

Postgraduate supervision: students' and supervisors' perceptions

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The aim of this research was to compare the views of postgraduate students and supervisors on the supervisory process in the Faculty of Education at the University of South Africa. The research was conducted in two phases. In the first phase, survey research was employed by means of a questionnaire in order to determine the perceptions of students on diverse aspects of postgraduate research. During the second phase, supervisors' perceptions of postgraduate supervision were ascertained by means of a qualitative inquiry using focus groups. The findings included a number of aspects which participants had found rewarding. Unmet needs of students related to the planning of the research, research methodology, contact with supervisors, feedback, response time and examination feedback. Supervisors desired the recruitment of higher potential students who would deliver better work.

Nagraadse studieleiding: student- en studieleierpersepsies

Die doel met hierdie navorsing was om die aard van die sienings van studente en studieleiers oor studieleiding by die Fakulteit Opvoedkunde aan die Universiteit van Suid-Afrika te vergelyk. Die navorsing is in twee fases uitgevoer. In die eerste fase is die persepsies van studente rakende verskeie aspekte van hulle nagraadse studie deur middel van 'n vraelys bepaal. Gedurende die tweede fase is studieleiers se persepsies van nagraadse studieleiding bepaal deur middel van 'n kwalitatiewe ondersoek wat fokusgroepe ingesluit het. Die resultate het op 'n aantal onbevredigende aspekte vir die deelnemers gedui. Onbeantwoorde behoeftes van studente het verband gehou met die beplanning van die navorsing, navorsingsmetodologie, kontak met studieleiers, terugvoering, responstyd en terugvoering na eksaminering afgehandel is. Studieleiers het 'n behoefte gehad aan studente met meer potensiaal wat werk van 'n beter gehalte lewer.

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The National Plan for Higher Education (Dept of Education 2001), which outlines the framework for realising the policy goals of the Education White Paper 3: A Programme for the Transformation of Higher Education (published in 1997) addresses the issue of postgraduate research. In 1998, master's and doctoral graduates accounted for only approximately 6% of all university and technikon graduates (Dept of Education 2001: 1 & 73). There were 5 222 from universities and 100 from technikons. To improve the output of master's and doctoral students, it is stated that research "will be funded through a separate formula based on research outputs, including, at a minimum, masters and doctoral graduates and research publications" (Dept of Education 2001: 3). However, higher education institutions should "ensure that they do not recruit students who do not have the potential to pursue further study and [...] do not retain students who have no chance of success" (Dept of Education 2001: 25).

In addition to recruitment and output issues, quality is a concern (Dept of Education 2001: 9, 26 & 61). In terms of postgraduate supervision, quality involves two aspects: the quality of the supervisory process (by supervisors) and the quality of the research output (by students). Hence, a concern for quality means caring about the goals, needs and interests of the customers (students) and ensuring that they are met (Arcaro 1995: 24; Whitaker & Moses 1994: 76). This implies that supervision should be assessed by the postgraduate students themselves to determine its quality. This provides crucial information on whether their expectations were met, and is central to the evaluation of supervision (Ramsden & Dodds 1989: 16; Van Niekerk & Herman 1996: 44).

However, the research output (dissertations and theses) of postgraduate students should also adhere to minimum standards as specified in the stated outcomes for South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA) registration and as expected by the community who are customers of higher education institutions. In the light of the fact that postgraduate research and supervision in South Africa is currently taking place in the context of university transformation, increasing numbers of disadvantaged students who must be accommodated by higher education institutions, and appeals for improved enrolment and output of postgraduate students (Dept of Education 2001: 73),

the delivery of high quality research output presents a challenge to supervisors. This raises questions about the expectations of students as well as supervisors in the research endeavour.

1. The roles of students and supervisors in postgraduate research

To be effective as researchers, postgraduate students should be able to master specific skills: “Research engenders the values of inquiry, critical thinking, creativity and open-mindedness, which are fundamental to building a strong, democratic ethos in society” (Dept of Education 2001: 71). To successfully complete a research project for a dissertation or thesis, a student has to select a relevant topic of research, master the techniques required to investigate the topic, apply these techniques correctly and present the findings in an appropriate way. The most important skill for students to master is the ability to evaluate and re-evaluate their own work and that of others in the light of current developments. This means that students should understand and critically evaluate the literature and apply it to issues and problems. Successful completion of a dissertation demonstrates a student’s ability to undertake independent research into an intellectual problem and arrive at appropriate conclusions. Postgraduate research requires conjecture, reworking, backtracking, correction and inspiration. In addition, a degree of tolerance for ambiguity is a prerequisite for successful research.¹

Phillips & Pugh (2000: 1) claim that postgraduate students should develop insight into their own situation to enhance their professional learning. Personal academic initiative is expected of them. Postgraduate students should take ownership of their studies and manage the investigation themselves. Phillips & Pugh (2000: 1) use the term “under your own management” as a key to the nature of postgraduate research. Students are responsible for determining what is required for their research and for carrying it. Postgraduate students (especially at the PhD level) should not wait for lecturers to tell them what to

1 Cf Katz 1997: 16; Nerad & Miller 1997: 76; Phillips & Pugh 2000: 21, 74; Salmon 1992: 14; Smith *et al* 1993: 53.

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do, but should initiate discussion, ask for whatever help they need, and debate what they should be learning.

In addition to the intellectual component, postgraduate research has a psychological component (Sayed *et al* 1998: 281). Rademeyer (1994: 92) claims that writing a thesis or dissertation can be an intensive, personal affair, with internal and external conflicts negatively influencing the process and completion. Perseverance, support from the supervisor, personal or collegial support, and previous experience contribute to the psychological survival of the process (Smith *et al* 1993: 57).

As far as the role of the supervisor is concerned, students believe that a supervisor should be enthusiastic and supportive. Binns & Potter (1989: 213) determined that postgraduate students see a supervisor's main functions as providing support, giving constructive criticism, and ensuring a measure of overall guidance. Students often complain about inadequate supervision, lack of communication between themselves and supervisors, and their own lack of knowledge of the required standards and of the supervisor's role and functions (Shannon 1995: 12).

With regard to the nature of the support which a supervisor or promoter should afford postgraduate students, Dillon & Malott (1981: 195) suggest that a supervisor should provide structured supervision and guidance in the form of regular consultation meetings. They designed a supervisory system with five components, namely specifying research tasks and performance standards; arranging meetings between the supervisor and student, perhaps on a weekly basis; determining deadlines; giving quality feedback, and providing incentives. This system produced more graduates in less time than more traditional supervisory approaches. However, it is not the task of a supervisor to write the thesis, edit the language or devise solutions for problems encountered during the research process (Deist 1990: 67; Hockey 1994: 296).

In the light of this, a research project was undertaken in the Faculty of Education at the University of South Africa (Unisa), a distance education institution. The aims of the research, ethical considerations, research design, findings and conclusions of this project will be examined in the remainder of this article.

2. The aims of the study

The aims of this project were threefold: to explore postgraduate students' perceptions of the supervision they had received; to examine supervisors' and promoters' perceptions of postgraduate supervision, and to compare these. Thus, the ultimate aim was to determine the compatibility of the expectations of students and supervisors. This implied a two-phase model for the empirical part of the research. In the first (quantitative) phase the students were surveyed. This was followed by a second (qualitative) phase involving the supervisors.

3. Ethical considerations

During both phases, ethical considerations meant that respondents were given adequate information regarding the aims of the research; the procedures that would be followed; possible advantages and disadvantages to them; the credibility of the researchers, and how the results would be used. They were thus able to make an informed decision about their participation in the research. The researchers ensured that they were competent to undertake the research project. This implied thorough preparation. During the focus group stage, no value judgements were made concerning the way supervisors handled their supervisory duties. All data were collected anonymously from students. As far as the supervisors were concerned, data were treated as confidential and findings were reported anonymously. As a mark of the researchers' gratitude for their participation, supervisors were informed about the findings of the study at a Faculty Board meeting. This was done objectively and the principle of confidentiality was not violated.

4. Research design

4.1 A two-phase study

As indicated, the research was conducted in two phases. In phase one, survey research was employed among students who had already completed master's or doctoral degrees, to determine their perceptions of the supervision they had received. Data were obtained by means of a questionnaire which was completed anonymously. Since the aim was

to generalise with regard to the perceptions of as many students as possible, it was decided to use a quantitative approach. The second phase of the research project aimed at an in-depth understanding of supervisors' experience of postgraduate supervision. Thus, a qualitative research approach was chosen for this phase, resulting in four rounds of data collection. The detail of these two phases is as follows.

4.2 Phase one

The questionnaire was divided into three sections. The first obtained data on students' training in research methods. It also determined how long they had to wait for supervisors to return their work.

In the second section, students evaluated the support or guidance they had received from their supervisors or promoters on 17 aspects. In identifying these, the outcomes of master's and doctoral degrees as formulated for SAQA registration were considered — Master of Education (MEd) for Interim Registration with SAQA 2000; Doctor of Education (DEd) for Interim Registration with SAQA 2000. Thus, students had to evaluate the support they had received on its efficacy in enabling them to:

- design an acceptable proposal
- plan the sequence of the chapters of a report
- achieve a balance between chapters
- plan the research project in terms of time-frames
- decide on a theoretical and/or empirical approach
- present a literature review critically
- present a literature review logically
- present a literature review in an integrated manner
- decide on a quantitative, or a qualitative or combined approach
- make decisions about data collection methods
- present research results scientifically
- interpret research results
- substantiate conclusions
- conduct research in an ethically responsible way

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- attend to editorial aspects
- ensure that the bibliography and references correspond, and
- ensure that the dissertation is scientifically rigorous.

In the third section of the questionnaire, students' judgments of the individual styles of guidance of their supervisors were determined. Fifteen statements were formulated, enquiring whether supervisors or promoters:

- encouraged independent work
- encouraged creative thinking
- allowed contact at home after hours
- forwarded sources or indicated relevant sources
- referred students to knowledgeable people
- made evaluation criteria available
- made enquiries if no work was received from the student after a certain time
- evaluated work thoroughly
- encouraged the student
- gave constructive criticism
- encouraged dialogue
- were knowledgeable about the research topic
- understood empirical research methods
- gave consistent instructions
- would be the student's first choice as supervisor, if the study were to be repeated.

Finally, the questionnaire included three open questions. These aimed to determine students' perceptions of the most rewarding aspects of their studies, the most frustrating aspects thereof and any recommendations they would make regarding supervision in the Faculty of Education. In identifying these, the outcomes of master's and doctoral degrees as formulated in the Faculty of Education at Unisa for SAQA registration were considered.

4.2.1 Validity, the pilot study and sampling of phase one

The draft questionnaire was given to a number of experienced colleagues at Unisa as well as at a neighbouring university for peer review. In addition, several members of a committee responsible for the administration of master's and doctoral degrees were involved, to determine whether the items were relevant (face validity) and if a representative sample of content was included (content validity) (McMillan & Schumacher 1997: 236). This resulted in major changes to sections two and three of the questionnaire. The open questions were added to collect data of a qualitative nature, to allow for triangulation. Thereafter, the questionnaire was given as a pilot study to a number of postgraduate students who were accessible on campus, and some small modifications were made.

After editing and translation (ensuring the questionnaire's availability in both official media of tuition at the university), the final version was mailed to 111 students who had completed their MEd degrees at least a year earlier and to 74 students who had completed their DEd degrees during the previous three years. After two weeks, follow-up questionnaires were mailed. Of the 185 questionnaires mailed, 75 (41%) were returned. Of these, 53 respondents (70%) had completed an MEd and 22 (30%) a DEd.

Detailed results of the survey are documented in Lessing & Schulze (2002). What follows here are those perceptions that were of significance in terms of the expectations of supervisors.

4.3 Phase two

Since the researchers hoped to obtain an in-depth understanding of the views of supervisors on postgraduate supervision, it was decided to conduct this investigation qualitatively. First, three focus groups were conducted. Due to time constraints, it was preferable to use focus groups rather than individual interviews. Moreover, group dynamics can work synergically to elicit information (Schurink *et al* 1998: 325) and participants have more confidence about expressing their feelings honestly in a support group of peers than in individual interviews (Folch-Lyon & Trost 1981: 445). The interview guide which was developed focused on the aspects of supervision which supervisors ex-

perienced as most satisfying and on problems encountered. In this regard a number of possible problem areas were listed as identified by the students and reported on in phase one. Since the key principle in forming focus groups is homogeneity (Kingry *et al* 1990: 124), the first focus group consisted of seven full professors, the second group of 12 associate professors and some experienced senior lecturers, and the third group of nine lecturers and other less experienced supervisors.

Analysis of the focus group data indicated that additional rounds of data collection including individual interviews with two managers were required. These managers are attached to the Faculty's Institute for Educational Research, which enjoys overall responsibility for the co-ordination of research proposals submitted by prospective master's and doctoral students as well as for the examination process of dissertations and theses. (These functions are operationalised by the Masters and Doctoral committee). This was followed by individual interviews with student administrators and, finally, by the analysis of relevant documents mentioned by interviewees.

4.3.1 Trustworthiness

Appropriate techniques were applied to ensure the trustworthiness of the qualitative findings. Triangulation of methods was used. Data collection methods involved focus groups, individual interviews and document analysis. Feedback from participants was obtained if the researchers were uncertain about the meaning of statements. In addition, the findings were circulated among participants so that they could confirm whether their views had been correctly reflected. Sampling decisions were carefully made. Focus groups and interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed *verbatim*. Both researchers analysed the raw data in order to reach a consensus on themes and categories and to check the consistency of each other's analysis. This ensured reliability.

4.3.2 Data analysis

Initially the data were divided into two broad categories, namely satisfying aspects and issues experienced with postgraduate supervision, in accordance with the initial interview guide. Within these two broad categories a bottom-up strategy was adopted in the following way (Johnson & Christensen 2000: 426-31):

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- The data were divided into meaningful units by bracketing them.
- The identified units were coded by means of category names and symbols. Single transcripts were given facesheet codes so that groups could be compared.
- All the category names and codes were placed on a master list.
- To address intercoder reliability, consistency in the use of codes between the two researchers was checked. Intracoder reliability was considered.
- The frequency with which observations were made was noted, to help with the identification of prominent themes between groups.

5. Significant findings of phase one: views of the students

5.1 Closed questions

In the first section of the questionnaire, some background data were obtained. The following data were meaningful in terms of the expectations or actions of supervisors.

- Only 49% of the students studied in their first language.
- A third of the students had no previous training in research methods.
- Only 29% of the students who had received previous training, for example during their BEd Honours studies, felt that this training had prepared them adequately for their master's studies.
- In the Faculty of Education, research seminars are presented annually during April, July and September. Of the students who had attended these workshops, 64% considered them very helpful, and 36% somewhat helpful in their master's or doctoral research.
- With regard to waiting time for responses from supervisors after chapters had been submitted for evaluation, 55% reported that work was returned within four weeks; 45% waited longer than that.

When students had to indicate how they experienced the support or guidance they had received in terms of the achievement of 17 outcomes of research at the postgraduate level, the following responses

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had significant implications in respect of the expectations of supervisors as revealed by the second phase of the research.

Of the master's students:

- 49% were satisfied with the guidance they had received on presenting and interpreting research results;
- 51% were happy with the planning of the research project in terms of time-frames;
- 59% were satisfied with the guidance they had received about deciding on a purely theoretical approach or a theoretical approach plus empirical methods.

Of the doctoral students:

- only 50% were satisfied with the guidance they had received in planning their research in terms of time-frames;
- 64% believed that the guidance they had received on making decisions about data collection, presentation and interpretation of research results was satisfactory.

Thus, both groups of students felt that there had been a lack of support in terms of certain research skills, suggesting that lecturers themselves may lack the necessary experience in this regard.

Thereafter, students' perceptions of their supervisors' individual styles of guidance were determined. The following findings were significant when compared with the supervisors' views of postgraduate supervision, as revealed by phase two.

Of the master's students:

- 47% of the students' supervisors referred them to knowledgeable people for consultation
- 53% of supervisors made enquiries when they had not heard from students for some time
- 93% of supervisors encouraged independent thought
- 89% thought their work was evaluated thoroughly
- 89% indicated that supervisors always encouraged them, and
- 70% would choose the same supervisor for future studies.

Of the doctoral students:

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- 36% recalled that their promoter had contacted them after some time had elapsed
- 50% indicated that their promoter had referred them to knowledgeable people for consultation
- 95% of promoters encouraged independent work as well as creative thought and
- 77% would choose the same promoter if they were to repeat their studies.

5.2 Open questions

Three open questions concluded the questionnaire. Student responses that were significant in relation to supervisors' views included the following:

5.2.1 Rewarding aspects of postgraduate research

When asked what they had experienced as the most rewarding aspect of their studies, many students mentioned the development of knowledge, understanding and critical thinking skills as well as research abilities. However, most responses focused on the supervisor. In this regard students referred to the encouragement and support they had received as well as to their endorsement of independence and creativity. "My supervisor was always encouraging, understanding and helpful. Our relationship was a source of motivation", said one. Thus, both masters and doctoral students indicated that if supervisors and promoters did their work efficiently and the research process went well, supervisors were greatly appreciated.

5.2.2 Frustrating aspects of postgraduate research

Several students indicated that they had not experienced any frustrations. Master's students who did mention frustrating aspects referred to the following important factors: lack of time-frames to adhere to; lack of knowledge or experience, and feelings of isolation. A supervisory system in which students received no feedback after examination also caused frustration. With regard to the supervisor, poor supervision or guidance was mentioned, especially time delays, too little guidance and harsh criticism. Examples included: "My supervisor

going on study leave [...] going overseas [...] late return of chapters submitted” and “My supervisor was extremely harsh in criticism and it was easy to consider giving up if it were not for my sheer determination”. In addition, respondents referred to lack of assistance with statistical analysis.

Among the doctoral students, some negative comments were also made about the promoter. These included: not encouraging independent thought; insufficient criticism of work submitted, and lack of interest in the theme of the research. Several responses also mentioned lack of assistance with statistical analysis.

To sum up, many students did not experience any frustrations. However, if supervisors and promoters are not efficient at postgraduate supervision, students can experience numerous problems during the research process, which can be a source of great frustration.

5.2.3 Students' recommendations regarding postgraduate supervision

The final question asked respondents to indicate what recommendations they would make regarding postgraduate supervision in the Faculty of Education. A considerable number of students made no recommendations, indicating their satisfaction with current practices. Those who responded focused mostly on the supervisor or promoter.

Master's students recommended that supervisors should help students plan their research within time-frames; make more contact with students (*eg* arranging for progress meetings or reports, for example, bi-monthly, and make enquiries after not hearing from a student for some time); be more supportive, for example, assisting with funding, statistical analysis, research techniques and publication of findings; waste less time by responding more quickly to work submitted; provide students with a list of professionals and other students dealing with similar fields of study in order to alleviate feelings of isolation; be monitored by higher authorities to ensure that they do their work diligently, and provide students with examination feedback.

Doctoral students recommended that promoters should give constructive criticism; encourage independent thought; respond more

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quickly, and provide students with some form of written evaluation after completion of the research.

The abovementioned findings led to the second phase of the research project.

6. Findings of phase two: views of supervisors

The detail of the findings is documented in an unpublished research report by Schulze & Lessing (2002). This section is a summary of supervisors' perceptions of the supervisory process in the Faculty of Education, insofar as these were significant in relation to students' views.

The satisfactory elements mentioned by supervisors were the intellectual growth which they and the students experienced as well as the personally satisfying relationships that developed between them and the students over time: "I learn a lot [...] the students expose me to new things" was one example.

6.1 Initial problems

Supervisors in all three focus groups mentioned students' unrealistic expectations of a master's degree: "They think they are going to finish this dissertation quickly".

The more experienced the supervisors, the more they tended to establish "ground rules" at the start of the study. These focus on technical aspects (for example, submitting typed work), language (submitting edited work), phased procedure (submitting one chapter at a time), framework (committing to a relatively fixed time-frame) and establishing boundaries (for example, when and where the supervisor may be contacted).

In planning the research the following pattern emerged. In contrast to the inexperienced supervisors, the experienced supervisors tended to have developed specific plans to help students initiate the study, for example, requiring that students peruse examples of completed dissertations or theses, outline the material of the first chapter and plan the study in terms of time-frames.

6.2 Ongoing challenges

In all groups poor use of language by second-language students emerged as a major issue. One supervisor stated: “When the work is grammatically so incorrect that you can’t read it properly [...] I say to him ‘You must have this read by somebody beforehand but I can’t accept it like this’”.

Apart from faulty use of language, the inferior quality of the work in general was mentioned by several supervisors.

Experienced supervisors tended to consider technical requirements from the beginning of the study. This is illustrated by the following remarks: “I insist that the bibliography comes with each chapter, and the table of contents too [...] I find that if you start checking it from the beginning, by the time you get to the second chapter, they’re getting [...] the basics correct” and “I think we have the right to expect typed work”. Less experienced supervisors were more willing to accept handwritten work.

The time supervisors took to respond to students’ work varied from a few days to six weeks. However, most agreed that a turnover time of about three weeks could be considered fair.

More experienced supervisors were more aware of the nature of the criticism given, whereas the inexperienced group did not seem to have considered the issue. Some experienced supervisors commented with great sensitivity, while others gave criticism to students in a “straightforward” manner, believing that one should not be so tactful that students fail to understand what is required.

Not all supervisors required their students to embark on an empirical investigation. Those who did sometimes recruited students according to their own expertise. One manager mentioned the disappointing fact that supervisors who were not skilled in research methods did not attend the workshops arranged in the faculty for them.

It was noteworthy that experienced colleagues had the confidence to consult experts for advice when they needed it, for example with empirical research issues and statistical analysis. By contrast, the less experienced supervisors were uncertain as to whether they could ask or whether they were supposed to “know how”.

6.3 Administrative problems

The focus group of associate professors felt that only students with the potential to complete their studies successfully should be accepted for the MEd or DEd degree. Both managers agreed that achievement in a BEd Honours course was not adequate for student admission. They were of the opinion that testing the students' ability to formulate well in English would be more appropriate.

Some supervisors expressed doubts about the system of allocating students to lecturers for supervision. This happens via various discipline-based interest groups operative in Unisa's Faculty of Education (such as Psychology of Education, Early Childhood Education and so forth). One manager agreed that some interest groups did not perform this function optimally or democratically.

Closely related to the above was the possibility of specialisation. Supervisors from the two most experienced groups emphasised the need for specialisation among lecturers so that only those interested and competent in postgraduate supervision should be involved in it. However, the managers agreed that all lecturers should be involved in postgraduate supervision since this is an integral part of a lecturer's work. One stated: "It is part of teaching".

Problems concerning examination elicited most responses. These included the following points. Students sometimes put pressure on supervisors to allow them to submit inadequately prepared work for examination purposes in order not to have to pay registration fees for another year. Supervisors agreed on the importance of feedback to both supervisors and students after an examination. However, findings revealed that even experienced supervisors were not aware that the reports of external examiners could be perused. Others were apparently not interested in reading the reports.

6.4 Distance education

The following attempts were made to take the "distance" out of distance education: requiring students to visit the university personally for some time during the research period; using available electronic media such as audio recordings or electronic mail; requiring students to phone supervisors at specific intervals, and making home tele-

phone numbers of supervisors available to students: "I like students to call me once a month, even if they have done nothing".

6.5 The need to train both students and supervisors

One supervisor commented that the students' research training at the BEd Honours level did not prepare them adequately for master's or doctoral studies and recommended that this training be improved. Inadequate research training at the BEd Honours level was also mentioned by management. The training of lecturers as supervisors was discussed at great length in all three focus groups. It was felt that compulsory workshops on postgraduate supervision were necessary. The possibility of regular colloquia for both students and supervisors was broached and a need for written guidelines on how to perform postgraduate supervision was expressed.

7. Main findings and discussion

When comparing the rewarding aspects of postgraduate research, both students and supervisors referred to the relationship between student and supervisor or promoter. In this regard, the first phase of the research indicated that 70% of the master's students and 77% of the doctoral students would choose the same supervisor or promoter again for their studies. Both groups mentioned the development of their cognitive abilities. For students, additional satisfaction was derived from making a contribution to the field of education.

However, students had many expectations which were not met, especially with regard to the support they anticipated from supervisors. This is in accordance with the findings of Binns & Potter (1989: 213). Students wanted more guidance with regard to the overall planning of the research in terms of the approach to follow (theoretical, quantitative or qualitative). For example, only 59% of master's students were satisfied with the support they received from supervisors in this respect. They wanted support with (statistical) analyses, as well as with the interpretation and presentation of research results. In this regard, it should be noted that a third of the students had no previous training in research methods. In addition, only 29% of the students who had received training, for example during their BEd

Honours studies, felt that this training had prepared them sufficiently for their MEd studies. Research seminars were presented annually and were very well received by all those students who attended them. However, at the time of the investigation the seminars were only presented in Pretoria and thus not accessible to many students.

Students' lack of knowledge of research methods posed a particular challenge to supervisors. The problem was exacerbated by the fact that many supervisors themselves lacked knowledge and expertise in research methods, or in the analysis, interpretation and presentation of empirical results. There were various reasons for this: some supervisors had only been schooled in one approach, for example a quantitative approach. Others who were not knowledgeable about research methods did not require students to conduct any empirical investigation, hence research skills were not acquired via this route. Other staff members did not attend the workshops in research methods which were arranged for them in the Faculty. Some supervisors referred students to knowledgeable colleagues, and some training was thus acquired in this way. However, there was often no deliberate attempt to learn more about statistical analysis, which was left to the "experts".

Students indicated that they wanted more advice on planning the study in terms of time-frames. This confirms the finding of Dillon & Malott (1981: 195) that supervision should include the determination of deadlines. Only about half the master's and doctoral students were satisfied with the support they received in terms of this aspect of supervision. It was evident from the focus groups that many of the more experienced supervisors did indeed help students plan their overall study in terms of time-frames. However, this was not done by inexperienced supervisors.

Postgraduate students wished to be referred to other students or to informed people in their research fields in order to alleviate feelings of isolation. 47% of the master's students and 50% of the doctoral students indicated that their supervisors had referred them to such people. Once again, the more experienced supervisors were more inclined to refer students to other experts. Often these supervisors preferred such an approach to having a co-supervisor. Regarding the students' wish to be referred to knowledgeable people, Phillips & Pugh

(2000: 1) state emphatically that students should take ownership of their studies and manage their investigation themselves.

Regular contact with supervisors was another unmet need of many postgraduate students. Although Phillips & Pugh (2000: 1) state that postgraduate students (especially at the PhD level) should initiate discussion, other authors suggest that supervisors should arrange regular consultation meetings (Dillon & Malott 1981: 195). In this regard, 53% of the master's students and 36% of the doctoral students indicated that supervisors or promoters made enquiries after some time had elapsed without contact between them. Some supervisors required students to visit the university personally for a period during the research; some used available electronic media, such as audio recordings or electronic mail, while others required students to phone them regularly, even providing their home telephone numbers. However, these measures were generally implemented only by the more experienced supervisors.

Supervisors and promoters encouraged independent thought, as indicated by 93% of the master's and 95% of the doctoral students. This freedom to work independently was highly valued, particularly by the doctoral students. This is in line with recommendations by various authors that students should be able to arrive at independent conclusions.²

Feedback was mentioned by both supervisors and students. Students stated that they desired criticism, but they wanted feedback to be constructive, not harsh. This concurs with Binns & Potter's (1989: 213) findings that students want constructive criticism. Dillon & Malott (1982: 195) confirm that supervisors should give quality feedback. In this regard the focus groups revealed that the experienced supervisors were much more aware of the nature of the criticism they gave, whereas the inexperienced group did not seem to have considered this aspect at all. However, this does not mean that the experienced supervisors were in agreement on the issue. Some experienced supervisors gave comment with great sensitivity, while others gave it to the students in a "straightforward" manner.

2 Cf Katz 1997: 16; Nerad & Miller 1997:76; Phillips & Pugh 2000: 21, 74; Salmon 1992: 14; Smith *et al* 1993: 53.

Students wanted supervisors to respond quickly after they submitted work for evaluation. The survey revealed that 55% received their work back within four weeks. This implies that 45% had to wait longer. In comparison, supervisors mentioned that the time they took to respond to students' work varied from a few days to six weeks. However, most agreed that a turnover time of about three weeks could be considered fair. In this regard, it should be borne in mind that most chapters are submitted by mail and, on reaching Unisa, are distributed via an internal mailing system. Hence, a significant period of time may pass before the work actually reaches the supervisor.

Some written feedback after examination was requested by numerous students at both the master's and the doctoral level. This would bring about a form of closure. Supervisors agreed on the importance of feedback, both for themselves and for their students. However, the focus groups revealed that many supervisors were not aware that they were allowed access to the reports of external examiners on request. Others were apparently not interested in reading the reports, perhaps because of other more pressing commitments.

Supervisors also experienced problems during the supervisory process. Mention was made of unrealistic expectations among students who underestimated the requirements of postgraduate research. This confirms Shannon's (1995: 12) finding that students are uncertain of the standards required. Hence, students often presented supervisors with poorly written work of inferior quality. In this regard, the results of the first phase of the project indicated that less than half of the students (49%) studied in their first language. Both Deist (1990: 67) and Hockey (1994: 296) stress that writing the thesis and editing its language are not the task of the supervisor. Apart from poor use of language, technical requirements, for example with regard to referencing and bibliography, were often not met by students.

Many supervisors mentioned that some students embarking on postgraduate research did not have the potential to complete their studies successfully. A mechanism was needed to recruit only those students who had the potential to be successful. This would concur with the recommendations of the National Plan for Higher Education (Dept of Education 2001: 25).

As well as suggesting that only students with potential be enrolled, some lecturers maintained that not all staff should be involved in postgraduate supervision. Some staff members do not have the ability or the interest to be competent supervisors. However, postgraduate supervision and student output are aspects considered for staff promotion and assumed to be an integral aspect of teaching. Thus, some students may be subjected to poor supervisory practices — to the frustration of both the supervisor and the student — unless mechanisms to improve supervisory practices are introduced.

8. Conclusion

Higher education institutions need to discuss the issues raised in this article so that means can be found to address the unmet expectations of students as well as supervisors. This could bring greater clarity on the various roles and responsibilities of master's students, doctoral students and supervisors. Moreover, it could lead to the implementation of more favourable practices and to an improved quality of research.

Considering the unmet expectations of students, it seems that they need much more support in terms of all aspects of empirical research. Many supervisors are insufficiently trained in research methods and do not attend the workshops presented for them. Compulsory training is needed in all aspects of the research process by means of workshops, seminars and colloquia. In view of students' positive evaluation of the research seminars presented to them, such seminars, too, seem valuable. In addition, previous training, for example during the BEd Honours, may need to be evaluated and improved.

Supervisors should be aware that students want advice in planning their study in terms of time-frames; contact with informed people or other students in their research fields in order to feel less isolated; regular contact with supervisors; constructive criticism, and a quick turnover for chapters submitted. Some students, especially at the doctoral level, are independent workers and want the freedom to use their own initiative. Finally, students want written feedback when the examination process has been completed. These expectations should be discussed and addressed. Decisions can be written into the policy documents that are available to all supervisors in a faculty.

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How can supervisors' expectations be met? It is clear that a mechanism needs to be developed to recruit only students with the potential to be successful in postgraduate research. Since poor language skills present so many problems, a language test may be considered. In addition, language courses should be implemented for students who need them.

Supervisors also need to develop their own individual ground rules. These should be presented to students in written format at the start of the research. They could include a reading list of textbooks in research methods which students are expected to consult; general information concerning the content of the various chapters of the research report; the examination criteria of that institution, and technical requirements.

Finally, general guidelines on postgraduate supervision in various faculties of higher education institutions should be articulated during a workshop and made available in written format. This is crucial for the inexperienced supervisor.

By means of the above, the expectations of both supervisors and postgraduate students may be met. In addition, supervisory practices may improve and the output of postgraduate students increase. Ultimately, the quality of this output should also improve.

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