STRENGTHENING POSTGRADUATE SUPERVISION

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POSTGRADUATE SUPERVISION AT A YOUNG UNIVERSITY

THE ROLE OF SUPERVISION INITIATIVES

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INTRODUCTION

Universities face tremendous pressure to develop high-calibre knowledge workers who will produce new, cost-effective and environmentally friendly solutions to complex economic and social problems. Olibie, Nwabugo and Ezoechina (2015:156) argue that knowledge-based economies look to universities to produce advanced knowledge that will bring about change, growth and prosperity in super-complex globalised environments. Innovation, creativity, lifelong learning and scholarship through research are argued to be at the forefront of these solutions (Mutula, 2011:184; Olibie et al, 2015:156), which makes postgraduate research a very complex and ever changing area of university activity (Grant, Hackney and Edgar, 2014:43) and supervision a crucial element in the development of the new generation of academics and knowledge workers.

This is not the only challenge that young universities are facing. There are also threats of brain drain as veteran supervisors and senior researchers reach retirement, leaving the faculties in the hands of academics who have not been prepared for effective research supervision and quality knowledge production (Olibie, Nwabugo and Ezoechina (2015:157). Pearson and Brew (2002:135) point out that this pressure on universities has prompted governments worldwide to provide funding to heighten research momentum, efficiency and quality. As research becomes increasingly recognised as vital to economic growth, research education has become a matter of greater concern for both governments and the public.

According to Barnett (2011) and Bawa (2011) universities also have to function within the realities of the societies in which they are embedded and address pertinent

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issues such as social inequalities, prejudices, power struggles and inequitable resource distribution which all impact on the ability to access universities, to benefit from learning and to develop research capabilities. As universities lie in the midst of societal diversity and development, there cannot be a single overarching approach to knowledge creation, innovation and research. Barnett (2011) further states that the diversity and complexity of the communities within which the university exists necessitate a wider assortment of approaches to establishing and supporting knowledge production through research. Bitzer and Albertyn (2011:875) attribute the drive towards different approaches to supervision to the “multiple transformations” that have taken place in societies worldwide, making research supervision an extremely challenging and fluid activity characterised by continuity, change and complexity (Grant, Hackney and Edgar, 2014). The quality of research output depends on the quality of the supervisor, supervisor-student relationship and the quality of the whole process and context of supervision (Severinsson, 2015:195).

It is in this context that this chapter has been written following an intensive staff development course, *Strengthening Postgraduate Supervision*, which proved to be very important to me as a novice supervisor. Such workshops are crucial for new supervisors as they confront the fallacy that completion of the PhD automatically transforms the doctoral graduate into an effective supervisor. These workshops prepare supervisors for the new challenging role they have to play by providing the strategies required for successful supervision. They provide the platform for novice supervisors to look critically at their practices and benchmark these against the experienced supervisors regarding their practices, treatment of students, the urgency that they give to the students’ submissions, and the nature of feedback that they provide. This chapter makes a case for such staff development opportunities being provided to academics as they complete their doctoral studies (Lategan, 2014; Pearson and Brew, 2002). Nothnagel (2015) emphasises the importance of supervisory skills development on an ongoing basis to meet the changing and demanding requirements on postgraduate supervision, while Olibie, Nwabugo and Ezoechina (2015) contend that mentoring plays a vital role in the development of new researchers with the skills necessary be independent and able to promote quality knowledge production.

THE CONTEXT IN WHICH I SUPERVISE

MacGregor (2013) cautions that the African continent needs to speed up the process of production of PhD holders not only for economic growth, but also to replace the current cohort of researchers. This warning supports the concerns raised

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by Mouton in Dell (2010) that South Africa has no other option but to grow its number of doctors to enable the country to grow its knowledge economy. In 2013, South Africa produced 2 015 doctorates, significantly less than the target of 5 000 set for 2030 (National Development Plan, 2011). The call for such enormous growth in throughput may be too steep especially within the context described by Nothnagel (2015:90) as “fraught with inherited injustices, deeply-rooted political identities an inherent suspicion of authority and a small academic educational research community”. Universities of Technology, in particular, come from a tradition of providing quality vocational training, where the production of knowledge was not seen to be central for the academics working in technikons, which did not offer postgraduate education. The offering of postgraduate studies and the subsequent shift in institutional nomenclature to ‘University of Technology’ entails major changes in the identity and practices of all involved.

It is thus clear that the context in which I am supervising is pressure-laden. There are tensions for the faculty to deliver on its promise to the university to boost research output without necessarily having the required capacity to do so. As a new supervisor I have to play my part in helping the faculty address such problems. This calls for being strategic in dealing with big numbers of under-prepared students in order to ensure quality output. Unfortunately, the kind of quality that is envisaged cannot be ensured without training, mentoring and guidance from experienced supervisors. The call to grow the number of postgraduate studies needs to be accompanied by structured efforts to develop supervision capacity.

DURBAN UNIVERSITY OF TECHNOLOGY (DUT)

DUT is one of six Universities of Technology which are included in the 26 public higher education institutions in South Africa. It is regarded as a medium-sized institution with an enrolment of 27 000 students. As a University of Technology, DUT is fairly young and was formed in 2002 through the merger of two technikons (Natal Technikon and ML Sultan Technikon). Such mergers were the result of the drive by the South African government to redress past higher education sectorial disparities. While in the past both traditional universities and technikons were categorised as higher education, the focus regarding all aspects of their work was different. Raju (2006:5) points out that the main educational task of technikons was to provide education and training in order to supply the industries with middle-level and high-level personnel with industry-specific skills and technological and practical knowledge for effective productivity, as opposed to the role of traditional universities to develop theoretical knowledge with a strong focus on research.

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This implies that the newly formed Universities of Technology are expected to fulfil similar mandates to traditional universities driven by teaching, research and community engagement as performance pillars leading to capacity challenges, funding shortages and productivity pressures. With 1099 postgraduates in 2016 (DUT Research Office 2016), DUT only registers 4% postgraduate students instead of the 7% benchmark. Such statistics greatly influence the ethos and practices in this environment in which I completed my doctoral degree and now emerge as a new supervisor.

On completion of my doctoral degree I was prompted by the university research office to submit my three-year research plan. This, together with the Faculty of Management Sciences' postgraduate expansion plans, put a lot of pressure on me as an emerging supervisor. The assumption is that anyone completing a doctorate is ready to start supervising postgraduate research by virtue of having been supervised. In my experience, as I outline below, this is not necessarily true and such expectations can actually serve to undermine the confidence and capabilities of the novice supervisor.

FACULTY OF MANAGEMENT SCIENCES

The Faculty of Management Sciences is the biggest faculty at DUT in number of departments and student enrolment. In response to the national call to increase postgraduate output, the faculty initiated Project 500 in 2013 aimed at enrolling 500 masters and doctoral students in 2014. Inevitably, those who applied were accepted on a first-come-first-served basis without any screening. Screening of postgraduate students for fitness, readiness and commitment is crucial to improving the success rate. Furthermore, the decision to offer postgraduate studies free of charge at DUT may have widened opportunities for physical access but did not in itself enhance opportunities of epistemological access. The institution struggles with under-prepared students who are not aware of academic research practices or of the extent of their commitment in registering for such programmes. The end result is that quite a number of students have become demoralised and inactive because they find postgraduate studies very challenging and have not been adequately prepared for its demands. Supervisors feel similarly unsettled by the enormous supervision loads and lack of progress in developing the required expertise or support in managing such loads.

We are already preparing for the second round of intake and we have been advised to drop the concept 'Project 500' as we have moved beyond the project stage into building a research enterprise within the institution. The rapid increase of

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postgraduate students has brought with it a number of additional responsibilities for supervisors. For example, the number of research proposals to be considered creates frustrations for supervisors with some being perceived to act as 'gatekeepers' when they review the proposals stringently. The number of applicants far exceeded 500 and the faculty was not able to allocate supervisors to all the applicants. To absorb the big number of applicants, the committee agreed that each supervisor should have a minimum of 20 students to supervise and also recruited supervisors from other universities.

As Maritz & Prinsloo argue (2015:3) we as new supervisors had to learn how to supervise 'on the go' because faculties assume new supervisors to be 'always/already' on completion of their doctoral studies (Manathunga and Goozee, 2007:309). We had to try and duplicate the positive practices of our former supervisors and avoid those which we felt were unhelpful. While there were a number of research meetings, these inevitably focused on necessary logistics and administrative matters and left scant room for deliberation as to how to supervise effectively. There was a one-day course for supervisors but this was designed to increase and improve on reviewing the numerous proposals that serve before the faculty committee. Furthermore, the lack of capacity is such that often such support has to be provided by colleagues who have not themselves supervised any significant number of postgraduate students to graduation.

The *Strengthening Postgraduate Supervision* course came at just the right time for me because I needed to learn about alternative approaches and most especially how to deal with the big numbers of under-prepared students we were expected to take on. When I saw the advert for the workshop I felt I could not miss the opportunity as I found myself overwhelmed with everything that was going on at Faculty Research Committee meetings. Clearly I needed to go on a retreat for someone to explain what was going on and prepare me for the new role of postgraduate supervision. The course began with a three-day face to face session in an environment combining novice and experienced supervisors with two facilitators who had been in the same predicament as we novice supervisors were currently in and who exuded empathy for our difficulties.

The big elephant 'postgraduate supervision' was dissected and each part was given a name and a role and then it was put back together. This phase was followed by three months of online interaction, comprising case studies, question-and-answer sessions, experience sharing and so on. By the time we converged for the last three-day session of phase three we were better informed than when we first met and had fostered a sense of community. The last session was followed by the development of

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a 12-page assignment which required us to read journal articles on postgraduate supervision and reflect on our own contexts and approaches.

This training gave me confidence to do what I do and enabled me to give names to what I do. By being able to name issues and find literature that related to that aspect, I gained a sense that I was not alone in this process. I know that I would still be struggling in the dark had I not attended the *Strengthening Postgraduate Supervision* course. At DUT, this course was then followed up with a series of workshops on research ethics and finally a three-day session on Supervising the Literature Review conducted by Rhodes University. This workshop also came at the right time as my first group of students were busy with their literature reviews.

Clearly models such as cohort supervision (Bitzer and Albertyn, 2011) group and team supervision (Samuel and Vithal, 2011; McKenna, 2016) are worth exploring in a faculty and department faced with big numbers. These approaches will allow the two supervisors in the department to deal with the 40 students that we have recruited plus those that we have been allocated. We are working on grouping them according to topics (such as tourism, environmental management and management) and we are now dealing with their supervision together. This will also mean that even if I am not around, the students are still able to get assistance from my colleague and vice versa. It is important at this stage to mention that the number of students that we both supervise in the department has dropped drastically in 2016 from the initial 32 to about 12 active students (2013, 2014 intake) as 62.5% has become inactive or dropped out. None of these students have graduated although we hope to see 5 of the active 12 graduating in April 2017.

The faculty has initiated a number of research methodology workshops which the students attend to get their research proposals ready and the writing centres (found across all campuses) help a great deal with editorial and other writing issues. The faculty has also designed a number of forms that are used regulate the administrative and procedural duties of the supervisor to make expectations more overt (Pearson and Kayrooz, 2004:100). However, I should mention that if I want to be a good supervisor, I cannot expect to always deal with all my students in a group. There are individual issues that require one-on-one interaction. So while I am now offered examples of alternative approaches and, through the course, am provided with a stronger sense of community, the enormous workload remains a pressing concern.

A CASE FOR POSTDOCTORAL AND RESEARCH SUPERVISION DEVELOPMENT

As universities become increasingly aware of the need to develop their academics as teachers who can respond to the multiple needs of our diverse students, so it

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becomes evident that it is equally important to prepare academics who are recent doctoral graduates for the new role of research supervision. Nothnagel (2015:91) cautions against the assumption held by South African universities and inscribed in the Higher Education Qualifications Sub-Framework (2013) that completion of doctoral studies qualifies one to be a postgraduate supervisor. Maritz & Prinsloo (2015:1) and Severinsson (2015:196) see the process of becoming an effective supervisor as a formative one which requires support and nurturing if the quality of supervision is to improve in a world of growing expectations and conflicting pressures with increased emphasis on “skills formation and timely completion” (Lee, 2007:680). Lategan (2014) talks of the whole research process that novice supervisors have to be inducted into by the faculty and Grant et al. (2014) refer to the need for effective supervisors to be acutely aware of the traditions, customs and beliefs of their discipline, while Lee (2007) argues the case of conceptual approach to research supervision. Grant et al. (2014:43) further argue in favour of supportive spaces to develop capable and innovative supervisors who will be able to inspire their students. Manathunga and Goozee (2007:310) suggest a learning cycle for novice supervisors where they get practical support from veteran supervisors, and learn the rules of the game through action learning projects, joint supervision and publications. Grant et al. (2014); Lategan (2014); Bitzer (2010); and Lye (2004) make a case for postdoctoral development support for novice supervisors if the quality of supervision is to improve. Lye argues that such training is important in order to avoid the research pitfalls already identified; Bitzer (2010) agrees that training is a key to good supervision; while Mohammad (2014:35) cites supervision conferences, research supervision codes of practice and university handbooks that help provide skills and knowledge on good supervision practices.

In support (Lee, 2007:680) posits that the length and depth of concepts that the supervisor has acquired will have an effect on the quality of supervision and project that emerges as the final product. Pearson and Brew (2002:135) point to concerns to improve research supervision effectiveness and quality in order to improve student satisfaction and timely completion rates through the use of extension programmes for supervision development. In agreement, Barnett (2000) stresses the importance of prudent research skills in a super-complex world.

WAYS IN WHICH SUPERVISION DEVELOPMENT HAS IMPACTED ON MY SUPERVISION

Phang et al (2014:252); Bitzer (2010:27); de Kleijn, Meijn, Brekelmans and Pilot (2014:117); Maritz and Prinsloo (2015:3); Mohammad (2014:37); and Lye

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(2004:130) believe that project completion and postgraduate success depend primarily on the quality of supervision given to the students. Mohammad further highlights the importance of developing curricula, supervisory practices and mentoring approaches to enhance postgraduate supervision. Farizah, Siti, Mohd, Muhammad, Mohd, Nor, Siti and Nooraini, (2015:95) caution against overlooking the fact that novice supervisors lack research and supervision experience and point to the dangers of expecting the new supervisors to “learn on the fly” (Maritz and Prinsloo, 2015) thus running into the same “research traps and pitfalls” (Lye, 2004) as their predecessors. Lee (2008:268) sees the extent of development of the concept of research supervision as crucial to the supervisor’s ability to navigate between a range of approaches to supervision, enhancing positive impacts and reducing negative impacts of each approach. Supervisors themselves, especially new ones, need to be supported and mentored and not left to make mistakes that were determined years ago and possible solutions identified.

My style of supervision continues to be shaped by other supervisors, both experienced and novice, who I met as I was going through my long lonely journey as a doctoral student as well as at workshops. I find such engagements to be crucial to my personal development as a novice supervisor. In many ways it is the provision of a developmental space and the opportunities to share experiences with colleagues that are the key merits of staff development initiatives, rather than the content of the course itself.

The lonely journey as a fairly isolated scholar that I experienced while undertaking my doctoral studies had some merits. It provided me with a strong sense of independence and an ability to structure my own project. I also had to learn not to allow myself to be derailed by distractions and to counter any debilitating negativity within myself. This experience comes in handy as I pinpoint possible derailment points to the students I supervise. There weren’t as many research workshops at the time as there are now within the faculty and my promoter was also a novice finding his way around the supervision maze without much support. The discussions that take place at the supervision workshops highlight my weaknesses and the weaknesses of others, and point the way towards becoming better at the job. It is interesting also to see experienced supervisors who may have become complacent learning from novices who are still very cautious and particular about this newly found field of expertise.

The course focus on social justice and inclusion made me question assumptions I might make about prospective students and their ability to cope with postgraduate education. In order to make the postgraduate learning space one in which the mysteries of the discipline are made accessible and open to critique, I have had to

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invest considerable thought as to how to make the space one that is welcoming to all and that acknowledges the multiple experiences my students bring with them. This has been a significant shift from thinking about postgraduate supervision in fairly functional ways (Lee 2007) where my primary objective has been to manage the supervision of the research project.

I also learnt about the importance of developing a student–supervisor agreement outlining the roles and responsibilities of each in order to prevent problems that might occur where such are not clarified beforehand. The norms and expectations that the student and supervisor bring to the process may differ considerably and may need significant open and collegial engagement in order to foster a shared sense of how to work together. I know about the value of keeping records of communication with the students, tracking their progress and proving needed support. Having a practical set of organisation skills is essential in a context such as mine where I have to manage large numbers of students, each with their own concerns. The training also highlighted the importance of turning students into scholars, whereby they are nurtured to ask relevant and critical questions. The focus on the student as a scholar, and novice member of the discipline, has entailed a significant shift for me as a supervisor. As a novice trying my best to become a good supervisor, I have learnt to ask relevant questions that help my students think carefully about the importance of their studies in their current and envisaged careers.

Another way in which being part of a development course assisted me was to expose me to various philosophies of supervising. The course and the subsequent portfolio that I had to submit compelled me to read literature on research supervision which I would otherwise not have done. Severinsson (2015:196) regards literature study on research supervision as useful to becoming an effective supervisor. For example, the ideas underpinning the “humanizing pedagogy” made me realise that I may be as vulnerable as the students are and made me consider the significance of social inclusion in the South African supervisory context. As a new supervisor I am increasingly aware of and sensitive to the ways in which different expectations and values, and prior learning experiences can play into the supervisory relationship. “Humanizing pedagogy” makes me rethink what I do as a supervisor and how as a fellow student I am undertaking a journey towards the discovery of knowledge alongside my students which changes and reshapes our mutual understanding (Khene, 2014:74). This relationship is feasible if I practise the “ontological vocation of being human first” (Bishop, 2014); being interested in each student and their progress (de Keijn et al, 2015:118) and applying the rule of treating others as one would like to be treated. Camangian (2014) talks about teaching as if your life depended on it, and

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I would like to advocate the same for supervision: agitating the students about the current self, treating the tension between that and the desired state of being through personal reflection, inspiration and transformation. The postgraduate students are in most cases adults with as much role conflict as the supervisor has to grapple with which requires some deep understanding and motivation from me as a supervisor while drawing a line between process facilitation and stepping over the line and 'walking for them' which I think I have done in some cases.

However, it is important to state that acquiring such insights and then implementing them in practice is not easy as this is a new role piled upon a series of pre-existing roles. Without development and support I would not be able to give names to what I do, nor understand why I do it. Maritz and Prinsloo (2015) talk of the capital that shapes the supervisor's process of becoming which is riddled with mistakes if the novice supervisor is left to their own devices to "understand the inherent rules" and roles without any form of institutional or collegial support.

My approach to supervision is thus strongly informed by staff development courses, readings and faculty support meetings. Such initiatives prepare one for this new, challenging and very important role by reducing the sense of "powerlessness and ineffectiveness" often experienced by the novice supervisor (Maritz and Prinsloo, 2015:2). My approach is increasingly adaptive as I gain confidence in myself as a supervisor and it changes with my own development and the evolving needs of each student and the stage of research that the student is at (Chaiyapetta-Swanson and Watt, 2011:16; Kleijn et al., 2015), beginning with fairly extensive structure and guidance and later moving to more independence and a more critical emancipatory approach. Sometimes I find myself taking on students whose relationship with their supervisor has failed. Here, in particular, I need to be empathetic and flexible as we move forward together (Wisker and Robinson 2013).

Postgraduate research supervision, as I have discovered (Nothnagel, 2015:91), is a field of study in its own right that demands specific skills and therefore should not be entered into unprepared by novice supervisors who are not simply "always/already" (Manathunga and Goozee 2007). Lee (2008:267) argues that a supervisor can make or break a postgraduate student especially if she herself has not been confidently inducted into the new field with its own concepts, theories and methodologies. Postgraduate supervision is not just about understanding my own field (which is management and leadership), but also about mastering the field of postgraduate research supervision. My understanding of research education is to develop effective research supervisors who are able to select ready students with some time to dedicate to their studies, and prepare, guide, mentor and motivate

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them towards completion. Research education is also aimed at supporting novice supervisors in teaching their students to think critically about their field of study, apply the new language and skills of research to question existing and accepted knowledge, and help in the development of new knowledge.

CONCLUSION

There are a myriad processes involved in guiding a student through the process of completing a dissertation and becoming an independent researcher. These processes are not necessarily known to those doctoral graduates who by virtue of completion of their studies are simply expected to become supervisors. Finding their way through these processes can become a lengthy and troubled process, with great risk to the novice supervisor and to their students if there are no mechanisms put in place to fast track their progress. Over and above these processes, the new supervisors are often themselves only just beginning to find their feet in the relevant discipline while simultaneously adjusting to the new role of supervisor. This chapter highlights the importance of research support and supervision development for novice supervisors to reduce the number of mistakes that may prove to be very costly for the students and the university as a whole, and to give them a sense of collegial space for becoming the kind of supervisor they would like to be. Development for the newly graduated doctors should not be incidental. It should be structured and compulsory if postgraduate research supervision effectiveness and quality are important to the faculty and university and if both timeous completion and project quality are important. This chapter argues that supervisors who have been exposed to supervision literature and nurtured through a supervision development process are likely to be better supervisors than those who are supervising with a sense of isolation and reliant only on their own experiences of being supervised. Staff development to enhance supervision capacity reduces frustrations for both the novice supervisors and postgraduate students and provides opportunities to foster a notion of professional communities collaborating to nurture a postgraduate environment for the benefit of all.

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