropriate input sessions on research design were an ongoing supervisor-led activity. Each seminar on research design was purposefully developed to respond to where the students were or in preparation for where they might be in the near future. Academic literacy and academic writing also formed part of the input sessions. The research design inputs ranged from proposal development through literature review, theoretical and conceptual frameworks, research methodology, working with data, data analysis, and writing for presentations and publications. The input sessions were individual and collaborative, some led by students of the cohort. Sessions were repeated as and when needed by the students.

Joining RXXX’s PhD cohort group, that was made up of students ranging from 1st years to students who were ‘ready to submit stage’, I quickly became a part of a community of scholars who became my support structure. And we engaged with each other constantly as despite the various PhD topics, and various stages of research, we were able to advise and assist each other under the mentorship and guidance of RXXX, who displayed patience as though we were toddlers, guiding and explaining in a meaningful manner. Listening to RXXX speak, engage and teach reminded me what real teaching is all about because even though I am an experienced teacher, RXX’s patience was a breath of fresh air. Taking his time in explaining concepts, pacing the flow of knowledge, he presented how one should go about conducting and presenting research in a manner that one could easily grasp. Each aspect of the thesis was discussed from

the proposal to the conclusion. I found myself sitting with a group of students, encountering a new world of big words in the research field (as my previous degrees were not in the education field) and having to come to grips with concepts that were extremely intimidating. RXXX was also very generous with his time as over and above the time spent in the cohort sessions, students were allocated personal time at his home to further discuss aspects of the PhD. (Graduate C)

8.4. The fourth key aspect was the pedagogy within the postgraduate cohort supervision process. An ecology emerged in the interplay between cohort engagements, smaller group engagements, individual one-on-one engagements, externally invited speakers, and out-of-cohort supervision moments. Accessibility for me as a supervisor was a key factor in our interactions. I view being an academic as a way of life, and as such, I make myself available to my students on demand. This meant that they could call me at any reasonable time to have a conversation on an issue that they were working on independently at that time. My perspective was that when a student is deeply engaged with an aspect of their study, it would be more productive for them to engage with me instantly rather than lose the momentum of their thought processes should they have to wait for a consultation request sometime later. Interest in the students 'academic growth through accessibility, care, trust and robust critical engagement were central to my supervision pedagogy.

We encountered some bumpy roller-coaster rides. It also felt like treading on a tight rope with rubbery legs. Prof. RXXX addressed us individually in an adjoining physical space. He carefully guided each student, swinging us towards a particular understanding and a specific situated study context. The intense but special academic encounters generated extreme solidarity among students. We encouraged each other and placed particular emphasis on streamlining the focus. Students also engaged collaboratively with each other. The tea/lunch interludes exuded a strong sense of community. Our informal discourses succeeded from what we absorbed beforehand. We engaged in narratives that engendered upon events at school, union developments, household chores, and much more. We also unpacked some mind-boggling issues pertinent to society and civilians over tea/lunch. The doctoral cohort model determinedly steered by Prof. RXXXX attained a high degree of success. He executed his duties with extreme humanness, rectitude, integrity, intellectual

humility and astuteness, compounded with rigour and vigour. Certainly, an effervescent cohort inclusive of supervisor and students in humanity, social development, and intellectualism. (Graduate D)

8.5. The fifth key aspect of the cohort system of postgraduate supervision was the shift from supervisor dependency to self-dependence, collective dependence and collaborative dependence. The movement of students in and out of the cohort allowed for a constant mix of students who were early entrants into a masters or doctoral programme with those who were longer in the programme and those who were nearing exiting the programme. This mix engendered a sense of self-dependence and collaborative dependence. Drawing on Bourdieu's (1986) key constructs of field, habitus and capital, the students were able to understand the social field of the cohort programme, strengthened by owing the seminar room as their doctoral space. They began to understand their shifting positions within the social field of the cohort, at times being in recessive positions and at other times taking leading positions. The students embodied themselves as postgraduate research students, understanding who they are and how to navigate the cohort space. Each of the students, because of the uniqueness of their study project, gained confidence in their areas of research focus, was able to contribute to discourses and debates beyond their study domain, and as such, positioned themselves as critical friends within the cohort sessions. Their knowledge and process skills capital grew as they progressed within the cohort and were able to position themselves at various levels of dominance and influence, both personally and collegially.

My experience of being a doctoral student started in 2014, with mixed feelings of excitement and trepidation. Trepidation was an intense feeling as I was experiencing anxiety about thinking of a feasible topic, the defence of the proposal and whether I had the capability to complete the thesis in the required time. But just like my masters' thesis, RXXX created such an enabling environment from day one for the entire cohort group. He displayed his great care and other humane skills to create an egalitarian environment - not positioning himself as 'Mr-know-it-all'. His humble and caring disposition made me believe in myself that I could complete this thesis with confidence. One of RXXX's strengths was encouraging the cohort group to freely articulate their views, even if some views were bizarre. This provided an enabling environment for critical discussion, critical and reflexive thinking. It also

allowed us to exercise our metacognitive skills and disruptive thinking. The space for disruptive thinking allowed the cohort to freely contest and express dissent about any issue that was up for discussion within the cohort. Some of us, including myself, used to digress from the issues at hand but RXXX was so skilful in adjudicating our thoughts (with great care not to upset us). His relationship with every student was customised, caring and trusting which deepened the professional bonds between supervisor and student. His penchant for high-level thinking, which made us as students raise our standards in our thinking and the presentations during the cohort sessions deepened our thirst for innovative out-of-the-box thinking. He pushed us to understand that a PhD involves nuanced and critical thinking. Another amazing aspect of RXXX's supervision was the efficient feedback we got about work that we sent to him. It was succinct, clear and unambiguous. This helped greatly to transition to the various stages of the PhD in a coherent manner. (Graduate E)

There were, however, some challenges within the cohort. There was a core group of students that made every attempt to attend the planned sessions and independent collegial sessions, but some just came in to listen, engaged little and only responded when asked specifically for comments. Perhaps these students had their own reasons; perhaps it was just cultural (meaning a traditional way of attending and receiving a lecture) or just non-committal. Not all of the students (e.g. two of the original cohort of 12 students) who attended the cohort completed their studies. Some took breaks due to various personal issues, like illness and work commitments. Some could not cope with the demands of a Masters or PhD study despite the generous support that they received within and outside of the cohort. More insights are needed on how to encourage these students to persevere despite personal, professional and academic challenges.

The cohort model did have its downsides as some would just pitch up for the session but were not prepared for work they had to do. This was disconcerting and did create discomfort in some of us. There was a tacit agreement that we all had to prepare for the cohort sessions but some didn't prepare or were absent from the sessions. But in the main, the cohort mode of supervision was a most enabling platform for me in completing my PHD in four years in terms of transitioning through many different phases of the PhD as well as my own personal and intellectual development. (Graduate E)

9 Discussion

This supervisor-led supervision process has the potential to contribute to the national project envisaged in the NDP of increasing the number of postgraduate students in South Africa. More postgraduate students were supervised simultaneously through this model of supervision than within the workload framework that guides the supervision of postgraduate students in universities. The lack of adequate supervision capacity within Higher Education Institutions identified in various reports (e.g., the CHE, Department of Basic Education, and NDP) calls for innovative ways to grow the supervision capacity that this model shows potential to do. There are, however, constraining factors. The first is the experience of the supervisor leading such cohort supervision processes. Novice supervisors may not be able to manage their own development alongside that of a heterogeneous group of students. The second is the supervisor's competence in terms of his/her scholarship, supervision, and social and human capabilities. In this respect, one can explore the notion of professional capital expounded by Hargreaves and Fullan (2012). For Hargreaves and Fullan (2012), professional capital includes human, social, and decisional capital. Noting the high-level pedagogy required for doctoral supervision, these three forms of capital complement one another in developing a doctoral graduate. Capital relates to the trust and confidence one builds through working with people within a social environment and making appropriate decisions. The supervisor's competence is not only located in the content of supervision, but also concerns how one harnesses students' inclusion within the social setting of a cohort; understanding the individual and how this understanding can be used to support the doctoral student in the journey to completion of his/her studies amidst his/her personal life and how the decisions taken by the supervisor build the student's confidence to make on-going decisions.

Framing supervision within collaborative learning models through the conception of professional capital attends to the personal, social, and academic aspects of postgraduate research supervision, especially as the outcome of such an opportunity is the reinforcement of independent studies characteristic of graduate attributes at this level of study. Malone (2017) notes that professional collaboration (within a cohort platform) builds professional capital that enhances an individual's desire for risk-taking and innovative thinking – core aspects of research in a doctoral programme to produce new knowledge or ideas.

This supervisor-led cohort system also responds to concerns about the quality of doctoral graduates given the rapid increase in registration for doctoral

studies. Drawing on McCallina and Nayar's (2012) notion of pedagogy within doctoral supervision as a specialist form of high-level teaching and learning, the teaching and learning moments within this system are vast and diverse. While the pedagogy of care across teaching and learning processes has been widely written about, it is evident within this model of postgraduate research supervision. Both the supervisor's and the postgraduate students' reflective accounts point to care and trust as fundamental to teaching and learning processes. Other pedagogical moments are also evident within the supervisor-led cohort model. These include the pedagogy of contestation (*the sessions provided much contestations*), disruptions, and critique as a way of teaching and learning; the pedagogy of place (*I remembered the cohort started in a dusty classroom at the Edgewood campus to one of the best boardrooms in the Westville campus*); and the pedagogy of complexity (*it also allowed us to use our metacognitive skills and disruptive thinking*). Teaching and learning moments located within contestations between and among students were evident. The boardroom and the tea station became safe spaces for personal, collective, and cohort engagements that led to personal learning moments that moved the students into deeper thoughts and expressions. The complexity associated with both the substance of what is to be learned as well as the process of how the learning should occur was evident in these reflective accounts.

Postgraduate research supervision through a supervisor-led cohort system is firmly located within Gough's (2008) notion of becoming pedagogical within a place—process tension. Drawing on this notion gives expression and characterisation to what high-level teaching and learning are within an ecology. The supervisor's and students' accounts suggest that the ecology that constitutes such a high-level pedagogy is, amongst other things, the self, the supervisor, the research, the institution, peers and colleagues, family and friends, the rationale for conducting a postgraduate study, the purpose of the research, and the examiners. In this ecology, people and other elements interrelate in a productive and transformative process. McCallin and Nayar (2012) identify various factors that may influence supervision outcomes, including the supervisor's expertise and communication skills, the student's level of experience and motivation and the organisational context in which supervision takes place.

10 Conclusion

The supervisor-led cohort model of postgraduate supervision offers a promising solution to the increasing demand for postgraduate education outlined in the

NDP. It allows for simultaneous supervision of a larger number of postgraduate students than traditional workload frameworks, helping to alleviate the current lack of adequate supervision capacity in South African Higher Education Institutions.

While the model shows potential, there are important factors to consider. Supervisors' experience in leading cohort supervision processes and their competence in terms of scholarship, supervision skills, and social and human capabilities are critical considerations. Exploring the concept of professional capital, which encompasses human, social, and decisional capital, further highlights the benefits of the cohort model. It enhances postgraduate students' social capital through collaborative learning, human capital through guidance and mentorship, and decisional capital through prudent decision-making within the cohort.

By framing supervision within collaborative learning models and the concept of professional capital, the cohort model addresses the personal, social, and academic aspects of postgraduate research supervision. It reinforces independent study skills and fosters a desire for risk-taking and innovative thinking, which are essential to produce new knowledge in doctoral programmes. Moreover, the students' reflective experiences show that the cohort model enhances quality by incorporating various pedagogical moments such as care, trust, contestation, disruptions, critique, place, and complexity. These elements create safe spaces for personal and collective engagement, deepening learning experiences. The supervisor-led cohort system aligns with the notion of becoming pedagogical within an ecological framework, where human and other elements interact in a transformative process. Factors such as the supervisor's expertise and communication skills, the student's experience and motivation, and the organisational context also influence supervision outcomes.

In summary, the supervisor-led cohort model of postgraduate supervision offers a promising approach to meet demand for postgraduate education while emphasising quality outcomes as anticipated by the NDP. By embracing this type of model, institutions can enhance their supervision capacity, promote collaborative learning, and nurture the professional development of both supervisors and postgraduate students.

References

- Adkins, B. 2007. PhD Pedagogy and the Changing Knowledge Landscapes of Universities. *Higher Education Research and Development* 28,2: 165-177. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360902725041>
- Apple, M.W. 1986. *Teachers and Texts. A Political Economy of Class and Gender Relations in Education*. London, UK: Routledge.
- Boud, D. & A. Lee 2005. 'Peer Learning' as Pedagogic Discourse for Research Education. *Studies in Higher Education* 30,5: 501-516. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03075070500249138>
- Bourdieu, P. 1986. The Forms of Capital. *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Capital*. New York: Greenwood Press.
- Bovill, C., A. Cook-Sather, P. Felten, L. Millard & N. Moore-Cherry 2015. Addressing Potential Challenges in Co-Creating Learning and Teaching: Overcoming Resistance, Navigating Institutional Norms and Ensuring Inclusivity in Student-Staff Partnerships. *Higher Education* 71,2: 195-208. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-015-9896-4>
- Bruce, C.S. & I.D. Stoodley 2009. *Towards a Pedagogy of PHD Supervision in the Technology Disciplines*. Brisbane: Queensland University of Technology. <https://eprints.qut.edu.au/18869/1/c18869>
- Burke, B. 1998. Evaluating for a Change: Reflections on Participatory Methodology. *New Directions for Evaluation* 80: 43 - 56. <https://doi.org/10.1002/ev.1116>
- Chapman, C., H. Chestnutt, N. Friel, S. Hall & K. Lowden 2016. Professional Capital and Collaborative Inquiry Networks for Educational Equity and Improvement. *Journal of Professional Capital and Community* 1,3: 178-197. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1108/JPCC-03-2016-0007>; <https://doi.org/10.1108/JPCC-03-2016-0007>
- Council on Higher Education (CHE) 2016. *South African Higher Education Reviewed: Two Decades of Democracy*. Pretoria: Council on Higher Education
- Council on Higher Education (CHE) 2022. *Review Report on Doctoral Education within South Africa*. CHE. <https://www.che.ac.za/publications/programme-reviews/release-doctoral-degrees-national-report-march-2022>.
- Department of Higher Education and Training 2013. *White Paper for Post-School Education and Training. Building an Expanded, Effective and Integrated Post-School System*.

- <https://www.dhet.gov.za/SiteAssets/Latest%20News/White%20paper%20for%20post-school%20education%20and%20training.pdf>.
- Gough, N. 2008. Ecology, Ecocriticism and Learning: How Do Places become 'Pedagogical'? *Transnational Curriculum Inquiry (TCI)* 5,1: 71 - 86.
- Hargreaves, A. & M. Fullan 2012. *Professional Capital Transforming Teaching in Every School*. New York, NY Teachers College Press.
- Harris, J., B. Caldwell & F. Longmuir 2013. *Literature Review: A Culture of Trust Enhances Performance*. Melbourne: Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership.
<http://apo.org.au/system/files/42110/apo-nid42110-80266.pdf>.
- Harrison, S. & C. Grant 2015. Exploring of New Models of Research Pedagogy: Time to Let Go of Master-Apprentice Style Supervision? *Teaching in Higher Education* 20(5): 556-566.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/13562517.2015.1036732>
- Kiley, M. & G. Wisker 2009. *Doctoral Supervision and Writing Pedagogies: Supporting Researcher Development*. London: Routledge.
- Koster, B. & B. van den Berg 2014. Increasing Professional Self-Understanding: Self-Study Research by Teachers with the Help of Biography, Core Reflection and Dialogue. *Studying Teacher Education* 10,1: 86-100.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/17425964.2013.866083>
- Lange, N.D., G. Pillay & V. Chikoko 2011. Doctoral Learning: A Case for a Cohort Model of Supervision and Support. *South African Journal of Education*, 31:15-30. <https://doi.org/10.15700/saje.v31n1a413>
- Le Grange, L., P. du Preez, L. Ramrathan & S. Blihnaut 2020. Decolonising the University Curriculum or Decolonial Washing? A Multiple Case Study. *Journal of Education* 80: 25 – 48.
<https://doi.org/10.17159/2520-9868/i80a02>
<http://journals.ukzn.ac.za/index.php/joe>
<http://dx.doi.org/10.17159/2520-9868/i80a02>
- Lee, A. 2008. How are Doctoral Students Supervised? Concepts of Doctoral Research Supervision. *Studies in Higher Education* 33,3: 267 - 281.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/03075070802049202>
- Lovitts, B.E. 2008. The Transition to Independent Research: Who Makes it, Who Doesn't, and Why? *Journal of Higher Education* 79,3: 296 - 325.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/00221546.2008.11772100>
- Maistry, S. 2022. Working With and Through Neoliberalism: Envisioning Research Supervision as a Pedagogy of Care in a Context of 'Privileged

- Irresponsibility. *Education as Change* 26: #11461.
<https://doi.org/10.25159/1947-9417/11461>
- Malone, H.J. 2017. Broadening Professional Communities through Collaborative Partnerships. *Journal of Professional Capital and Community* 2,4: 190 - 199. <https://doi.org/10.1108/JPC-08-2017-0019>
- Manathunga, C. 2005. The Development of Research Supervision: 'Turning the Light on a Private Space'. *International Journal for Academic Development* 10,1: 17 - 30. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13601440500099977>
- Masek, A. & A. Alias 2020. A Review of Effective Doctoral Supervision: What is it and How Can We Achieve it? *Universal Journal of Educational Research* 8,6: 2493 - 2500. <https://doi.org/10.13189/ujer.2020.080633>
- McCallin, A. & S. Nayar 2012. Postgraduate Research Supervision: A Critical Review of Current Practice. *Teaching in Higher Education* 17,1: 63 - 74. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13562517.2011.590979>
- Motshoane, P. & S. McKenna 2014. More than Agency: The Multiple Mechanisms Affecting Postgraduate Education. In Bitzer, E., R. Albertyn, L. Frick, B. Grant & F. Kelly (eds.): *Pushing Boundaries in Postgraduate Supervision*. Stellenbosch: SUN Media
- National Planning Commission. 2012. *National Development Plan 2030: Our Future - Make It Work*. National Planning Commission.
https://www.gov.za/sites/default/files/gcis_document/201409/ndp-2030-our-future-make-it-workr.pdf.
- Samuel, M. & R. Vithal 2011. Emergent Frameworks of Research Teaching and Learning in a Cohort-Based Doctoral Programme. *Perspectives in Education* 29,30: 76 - 87.
- Sayed, Y. & R. Ahmed 2011. Education Quality in Post-Apartheid South African Policy: Balancing Equity, Diversity, Rights and Participation. *Comparative Education* 47,1: 103 - 118.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/03050068.2011.541680>
- Shawa, L.B. 2015. Graduate Output in South African Higher Education: The Dilemma of Policy Intervention. In *9th Annual Teaching and Learning in Higher Education Conference*. Durban, September 2015
- South African Government 1997. *Programme for the Transformation on Higher Education: Education White Paper 3*. Pretoria: Government Printers.
https://www.gov.za/sites/default/files/gcis_document/201409/18207gen11960.pdf

Labby Ramrathan
Professor
School of Education
University of KwaZulu-Natal
Durban, South Africa
Email: ramrathanp@ukzn.ac.za

Tohida Cassim
Research Assistant
School of Education
University of KwaZulu-Natal
Durban, South Africa
Email: tohidac@gmail.com

Indran Pather
Research Assistant
School of Education
University of KwaZulu-Natal
Durban, South Africa
Email: indrinpather@gmail.com