

# **Chapter 14: Developing Transformative Postgraduate Supervision Practices for Early-Career Academics: A Journey of Growth, Guidance and Success**

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## **Abstract**

Postgraduate supervision represents both a significant responsibility and a rewarding opportunity for early-career academics. However, the transition into a supervisory role from just being a supervisee comes with common challenges such as inadequate preparedness for the lack of formal supervision training, balancing multiple roles in academia, and issues of power dynamics in supervisory practices, which also lead to conflicts. This chapter adopts a qualitative autoethnographic methodology to critically reflect on my personal journey from being a supervisee to becoming a supervisor for honours, master's and PhD students. The analysis explores the multifaceted nature of the supervisor's role, emphasizing the importance of building trust and rapport, providing constructive feedback, cultivating critical thinking, and offering consistent motivation and support. The discussion highlights practical strategies such as the 'sandwich' feedback method, structured check-ins, and collaborative learning models for fostering a supportive and productive supervisory relationship. This underscores the significance of creating inclusive environments where students feel empowered to thrive, ultimately enhancing the quality of the postgraduate research experience and the development of the next generation of researchers. In addition to helping individual students, this chapter recommends a proactive approach that leads to more impactful and significant research outcomes such as higher publication rates, better research quality, and happier students.

**Keywords:** postgraduate supervision, early-career academics, collaborative learning, supervisor-supervisee relationships, artificial intelligence

## 1. Introduction

Early-career academics always encounter challenges as they pass through the transformative journey of being a postgraduate student or supervisee to become a postgraduate supervisor. Challenges include managing time constraints while meeting the diverse needs of students (Alebaikan *et al.* 2023; Winchester-Seeto *et al.* 2014). This transition is not only filled with challenges, but also with personal growth and victories (Masood *et al.* 2023; Wisker 2012). Reflecting on my own personal supervision journey, which began with completing my PhD in 2023, I experienced the crucial role of transformative supervision in shaping a student's ongoing academic success. Being an early-career academic who has had experience in supervising honours students from three South African Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) and taking on the challenge of supervising now master's and PhD students, brought both excitement and anxiety. McAlpine and Amundsen (2011) argued that many early-career academics enter supervisory roles without formal training and instead rely on their own experiences as doctoral students, therefore highlighting this as one of the most significant gaps in academic development. Therefore, in this chapter, I reflect on my personal progress in supervision, including the challenges encountered and strategies that have proven impactful in guiding postgraduate students to complete their research project successfully on time. Through reflexive engagement with my lived experiences across multiple levels of higher degree supervision, this chapter highlights the dynamic relationship between theoretical frameworks and practical experiences in contemporary postgraduate supervision.

Postgraduate supervision is more of a mentorship role than just an administrative task, as it requires a delicate balance between guidance, encouragement, responsibility, and accountability (Green *et al.* 2023; Manathunga 2007). Additionally, early-career academic supervisors often face challenges, such as power dynamics between supervisors and supervisees, managing conflicts, meeting student-specific research expectations, a lack of monitoring student performance, and the ability to adapt to the evolving academic space now dominated by artificial intelligence (AI) tools (Cardona *et al.* 2023). Simultaneously, this rise in AI in HEIs has also changed the dynamics of

postgraduate supervision, posing new distinct challenges alongside potential benefits for early-career academic supervisors. Adapting to this academia requires flexibility and a clear pedagogical framework for early-career academics, who are still refining their supervisory approaches. Therefore, this chapter also examines how early-career academics can create postgraduate supervision strategies that are efficient in balancing different student needs while maintaining academic integrity and using AI as a supportive tool rather than as a replacement for human mentorship in this era of AI becoming increasingly integrated into academic processes. This chapter aims to equip early-career academics with the insights needed to thrive as supervisors in a rapidly changing academic environment.

## 2. Methodology

In this chapter, a qualitative autoethnographic methodology was employed to examine the journey of transformative postgraduate supervision practices through the lens of my personal experiences as both a former supervisee and an early-career academic supervisor. Based on a study by Ellis *et al.* 2011), I revisited my reflective journals from 2018 to 2024 notes from supervision meetings, anonymized email correspondence, and other documents to trace how my supervisory style has evolved with particular attention to critical incidents that shifted my reshaped my understanding of what impactful supervision looks like. Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke 2006) was adopted to identify key themes, focusing on the navigation of power dynamics in providing feedback to students, balancing what the institution expects with the need for flexibility, and helping students develop independence through structured autonomy. Ethical rigor is maintained through the anonymization of student data and by constantly checking my own biases (Pillow 2010), while the relevant literature provides external validation of emerging themes. This methodological approach connects my personal experience with the theoretical one, offering empirically grounded yet deeply contextualized insights into how early-career academic supervisors can develop practices that foster both student success and their own professional growth. The autoethnographic approach highlights the emotional and relational aspects of supervision, which are often overlooked in traditional pedagogical research (Gravett *et al.* 2022; Norton *et al.* 2023). I believe that postgraduate supervision is an ongoing, hands-on practice, not just a set of skills you check off a list.

### **3. A Journey as a Postgraduate Supervisor: Challenges, Victories and Strategies**

#### ***3.1 Experiences as a Supervisee and First Appointment as a Supervisor***

The completion of my PhD in 2023 was a transformative experience that laid the foundation for my supervisory role. The PhD journey was not just about academic growth, but also about personal development, work-life balance, and overcoming personal life and research challenges. This journey not only shaped my academic knowledge but also my supervision goals, and taught me the importance of resilience, time management, and the value of constructive feedback. Janta *et al.*'s (2014) book discusses how students may feel lonely and isolated during their doctoral studies and end up dropping out. This highlights the importance of resilience as a doctoral student and being able to manage time effectively (Bearman *et al.* 2024).

As a supervisee, I learned the significance of a supportive supervisor who fostered independence while providing structured guidance (Lee 2019). These experiences have also shaped my approach to supervision, emphasizing independent thinkers, clear communication, and sub-communities of mutual learning. In addition, I adopted a *Collaborative Cohort Model* for supervision (Burnett 1999). My students (supervisees) learned the culture of supporting one another. For example, once a student has mastered his or her research, that student will also provide guidance to other students. Due to this sub-community of mutual learning, I have created students who support each other beyond my organized meetings. Through this system, I have been able to create a learning community and ensure that I do not become the only one to support students. Through this approach, I am also able to use time efficiently to collectively address issues of feelings of isolation, which causes students to be unable to complete on time (Burnett 1999).

#### ***3.2 Early Supervisory Experiences and Lessons Learned***

When I started supervising, I was driven by a real passion to give back and help shape the next generation of researchers. However, honestly, I was anxious. I had serious doubts about balancing supervision with all my other academic responsibilities, such as teaching, community engagement, administrative duties, and the usual academic grind. This is a common concern for early-career academics under supervision. Setting boundaries and responding to the diverse

needs of my students were definite learning experiences in the beginning, combined with challenges.

## **4. Challenges Faced by Early-Career Academics in Postgraduate Supervision**

### ***4.1 Lack of Formal Supervision Training***

The lack of formal supervision training is a critical gap in academic development, as many early-career academics transition into supervisory roles without formal training, relying instead on their own experience as doctoral students (McAlpine & Amundsen 2011). Transitioning from being a doctoral student to suddenly being responsible for supervising other postgraduate students is a huge turning point; however, early-career academics often find themselves thrown into this role without much preparation (Pyhältö *et al.* 2024). Unlike teaching and learning, where there are usually workshops and trainings, supervision is often treated as a '*learn as you go*' or '*learning through trial and error*' (Abakah 2023; Ventista & Brown 2023). One is expected to somehow copy or absorb skills by reflecting on what their own supervisor/s did or just figuring it out as you go, which can leave early-career academic supervisors feeling lost. This is also evident in the studies by Fragouli (2021), Halse (2011), and Masuku (2021), highlighting that supervisees become research supervisors by reflecting on their postgraduate supervision programme or course and the impact of doctoral supervision on supervisors' learning. Therefore, creating a supportive environment for both postgraduate students and supervisors who are still in their early careers is essential for their academic and personal growth, fostering a sense of belonging and reducing staff turnover (Akpey-Mensah & Muchie 2019).

### ***4.2 Balancing Multiple Roles in Academia***

The role of early-career academics is multifaceted and comes with complex responsibilities, including postgraduate supervision, which forms a key component. Early-career academics are expected to excel in research and teaching, engage with communities, and contribute to administrative university services. All these duties put pressure on early-career academic supervisors, as they need to align these duties with institutional expectations in research outputs, and this is a balancing act that requires comprehensive skills and a

robust set of coping mechanisms (Rosa 2022). This is also referred to as '*triple burden*,' as early-career academic supervisors are expected to juggle all these duties with excellence. These competing demands can significantly detract early-career academic supervisors from their capacity to provide the dedicated supervision that postgraduate students require (Group 2017). The emphasis on research output for career advancement, pervasive pressure to '*publish or perish*,' secure grants and build a strong scholarly profile (Shalaby *et al.* 2020). This situation is further complicated by the diverse range of teaching commitments, such as managing large course loads, mentoring students, and implementing pedagogical innovations, as well as administrative and service roles including committee work, peer review, and contributions to institutional governance (Hénard & Roseveare 2012; Marshall *et al.* 2011). It has been observed that institutions often fail to fully recognize the workload associated with postgraduate supervision, which is often treated as '*invisible labour*' (Odularu & Akande 2024). This oversight can create a challenging situation for early-career academic supervisors, as they may face unsustainable expectations in terms of the support and guidance they provide to students (da Silva 2021).

As an early-career academic with almost 7 years of experience in HEIs, I normally teach 3 modules consisting of +/- 250 undergraduate students and +/- 30 postgraduate students, though enrolment numbers differ every year. Furthermore, I successfully supervised 50 honours students from the three universities. As an early-career academic who is new to postgraduate supervision (especially for master's and PhD students), this becomes a strain due to the workload, which causes limited time for in-depth feedback, resulting in delayed student progress. Similar findings were found by Hillbrick and Jucks (2019), who found that early career academics supervise an average of 5-8 postgraduate students while managing 2-3 courses per semester, with little institutional support. Therefore, institutions should account for supervision workload and formally allocate hours, just like teaching duties, to avoid conflicts or disagreements that might arise and delay students' progress in their research projects.

### **4.3 Power Dynamics in Supervisory Practices**

The supervisory process or practice involves the power dynamics that early-career academic supervisors need to pay careful attention to. They must always balance providing constructive feedback while fostering students' independence in research, enabling them to confidently explore their research interests while still receiving the necessary support (Odularu & Akande 2024). This

balance becomes even more complex when AI tools are integrated, potentially complicating supervisory relationships. AI tools such as ChatGPT, Elicit, Scite, Deepseek, and QuillBot reshape supervision practices in many ways. As many students adopt these tools to write, find literature, and analyze their research, early-career academic supervisors encounter difficulties adapting to AI-augmented supervision and ensuring that students adhere to academic integrity (Cotton *et al.* 2024). These tools disrupt traditional supervision practice, which is more of learning through conversations and feedback provided in the context of an ongoing relationship. Therefore, the ethical implications of these AI tools must be carefully considered while maintaining a human touch, which is essential for effective supervision (Zawacki-Richter *et al.* 2019).

It has been observed in the literature that there are issues of power in supervisor and supervisee relationships caused by supervisors, demonstrating their inherent personality traits, tendencies, and natural learning in their role as supervisors, which might clash with supervisees' expectations or research needs (Odularu & Akande 2024). For example, a supervisor who is not naturally empathetic might not show more compassion towards their students, or a supervisor who is not highly organized might not establish clear protocols that could meet students' needs and expectations. This behaviour might continue, since the supervisor might exercise his or her power in supervision, even if the student is unsatisfactory. In addition, power dynamics are visible, especially when the supervisee is not prepared for the postgraduate programme, which exacerbates the conflict that might arise during the supervision practice (Odularu & Akande 2024).

#### **4.4 Supervisor - Supervisee Conflicts in Supervision Practices**

Conflicts in supervision can arise from misaligned expectations, poor communication, disagreements on research methods, or supervisors' different working styles. Therefore, it is important to tackle these issues to prevent them from escalating and to perceive this conflict as a learning exercise. For example, in my supervision experience, there was a disagreement about the methodology, and we then decided to conduct a joint literature review together with the student to find a solution. This exercise transformed this conflict into a learning opportunity. Conflict resolution training can also be valuable; one study suggests that it can significantly reduce escalated cases and boost student satisfaction (Min *et al.* 2020). By proactively working together and showing empathy, one cannot only preserve the supervisory relationship but also show

students how to navigate professional conflicts.

As early-career academic supervisors, one way to ease potential tensions is by setting clear guidelines from the start. Even with the best efforts, some conflicts might be difficult to resolve on their own, highlighting the need for institutional support. Keep an eye out for warning signs, such as consistently missed deadlines or breakdowns in communication. In addition, addressing performance issues early can make a significant difference. If you spot these early, you can escalate the issue through formal channels, such as university mediation services, before things become too strained. In extreme cases, it might be necessary to reassign supervisors or suggest well-being referrals, but these should be the last resort after trying all collaborative solutions (Managing Conflicts in Social Work Supervision 2024). By seeing conflicts as a normal, manageable part of academic supervision and mentorship, early-career academic supervisors can strike a balance between accountability and support, ensuring that challenges become opportunities for growth, rather than roadblocks. Normalizing conflict resolution as a key skill can help create an environment in which both supervisors and students can build resilience and develop professionally (Peggs 2023). As noted in the findings on African Universities of Technology, engaging in collaborative mentorship programs can foster a supportive environment. The importance of clear supervisory guidelines and managing learning relationships at the doctoral level is critical for getting off on the right foot and staying on track (Lubbe *et al.* 2005).

## 5. Effective Supervision Strategies for Student Success

### 5.1 *Building a Strong Supervisor-Supervisee Foundation*

It is important to set clear research goals, deadlines, and communication methods from the outset to avoid potential misunderstandings of the supervisory relationship. A practical approach I always adopt is to discuss a supervision memorandum of understanding (MoU) with the supervisee in our very first supervision meeting. This MoU serves to clarify expectations, outline key project milestones, and ensure everyone is on the same page (Keane 2016). This approach has been effective in preventing misunderstandings and enhancing productivity while keeping the research project on track. A written supervision agreement outlining expectations and milestones has been shown to improve student-supervisor alignment and reduce conflicts (Tikkanen *et al.* 2024). Research indicates that structured agreements foster accountability, particularly in research projects in which ambiguity can lead to delays (Lee 2019). There-

fore, providing students with a documented framework ensures transparency and helps them manage supervisee and supervisor responsibilities effectively.

A structured plan for supervisory meetings to ensure regular check-ups is outlined in the MoU (Keane 2016). Setting weekly or bi-weekly structured meetings, whether face-to-face or via digital platforms (such as MS Teams and Zoom), is critical for consistent research progress tracking (Daramola 2021; Keane 2016). Establishing manageable short-term goals, such as submitting a draft literature review or completing a methodology chapter, keeps students engaged and motivated (Daramola 2021). Studies have shown that when students and supervisors interact regularly with a focus on specific goals, they tend to feel less anxious, produce better research, and improve research output (Yende 2021). In addition, utilizing shared online platforms such as Google Docs alongside peer support groups can create a more collaborative learning environment for supervisees (Burnett 1999). Supervisors also experience some sort of burnout during the supervision process; therefore, engaging in peer networks, whether through formal workshops or informal discussions, can be beneficial to the early-career academic supervisors. Participation in supervisory communities of practice provides emotional support and shared problem-solving strategies (Huet & Casanova 2022). Evidence shows that mentorship among supervisors enhances reflective practice and reduces burnout (Ali & Coate 2013). Institutions that facilitate supervisor development programs report higher satisfaction and better student outcomes (Duke 2017).

## ***5.2 Building Trust and Rapport***

Excellent postgraduate supervision is not just about academic guidance but also about creating a space where students feel supported and confident to succeed. The heart of effective supervision lies in the ability to build genuine trust and rapport. Research emphasizes that supervisors who actively demonstrate an interest in their students' development while fostering an inclusive, respectful environment tend to cultivate more productive supervision relationships (Daramola 2021). This involves maintaining approachability through consistent availability and open communication channels, practicing active listening to understand students' perspectives and concerns, and intentionally acknowledging their milestones and achievements to reinforce their sense of belonging to academia (Ngulube 2021). Regular informal check-ins, such as quick chats about challenges and aspirations, can significantly strengthen this bond between supervisors and supervisees. Equally important is showing cultural sensitivity,

which is especially vital in diverse academic settings from the outset, as these are necessary within which meaningful supervision can flourish (Daramola 2021). Combining these elements creates a supportive foundation that enables both academic growth and personal development.

### **5.3 Providing Constructive Feedback**

Effective feedback is essential for student growth; however, its impact depends on how it is delivered. A well-structured approach, such as the ‘sandwich’ method, begins with strengths, addresses areas for improvement, and concludes with encouragement, helping students receive constructive criticism without feeling discouraged (Bastola & Hu 2024). To maximize effectiveness, feedback should be timely and specific, targeting concrete aspects of work rather than the student personally (Bearman *et al.* 2024). Supervisors can further enhance learning by prompting self-reflection through open-ended questions and guiding students to critically assess their own progress. Importantly, feedback should be framed as part of an iterative dialogue, reinforcing that revision is an integral, not a punitive, part of scholarly development (Zhang & Gao 2024).

### **5.4 Facilitating Critical Thinking**

The development of independent research skills and critical thinking is at the core of effective postgraduate supervision. Supervisors play a pivotal role in cultivating these abilities by creating an intellectually stimulating environment where students feel empowered to challenge assumptions and consider diverse perspectives (Sibya & Mahosi 2025). Practical strategies include facilitating brainstorming sessions to spark innovative approaches, posing thought-provoking, open-ended questions that deepen analytical skills, and structuring regular opportunities for students to present and refine their work through peer feedback. These methods not only foster academic autonomy but also prepare students for the complex problem-solving demands of scholarly research (Usman *et al.* 2023).

### **5.5 Motivation and Support**

The postgraduate research journey often presents significant challenges, with many students experiencing periods of self-doubt, frustration, or difficulty in managing time effectively. Effective supervisors recognize these common

struggles and provide crucial emotional and academic support by normalizing the difficulties inherent in the research process (Gunasekera *et al.* 2021). Practical support strategies include offering flexible deadlines or adjusting timelines to accommodate individual learning needs, encouraging peer collaboration and mentorship opportunities, and helping students develop personalized approaches to time management and stress reduction (Fragouli 2021; John, n.d.). This balanced approach acknowledges the emotional dimensions of research, while maintaining academic rigor, ultimately fostering resilience and sustained productivity (Peggs 2023).

## 6. Conclusion

Transformative postgraduate supervision is an ongoing journey for early-career academics that demands intentional guidance, pedagogical skills, emotional intelligence, and commitment to growth. As demonstrated in this chapter, successful supervisors combine structured approaches (clear expectations, delivering constructive feedback) with adaptive strategies (motivation and emotional support, flexibility) to meet students' diverse needs. The key practices discussed, from establishing trust and rapport through active listening to fostering critical thinking through open-ended questioning, collectively contribute to a supervisory model that nurtures both academic excellence and personal growth. By embracing these supervisory competencies, early-career academic supervisors can create a professional environment that is transformative and foster intellectual curiosity, resilience, and a sense of belonging to their postgraduate students. As higher education continues to evolve, these human-centered yet rigorous supervision practices remain essential for sustaining quality research and fostering inclusive academic communities.

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