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Exploring Challenges of Supervising Postgraduate Students in Open Distance Learning in Higher Education Settings

Abstract

The paper explores the challenges of supervising postgraduate students in open distance learning in higher education. The researcher argues that inaccessibility of information and services provided by supervisors, can contribute to a low quality of students' success. The responsibility of institutions is to ensure that facilities provided to supervisors are always appropriate in order to supervise students in distance education. Moore's Theory of Transactional Distance assumes that distance is a pedagogical, not geographic phenomenon. It raises questions about understandings and perceptions that might lead to communication gaps. The challenges in distance postgraduate supervision originate from the spatial and temporal distance and disconnection between the supervisor and student. It is assumed that some universities may not have adequate staff with PhDs to supervise students. However, the challenges of supervising postgraduate students are the lack of supervision skills, changing of supervisors, and the mode of supervision employed.

Keywords: supervision, postgraduate, students, open distance, learning, environment

Introduction

The paper explores the challenges of supervising postgraduate students in an open distance learning (ODL) environment. The argument in this paper emanates from the fact that some researchers have suggested that postgraduate supervision itself needs revitalizing to keep it current with the need for academic expertise and rigour. Van der Laan et al. (2021) believe that the inadequacies in supervision are associated with evidence that: postgraduate student attrition and failure to compete metrics are at worryingly low levels; student attrition is somewhat related to inadequate supervisory and institutional support; and university capacity to adequately support students is limited, especially within the context of increasing demand for certain postgraduate programmes. According to the above authors, postgraduate research students make a valuable intellectual contribution to the research efforts of universities. In many instances, they enhance the research outputs and specialization of the supervising faculty.

Method

The paper is qualitative in nature and follows an interpretivist paradigm. This paper reviewed literature on supervision from the point of view of supervision of postgraduate students in an ODL environment, using Moore's Theory of Transactional Distance as a lens. Then it offers some reflections on supervision. The pressures upon supervision of students at a distance are related to issues encountered in distance supervision. In the Theory of Transactional Distance, Moore posits that

in distance learning scenarios, the separation between the supervisor and students can lead to communication gaps, a psychological space of potential misunderstandings between the behaviours of supervisors and those of the students (Falloon, 2011). The paper uses Moore's theory of transactional distance in understanding supervision of postgraduate students at a distance. In this paper, transactional distance will refer to the psychological space of potential misunderstanding between the behaviours of people involved in distance education in case supervision due to the physical separation. Moore built his theoretical models based on the interplay of three concepts, 'dialogue, structure and autonomy' (Wang & Liu, 2003). Distance supervision ought to be understood as the universe of supervisor-student relationships that exist when students and supervisors are separated by space and/or by time. This explanation includes both synchronous and asynchronous delivery modes. Transactional distance theory is important conceptually, since it proposes that the essential distance in distance supervision is transactional, not spatial or temporal. Advances in communications technology, which made synchronous and asynchronous interaction readily available can easily enable interaction to become a key factor in distance supervision (Gorsky & Caspi, 2005). Moore's Theory of Transactional Distance assumes that distance is a pedagogical, not geographic phenomenon. It is understandings and perceptions that might lead to a communication gap or a psychological space of potential misunderstandings between the supervisor and student. Moore also suggests that this distance must be overcome if effective, deliberate, planned supervision is to occur in the supervision of students (Falloon, 2011).

Purpose of the paper

The paper aims to explore the challenges pertaining to supervision of postgraduate students in open and distance learning (ODL) modes that are likely to limit the success of both supervisors and postgraduate students.

Research question

The overarching question this paper is trying to explore is: To what extent do we know about the challenges facing higher education institutions (HEIs) in supervising postgraduate students in open distance learning (ODL) environment? Choices for methods of supervision undoubtedly have benefits for supervision of postgraduate students who live at a distance from the university. Because of the potential complexity of objectives and roles in supervision, a structured agreement appears to be an important part of the effective supervision relationship. Without this supervision can easily degenerate into unstructured socialization, and also having session objectives is important. Mutual respect and trust are an essential base for the supervision relationship, with detailed feedback appear to be critical to supervision at a distance (Kavanagh et al., 2002).

Importance of communication

Maintaining good communication with distance students can be difficult, particularly with respect to striking a balance between support and harassment.

Email or telephone contact every month can be helpful and more likely to accord with the comfort values of the student trying to develop an appropriate pattern of integrating masters/doctoral study with the rest of life (Watts, 2008). The word communication comes from the Greek ‘communis’ which means common (Ferreira & Pellegrini, 2019). Communication represents a strategic tool to strengthen the organizational culture and the identity of the institution. The communication process in organizations basically involves administrative communication, barriers and communication vehicles, formal and informal networks. Therefore, the importance of communication is to avoid errors between the supervisor and the student (Ferreira & Pellegrini, 2019). Interpersonal communication can play an important role in the negotiation process during the supervision process (Geber, Baumann & Klimmt, 2019).

Thus, inaccessibility of information and services provided by DE supervisors, can contribute to low quality of students’ success. The main responsibility of the institutions is to ensure that the facilities provided to supervisors are always appropriate for the supervision of students in a distance mode. The benefit of having good facilities is that it can be a factor in helping supervisors to reach their students with ease. There are circumstances where students and supervisors face personality clashes, barriers to communication, cultural and language difficulties or personal differences in working approaches. As an educational institution, all of these should be handled effectively to facilitate these students. In a thesis programme, there is a crucial need for an effective supervisory approach. Students may experience a lot of difficulties during their research process. Some of them may not be familiar with the research topic and some of them may lack the requisite knowledge of research methodology. On the other hand, supervision is one of the main elements that should be considered when discussing about graduate students. DE supervision has become very critical for graduate students to achieve higher degree certification. Supervision ought to be a central process for the successful completion of programmes. DE supervision needs to be interpreted as a two ways interactional process that requires both the student and the supervisor to consciously engage each other within the spirit of professionalism, respect, collegiality and open mindedness (Bueno, 2019).

Supervisors need to give prominence to existing competences and creativity, thus choosing skilled communication as well as authentic behaviours, so that they can help students through a manual to use as a reference point for the students as ways of supporting them. Distance supervisors ought to be involved in the theoretical and practical supervision of students through communication (Berney & Bourquin, 2019). The issue of who ought to initiate contact, the student or the supervisor is a concern. I would argue that maintaining effective communication is the responsibility of the supervisor, as part of both what the student is paying for and of the informal, if not explicit, learning contract between them. Establishing a formal contract, as an explicit strategy, is one possible way to solve supervision issues because a contract sets out the roles and responsibilities of both the supervisor and the student (Watts, 2008).

Challenges of supervising postgraduate students

By establishing distance learning and education programme, universities are now better positioned to attract part-time students, mainly working professionals,

and people with disabilities. The issue of flexibility is of a greater importance to supervision of postgraduate students in distance education because they are expected to be provided with the time and space to take up their studies alongside their demanding jobs and caring responsibilities (Nasiri & Mafakheri, 2015). Therefore, the challenges in distance postgraduate supervision originate from the spatial and temporal distance and disconnection between the supervisor and student. From a timing perspective, supervisor and student may live thousands of kilometres from each other, which may create an issue when finding a mutually convenient and productive time to connect (Ibid, 2015). It is highly likely that both supervisor and student may experience a lack of good personal knowledge about each other. This may drive the supervisory conversations towards a formal format and may make it harder to create an informal environment for discussions. This means that the encounters are in danger of being less motivating and less engaging, especially from the perspective of doctoral students that are in need of continuous technical and pastoral support for several years (Ibid, 2015). Lack of delicacy and depth in communications is yet another risk for distance supervisory discussions. Supervisors may experience an increased workload due to the expectation that they should be constantly open to requests from students and as they sometimes represent the whole university system for a distance student (Ibid, 2015).

Lee (2008) opines that supervisors may see themselves as being like the family doctor. They will provide some specific expertise but will also be a gatekeeper to many more learning resources, specialist opinions and networks. The supervisor can choose which gates to open, particularly in the early stages of the student's life. Within this understanding, therefore, there is also an understanding of the power of the supervisor in its widest sense. Not only is the student 'present' but also the supervisor is also 'present' as well. There is another aspect of the power dynamic may arise from the supervisor being gatekeeper to the qualification and the academic discipline: that of ownership (or even suppression) of the result. The student needs to be aware of how powerful (or not) their supervisor is in the institution, and discussion about enculturation as a concept or an expectation could help the student to make realistic decisions.

With the increased demand for higher education, some universities or departments may not have adequate staff at PhD level to supervise postgraduate students. This problem might result in the allocation of students to supervisors without adequate disciplinary background to advise the student, resulting in a potential challenge of having to offer supervision services in an unfamiliar academic terrain. Another challenge is that the supervisor may not have ground knowledge on the research area of focus and methodologies for appropriate data collection. Quality of postgraduate work may also be at risk when students are allocated to newly graduated PhD lecturers who need time to learn how to supervise. While they can learn through apprenticeship/tutelage of a more experienced supervisor, prepared guidelines may be useful in providing some tips and expectations for quality supervision (Kimani, 2014). In many of these cases, the challenge is that such supervisors are unable to guide the student to grasp the whole essence of the research focus and the entire optimal methodology to bring out the knowledge gap that the research is set to fill. Such is also possible with a supervisor who is not knowledgeable with the current theories and practices in the area of study. This has

serious implications for the quality of research output and the thesis. Evidently, such supervisors either delay the students 'completion schedule or just allow the student to submit a low-quality thesis/dissertation' (Kimani, 2014, p. 65). The relationship between a postgraduate supervisor and student is a crucial element in the successful completion of a PhD, in an era where timely completions have become a key focus. It is common to view the experience of postgraduate supervision in terms of conflict, isolation from others, trauma and 'fraught discipleship' (Hemer, 2012).

Lack of supervision skills

Supervisors need to be assessed whether they have information and the requisite skills critical to supervision at a distance. They ought to be trained in specific skills in distance supervision through a practical demonstration (Harvey & Schramski, 1984). **Change of Supervisors:** Difficulties in compatibility between the student and the supervisor may result with changes of supervisors in the middle of the research process. And the change may be more of a disruption rather than a benefit as a result of which the quality of the research report may be compromised. **Mode of supervision:** Co-supervision can be problematic because of diversity in views which can be confusing for the student. There may also be those supervisors who strive to gain a student's favour by discrediting other supervisors. The conflicts can get out of hand to the extent that the main or the principle supervisor is unable to control, unfortunately affecting not only the quality of supervision but also the students' rate of completion (Kimani, 2014). Among the challenges of postgraduate distance supervision students include engaging in the research culture of the university, dealing with isolation, self-regulating their learning, and effectively using online communication. While working with students, DE supervisors should maintain a system of communication and support throughout the research process, prepare students for research, writing, and new forms of communication, and be sensitive to students' life and work demands. These supervisors are expected to provide constructive feedback, opportunities and online spaces and technologies for communication, and maintain dialogue toward successful and reciprocally satisfying research processes (Kara & Can, 2019).

Ethical approval ought to be given for the study by the university's Ethics Committee (Davies, 2020). Time pressures are an acute element within the supervisory relationship, with the emphasis on timely completions for postgraduates and the workload pressures facing academics supervisors (Hemer, 2012).

Cardilini, Risely and Richardson (2021) believe that supervisors have the responsibility to give guidance and feedback on critical thinking, written communication, and relevant discipline knowledge to students. Students' expectations are that more guidance on developing their academic independence, their collaboration skills, and maintaining motivation should be provided by supervisors. Yet, some supervisors may think they have little or no responsibility in guiding students in qualitative attributes. Similarly, Sá, Santos and Serpa (2021) are of the view that 'the role played by the supervisor in monitoring the process of design, preparation and presentation of the end-of-programme project by students is undeniably important'. It is up to them to make sure that the student follows the timetable agreed upon at the beginning of the process, attains the objectives of the project and delivers a quality product, always in an iterative relationship with the

student. Therefore, supervisor's supervision activities must be characterised by flexibility, iteration, continuous feedback and constructive criticism, in the sense that the supervisor trains the student with investigative competences, in this teaching-learning process, although with specific characteristics.

Findings

The challenges faced by supervisors when supervising postgraduate students are lack of supervision skills, change of supervisors, and mode of supervision employed.

Conclusion

The challenges of postgraduate distance supervision for students include engaging in the research culture of the university, dealing with isolation, self-regulating their learning, and effectively using online communication. Supervisors should maintain a consistent system of communication and support throughout the supervision process.

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