Chapter 12: Essential Elements of Support for Effective Supervision and Well-being of First-generation Postgraduate Students: An Autoethnographic Perspective

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Abstract

This article is a contribution to the scholarship on supervisory support aimed at first generation post graduate African students' well-being in South African universities. Whilst there is a plethora of studies on supervisory models, styles and practices, there is a distinct paucity of research on personal and academic support provided when a post graduate student experiences a challenge/s that threaten progression and timeous completion of the post graduate study. This paper attempts to fill the gap on support as epistemological access. The discussion is located within the supervisor student relationship (SSR) and I offer an autoethnographic perspective on supervisory support as a thread of epistemological access underpinned by an intermediate to strong supervisory style, an 'ethic of care' (Tronto 2020) and the notion of a 'psychological contract' (Cureton 2016). I reveal my attempts to support students' mental well-being whilst encouraging post graduate students towards academic success. My reflections and reflexivity distil from my supervision experiences and students' digital and written feedback which establishes what comprises essential elements of support for their positive well-being. I present a layered framework of my supervisory selves for effective supervision including a triple vignette of support (care, concern and collaboration). I also reveal my commitment and contribution to 'technical generativity' (Kotre 1984) in developing the next generation of African academics. I conclude with theoretical insights on staff and students' mental well-being and the construct of 'underprepared supervisors' for first generation post graduate students in higher education.

Introduction

There is an abundance of literature on effective / quality supervision for post graduate students for good reason. A significant argument has been that pre-paring the next generation of academics is a key role of supervisors in contributing to developing the knowledge economy (Govender & Markus 2025; Lemmer 2016) but a more pressing concern should be that of these students' success in university contexts where they are 'first generation'. Ngulube (2021) asserted that whilst there is a substantial body of research internationally on post graduate supervision practices, in South Africa by comparison, it is an under researched field. Indeed, ethnographic contributions have aimed to mine into South African post graduate supervisors' thinking about their pedagogical practices (Maistry 2015; Lemmer 2016; Govender & Markus 2025) but studies on post graduate students' well-being is limited save for a study by Maritz (2024) on the COVID-19 pandemic. The need for further research and critical reflection is relevant because the pandemic has passed but the widening of access in South African public higher education institutions (HEIs) continues which has resulted in large numbers of 'first generation' African post graduate students who now occupy public higher education. Without epistemic/ epistemological access, their success is limited (CHE 2024) with repercussions for the South African economy. The question that needs to be addressed is 'What are the elements of support for effective supervision of post graduate students when they experience a challenge/challenges?' This article is thus a contribution to the support scholarship for effective supervision of first generation post graduate students for success. I embed post graduate students' positive mental well-being within the discourse on effective supervision.

Public HEIs in democratic SA, propelled by social justice imperatives and the need for equity of outcomes for African students, have foregrounded research into first generation undergraduate students in their first year of study. The result of neoliberal influences on institutions have unfolded as a plethora of research investment into studies on first year undergraduates given concerns by the Council on Higher Education (CHE) on first year drop out and under-graduate throughput rates however post graduate throughput and drop-out rates should also be of equal concern (CHE 2022; 2024) and as a priority on the

institutional agenda. These very same neoliberal influences on institutions unfold as significant pressure on university supervisors to ensure that their students complete their studies in the minimum time period with performance management repercussions for supervisors when this is not met. Thus, the pressure on supervisors to effectively supervise post graduate students is immense, affecting their mental well-being. This pressure has contributed to different models of sharing supervision beyond the master-apprenticeship (Ngulube 2021) to cohort (Maistry 2015), community and small groups (McKenna 2016; Nkoane 2014). Despite these innovations, an underlying thread since I began supervising has always been: What constitutes essential elements of support for postgraduate students' success when they experience challenges in completing their studies? The supervision contract crafted by the institution defining the SSR offers some inroads however I have not been convinced that this is a substantial document for student support given my experiences with first generation students. Interestingly, Ngulube (2021: 255) reminds us that supervision practices are poorly theorised and not well understood and makes a call for supervisory pedagogies and herein lies my other contribution which I hope will assist in strengthening the supervisory contract.

The paper is structured in the followed way: I begin with the grand discourses on supervisory styles which establish what could be an essential element in supervision whilst the next section discusses selected key narratives from the quantity and quality scholarship on supervision practices highlighting another element, namely the value of the supervisor's characteristics. Indeed, questions about whether the supervision quality is good/ effective (Nulty, Kiley & Meyers 2009; Dimitrova 2016) or not, have endured in the scholarship and these could untangle caveats of essential elements of support for effective supervision. I unpack the current narratives attached to the widening of access into public higher education in SA and then I present a combination of personal and academic elements of support required by my students drawing on my recent supervision of postgraduate students from 2020 onwards. Using a qualitative autoethnographic approach, I reflect on my supervision extracting some critical vignettes of support for postgraduate supervision success of the students. Distilling from this, I present a framework of essential academic and personal elements of support for my students who experience challenges during the course of their study. This can be used for discussion in workshops to capacitate early career supervisors for institutional planning in addition to strengthening the supervision contract, namely the Memorandum of Understanding between the supervisor and student.

Supervisory Styles

There are numerous supervision styles but Spear (2020) distils these into 3 main supervisory ones based on the supervisor's interactions with students: strong, weak and intermediate. Additionally, there can be a multitude of variations in each of these categories. For Spear (2020), a strong interaction is most evident where there are laboratory experiments and students meet with the supervisor to plan, undertake the experiments, and monitor the outcomes. At the opposite end of the continuum is weak interaction. This occurs when the supervisor and student have an initial meeting and thereafter the student works independently most of the time with very little input from the supervisor until submission of the draft thesis. In this supervisory style, the student has to be self-sufficient. The intermediate supervisory style and variations of this style is the most common and unfolds where there are regular meetings with the consent of all parties: supervisor and student. The supervisor is engaged in critiqueing the student's work at regular intervals and drafts of various chapters are submitted which progressively develops the study until timeous submission of the thesis.

It's interesting that Spear at no point, alludes to what could be a challenge/s in any supervisory style which may derail the progress of the student, and herein lies my contribution via this article, what is the nature of the support provided to students by the supervisor, when a student experiences a challenge/s that threaten his/her progression and timeous completion of the post graduate study. Erikson's theory on human development resonates with the many crises that human beings face which they have to navigate successfully before progressing to the next level of development. He explains that a crisis is 'a crucial period of increased vulnerability and heightened potential for development' (Erikson 1978:05). This has resonance for postgraduate students who are navigating studies and they don't have the cultural capital of their parent's experiences of university life to help them navigate challenges, making them first generation post graduate students. They may experience this challenge/s in any post graduate study. Students' mental well-being is important during times of crises and Maritz (2024: 02) explains that 'Mental health serves as the foundation for achieving comprehensive well-being' and the value of care: 'Care acts as the mediator that links mental health to the supervisory process'. Tronto's ethic of care (2020) model, underpinned by reflexivity, is a contribution to the 'nature of care, ethical responsibility and social justice'. The SSR is an important influence in the mental health and well-being at postgraduate level (White *et al.* 2023) of both the staff and students.

Thus, in the context of students in massified public HEIs, how does the supervisor support and encourage the majority African postgraduate students towards success and steer students away from possible drop out given the recent CHE (2022 2024) statistics on first generation students facing epistemological access challenges and a multitude of socio-economic challenges as well.

Supervision: The Quantity Discourse

Encapsulated within the quantity discourse of supervision, lies the number of post graduate students which an institution allocates to a supervisor as part of the workload. This is an interesting caveat of the greater supervision discourse because it varies across institutions locally influencing the quality supervision discourse as it impacts on the time available for the supervisor to provide support to each student. Carter and Kumar (2017) have noted that students and supervisor are under immense pressure to complete timeously. Spear's study (2020:07) did draw attention to feedback as being important and a supervisor's workload can influence how often a student receives feedback. Spear notes the importance of 'regular and appropriate contact', and this aligns with intermediate student- supervisor interactions, as being necessary for effective supervision. Studies have found that students have been unhappy with their supervisors when they were too busy with teaching and have too many students (Spear 2020). These findings link to Cureton's concept (2016) of a 'psycho-logical contract' but he references this with the institution. It is applicable to the supervisor who is a representative, acting on behalf of the institution. Spear's findings (2020) do flag that the workload of academic staff can be overwhelming as supervision is just one aspect of academic staff life. Spear (2020:09) also warns that 'constructive and timely criticism' impacts on handing in a thesis on time. Within the literature on supervisory styles, there is a distinctive gap about the nature of student- supervisor relationship (SSR) that hinges on interactions for the student's mental well-being during a challenge/s faced by the student, although the supervisor's characteristics and attitudes are viewed as important for effective supervision (Buttery 2005). The same critique applies to the discourse on the supervisor's characteristics and how this can facilitate the students' mental well-being in times of a personal crisis. Studies on the supervisor's characteristics, attitudes and a pedagogy of care embedded within the discourse of numbers (number of students for supervision, number of modules to teach, number of students graduating timeously etc.) signal an important focus as it forms the foundation of the SSR.

Supervisor's Characteristics, Attitudes and Supervision Support

In respect of the quality of supervision, Buttery *et al.* (2005) expresses the valuable role of the supervisor in ensuring student success. An interesting caveat of the supervision quality discourse emerges from the work of Liang *et al.* (2021) who undertook a study on post graduate students' well-being and the student supervisor relationship (SSR) which revealed insights on first-generation students. Liang *et al.* (2021: 273) revealed 'it is more difficult for first-generation students to establish sound SSR than non-first-generation students. Additionally, a good SSR is more important for first-generation students' positive well-being'. These findings are significant because they place focus on supervisors needing to strength the student supervision relationship for first generation postgraduate students and to offer greater support to towards them achieving 'positive well-being' (Liang *et al.* 2021: 273). Australia faces a similar battle of post graduate first generation student success, upon widening of access into universities for indigenous students and this situation resonates with that of first generation African students in South Africa. Andersen *et al.* (2021) asserted that indigenous post graduate students do depend on their supervisors for support and understanding for their overall well-being and later Andersen *et al.* (2022) emphasized fears for the mental health and well-being of indigenous students. Pham *et al.* (2025) also researching supervision have called for the strengthening of student support for indigenous students.

There are different forms of support that could contribute to this well-being but Liang *et al.* (2021) don't venture this far. Overall *et al.* (2011) in Chang *et al.* (2025:02) explain two types of support for post graduate students: academic and personal. Academic support refers to assistance provided by supervisors in relation to students' research tasks including helping postgraduates establish clear goals and expectations, assisting them in academic activities, accessing resources and support for research. Personal support is provided by the supervisor to alleviate stress and build the confidence of the student. Moreton-Robinson *et al.* (2020) state that to strengthen student support, there is a need for both students and the supervisor to understand their roles and responsibilities. These roles and responsibilities can be found in the supervision contract which each institution carves out for supervisors and candidates.

The Memorandum of Understanding (MoU): A Guiding Document

Spear (2020) states that there are some universities which have established set

guidelines for regular meetings and the university where I am located, effects this through the MoU which is mandatory for the supervisor and student. The MoU clearly states that the SSR is one of mentorship. It contains several technical responsibilities such as assistance with the student in applying for ethical clearance, plagiarism and completing progress reports on students. There is also a caveat on students' academic development such as language skills and providing opportunities for fieldtrips and conferences. It extends to guidance on topics and institutional requirements where students expect their supervisors to provide assistance. Whilst the MoU between the student and the supervisor is an institutional academic contract which outlines the roles and responsibilities of both parties, the personal support aspects are thin in this contract. It could be that there is a tacit belief that students will be recommended by the supervisor for counselling should they need personal support. I am mindful that there exists the narrative of underprepared institutions (Dhunpath & Vithal 2012) in respect of first generation students, and I have begun to question whether we are underprepared supervisors as there is a gap on personal support in the MoU.

Methodology

I understand supervision to be about shaping and supporting the post graduate student, drawing on the definition by Anderson *et al.* (2006). My aim in his paper is to self-reflect on my supervision via autoethnography (Spear 2020) but I extend this to analytic autoethnography as used by O Neil (2018). Autoethnography is a qualitative narrative approach to research which embodies the self in multiple social contexts (Creswell & Poth 2018). Lemmer (2016: 79) explains that 'Autoethnography also aims to link the self with the social and cultural world – the self in relationship with others in a social context'. I narrate my personal story (Govender & Markus 2025) using my embedded perspective of supervision with post graduate students and I utilise the reflexivity of autoethnography to highlight my insider perspective in a public HEI. I bring to the fore what my own students have been satisfied with and have needed (using unsolicited self-reported data) in the supervision process coupled with my own experiences to establish what students regard as essential elements for their support and to further enrich my practice through my experiences. My second aim is to develop scholarship on support on 'positive well-being' (Liang *et al.* 2021) of first generation post graduate students and staff who are supervising.

O'Neil (2018) in an autoethnographic paper reflecting on his own supervision experiences towards improving his practice, advances the value of analytic autoethnography for professional development in postgraduate supervision. However, his study focused on effective supervision for masters students' theses whilst I report on findings from both masters and doctoral students in Geography Education. O'Neil (2018: 487 citing the work of Anderson *et al.* 2006) explains that in analytic autoethnography, there are five aspects: '1) the researcher is a complete member researcher (CMR); 2) analytic reflexivity is used during the study; 3) the researcher is visible and active in the text; 4) there is dialogue with informants beyond the self; and 5) there is a commitment to theoretical analysis'. Autoethnography allows for deep insights into experiences which is not always possible in other methodologies (Ngunjiri, Hernandez & Chang 2010).

Whilst, I have been supervising for 15 years, I pull from fresh memories (Wall 2008) in the past 5 years with selected students to highlight certain vignettes of support which they consider to be essential in the SSR. I distil from predominantly digital communication such as WhatsApp messages and emails as well as written acknowledgements in submitted theses. Formally, I interact with my students weekly and at times more frequently given their needs or if I think there is an event/discussion important for their growth and development. If I am away on conference, my students are provided with targets to meet in my absence. My thinking and decision-making is also weaved into the discussion for rich analytic autoethnography. I provide my general approach to supervision mindful that my invitational philosophy to teaching and learning is embedded in my character and attitude which influences my supervision style and the support I am able to provide. The views expressed reflect my own insights of post graduate supervision and my students' articulations. I am confident about preparing my students academically for success given that in my 15 years of supervision, I have graduated 19 students, but I'm acutely aware of the literature on first generation students needing greater non-academic support (Liang *et al.* 2021).

There is an institutional performativity expectation for supervisors, another neoliberal influence, that graduating students must occur timeously. Additionally, supervisors develop the next generation of academics who will have to be effective supervisors. Lemmer (2016: 81) uses generativity in her autoethnographic paper on postgraduate supervision and she cites Erikson (1964) as defining generativity 'as establishing and guiding future generations through the creation and maintenance of a wide range of institutional, cultural,

and individual resources that are necessary to sustain intergenerational solidarity'. I draw on Kotre's (1984) expression of technical generativity which is the transference of knowledge and skills to the next generation of students who will likely enter academia.

My Initial Steps in Supervision - Building the Foundation

When I began supervising, I was not provided with an institutional mentor. I noticed an opportunity for professional development and joined a cohort seminar group for higher education supervision to develop my skills. I had a doctorate in Education but I was uncertain if I had the necessary tools to be an effective supervisor. Similar to O' Neil (2018), I began with a dyadic relationship of mentor and mentee by providing targets to be reached at the beginning of each year, an outline for the thesis, undertaking group and individual consulting on a regular basis physically and through email. Parts of this were distilled from my own supervision as a doctoral student. This is not unusual and Govender and Markus (2025) cite studies (Bitzer & Albertyn 2011; Lee 2009) where this has unfolded with numerous academics moving into the role of a supervisor upon graduation and using the very same methods of their supervision as a blueprint for how they should supervise.

I inserted aspects that I felt were relevant from my own doctoral supervision or what I felt was lacking when I was a student, for example- annual targets, workshops to craft articles for publication and student presentations of their progress. The targets and presentations were the result of me participating in the School of Education cohort seminars over weekends (Friday to Sunday in selected months), spread across the year. I gleaned knowledge from more senior colleagues but these were more academic in focus in the fields of theory, methodology, critical thinking, analysis, presentation of data and theory building.

My first inclusion in a doctoral cohort was as a student in the Education cohort at the then University of Durban Westville. The supervisors were highly regarded experts in their fields and introduced guest presenters for added insights. I was in awe of them but I was also a confident student, reading extensively about my phenomenon (teacher migration) which I was pioneering in South Africa, especially on theories and research design. I had defined my pathway for my study with detailed targets and the ability to qualify my choices for each aspect of my study.

I was aware that one of the main supervisors in the cohort sessions had very little patience with first year doctoral students who were unable to defend their research position and qualify their research design choices. Whilst I understood the need for this, I was saddened at how harshly she would comment about other students' prospective studies. This was my first encounter of post graduate students' mental well-being and it bothered my peers as well. They discussed how uncomfortable, intimidated and embarrassed they were at receiving comments without care in an open forum. This resulted with me noticing that some students dropped out of the doctoral study programme. This drove me to read more intensely so that I would not be on the receiving end of her wrath. I was rewarded, when during a coffee break, she approached me to say that I reminded her of herself when she was younger. I didn't want to ask her to explain .... I did ponder whether she was referring to me being equally cruel and candid, trying to match her with confidence during questioning in the sessions. Either way, I completed my study and graduated in the minimum 3 years. In hindsight, I realise that this was a crucial point for me – I was shaken by her harshness and lack of warmth towards my peers although mesmerised by her brilliance as a researcher. I hope that as a supervisor, my students never find me unapproachable and cruel in my comments, their well-being is important and it propels my supervision support. I want to exude warmth so they can succeed enveloped by care. I sometimes think that maybe I do enter that terrain of harshness when I'm repeatedly making the same comment during supervision consultations about continued plagiarism and the submission of work with the same errors as the student's previous submission. I remember a student in my early years of supervision telling me '*talk to me, don't talk at me*'. It is an area that I continue to refine and hone my skills as a supervisor.

I'm comforted by comments such as '*Thank you very much for the feedback*' (Bongani) which has made me realise that the guidelines in the physical contract (MoU) on the supervisor needing to provide feedback timeously, is appreciated by students when a supervisor adheres to it. Morrow (1994) explains that epistemological access is about support, guidance and collaboration and whilst the MoU defines areas for guidance and mentorship, there are gaps in respect of the support and collaboration that is needed for epistemological access for students. Valuable theoretical insights into the nuances of support can be found in the work of Masuku (2021:145) who states that 'It is crucial for the supervisors to be aware of power relations, students' issues, and to know their students background'. Thus, beyond the institutional MoU, there is a 'psychological contract' (Cureton 2016) which I believe

extends to support in the form of care and concern for students' welfare and well-being, that appears to be significant in the SSR. For example, during the recent floods, I enquired about the safety of two students via WhatsApp as one sent me a video of his village in flood since he was unable to connect over a deadline for submitting work. Both are part of the masters' programme, and are close friends and they live in deeply rural areas that were affected. Bongani messaged me '*Except for the prolonged downpour, everything is fine ... I think he is okay, we did speak during the course of the day ... I will try to reach out to him today. Prof, thank you so much for your concern about us*'. Later his colleague Sanele responded to me via WhatsApp: '*better now that the volume of the water has dropped ... Prof once again, thank you so much, the support you are giving us, its greatly appreciated*'.

There have been other times where students have been ill or their roles as parents overwhelm them and they are unable to meet targets or attend meetings. I know support and understanding are needed to provide for their positive well-being so they can progress. For example, Zanele messaged me '*I am sorry, I was not able to speak to you today, I had some personal matters, I had to attend to, If u are still able to speak to me, I can call you, after my doctor's appointments in the morning*' and Thabi explained ' *…found 1 or 2 things I need to fix, my son had his vaccinations yesterday so he's been really miserable, so I'm trying to work with him on my lap*…'. I want to create an environment underpinned by a pedagogy of understanding, care and concern that enables learning and progress in the post graduate degree, rather than disable it. Research by both Fragouli *et al.* (2021) and Roach *et al.* (2019) found that the quality of the SSR determines the outcome of the research project. Andersen *et al.* (2018:3-4) have also warned that 'The pedagogical relationship between the student and the supervisor … is intrinsic to the student's success', and it appears that the affective aspects hold the key to supporting students for success. This is also reinforced in comments. Zola sent me a WhatsApp message when I told her that I was presenting a lecture on student supervision (in 2021) and would like to share our experiences: '*Pls also include you've been my mother for the past 10 years ♡. It goes beyond supervision*'.

Intermeshing Personal and Academic Support

The value of intermeshing the personal and academic elements of support for student success seems to signal a route to students' positive well-being. Spear's study (2020) emphasized student's expectations of 'a measure of pastoral care'

where they expect 'advice, sympathy and encouragement outside of academic advice 'and herein is where I feel that inadequate attention is given in the literature on the extent to which a supervisor has to support post graduate students for their well-being as this will steer them towards success. I believe that much more is needed than just 'a measure' for first generation post graduate students. Chang *et al.* (2024:02) have illuminated that 'personal support from supervisors can help alleviate postgraduates' stress. When postgraduates receive care, understanding, encouragement, and appreciation from their supervisors, they enhance their psychological capital, including self-efficacy, adaptability, and resilience'. Chang cites Ahmed *et al.* (2017) who establish that personal support has a ripple effect leading to the achievement of academic goals such as research, resilience in responding effectively to challenges, increased confidence & optimistic behaviour.

A 'Triple C' Vignette of Student Support: Care, Comfort and Collaboration

This vignette of support features in two separate narratives that I discuss below: one narrative (Sibusiso) is of an anticipated challenge which the student knew he would be experiencing and needed to navigate and resolve. The other narrative (Slindile) is of an unexpected challenge that arrived as a hurdle to the consistent academic progress of the student, who suddenly needed personal support.

The Expected Challenge…

The narrative of Sibusiso demonstrates how personal support in the form of care and concern catalysed into cross disciplinary research collaboration leading to professional growth and academic success. Sibusiso did not have a family support structure, and whilst fee remission is available for the doctoral study, he needed a job to provide for his daily needs during the minimum time of three years. He declared that finance was his greatest worry in one of our early consultations. I was concerned for his welfare and I comforted him that we will find a source of income as there were numerous contract staff positions being advertised daily. I was also leader of several funded projects and participating in other projects with colleagues (institutional and national). We were all in need of some form of project assistance. Sibusiso was prepared to dedicate the required time to co-ordinate aspects of two of the projects and he received the

requisite training for each, affording him epistemological access (Morrow 1994) into research. He also had to balance this with his study and he chose wisely by selecting the project closest to his doctoral study so it could broaden and enrich his conceptual, methodological and theoretical understandings. He was also in a position to now transition from student to colleague so the power dynamics altered as he collaborated with myself and other colleagues to drive the projects towards achieving the deliverables timeously. He was enthusiastic and participated with zeal, building cross disciplinary research relationships and learning new research skills. He emailed me stating '*Thanks so much for your support and giving me a chance to participate in this project, which is so relevant to my PhD study as well as this paper which we are working on, I am confident that after the project*…'. He was already planning for further academic endeavours to keep the momentum, with us as project leaders having gained epistemological access. Sibusiso has travelled extensively across South Africa as a result of the projects, building research networks and providing insights from one of the projects for a new international project proposal. He completed his doctoral study in the minimum 3 years and we co-published two articles during this time. Participating in the projects also came with challenges and I recall a WhatsApp message to me from another doctoral student informing me that Sibusiso had not been paid on time from both projects due to a technical systems glitch and this lack of income had repercussions for his food security. I understood that I had to respond as I had an ethical responsibility (Tronto 2020) towards him.

An important aspect of my supervision is to create personal and professional living, learning communities by linking students who have similar research interests as they can offer support to each other either during our cohort consultations or outside of formal meetings. At the commencement of a meeting, each student speaks about his/her work life balance elaborating on the obstacles they are encountering, the opportunities and triumphs. Their peers are then encouraged to respond or add to this discussion and to build relationships with each other after the cohort meeting for further engagement with each other. Students are also asked to comment during the cohort session or later via email/ WhatsApp about what type of support they need. These communities develop organically and I suggest during sessions what the strengths of the various students are and students themselves identify colleagues who can assist them to develop certain skills or if their personalities resonate with each other. Living, learning bonds crystallise over time. During cohort sessions, doctoral students who have already graduated and may now be located at other institutions as

lecturers (locally and abroad) are invited to present on their experiences, their Geographical and writing expertise, their strengths developed through their doctoral study group consultations and workshops. They now share and assist to develop other students in the existing cohort. In this way technical generativity (Kotre 1984) is nurtured. Graduated students also share their details with the current students and as such a hierarchy of successful doctoral students with different strengths develops across the years for current students inspiring them towards success. This is feedback sent to me by Sibusiso: '…*I am now in touch with Zola on WhatsApp and I asked her to check ideas which needs some citations and to check plagiarism using her anti plagiarism software as well and to do some peer reviews. As such I will edit the article and send a refined version tomorrow morning. Sorry for the inconvenience. Thanks for linking me with her*'.

At times, students feel more at ease to share or speak about their challenges to each other as part of the living, learning community and this deep connection is valuable for building their personal support structure as first generation students. Sibusiso now provides research guidance to current postgraduate students on referencing, professional learning communities and environmental education. Students are grateful for all the forms of support provided (academic and personal) and at the end of 2024, Zola sent me this message after receiving news of her doctoral dissertation passing the examination process: ' … *cannot believe how fast the year can go…thank you for all the love, guidance and support you have given me throughout the years'.*

After his doctoral graduation, Sibusiso was offered a post-doctoral fellowship at another HEI by one of the national project leaders, coupled with the opportunity to supervise postgraduate students, after being recognised for his research competence, rapid professional development and his publications history. His increased confidence and supervisory growth is evident in his emails to me: '*I'm currently supervising a masters' student. Since graduating, I focussed on leading supervision workshops and benefitting from your mentorship*'. Later, he messaged me on his next achievement, '… *I was asked to review one of the chapters for Dr Z…special edition and this is what he said after going through my review…thought of sharing with you because I got all these skills from you and am forever grateful'…..The comment he received from the editor of the special edition was: 'Thanks for the thorough review. We need to co-edit a special edition together soon. Your editing skills are -happy emoji*'

Despite being far away physically, he together with other graduated students spread across the world and in South Africa, continue to participate in

the cohort meetings and workshops depending on the agenda for each meeting, they have become my supervision colleagues, collaborating and contributing to content knowledge, writing skills and honing our supervision skills, sharing our experiences and ideas. Our professional living, learning communities are enduring beyond the doctoral time period and across borders. Sibusiso who is now in another province, sent me this message for a workshop on referencing that I suggested he lead: *'Hi…I can do the workshop but I will need some time to prepare for the presentation and I will prepare a quiz of not more than 10 MCQs to do at the end of the session'.* He was also invited by another academic Dr X, who was my doctoral scholar and is part of our supervision team to participate in an online proposal defence. Sibusiso messaged me with the news of his academic advancement '*Hi Prof, I was part of the masters proposal review panel today for Dr X's student'.* Post graduate academic supervision support has been nationalised without a formalised memorandum of under-standing and the development of the next generation of academics are taking shape.

Navigating the Unexpected Challenge …

The supervisory contract (MoU) will not alert you that SSR is unique to each student: each student is an individual and his/her context, experiences, personal and academic support needs are different given a variety of factors such as 'personality, background and aspirations' (Spear 2020). Masuku (2021: 145) also similarly advances that 'supervisors need to realize that students are not the same' and subsequently the challenges that each face will be different and the support and extent of this support will vary. An example of greater care, comfort and collaboration was evident with Slindile. She was employed as a climate change training officer providing support in climate mitigation to local farmers with funding by USAID. She is hardworking and extremely committed and within two years she had advanced academically and submitted the first three written chapters (introduction, literature and theory and methodology) of her dissertation. She was thus progressing well in her studies until this obstacle. A major unexpected obstacle to her consistent progress occurred when Trump cut aid to Africa in March 2025. Overnight, she lost her job and mentally the strain was evident in our consultations.

Maritz (2024) had noted how mental strain affects postgraduate students' well-being and the need for the supervisor to provide personal support. We were spending time on WhatsApp daily: talking, messaging, sending voice

notes, and having zoom meetings about the repercussions of her loss of income, how she would continue with data generation and her future. We have spoken about the repercussions of the loss of aid for the non-governmental organisation and her data generation plan for her study. I was intent on her building 'psychological capital' (Chang 2024) and I suggested that she should write an article on the impact of the loss of aid for all stakeholders who are part of the NGO. I surmised that this would be some form of mental therapy for her to capture the details vividly in real time, and secondly, she would explore and learn about aspects of positionality and a new approach to qualitative analysis. She could also achieve an academic target: a publication from this, if the peer review process was successful. We also conversed at length about opportunities for employment and began searching for research positions that she could apply for abroad and locally: she would find the advert or I would and discuss it with her then I would craft the motivation letters if needed and email them. We continue to do this until she is successful; she is suddenly under immense mental strain and shifting her to 'positive well-being' (Liang *et al.* 2021) is necessary for effective supervision.

Ethical responsibility (Tronto 2020), care and concern drive me, I feel under pressure to assist her to find a job so she can persist in her studies, continue with her data generation and meet her academic targets for her doctoral study. I'm just a WhatsApp message / call away if she needs to talk and she calls me regularly, more than any other of my students. I understand her pain and I don't want her to lose the momentum of her study. I am also acutely aware that this is a temporary hurdle that I need to help her to navigate in her journey. Similar to Lemmer (2016: 92), I am conscious that I'm engaging in technical generativity (Kotre 1984) and I'm confident that she will soon be offered an academic or a research position. Until this unfolds, I will continue to scaffold her, providing the academic and personal support that she needs for her 'positive well-being' (Liang *et al.* 2021). At the time of submitting this article, she was shortlisted for a contract lecturer position at a university close to her home.

I have realised that every post graduate student will need support at some point in their study.

The Road to Success is Paved with Obstacles...

I am reminded by Zola of the lengthy heart wrenching struggles that can derail a student, threatening timeous completion of the post graduate research study and how important academic and personal support is for student success. The

following excerpt is taken from Zola's acknowledgements in her dissertation:

'*I would like to thank my supervisor, Professor Manik, whose support, patience, guidance, devotion, assistance, grace, and encouragement motivated me to combine my interest in XXXXXXXX in bringing this dissertation to fruition. This has been a five-year journey of pitfalls, 'never giving up', and 'soldiering on', a bumpy road to completion due to my father's passing, which made it challenging to stay 'afloat'. Prof. Manik has been more than a supervisor; she has been my mentor, a role model, and a researcher of the highest calibre who has encouraged me since my undergraduate studies. Thank you for walking this path with me. Ngiyabonga kakhulu Ma wami; Izandla zedlula ikhanda'*.
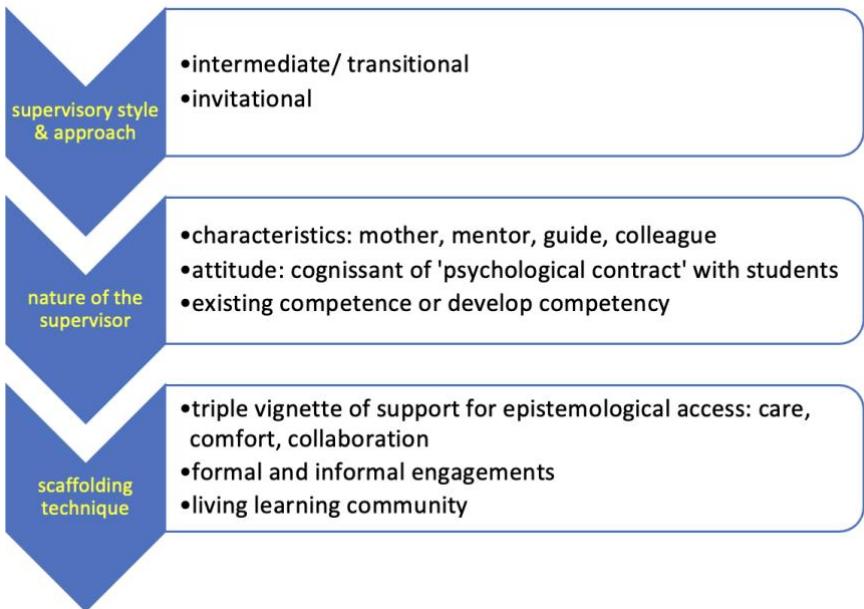
Maybe this is the key, to be '*more than a supervisor*' or is it that the supervisory role now is more personal support than academic support for first generation post graduate students. Liang *et al.* (2021) and Pham *et al.* (2025) have both recently revealed the value of personal support.

Discussion

Effective supervision extends further as demonstrated in the narratives which I presented for discussion. In SA, with the widening of access into higher education, first generation postgraduate students are experiencing academic and personal challenges that threaten their progress and which can lead to slow throughput or drop out. Challenges have been reported in research studies (Jepchirchir & Munyua 2022; Mavuru *et al.* 2023) and because supervisors are the primary source of guidance and support, they have to provide various forms of effective support (Chang *et al.* 2025: 02) which is equally strenuous for their mental well-being. Wang *et al.* (2013) had long declared that it is the role of the supervisor to provide psychological support that reduces a student's mental pressure. Academic and personal support are thus argued to be essential for postgraduate students (Ballard & Clanchy 1993; Overall *et al.* 2011 in Chang *et al.* 2025). There is also a 'psychological contract' (Cureton 2016) between supervisor and student and this contract is intangible: the expectation of support that is critical to the student's success. It exists as expectations that the student has of the supervisor that the supervisor will assist to alleviate the challenge but the supervisor may not always be successful in achieving this. It is evident that the majority of first-generation undergraduate students in SA are not graduating in the minimum time (CHE 2024) thus post graduate students could also be

facing similar challenges of epistemological access where forms of support are critical to their success.

Drawing from Lemmer (2016: 81), these are the 'layers of my supervisory self' for effective supervision of my first generation post graduate students incorporating academic and personal support. The framework presented comprises my supervisory approach and style (intermediate which grows to strong when students face challenges), my supervisory characteristics, attitude (such as understanding and being available) and competence and the support (scaffolding) techniques that I use: formal and informal interactions (engagements), a triple vignette of care, comfort and collaboration for epistemological access, the creation of living, learning communities of students and graduated students and colleagues.

supervisory style & approach
- intermediate/ transitional
- invitational

nature of the supervisor
- characteristics: mother, mentor, guide, colleague
- attitude: cognissant of 'psychological contract' with students
- existing competence or develop competency

scaffolding technique
- triple vignette of support for epistemological access: care, comfort, collaboration
- formal and informal engagements
- living learning community

A layered supervisory framework for first generation postgraduate student support and positive well-being

Manathunga (2005) avers that internationally and in SA, many students are not prepared for post graduate research and given my experiences with the nature

of students' challenges perhaps we as supervisors are deficit because we are overburdened with excessive workloads due to the widening of access into higher education and without in-service training for this context. Staff have to demonstrate effective post graduate supervision as it affects graduation and throughput rates and university ranking (Nulty, Kiley & Meyers 2009, Carter & Kumar 2017). Masuku (2021) states that despite there being an increase in the intake of PG students in HEIs since 1994, the graduation rates have been lower (CHE 2009) than expected placing greater strain on academic staff. The majority of students in higher education are first generation post graduates, experiencing a combination of personal and academic challenges which they need to navigate and supervisors are under institutional pressure due to institutions chasing neoliberal targets: drop out, throughput and graduation. Supervision is in addition to my other workload commitments such as teaching practice, community engagement and teaching two modules and large class sizes have now become the norm, adding to mental pressure (Wang *et al.* 2013). The university's neoliberal push of throughput and graduation rates can impact the progressive development of the student who experiences mental strain to complete in the minimum time. Thus, both the supervisor and students' mental well-being are being tested in this current academic environment.

Conclusion

It is asserted that post graduate education contributes to building the knowledge economy and society and both the supervisor and student are active participants in this construction. Masters and doctoral students depend on their supervisors to meet their targets and successfully advance in their studies. Post graduate supervision is a sensitive topic for academics because it carries great responsibility (Spear 2020) and it is also complex. I am still left wondering whether we are underprepared supervisors in public HEIs as we now have large numbers of first generation post graduate students than previously? Perhaps, institutions need to be more cognisant of their responsibility to capacitate staff given the discourse on supervision support for the success of first generation post graduate students. Whilst I presented my supervision support framework that is effective for my students, I want to advocate for an institutional supervision support framework (Andersen *et al.* 2018) to enhance the capacity of staff to effectively support first generation students for their positive mental well-being and the mental well-being of supervisors. The need for social justice

and equity of outcomes in HE drives numerous epistemological access support programmes for undergraduate students. However, this needs to be matched by nuanced support provision for post graduate students and their supervisors else it will be myopic to aim for the production of one hundred doctoral students per million per year by 2030 (National Planning Commission 2012) without a clear strategy of institutional capacity building for staff and a multipronged support strategy for staff and post graduate students' positive well-being.

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