

# **Chapter 15: A Reflection on Postgraduate Supervision Practices: A Case of One University in KwaZulu-Natal Province**

**Zinhle Primrose Nkosi**

**ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6086-3252>**

**Phephani Gumbi**

**ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6782-6427>**

## **Abstract**

The role of postgraduate studies in the enterprise of a research university cannot be underrated. Therefore, good supervision is expected to provide valuable support and mentorship to postgraduate students. Various scholars have argued that a supervisor must fully understand their role clearly in show-casing that their students complete their studies. However, others have posited that the lack of formal training of supervisors in fulfilling their roles, delays the student to complete their studies. Consequently, it is necessary that supervisors should keep reflecting on the ways in which they supervise their postgraduate students. Thus, this paper seeks to reflect on and evaluate our postgraduate supervision practices, especially as mid-career academics and supervisors. Operating under the interpretivist paradigm, the study uses a qualitative research approach, and it adopts action research methods. Participants include two lecturers in the field of language education and are also researchers in this study. Besides, nine post-graduate students form part of the sample. Interviews, telephone conversations, observations, and document analysis are used as data generation methods. Data analysis is done using thematic analysis. Among findings, the study reveals that while our supervision strategies are helpful to the students, we need to improve on the ways in which we provide feedback and turnaround time in providing feedback. The need for group supervision was identified as a tool to provide opportunities for sharing ideas. The study concludes that as supervisors, our methods of supervision are helpful, even though we need to improve on certain

areas. The study has implications for further research that will focus on experienced supervisors who are senior academics, and their supervision styles.

**Keywords:** Postgraduate studies; Reflective self-study; Researching in isiZulu; Supervision practices; Supervision strategies; Students' voices

## **Introduction and Background**

Knowledge transfer is an inevitable process in higher education where research outputs are largely associated with the production of Master's and Doctoral graduates (Van Rensburg *et al.* 2016; Dladla & Ndlovu 2019). In South Africa, the higher education system has a challenge of substantial growth in postgraduate enrolments since 1994. However, graduation rates for doctoral programmes are much lower than desired, yet the numbers have doubled in recent years. Therefore, there is some noticeable growth especially when considering the supervision capacity in the system. There are many reasons for lower doctoral graduation rates, such as, increasing burdens for academics to supervise the students and that many students in South Africa and internationally are under-prepared to conduct research studies (Masuku 2021).

Numerous studies reveal that research supervision plays a significant role in the success of postgraduate students (Sonn 2016; Vereijken *et al.* 2018; Mhlahlo 2020; Fragouli 2021). This suggests the need for a good supervisor. Therefore, the role of a supervisor in providing a supportive, constructive and engaged supervision process is important. Existing literature confirms that academics who are PhD holders can supervise postgraduate research studies. The assumption is that they are qualified to do so. The range and depth of concepts of supervision a supervisor holds will dictate how they supervise and what type of a researcher will emerge at the end of the process (Masuku 2021). Azure (2016) states that supervisors should be able to efficiently supervise because they also engage in research.

However, many studies have revealed that some supervisors are not good enough to be able to provide the necessary support to their postgraduate students (Masuku 2021; Alam *et al.* 2013; Adams & Noronha 2015). This is consistent with some studies which have revealed that delays in postgraduate completion are due to poor quality supervision (Sidhu *et al.* 2014). Studies have pointed out that poor supervision of postgraduate students is due to factors such as students' poor writing skills, overloaded supervisors, and students' poor

planning and management of their studies. Alam *et al.* (2013), too, claim that poor supervision causes completion delays of postgraduate students' studies. Hence, there is an urgent need to improve supervision in higher education.

Adams and Noronha (2015) advise that supervisors need to be helped and directed on how to train research students, from students completing an undergraduate research paper right through to PhD level. These researchers mention that across the higher education sector, many supervisors are struggling, as they lack good supervision strategies. Zewotir, North, and Murray (2015) have expressed that many postgraduate students do not complete their studies within the given timeframe and others drop out. Nevertheless, some studies on postgraduate supervision state that the dynamics of the process of supervision is influenced by students' and supervisors' existing characteristics, such as their prior knowledge and skills (Masek & Alias 2020), their values and expectations (Manathunga 2007), and their goals for the supervision (Abiddin *et al.* 2009).

Conducting this study was therefore based on the results of many studies that point at the lack of good supervision as the foundation to delayed completion or poor postgraduate studies. We felt we needed to reflect on our postgraduate supervision practices, so we can improve in what we are doing. The objectives for this study therefore, were, (1) to evaluate the effectiveness of our postgraduate supervision strategies and practices, and (2) to get our students' views regarding our supervision practices. The research questions are aligned with the research objectives.

## **Conceptual Framework**

This study uses the concept 'mentoring' as a conceptual framework. Mentoring is a phenomenon where an expert, or someone experienced in the field, provides training to a less-skilled individual. Different scholars have defined the concept of mentoring. For example, Vumilia and Semali (2016) advocate that mentoring refers to all activities geared toward guiding, counselling, monitoring, supervising, and supporting the student. This assertion is in line with Ambrosetti (2014), who attests that mentoring concerns the development of the relationship between the mentor and mentee, which in turn provides the underpinning for the growth of the mentee's skills. Bearman *et al.* (2007) state that mentoring is an interpersonal relationship that comprises a series of purposeful, social interactions, and it involves pairing young people with an older peer or volunteer, who acts as a positive role model. This is further attested by Rubbi-

Nunan *et al.* (2023), who emphasize that the mentoring relationship ought to be based on trust, confidentiality, mutual respect, and sensitivity. Again, this concurs with the KMP House of Mentoring (2020), which asserts that trust is the glue that holds relationships and organisations together, and that trust is one of the most important elements in the mentor-mentee relationship. In simple terms, a successful relationship between a mentor and a mentee requires a high degree of trust from both parties.

This conceptual framework is appropriate to this study because, as supervisors, we provide mentorship to our students, our mentees, with the knowledge and skills that we have, which we believe are relevant to the role of supervisor, who is required to mentor, nourish, guide and lead the student on their journey towards achieving a postgraduate degree. As supervisors holding PhDs, we are qualified to supervise Honours, Master's and PhD students, therefore, it will be helpful to listen to the students we supervise, so we can reflect on our practices, and improve where required.

In the School of Education, there is a memorandum of agreement between the supervisor and the student, in which both parties need to sign before they begin their working relationship. This memorandum of agreement emphasizes that the relationship between supervisor and a candidate in a research degree is one of mentorship. In this way a supervisor should advise about the structure of the degree, should direct the candidate to sources and material, may suggest better forms of expression, but in the end the thesis/dissertation must be the candidate's own work (UKZN: Memorandum of Understanding between Supervisor and Candidate 2023; UKZN: Postgraduate Supervision Agreement 2014).

## **Research Methodology**

We chose a qualitative research approach to conduct this study. As opposed to quantitative research (that relies on measurable or numerical data), qualitative studies gather non-numerical data on how people live, think and respond to different situations. Accordingly, qualitative studies may be conducted to get insights into people's experiences, behaviour, beliefs, and attitudes. A qualitative approach naturally involves observing the population and conducting in-depth interviews or focus group discussions (Corner *et al.* 2019; Cohen *et al.* 2018). Also, the study operated under the interpretivist paradigm. According to Nickerson (2024), the interpretivist paradigm focuses on understanding the subjective meanings and experiences of individuals within

their social context. In addition, this type of paradigm uses qualitative research methods that focus on individuals' beliefs, and motivations to gain understanding of social interactions.

This study also adopted participatory action research methods. Participatory action research emphasizes that participants should be members of the community being studied, empowering those directly affected by outcomes of that research. In this method, participants are effectively co-researchers, with their lived experiences considered formative to the research process (George 2024). Participants included two lecturers in the field of language education and were also researchers in this study. In addition, nine postgraduate students formed part of the sample. These students were selected purposively, as we targeted only those doing their Independent Research Projects through the medium of isiZulu at Bachelor of Education Honours level, as well as those conducting Master's and PhD studies in the medium of isiZulu. We included these students to get their views on how they experience supervision support from us as their individual supervisors, as well as other supervisors in the isiZulu Discipline. It is important to note that at Bachelor of Education Honours, Master's and PhD levels, students choose the medium of instruction in which they want to be taught or supervised. We have fewer students who conduct their research in the medium of isiZulu, as compared to those who prefer English as a medium of teaching and conducting research. For example, at B Ed Honours level, about 250 students are registered for the course (English and Zulu students combined). Out of the 250 students registered for the Independent Research Project course at B Ed Honours level, only 14 conducted their Independent Research Projects in the medium of isiZulu. The same applies at Master's and PhD levels. Most of the students prefer to conduct their studies through the medium of English, the second language of many. This is the reason in this study, we had three students at B Ed Honours level; three at Master's level; and three at PhD level, as part of the sample for this study.

Face-to-face interviews, telephone conversations, observations, and document analysis were used as data generation methods. Data analysis was done using thematic analysis. Issues of trustworthiness were observed. Once the data analysis was completed, we sent the report to the participating students for them to check if what we wrote was a true reflection of the information they provided. We gave them liberty to edit the report wherever they felt it was contrary to their statements and actions. However, they did not change anything as they approved what was written. Also, ethical issues were taken into consideration. This included obtaining informed consent of the nine students

who were part of the sample, their rights to participation in the study, permission from the gatekeepers, the issue of confidentiality, etc.

## **Findings and Discussion**

The findings presented below are in line with our research objectives (1) to evaluate the effectiveness of our postgraduate supervision strategies and practices, and (2) to get our students' views regarding our supervision practices. Therefore, in the discussion we will associate what we perceive as the effectiveness of our postgraduate supervision strategies and practices, with our students' voices that support what we say regarding our supervision practices. In doing so, both our research objectives will be addressed under each heading. This therefore suggests that each of what we view as an effective strategy and practice, will be supported by the students' statements.

## **The Effectiveness of Postgraduate Supervision Strategies and Practices and our Students' Voices**

The following themes will be discussed: Supervision contract; supporting the student on conceptualising the topic; thesis organization and layout support; group supervision and seminar presentations; remaining relevant throughout the process; providing effective and timely feedback; student-supervisor relationship; support in relation to academic writing skills; communication between supervisor and student; peer review; and disseminating research.

### ***Supervision Contract***

A supervision contract for postgraduate studies is an agreement between a student and a supervisor that outlines the roles and responsibilities of each party. This agreement should establish a mutual working relationship and ensure accountability. Furthermore, it should also be in line with principles of academic freedom and integrity. At the University of KwaZulu-Natal, the supervision contract entails that both the supervisor and the student commit themselves to striving for a productive, trustful and honest working relationship, aiming for the achievement of a research degree award, which can be best achieved by adhering to the principles contained in this contract (The University of KwaZulu-Natal, Postgraduate supervision contract 2014). In the School of Education of this University, the memorandum of agreement between the

supervisor and the student, emphasizes that the relationship between supervisor and a candidate for a research degree is one of mentorship. In this way a supervisor should advise about the structure of the degree, should direct the candidate to sources and material, may suggest better forms of expression, but in the end the thesis/dissertation must be the candidates own work (UKZN Memorandum of Understanding between Supervisor and Candidate 2023; UKZN: Postgraduate Supervision Agreement 2014).

Before one agrees on supervising a student, usually, we must ask ourselves why we need to supervise that student. A supervisor is either approached by the student to be their supervisor, or they must select the students from the list sent by the research office, according to the area of specialization. Once the supervisor has agreed to supervise the student, they would start by filling out the appointment of supervisor form, and send it to the research office, so it is on records who supervises the student. Once all procedures are followed, the supervisor must contact the student and set an appointment date. In the meeting, the supervisor would be discussing with the student what they want to do in the study. Signing a supervision contract between a student and a supervisor is important. However, this requires that both the supervisor and the student should honour the supervision contract. For example, if we both agreed that the turnaround time for a student to receive feedback is within the period of three weeks, this needs to be honoured. Of course, we try to honour the supervision contract, so our students do not lose trust on us. For example, three students were quoted saying:

I do not want to lie, my supervisor does his best to meet with me whenever we have an appointment, and the feedback I receive from him is super brilliant. (**Anna**)

Right from the beginning we both signed a contract, and both of us adhere to it. I have an amazing supervisor. If for any reason she won't be able to meet with me, she does not make a mistake, she lets me know, and we reschedule the appointment. (**Nonto**)

Sometimes I fail to meet the agreed submission deadlines, if I feel I have not done adequately, according to her expectations. I do not want her to push me, but I must show enthusiasm, so she is also encouraged. (**Aphiwe**)

Not honouring the supervision contract has been reported to influence the study

completion. However, the supervisory agreement may be affected by various factors. For example, some students enter the postgraduate education environment with inadequate knowledge of research methods (Lessing & Schulze 2003) or academic writing skills (Singh 2011; Strauss 2012) and have little prior knowledge about roles and responsibilities on conducting research studies (Lee 2010). They may not be able to progress through the postgraduate programme without significant development of the required skills and adequate support. Therefore, it might not be fair to put a blame of the study delays on the supervisor, instead, both the student and the supervisor must account.

According to the University of KwaZulu-Natal supervision agreement (2023), the supervisor should have the leadership abilities to not only provide appropriate direction for the student, but to help students to develop appropriate networks in their field. Similarly, appropriate completion and safe keeping of supervision record is essential to document the progress of a student in the post-graduate program and to keep an audit trail of the decisions made during supervision meetings. As supervisors, we are committed to supervising our students and to honour the supervision contract, so they can complete their studies at a reasonable time. However, it must be noted that some of our students fail to complete their studies at a reasonable time, but usually, this is due to various factors. For example, the student was not well, or they had family related issues which impacted negatively on their work. If a student is open to share their difficulties, we encourage them to suspend their studies for that semester if they are confronted with challenges which impact negatively on their studies.

## **Supporting the Student on Conceptualising the Topic**

Effective conceptualisation of the research topic is key when beginning any research project. This involves selecting a topic and developing a research question that is researchable. A well conceptualized research topic helps ensure the research is focused and it will be able to produce a useful information. A supervisor's role in conceptualizing a research topic includes providing guidance and support, and helping the student develop a coherent research design. In line with this, as supervisors we help our students to conceptualize their research topics successfully. Here, we encourage students to start by reflecting on their interests and hobbies. This allows them to consider topics that genuinely intrigue them and which they feel curious about, and that which they feel motivated to explore further. Usually, this happens during the first meeting between the supervisor and the student. Here we discuss what the

student wants to research, what makes them want to conduct such a study, and what they want to achieve by conducting such a study. Usually, during this meeting, we check if a student requires help in refining the topic. For some students, the topic is clear, and focused, while for others, there is a need to assist them refine the chosen topic, to ensure it is researchable. Also, at this meeting, we give the student an opportunity to present both the research questions and the objectives to the study. Usually, the meeting is 90 minutes long. At the end of the meeting, we ask students to evaluate the session. This usually helps us as we get the sight of how the student has experienced the session. Before we conclude the session, we plan for the next meeting. This is evidenced in the students' quotations below:

Truly speaking, when I started, I was passionate about doing my Masters, but it was difficult for me to work out the topic clearly, although I knew what I wanted to do. My supervisor assisted me so much to shape it. During this time, I was all over the place, hahahahaha! **(Sheshile)**

Whether you like it or not, you need a supervisor. You can't just be on your own. When I started dreaming about doing a PhD study, my supervisor made me think more than I could imagine. One just takes things for granted. With the support and guidance of your supervisor, you feel at ease, no fear, and once you are guided correctly, you just feel you are the owner of this study. **(Musa)**

Badenhorst (2021) affirms that research conceptualization is challenging for doctoral and master's students engaged in thesis writing or writing for publication. Therefore, as supervisors, the stage of research topic conceptualization is crucial, as it is where the student needs to get guided, so they feel motivated, instead of getting discouraged. Failure to get proper guidance may result in deregistration, which is not what we anticipate.

## **Dissertation or Thesis Organization and Layout Support**

Once the student completes data generation and data get transcribed, usually, we talk about a thesis organization and layout, so they have a clear picture of how they need to organize their report once they complete data analysis. We advise our students to not wait until it is too late, to start writing an introductory

chapter and a literature review chapter earlier, keeping in mind that these will need to be updated until the research report is completed. Generally, we start with a lecture, explain different sections that are essential in the research, and how they should be presented during the write-up process. At Honours level, more support is required on this, as it is where students need to grasp the research concepts, understand each part of the research project, so that they find it easier to organize their Independent Research Projects. For example, in guiding our students for the thesis layout, we emphasize a need to use a consistent spacing between headings and paragraphs; use a consistent in-text reference style; ensure captions are clear and represent the figures or tables they accompany; use Roman numerals for page numbers in the preliminary pages of the thesis and table of contents, and Arabic numerals for the rest of the thesis. The mastery of such skills is vital when the student is still at Honours level, as these would also be required for the development of their Master's dissertations. By the time they are at PhD level, most of our students can organize their work meaningfully. The examples of students' statements below coincide with how we perceive our practice in relation to this topic:

I learnt at Honours level how to organize a dissertation. There must be consistency in everything, and your work must be presented logically. My supervisor encourages me to check how others have organized their work, and that helped a lot. (**Nonto**)

You can't just do whatever you want because your work will look untidy, and you know your supervisor won't be quiet about it. Just need to organize your thesis in the way others do at UKZN, just check published UKZN theses and dissertations, and try to organize the work just like others do. It helps to have a model thesis. (**Sizwe**)

The format for the University of KwaZulu-Natal dissertations and theses outline includes: Preliminary pages (title page, preface and declaration, dedication, acknowledgements, table of contents, list of figures, tables and acronyms (separately presented), abstract, then the main text, followed by the list of references, then the appendices (UKZN, Guidelines for presentation of Masters and PhD dissertations/theses by research 2015; UKZN (Graduate School of Business & Leadership): Postgraduate Student Guide 2020). However, we are not aware of a thesis/dissertation outline document that is available specifically for the School of Education.

## **Group Supervision and Seminar Presentations**

One of our strategies that we find productive is group supervision. Here, we plan a meeting in advance, invite all the students that we supervise. Usually, we begin with a lecture, whereby one or two of us present on a certain aspect of the research project. Normally, every member of the group we invite is at the same stage of their project (research proposal stage or write-up, for example, literature review section, research methodology section, or data analysis). This gives them an insight into how they can structure their own work, either at research proposal or write-up stage. After we finish presentations as supervisors, we allow question and answer discussions, so that each student benefits from the presentation. This is followed by students' presentations of their own work. Each student is given 15 minutes to present, and critiques from peers and the supervisors should come next. This entails that a student joins the session well-prepared, to be an active participant in the group discussions. This is done either through contact or virtual modes. In addition to this, as a Discipline of isiZulu, we organize seminars for our Honours, Masters, and for our PhD students, where all the Discipline supervisors and their students come together and share ideas. The same routine is followed, as students are given the opportunity to present their work and supervisors and peers provide constructive feedback. We encourage respect for one another even if a student gives a poor presentation. We find seminars very useful, as this is when each one of us is afforded the opportunity to hear what other supervisors view his/her student's work. In other words, the student not only receives feedback from their individual supervisor, but from a group of supervisors, including those who are not her/his own. Below are examples of some of the students' statements:

We meet at an agreed date, and each one of us presents their work. You will get feedback from peers. This is very beneficial to me, and others as well. (**Khanyi**)

Our seminars are vibrant. The feedback I receive from supervisors and peers is very fruitful. (**Sizwe**)

I prepare myself well to be able to present with confidence. But I really enjoy the seminars, they are very good. (**Ntuthuko**)

As seen in the statements above, students are encouraged to present their own

work, while also motivated to give feedback to others, which becomes a good learning experience to both the presenter and the peers. Also noted is that students see the need to get prepared for their presentations. All this contributes to their learning. This coincides with Steenkamp and Brink (2024), who evaluated the effectiveness of peer learning (discussion forums, peer review and group work) employed in a postgraduate research module, and found that peer learning facilitated cognitive, behavioural, collaborative and social engagement. Also, these researchers found that reviewing comments on discussion forums and peer reviews on peer written work, developed students' communication skills and fostered a sense of community. In addition, these researchers remark that peer reviews allow students to obtain feedback on their writing prior to their work being graded. Also, Malan (2020) elaborates that where students are given an opportunity to work together and critique each other's work, a final potential benefit is increased student engagement, which then contributes to their improved performance.

## **Remaining Relevant throughout the Process**

It is our duty to provide guidance to our postgraduate students, from Honours degree through to Doctoral studies. At any level of study, as supervisors, as stated earlier in this paper, we guide them from the conceptualization of the topic, until they graduate. This also requires that as supervisors, we ensure that our relationship with students, takes on a more collaborative, mentoring role. Our role is to facilitate development of research students who are creative, critical, and able to push the boundaries of frontier research. The students' statements below, are testament to this:

My supervisors are always relevant. There are always there for me, to guide me, and when I need help. (**Aphiwe**)

Ever since we started, I can see I am getting somewhere. The kind of supervision I receive is extraordinary. (**Musa**)

I am about to complete my study, and there is no part of my work that I do not fully understand. From the beginning, I am journeying with my supervisor. This is not to say she does my work, no, but she only guides me, clarify for me wherever I am confronted with fear and confusion. (**Bhekani**)

There is no point I doubt my supervisor. He is my strength. He was my Independent Research Project supervisor at Honours level. I couldn't look for a better supervisor. I am satisfied having him as my supervisor. **(Sheshile)**

As evidenced in the statements above, this simply means that being relevant as a supervisor entails, among others, that a supervisor should be able to advise the student on identifying a specific, and significant problem or gap that needs to be researched. This also means that a supervisor should advise a student, so their research is able to address an issue that matters to the intended audience. In simply, being relevant should mean that the supervisor is able to guide the student, being present at any stage of their research, until the project is completed, and the student can graduate.

## **Providing Effective and Timely Feedback**

McCallin and Nayar (2012) remark that good quality feedback to students is essential (and should alert the students to the areas in their work that need improvement. Ineffective feedback can create tension in the supervisor-student relationship and impede learning and achievement (East, Bitchener & Basturkmen 2012). Therefore, as supervisors, we try to prioritize giving our students effective, constructive, and timely feedback on the same document that the student submitted, and we do this through track-changes. Also important to note is that praising and appreciating a student for showing improvement in their writing when providing feedback, has positive results.

It is good to see your supervisor appreciating your efforts. Such appreciation of my work, and those praises are indeed motivational. **(Khanyi)**

Howells *et al.* (2017) observes that appreciation is vital to improving supervisory relationships, including building trust, enhancing communication, and improving self-motivation and creativity. Also, Morin (2024) states that teachers who use praise regularly tend to have better relationships with their students. When students feel that supervisors are honestly telling them what they did well, they are more willing to continue to work hard, and to look for strategies to overcome obstacles.

Turnaround time is important to monitor the period the study should

take. Turnaround time simply refers to the amount of time it takes for a supervisor to read and provide feedback on a submitted piece of work, typically including the time from when they receive the document to when they submit their feedback. This happens according to what was agreed upon when both parties (supervisor and student) signed the supervision contract, at the beginning of the research journey. However, due to unforeseen circumstances and heavy workload supervisors may be confronted with, it happens that feedback takes longer than it was anticipated. This usually creates problems between a student and the supervisor.

The following are some of the students' statements:

I receive timely feedback, always very effective and constructive feedback. (**Sizwe**)

From the beginning, we agreed to meet on monthly basis. It has been like this since then, and I trust that I am going to complete my study on record time. (**Ntuthuko**)

Nethsinghe and Southcott (2015) and Lim *et al.* (2019) concur that providing feedback on the same document and ensuring it is timely, is a good strategy. Adams and Norohna (2015) emphasize the importance of diagnosing what the student's writing problem is. For example, the supervisor might find it difficult to understand what the student was trying to say, or they struggle to structure their thinking and writing, or they have inadequate knowledge of grammar and expression. In this case, the supervisor needs to be careful about choosing appropriate feedback. It is for these reasons that we try our best to provide feedback that will address all the inadequacies contained in the writing. For example, some feedback will focus on expression, some on conceptual understanding, some on referencing, and so on.

In line with the above studies, Ali *et al.* (2016), comment that a supervisor should provide timely and constructive feedback, and encourage the students to work independently, as well as present their work when opportunities arise. They further state that a supervisor is expected to help students understand their shortcomings and to help them manage their research in a timely manner. In the same vein, Betts (2009) asserts that constructive feedback can only be effective if the message the supervisor wants to convey corresponds directly with how the student perceives it. As a result, good communication skills are essential to engage with students successfully (Betts 2009).

## **Student – Supervisor Relationship**

We believe our relationships with students we supervise are what many researchers believe is required of a student and supervisor. As novice supervisors, we may not boldly say we have perfect student-supervisor relationships, but the student evaluations make us believe that we have good relations with them. This includes the way we speak to our students, the kind of feedback we give, the time we spend supervising them, the care we demonstrate; all this contributes to making stronger bonds between ourselves and the students we supervise. For example, in their evaluations, some of the students said:

I have trust in my supervisor. She is like my sister. I don't know how I would cope with the study stress if she was not there for me. We are not friends; we are like partners. We share a lot, and this is what keeps me going. Even when I don't do well, she does not harass me. I am really very grateful to have her. She is very approachable. (**Aphiwe**)

Having a good supervisor-student relationship is what I count as one of my blessings. This is how I feel. He nurtures me in every respect. I feel very motivated.

Our relationship is perfect, we do not have any issues. Yes, he is strict because he does not want me to relax, but to work, *Nkosi yami* [My God!], he can't do the work for me...When I am sick, he understands me, and if for whatever reason I need help, he makes sure to answer all my questions, then I go! (**Bhekani**)

Consistent with the sentiments expressed by students in relation to supervisor - students relationship above, Yende (2021) explored the factors of effective post-graduate student-supervisor relationships. He found that poor relationship between student and supervisor has an impact on the success of postgraduate studies. Also, Ali *et al.* (2016) mention that an effective supervisor is expected to be friendly, approachable, and aware of the standard of work expected from a student.

Building and maintaining effective relationships is vital for both postgraduate students and supervisors. As Ismail *et al.* (2017) state that the student-supervisor relationship is widely acknowledged as a pivotal factor in shaping postgraduate experiences and outcomes. This assertion is in line with Odularu and Akande (2024), who confirm that the supervisor-supervisee

relationship enhances students' academic and career development. Zhu (2022) states that a supervisor-student relationship is in essence an interpersonal relationship, and its formation and change cannot be separated from the interaction between supervisors and students. Also, according to Parker-Jenkins (2018), a better supervisory relationship can help improving students' overall satisfaction with the study. At the same time, a poor supervisory relationship can lead to depression and even dropout (McAlpine 2017). As we reflect on our supervision practices, we feel our actions are not in contradiction with the university expectations, about how we relate to our students.

## Support in Relation to Academic Writing Skills

Academic writing skills of postgraduate students are vital for them to conduct their research effectively. This is due to the high demands placed on the quality of their studies (Ooi *et al.* 2022). Many of our students whom we supervise at postgraduate studies have not yet mastered academic writing skills. For example, some struggle using academic language, instead they use colloquial language, with lots of language and grammar errors. These include spelling errors, poorly constructed sentences, incorrect paragraphing, verb agreements, punctuation, and so on. They also demonstrate incompetence in using research concepts. To deal with the problem, we try to organize sessions whereby we train them on academic writing. We organize two sessions per annum, as we find it valuable. Although we put effort on dealing with this problem, students continue to commit errors in their submissions. In addressing this problem, we use track changes on the submitted document and ensure we provide constructive and effective feedback. As they continue to make their submissions, we then note a reduction of errors, even though the document may not be error free.

Mhhmm, academic writing is nobody's home language. Hahahaha! When you write, you think *uyashaya* [you are doing your best], only to find that, wow! Truly speaking, initially, I had poor academic writing skills, but now, yes, I am trying my best, he does not have many comments that point at my writing. I have improved drastically. (**Anna**)

I was unaware of so many language and grammar errors when I started, but she taught me how to write academically. When I go back to my previous drafts, I even laugh at myself when I read her comments. I feel

like I was stubborn, as she would keep telling me one and the same thing .... I am better now, but ja, I still make some mistakes, but I feel like I am getting there. The sessions regarding academic writing skills are also very helpful. (**Sheshile**)

Schulze and Lemmer (2017) remark that the ability to write according to the conventions and forms of disciplinary academic writing is essential to success at university. Likewise, Albertyn, Kapp and Bitzer (2008) and Lessing (2011) have mentioned that the lack of academic writing skills in postgraduate students has been identified as a major obstacle to the successful completion of the dissertation, among a range of problems encountered by supervisors and students during supervision.

## **Communication between Supervisor and Student**

Usually, we communicate with our students on a face-to-face basis. However, we try to be flexible as some of our students stay far away from the university, and others are from nearby countries like Zimbabwe and Swaziland. It is therefore not always feasible to meet face-to-face. In cases like these, we use other modes of communication, which include e-mail, telephone, WhatsApp calls or meetings via Microsoft Teams. Checking with the student is of utmost importance as they might not be financially stable to always consult on face-to-face basis. Such strategies are helpful to both us and our students, for convenience purposes. Below are some of the examples of students' statements in relation to this:

As I am an international student, it feels like my supervisor and I see each other frequently. We communicate regularly, and that happens via WhatsApp, email or a normal call. (**Nonto**)

We communicate in various ways, for example, [Microsoft]Teams or Zoom meetings, e-mail, or WhatsApp. All this works for me very well. I have no stress. (**Musa**)

Mncina *et al.* (2024) and Quecano *et al.* (2024) state that ineffective communication in postgraduate supervision is a significant issue and can have a negative impact on university research productivity and student dropout rates. A lack of communication may cause students to feel isolated and disconnected, and this

may hinder their ability to learn. This is the reason we try to communicate with our students frequently, avoiding them to feel neglected, while noting they need to work independently. This is also in line with Castelao-Huerta (2024), who emphasizes that positive aspects of supervision that are highly valued by doctoral students include, among others, good communication, informal interactions, collaboration, meaningful and encouraging feedback, emotional support, and role modelling. This finding is significant because, as Casey *et al.* (2022) state, supportive supervision, which includes good communication between the supervisor and the student, has a crucial effect on doctoral students' mental health, reducing emotional exhaustion, leading to better outcomes.

## **Peer Review**

Peer review refers to critical peer reading, as a strategy that involves students working together according to specific criteria and then providing, and likewise also receiving informal formative feedback to improve their reading and critical thinking skills (McLeay & Wesson 2014). Kwai-peng (2023) states that peer review is a useful learning tool for students, which provides them with opportunities to interact with their peers when engaging in the process of critical reading and critical thinking, thus possibly raising students' motivation to learn. Here, we encourage students to swap their works, and each to read and provide feedback to another's work. We find such a strategy having a positive impact as students learn from and correct each other, which in turn improves their writing skills. Once the student gets feedback from their peers, they do corrections, based on the comments should they find them useful. Such work comes to the supervisor with less errors. The strategy seems to have a positive effect on building stronger interpersonal relations among students. Below are two of the students' quotations:

I will never forget on my first day, having to present to my peers! I was so nervous, but my supervisor can make you feel at home, same as my fellow students. They are very supportive and can make you feel like, you know what, all these are here to help me, they are not fighting with me. (**Ntuthuko**)

When you get feedback from fellow students or supervisors, you just need to have a positive attitude and should never take anything personal. Peer reviews are very constructive .... We have very good relations as

peers, as well as with one's individual supervisor, and all the supervisors who are not your own, who are in the Discipline. (**Sizwe**)

The above statements are in line with Mulder *et al.* (2014) who state that peer review is fundamental to academic endeavour, but opportunities for students to benefit from peer review in higher education remain limited, and relatively little is known about how student perceptions influence their appreciation of peer review. Also, Burgess *et al.* (2021), state that peer review is necessary for promoting reflection on individual behaviours; providing opportunities to develop their own professional skills, good relations among students and is considered key to student success. These researchers further state that giving and receiving peer feedback has the capacity to provide an effective learning experience for students, creating reflective students, who can analyse their own performance.

## **Being a Mentor in Disseminating Research**

Explaining to our students the benefits of disseminating research by writing peer reviewed research articles and presenting at conferences is of prime importance. For us to do this, we create a supportive environment for them to get confidence to engage in these research activities. We facilitate peer support and collaboration among our students and encourage them to share their research with each other and with other audiences, before the paper can be presented at a conference or submitted to a peer reviewed journal.

## ***Conference Presentations***

As supervisors, we provide mentorship to our students, motivate them to work and finish their research projects while also developing to become good conference presenters. We encourage our students to present at conferences. It is our duty to assist them identify suitable conferences for their topic and goals. This includes providing them with a list of relevant and reputable conferences in their field. We also advise them on how to choose between different types of presentations, such as posters, oral presentations, or workshops, depending on their preferences and objectives. We offer them feedback and suggestions on how to write an effective abstract, proposal, or paper, and how to follow the conference guidelines and deadlines. This helps them practice and polish their presentation skills, and with this, they receive constructive criticism and encouragement. Below are some of the examples of students' statements:

He encourages us to work in collaboration, and my peers and I have become a very good team. We check each other's work when we prepare ourselves for conferences. (**Sheshile**)

I am not afraid to stand in front of people at a conference. The mock presentations that we have with our supervisors shape us to be who we are. My dissertation is towards completion now. I get feedback from others, work out the errors identified, so I end up with a stronger paper. This prepares me for my research report writing. (**Khanyi**)

His encouragement is amazing. I have attended more than three conferences, where I presented my papers with my supervisor and fellow students. (**Anna**)

I have a list of conferences; it is only up to me to choose the one I am interested in. Having a supervisor who guides you is a blessing indeed. (**Nonto**)

My supervisor is so helpful, she is my mentor and is there for me, so I am confident with my work. I have my own flops, but she is very patient with me. Not only is she helping me with my study, but she encourages me to present at conferences, write research papers. One of my articles which I co-authored with her has been published. I am so happy. (**Khanyi**)

Donnelly and Fitzmaurice (2017) emphasize the importance of supervisors to be good mentors to students they supervise, mentioning that they need to act as facilitators of learning, rather than presenting themselves as experts. It is therefore important for a supervisor to develop their students as potential future academics, who are also good researchers, while also monitoring the progress in their research projects.

### ***Peer Reviewed Journal Articles***

We encourage our students to publish journal articles. Firstly, we try to assist them with the preparation and submission process of a manuscript for publication, offering them feedback and suggestions based on each component of the paper. Below are some of the students' statements in relation to this heading:

My supervisor is very helpful and the support I get from her is amazing.

I did not know how to even work out the paper for publication. But with the help I receive, I can even write the paper on my own now. (**Musa**)

His dedication in supervising me is unbelievable. Yes, he criticizes me, but his comments are very constructive. (**Sheshile**)

When I started, I could not even write an abstract for a conference paper or a manuscript to send to a journal. My confidence has improved, in such a way that I even assist my fellow students. (**Bhekani**)

Marson and Ferris (2023) state that postgraduate students must be provided with guidance on the process of academic publishing, selecting the correct journal relevant for their discipline, and how to respond to the peer-review system. They further mention that supervisors should be trained to assist their postgraduate students, so they are effective in assisting them in publishing and dissemination of their research results. However, Richards and Fletcher (2019) remark that there is often insufficient training of supervisors to help students in this regard.

## **Conclusions**

Based on the findings discussed above, we feel we are not in contradiction with what is expected of a supervisor who supervises a postgraduate student in conducting their research studies. Our findings reveal our postgraduate supervision strategies and practices are effective, in that students find them useful and they feel supported in their research journey. The gaps that students have identified, for example the feedback turnaround time, is helpful to us as we will try to improve on this area, in ensuring that we do not disadvantage our students, which may result in delayed completion of their studies. We therefore found it helpful to listen to the voices of our students, as it assisted us to reflect on our actions, so we can change the ways we do things; in ensuring we provide adequate support. Our students' voices are in line with how we evaluate ourselves, as their statements support our self-evaluations about our supervision strategies and practices.

Our findings are consistent with the literature available, which explains the qualities of a good supervisor. Most researchers globally seem to have a similar view on characteristics of a successful supervision. The kind of mentorship we provide to our students seem to have a positive effect as

evidenced through the students' statements quoted in the discussion. It is motivating to note that what we do to mentor and support our students, is also what they note and appreciate. The need for group supervision was also identified as a tool to provide opportunities for sharing ideas. Also important is that while we monitor the progress of our students' research progress, we try to also develop them as future researchers. It might also be useful for the supervisors to have a thesis/dissertation outline available specifically for the School of Education. The study concludes that as supervisors, our methods of supervision are helpful, even though we need to improve on certain areas, for example, the turnaround time in providing feedback, even if we may have other responsibilities.

We are of the opinion that more needs to be done to empower supervisors about research supervision skills. We also think that the study has implications for further research that will focus on experienced supervisors who are also senior academics. Such a study should focus on their supervision strategies and their impact on students' completion of their studies.

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Zinhle Primrose Nkosi  
IsiZulu Education  
School of Education  
University of KwaZulu-Natal  
Edgewood  
[Nkosiz@ukzn.ac.za](mailto:Nkosiz@ukzn.ac.za)

Phephani Gumbi  
IsiZulu Education  
School of Education  
University of KwaZulu-Natal  
Edgewood  
[Gumbip1@ukzn.ac.za](mailto:Gumbip1@ukzn.ac.za)