

Mentors' Views of Supervising Post-graduate Students Undertaking Research at an Institution in Zimbabwe

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KEYWORDS Mentors. Mentees. Research Supervision. Post-graduate. Zimbabwe

ABSTRACT Research is a critical component in the curriculum for post-graduate students. The mentees are assigned supervisors for guidance. The present study sought to investigate the experiences of mentors for post-graduate students undertaking research. The research design was a survey. Purposive sampling was used to select five mentors. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the participants. The study found that the majority of the mentors did not receive training on how to supervise postgraduate research students. The mentors reported that their mentees were not pro-active, lacked knowledge, lacked English expressive skills, poorly referenced their work, submitted unedited work and used outdated sources. They indicated that mentoring postgraduate students enhanced their research skills, resulted in joint publication of articles, positive relationship with mentees and sharing of experiences. The departments and faculties need to adequately prepare mentors to effectively supervise postgraduate research students.

INTRODUCTION

The need to enhance the research profiles of universities and to enrol more postgraduate students mirrors the challenges faced by African universities. Universities get more recognition for high post-graduate throughput rate. In this circumstance, it is imperative that the universities train their teaching staff on research supervision. Universities face a daunting task in that they have to strike a balance between enrolling more post-graduate students without compromising quality. Coupled with the above problems is the recognition that post-graduate students in developing countries experience a myriad of challenges that include acute shortage of resources. Thus, supervising post-graduate students undertaking research in depressed economies such as Zimbabwe is a Herculean task. It is against the above that the present study sought to explore the mentors' views of supervising postgraduate students undertaking research at an institution of higher learning in Zimbabwe.

According to Parsonson (2011), active participation in research and dissemination of re-

search findings is a primary role for a university academic. Mentoring of post-graduate students is one corollary of that direct involvement in the research endeavours of an academic. Mentoring has historically been common among men. It has also emerged as a popular concept in several academic fields (Daviahizar 1988). Research has pointed out that there are high proportions of post-graduate students who fail to complete their studies within the time given. Problems with mentoring were the most cited reasons for non-completion of research projects (Moses 1985; Russell 1996). It has been demonstrated that post-graduate students benefit when the nature and extent of assistance the students should receive are clarified (Jacobs 2009). A mentoring relationship in research supervision can enable the development of leadership potential and competence of the mentors (Daviahizar 1988).

The mentors have a critical role in initiating students into research, enthusing students and stretching their minds (Moses 1985). A mentor is an example or source of guidance about professional development and should help the mentee to cope with demanding responsibilities of being a research investigator. To fulfil such a responsibility, the mentor needs skills in writing and reviewing papers, grant writing, management of time and commitments, development of ethical judgment and standards for treating others fairly.

Consistent with the above, Powles (1994) views mentoring as an interactive teaching-learn-

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ing situation. The mentor has to train the mentee by developing his/her intellectual structures in relation to a content domain within the subject area. The mentoring relationship constantly shifts and develops, with the mentor often in the role of the mentee. Thus, academics have a responsibility to educate and develop the next generation of scholars (Parsonson 2011). They need to pass on research skills, methods, applications and develop appropriate writing and dissemination skills. In line with the above, Kiley (2005) states that effective supervisors see themselves as important members of what can be an extended, and often extensive team providing education and research support. Characteristics of good mentors include enthusiasm, passion, sensitivity, respect, unselfishness, appreciating individual differences, balancing direction and self-direction (Lee et al. 2007).

Irrespective of the model that the mentor adopts, supervision would support each mentee's progression through their own learning experience. Mentoring requires a dynamic approach that should be altered as the mentees' needs change throughout the mentoring process (Wright 1992). Therefore an effective supervisor needs to be flexible and adaptively facilitate the process. As a result, mentoring compels the supervisor to be vigilant for, and act on behaviours that suggest that the mentee may be experiencing challenges (Manathunga 2005). Similarly, Murray (2003) posits that the nature and quality of the relationship between the mentor and the mentee is determined by the individuals involved, rather than anything inherent in the relationship. The mentor and mentee have to develop a way of working together that they find mutually satisfactory. However, for the new mentor, setting the right tone for interacting with the student is a difficult task. There is no one size fits all in supervision. Different students respond best to different approaches, hence, the mentors need to be flexible.

Parsonson (2011) opines that supervisors need to have clear guidelines on the University's expectations of them as mentors. The guidelines should spell out the number of students an individual can effectively supervise at any given time. The procedures for developing and approving student projects to ensure that they are both manageable and within the student's ability to undertake and complete within the required time span. In addition, the responsibilities of both

mentors and mentees need to be understood. In line with the above, Parry and Hayden (1994) and Elphinstone et al. (2011) indicated that post-graduate research students benefit when their department or faculty has considered and clarified the nature and extent of assistance these students should receive.

As much as they need the support of the mentors, post-graduate students have a bigger role to play in their studies. According to Katz (1997), post-graduate students should understand and critically evaluate the literature and apply it to the research problem that they formulate. They should demonstrate the ability to research an intellectual problem and make appropriate conclusions independently. In addition, Phillips and Pugh (2000) state that post-graduate students should develop insight into their own situations to enhance their learning. They need to initiate and take ownership of their studies and manage the investigation themselves. Also important is the ability to initiate discussion, ask for help and debate what they should be learning.

There are numerous reasons why post-graduate students struggle or fail to complete their researches. Zuber-Skerritt and Ryan (1994) noted inadequate supervision, the mentee's emotional and psychological problems, lack of communication between mentor and mentee and the mentee's lack of knowledge as the main problems. The mentors may lack experience, commitment and time to walk the mentee through the full mentoring distance. The mentees' intellectual and social isolation, insecurity to fulfil the standards and lack of confidence in their ability to complete their theses within the specified time or not at all is another problem. Furthermore, mentees may lack the requisite skills, training or experience in research methods. Equally important is the lack of understanding and communication between the mentor and the mentee. The mentoring journey can be bumpy if the role of mentoring and its motive are unclear. Later studies (Kiley 1998; Cadman 2000; McClure 2005) found that the problems often result from a mismatch of expectations and teaching and learning styles, incongruent perceptions, lack of mutual understanding of various aspects of the mentoring process and different academic values.

Most revealing were the findings that the absence of a systematic approach to address-

ing writing problems in research, confusion among research students (Aitchison and Lee 2006) and limited English proficiency (Bitchener and Basturkmen 2006) hampered the mentoring process. In Australia, Wang and Li's (2008) study found that although international research students met the English language requirements for entering the university, they showed a general sense of inadequacy in regard to writing a thesis in English as a second language. They also lacked confidence in using English to express themselves clearly and accurately. In South Africa, Lesseng and Schulze's (2003) report that mentors indicated that mentees underestimated the requirements of postgraduate research, as a result, they had unrealistic expectations. The mentees presented their supervisors with work that was poorly written and of inferior. Poor use of English language and technical errors such as poor referencing and bibliography were evident. In the same study, Lesseng and Schulze found that the mentors indicated that some students embarking on postgraduate research did not have the potential to complete their studies successfully.

Other studies revealed that postgraduates indicate multiple responsibilities as an important impacting factor on study progress and success (Strauss 2001). The four major challenges that postgraduate students experience include relationships with supervisors, the importance of support structures, study isolation and confusion over resources (Johnston and Broda 1996). Across several countries in general and developing countries in particular, supervisors find that postgraduate students are less prepared for higher degree studies than in the past (Brown 2007). This situation puts increasing and unprecedented pressures, particularly on young and novice mentors. Therefore mentoring postgraduate students is a complex process which requires sound academic and interpersonal skills (Bak 2004). The process poses challenges to both the mentor and the mentee.

Although there is growing regional and international literature on mentoring of postgraduate students, little has been written on the mentors' perceptions of their mentees. In Zimbabwe, empirical reports on the support and challenges experienced by the mentors and the support they give to the mentees are scant, and appear to be a relatively rare phenomenon. This study provides a glimpse into the complex landscape of

the mentoring of postgraduate students. The goal of the study was to investigate the mentors' views of the postgraduate research students that they supervised. The specific research questions were:

- ♦ What support did the mentors get from the university?
- ♦ What are the strengths and weaknesses of the postgraduate students?
- ♦ What benefits did the mentors derive from supervising the mentees?

METHODOLOGY

Design and Setting

An exploratory study was conducted at an emerging Historically Black University in Zimbabwe. The exploratory design allowed the discovery of insightful information on the mentors' perceptions of the postgraduate students that they supervised. The participants were senior university lecturers who had at least 10 years of teaching higher education students. They also had experience in supervising postgraduate students undertaking research.

Participants

Purposive sampling method was used to select the five participants from a university in Zimbabwe. Four were male and the fifth one female. Gender difference in the views of the participants was outside the scope of the study. To be eligible to participate in the study, the participants needed to meet the following criteria: (a) full-time university lecturer; and (b) experience in supervising postgraduate students undertaking research; and (c) available and willing to share their experiences in the supervision of postgraduate students. Their ages ranged from 46 to 53 years of age. The participants had a mean age of 48.3 years. All the participants were of Black African ethnic origin.

Measuring Instrument

Data were collected using a semi-structured interview. A semi-structured interview provides greater depth of data than structured interviews (Fontana and Frey 1994). It is flexible and allows in-depth coverage of a phenomenon from the participant's perspective. Probing for more in-

formation and clarifications was possible. The interview guide that was used gathered data on support given to supervisors by the institution, strengths and weaknesses of the mentees and benefits of supervising postgraduate students.

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness of the study was enhanced by implementing the criteria proposed by Lincoln and Guba (1985). Specifically, we implemented the four strategies of credibility, dependability, confirmability and transferability. The four strategies were implemented through prolonged engagement with the field, mixed methods in data collection, dense description of results and giving a chain of evidence of the entire research process.

Procedure

The present study adopted following procedure: First, Heads of Department were consulted and helped to identify senior lecturers with experience of supervising postgraduate students. Next, visits were made to the identified lecturers. They were individually asked to indicate whether they were willing or not to participate in the study. Thereafter, individual interviews were conducted in the lecturers' offices. The conversations were recorded. The interviews were conducted in English.

Data Analysis

Data were analysed using thematic content analysis. The method is used to identify, analyse and report patterns (themes or categories) within data (Braun and Clark 2006). All interview discussions were transcribed. Key themes were developed from the data and study objectives.

Ethical Issues

Permission to conduct the study was obtained from the university's Ethics Committee. Informed consent was verbally obtained from the participants. Participation in the study was voluntary. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw from the study if they needed to do so. Confidentiality was maintained throughout the study. Reporting was anonymous as the participants' actual names were not

used. Efforts were made to analyses and report the findings as accurately as possible.

RESULTS

Six main categories emerged from the conversations with mentors of postgraduate research students. The themes include supervision training programmes for mentors, support given to supervisees by their mentors, strengths of mentees, weaknesses of mentees and benefits accrued by mentors from supervision. Each theme was established by extracting supporting statements from the interview sessions. Within the themes, similarities and differences emerged between the different interview sessions. These are presented next.

Supervision Training Programmes for Mentors

The mentors showed mixed views on the support that they got from their faculties. Only two participants reported that they got support in the form of training and material resources. Although acknowledging that training programmes were organised, another participant saw no reason for attending them because there was nothing new to learn. However, the other two participants indicated that they were not trained to supervise postgraduate students. The findings are supported by the following statements:

I attended training programmes on supervision and research active writing. (Participant 1)

I got a lot of support from the university. The university provided a conducive research environment. There are adequate research facilities and equipment such as IT and library facilities. (Participant 2)

I did not get any support. (Participant 3)

Workshops are organised but they are not beneficial. There is nothing new to learn from novice researchers. (Participant 4)

I was not formally trained on how to supervise postgraduate students. (Participant 5)

Support Given to Supervisees by Their Mentors

Three mentors reported that they gave support to their mentees. The support included equipping the mentees with research skills, language support, editorial knowledge, providing

literature and team work. These are presented next.

- ♦ Training of mentees

Two participants reported that they gave close supervision to their mentees. The finding is supported by the following:

I organise afternoon and weekend consultations to equip them with research skills. I train them to formulate the research methodology. I advise them to develop a plan for the next chapter and not just wait for feedback from the supervisor.... I also encourage them to attend research seminars. (Participant 1)

I give examples and illustrations as well as provide close supervision. (Participant 3)

- ♦ Language support

One participant said:

I teach sentence construction and ensure that they stick to short sentences by giving illustrations. Also, I teach them to paraphrase other researchers' work rather than copying. (Participant 3)

- ♦ Referral to editors

Another participant had this to say:

I ask them to take their work to editors before submitting for marking. (Participant 1)

- ♦ Relevant to literature

Two participants assisted their mentees to access information. They said:

I help them to access relevant and recent literature. (Participant 1)

I show them how to search for information on the internet. (Participant 3)

Providing literature on topic under study and asking them to summarise articles read following a given format. (Participant 5)

- ♦ Encouragement of team work

Teamwork was highlighted by one participant. The participant said:

I encourage the students to work in teams. (Participant 1)

Strengths of Mentees

Three mentors indicated that their mentees had several strengths. The mentees consulted regularly, made use of research facilities, showed mastery of research knowledge and had good expressive skills. These findings are presented next.

- ♦ Consultation

The students consult regularly. (Participant 1)

- ♦ Use of research support facilities

The students consult regularly. They make use of library facilities, Internet and computers for typing their work. (Participant 1)

- ♦ Mastery of research knowledge

Students that I supervised had a good understanding of research and adequate skills to conduct their studies. (Participant 2)

They showed an understanding of research. They embarked on their research after successfully completing their research methodology course. (Participant 3)

- ♦ Expressive and writing skills

The expressive and writing skills were good. (Participant 2)

Weaknesses of Mentees

The five participating mentors reported that their mentees had several weaknesses. The mentees were viewed as not pro-active, lacked knowledge, lacked English expressive skills, poorly referenced their work, submitted unedited work and used outdated sources. In addition, they struggled to access recent relevant and literature, their work was below postgraduate level and they failed to complete their projects in time. These are presented next.

- ♦ Not proactive

The students are too slow. They always wait for a submitted chapter to be marked before starting to work on the next chapter. (Participant 1)

Some students lack the zeal to complete their studies. (Participant 5)

- ♦ Lack of knowledge

Post-graduate students are not aware of their responsibilities in research... They lack knowledge on research policies, guidelines and procedures. (Participant 1)

Other students fail to understand information that they would have surfed from the internet. They cannot link the ideas they would have got from previous researches and books to their own researches. They simply copy without taking just the ideas of other researchers. (Participant 3)

Some embark on their research with minimal knowledge. You are like starting afresh. The students seem not sure of what is required of them. They make no attempt to link what they learnt in the research methodology module with what they need to do. (Participant 4)

- ♦ Lack of English expressive skills

Other students' English language is generally poor and their comprehension of other researchers' work is a problem. Putting ideas together is a problem as well. They have difficulty in coming up with sub-headings, especially in their literature review. (Participant 3)

Some students have language problems. They cannot express themselves. They struggle to conceptualise their ideas and present their arguments logically. (Participant 4)

They lack scholarly writing skills and their language is generally below postgraduate level. (Participant 5)

- ♦ Poor referencing

The students struggle to reference their work both in the text and at the end of the text. (Participant 4)

- ♦ No proof reading

Some submit their work without any proof-reading. (Participant 1)

- ♦ Use of outdated sources

They use outdated sources. (Participant 1)

- ♦ Struggle to access literature

Some students do not have the skill to access relevant literature from the Internet. (Participant 3)

- ♦ Functioning at undergraduate level

Students fail to distinguish between postgraduate and undergraduate research. (Participant 1)

- ♦ Delayed completion of research

The students fail to complete their projects in time. (Participant 1)

Benefits Accrued by Mentors from Supervision

Only two participants reported that they benefitted from supervising post-graduate research students. The benefits include improved research skills, joint publication of articles, positive relationship with mentees and sharing of experiences. These are presented next.

- ♦ Improve research skills

I improve my own research skills. (Participant 3)

- ♦ Joint publication

There is joint publication of articles with students. (Participant 3)

- ♦ Positive relationship with supervisee

I develop a positive relationship with the students. (Participant 1)

- ♦ Sharing of experiences

There is sharing of research experiences with the students. (Participant 1)

DISCUSSION

Due to the disproportionate gender representation, comparison of perceptual views of male and female participants was not done. It emerged from the study that the mentors had mixed views on the support that they got from their faculties. Only two participants reported that they got support in the form of training and material resources. Although acknowledging that training programmes were organised, another participant saw no reason for attending them because there was nothing new to learn. However, the other two participants indicated that they were not trained to supervise postgraduate students. The finding that some mentors did not receive any training in the supervision of postgraduate research students flies in the face of conventional wisdom. The finding meant that students supervised by ill-equipped mentors may not benefit much from the mentoring process. For the mentors to be effective, their departments or faculties needed to clarify the nature and extent of assistance the students should receive (Parsonson 2011). The training is essential in that it can enable the development of leadership potential and competence of the mentors (Daviahizar 1988). Untrained mentors may not have enough motivation to initiate the mentees into research, enthuse them and stretch their minds (Moses 1985).

Three mentors reported that they gave support to their mentees. The support included equipping the mentees with research skills, language support, editorial knowledge, providing literature and team work. The finding is consistent with Parsonson's (2011) assertion that research mentors need to pass on research skills, methods, applications and develop appropriate writing and dissemination skills.

Three mentors indicated that their mentees had several strengths. The mentees consulted regularly, made use of research facilities, showed mastery of research knowledge and had good expressive skills. However, all mentors reported that their mentees had several weaknesses. The mentees were viewed as not pro-active, lacked knowledge, lacked English expressive skills, poorly referenced their work, submitted unedited work and used outdated sources. The find-

ing is consistent with previous studies which found that postgraduate students whose first language was not English had limited English proficiency (Aitchison and Lee 2006; Bitchener and Basturkmen 2006). Although the students met the English language requirements for entering the university, they showed a general sense of inadequacy in regard to writing a thesis in English as a second language (Wang and Li 2008). Furthermore, such students lack confidence in using English to express themselves clearly and accurately. Therefore the use of English language hampers the mentoring process. The finding also supported Lesseng and Schulze (2003) whose study with South African students showed that poor use of English language and technical errors such as poor referencing and bibliography were evident in postgraduate students' work.

In the present study, postgraduate research students struggled to access recent relevant literature. Their work was perceived to be below postgraduate level and they failed to complete their projects in time. This finding gives credence to Lesseng and Schulze's (2003) finding that some students embarking on postgraduate research did not have the potential to complete their studies successfully. Presumably, they struggled because they were not competent enough to conduct research at postgraduate level or underestimated the requirements of postgraduate research; as a result, they had unrealistic expectations. According to Lesseng and Schulze, struggling students presented their supervisors with work that was poorly written and of inferior standard.

However, it can be suggested that some students struggled because of the multiple responsibilities that impacted negatively on study progress and success (Strauss 2001). Other students might have struggled as a result of poor relationships with mentors, lack of support structures, study isolation and confusion over resources (Johnston and Broda 1996). As expected, in Zimbabwe like other developing countries, supervisors find postgraduate students to be less prepared for higher degree studies than in the past (Brown 2007). This situation puts increasing and unprecedented pressures, particularly on young and novice mentors. Another plausible explanation is the mismatch of expectations and teaching and learning styles, incongruent perceptions, lack of mutual understand-

ing of various aspects of the mentoring process and different academic values between the mentor and mentee (Cadman 2000; Kiley 1998; McClure 2005).

Only two participants reported that they benefitted from supervising post-graduate research students. The benefits include improved research skills, joint publication of articles, positive relationship with mentees and sharing of experiences. The finding may demonstrate some mentors' lack of understanding of their roles and responsibilities in the mentoring process (Moses 1985). They might not have been aware that they were to serve as an example or source of guidance about professional development and should have helped the mentees to cope with demanding responsibilities of being research investigators. The mentors needed to possess skills in writing and reviewing of papers, grant writing, management of time and commitments, development of ethical judgment and standards for treating others fairly.

CONCLUSION

Some of the themes emerging from study concern frustrations within supervisory teams. It emerged from the present study that the majority of the mentors did not receive training on how to supervise postgraduate research students. Supervisors reported difficulties when research students appear not to be pro-active, lacked knowledge, lacked English expressive skills, poorly referenced their work, submitted unedited work and used outdated sources. Despite several weaknesses of postgraduate cited, most supervisors reported that supervision of postgraduate students was empowering. Mentoring of postgraduate research students enhanced the mentors' research skills, resulted in joint publication of articles, positive relationship with mentees and sharing of experiences.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The study recommends that departments and faculties equip mentors for post-graduate research students with the knowledge and skills to effectively supervise the mentees assigned to them. The duties and responsibilities for both the mentor and mentee should be clearly spelt out.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

Only one female lecturer took part in the study. Further study can be conducted with more females to listen to their views. The mentors' experience of supervising postgraduate students was not considered. This could be addressed by a follow up study that would focus on the experiences of novice, medium experienced and highly experienced mentors.

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