

# Student experiences of the PhD cohort model: Working within or outside communities of practice?

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*The Collaborative Cohort Model (CCM) of higher degrees supervision is gaining increasing popularity internationally and, in some contexts, replacing the conventional Apprentice Master Model (AMM). Among the motivations advanced for this shift is that the CCM improves completion rates and enhances the quality of research supervision. This exploratory paper interrogates these claims through the eyes of students, by documenting and analysing their experiences of the CCM currently used by the Faculty of Education, at the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN), South Africa. This form of supervision integrates the traditional master-apprentice supervision with cohort seminar sessions. The traditional supervision involves students working one-to-one with what is referred to, in this instance, as the appointed supervisor/s while the cohort seminars draw on the expertise of a team of experienced and novice supervisors referred to, in this instance, as the cohort supervisors. In addition, students benefit from contributions offered by peers within the cohort as they are guided through the various phases in the research process. This paper engages with the experiences of a small sample of students, appraising the key principles of collaboration and collegiality which are integral to the success of the cohort model. The study reveals abundant evidence of successful collaboration and collegiality among students and between the cohort and appointed supervisors. However, there are also instances of students in the cohort working in isolation and supervisors working counter to each other. Through engaging with student experiences of the cohort model, this study offers critical new insights into the strengths, limitations and challenges of using the model to address the unsatisfactory PhD productivity rate in South Africa.*

**Keywords:** Master-apprentice supervision, cohort supervision model, collaboration, collegiality, doctoral cohort seminars.

## Introduction

Completing a doctoral degree successfully is perhaps the most daunting of all endeavours undertaken by students pursuing higher education. The road to successful completion of the degree is often strewn with apparently insurmountable obstacles and can be circuitous. Many who have travelled this road have not reached their destination and have given up the journey in anguish as the current literature reveals.<sup>1</sup>

Given supervisor support (sometimes by more than one supervisor), why is it that doctoral students still find it difficult to complete their degrees in reasonable time or, in several instances, not at all? Why is the ABT (All but the Thesis) phenomenon a perennial problem in doctoral studies internationally? The answers to these questions are elusive, but a common explanation is that it is the nature of support rendered by the supervisor/s working within the traditional Apprentice Master Model. This is typically a closed, cloistered environment where students enjoy little engagement with student peers and other Faculty members which act as disincentives to completion. Concerns about unsatisfactory completion rates and quality of research supervision (Burnett, 1999) have consequently motivated the move internationally from the traditional model of doctoral supervision to the cohort model, which promotes collaborative and interactive learning utilising a structured programme (Tareilo, 2007). In addition, findings indicate that the cohort provides social and emotional support, interdependence and shared ideology (Mandzuk, Hasinoff & Seifert, 2003).

In an attempt to maximise support for its doctoral students, the Education Faculty of UKZN has adopted both traditional one-to-one master-apprentice supervision with cohort seminar sessions, running concurrently. The cohort sessions, which supplement the support offered to students by one-to-one supervision, draw on the expertise of experienced and novice supervisors from within the Faculty who also act as cohort supervisors. In addition, students within the cohort benefit from the guidance offered by cohort peers as they navigate the various phases in the research process. The seminar sessions also allow for “real-time” appraisal of students’ work in progress by both peers and cohort supervisors.

Bringing students within a particular cohort together six weekends a year (Friday afternoon to Sunday afternoon) over three years, the seminars augment the one-on-one supervision that continues alongside the seminars (Vithal, 2009; Samuel & Vithal, 2011). The seminar sessions focus on proposal development in the first year, fieldwork and data production in the second year, and data analysis and thesis writing in the third year. The seminars are designed to give students opportunities to chair sessions, advance their ideas for debate and discussion and both give and receive criticism in a robust and critical but caring environment (Vithal, 2009). According to Vithal (2009), the cohort programme, in addition to supporting the doctoral students, also provides opportunities for novice supervisors to be mentored and inducted into supervision by working alongside their more experienced colleagues.<sup>2</sup>

Critical to the support provided in the seminar sessions is the creation of communities of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998; Samuel, 2008). Thus, it is not only collaboration between cohort supervisors and students and among students within a particular cohort but also collaboration and collegiality among cohort supervisors and between cohort supervisors and appointed supervisors that would unleash the potential that the cohort model of doctoral supervision holds for both students and academic staff.

The success of the cohort model of doctoral supervision over the apprentice-master model, particularly as it addresses the problem of throughput at UKZN, is well documented (Samuel, 2008; Vithal, 2009), and will be borne out by relevant statistical data presented in this special issue of the Journal. Therefore, this paper will not explore the merits of the model in any significant depth. Instead, the paper addresses the question of collaboration and the development of communities of practice as experienced by past and current students in the PhD cohort programme run by the Faculty of Education at UKZN with a view to establishing potential blind spots in the model that undermine its value as a complementary approach.

## Literature on the cohort model

The cohort model, existing in various guises within higher education for the last fifty years, is being increasingly used in university faculties internationally to enhance teaching and learning in undergraduate coursework (Young, Bruce & Stellern, 2002; Mandzuk *et al.*, 2003) as well as for supervision of doctoral degrees (Norris & Barnett, 1994; Burnett, 1999; Ali & Kohun, 2006; The Graduate Institute, 2006). A comprehensive review of the literature relating to the cohort model (Lewis, Ascher, Hayes & Ieva, 2010) provides a lucid illustration of factors motivating the use of the model for doctoral programmes and discusses the strengths associated with the use of the cohort model as well as its limitations and challenges.

Among the motivations for appropriating the cohort model for doctoral programmes, Lewis *et al.* (2010) identify poor completion rates of doctoral studies, lack of support for and feelings of isolation of doctoral students, and the pressure on students, faculty and administrators to meet academic expectations timeously. The strengths of the cohort model include academic, affective and interpersonal benefits (Young *et al.*, 2002). In the review by Lewis *et al.* (2010), the benefits of the cohort model are identified as promoting greater solidarity within cohorts by generating mutual support and protection, improved graduation rates, reduced attrition and the creation of intellectually stimulating environments within which research learning is facilitated. In addition, Unzueta (2008) discovered that cohort members, as opposed to non-cohort students, enjoy opportunities to develop conference papers, co-author manuscripts for publication, serve as guest lecturers for university courses, and co-teach with professors.

Among the challenges and limitations of the cohort model are the potential for discord among students and the pressures on instructors (Mather & Hanley, 1999). In addition, Lewis *et al.* (2010) observe that without purposeful faculty nurturance, departmental collaboration and administrative guidance, the cohort model simply becomes a convenience tool. Mandzuk *et al.* (2003) noted that the literature on the cohort model lacks the conceptual grounding that is essential for understanding how the use of the cohort model in teacher education affects the process of becoming a teacher. To fill this gap these authors explore the social capital of the cohort model used in teacher education which includes the fostering of independent thinking, collegiality and collaboration. Collaboration and collegiality, the key features of communities of practice and professional learning communities (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2001), also underpin the cohort model of doctoral supervision in the Education Faculty (UKZN). This paper thus uses this as a point of departure to interrogate student experiences of this model of supervision.

## Methodology

Conceived as an exploratory study of *student experiences* of the PhD cohort model, a small group of students was selected to appraise student engagement and experiences with the model. Eight doctoral students belonging to two phase cohorts (2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup>) but at varying stages of their research were selected for this study. An additional four respondents who had already completed their doctoral degrees through the cohort model and who are current members of staff at UKZN were also selected. Written consent for participation in the study was obtained.

The experiences of the twelve respondents were interrogated during the seminar sessions, and between seminar sessions when in contact with their cohort peers and with their appointed supervisors to ascertain the nature and degree of support extended to students and whether this support is undergirded by collaboration and collegiality. Questionnaire responses to largely open-ended questions followed by interviews (telephonically or face-to-face) for clarity and elaboration provided the data from the eight current doctoral students. Additional data was gathered from a focus group discussion involving the remaining four respondents. Clarity and comment on certain issues raised in the student responses were sought from the 2010 overall co-ordinator of the cohort seminar sessions by means of telephonic interviews and e-mail correspondence.

Responses of research participants were coded and used to generate themes. Seven enduring themes were identified and these were then compared with extant literature with a particular but not sole focus on collaborative work during and between cohort sessions. In addition, for purposes of authenticity (Guba & Lincoln, 1989; Denzin & Lincoln, 1998) and to capture the richness of student experiences (Geertz, 1973); detailed descriptions from the data are documented in this paper.

## Analysis

### Developing research knowledge and regulating the pace of research

The literature on the use of the cohort model for doctoral programmes cites academic success as a significant benefit of the model enabled by, among others, the creation of intellectually stimulating discussions and interaction with professors (Potthoff, Dinsmore & Moore, 2001). In addition, Tareilo (2007) speaks of doctoral cohorts gaining access to exemplary programmes and highly qualified instructors that expand and enrich the learning experiences of each member in the cohort. The high throughput and timeous completion of doctoral degrees within a cohort programme (Burnett, 1999; Potthoff *et al.*, 2008) are also cited, together with reduced attrition as further benefits of the cohort model.

The research participants also revealed that the high quality input on various aspects relating to research learning, from the cohort supervisors and invited speakers (during the Friday night plenary sessions) are productive and stimulating. In particular, they spoke of the insightful discussions on locating research within particular paradigms and matching this with the appropriate research approach and

methodology. They also emphasised the benefits derived from listening to new graduates reflect on the challenges they had faced and how they had to overcome these. Some students referred to how the cohort system forced them to pace themselves effectively by setting time frames for completion of tasks and ensuring that they adhered to the time frames.

In addition, participants in the focus group discussion reflected on their access to current research knowledge focusing on new paradigms that the cohort sessions afforded to mature students who had completed their Masters degree more than two decades before embarking on their PhD as suggested by Student J:

*I did my Masters in 1974 and my PhD 30 years later. I had to work in a different paradigm. Now I think I wouldn't have been able to do it without the cohort. There were others who were in the same position and this gave me confidence.*

Participants also reflected on the benefits of the cohort sessions especially in the first year for students from faculties outside the Education Faculty. Five of the twelve participants were in this position, with two from Health Sciences, one from Pure Sciences, one from Management Sciences and one from Theatre and Drama. They all reflected on how the seminar sessions helped to induct them into the discourse of educational research seamlessly, as indicated in the following responses:

*I had a pure Science degree; I didn't have an education degree. It was just a different type of study. I think I would not have been able to do it if I did not participate in the cohort sessions. (Student J)*

*I come from the Health Sciences so it [Education PhD] was a whole new ball game for me. The group was like a resource for me. (Student L)*

*It has been useful as I realize what standards I have to set for myself and how to pace myself. (Student C)*

*I needed those short-term goals. There's a sense of structure so we can achieve these little steps along the way. The task which appeared so daunting to complete by the end of the first year became more manageable. (Student I)*

## Affirming students' voices

The cohort model engenders flexibility in the programme structure. In addition to cultivating a supportive co-operative and interactive learning community, it simultaneously gives voice to each candidate (The Graduate Institute, 2006). Membership in a cohort exposes one to a pool of professionals which enriches and expands the learning experiences of each candidate as s/he develops in the programme (Haworth & Conrad, 1997). The issue of individual development together with group development and giving students a voice is also deliberated by Galvin (1991), who contends that an interactive learning community fosters both teachers' and students' willingness to freely exchange ideas, feelings, questions, and dispute with comfort, listen carefully to others and evaluate with freedom.

Respondents in the focus group raised the issue of students acquiring a voice in the cohort seminar sessions as they developed personally and grew in confidence through imbibing critical input from cohort supervisors and visiting scholars in the field of research. Two of the respondents spoke of how insecure and silent they were when they first entered the programme. However, by the end of their third year they were able to talk confidently on research issues, engage in constructive debate with peers and cohort supervisors, and apply the knowledge they had acquired to critique their peers' work. They added that, initially, cohort supervisors contributed greatly in the sessions but this acted as a stimulus to engender greater contribution from the students as they grew confident and as their own knowledge of research grew through the inputs from the cohort supervisors. The following response captures this position:

*I had a very hazy notion of different methods and methodologies. I was very quiet when I started. I listened more than I contributed but I think at the end of the three years I was able to make a meaningful contribution and I wasn't afraid to speak out and I was able to speak about research*

*with more confidence. I think finding your voice is what happens in this kind of collaborative cohort model. (Student I)*

## Decreasing relevance of post-proposal generation phase

In appraising the value of their experiences across the years of support, students found the research proposal phase (generally the first year on the cohort programme) very useful because generic research issues cutting across different research areas were interrogated, providing critical insights for their proposal development. However, the post-proposal generation phase was considered less useful. Five of the six students interviewed commented on the lack of relevance for their study of the second and subsequent year seminar sessions. In the second and third year, the students were of the opinion that they would have been better engaged working with students in similar research areas who were at the same stage of completion in their research. Students suggested that there should be regrouping in the second and subsequent years based on similar research areas. This is reflected in the following comments:

*This year [data generation phase] I have not found the sessions to be as useful as they were last year [proposal development phase]. This may be because all of the sessions occur as plenary sessions. Because of the diversity in terms of research areas and the stages that participants are at, the sessions are not always directly relevant to my particular needs. Having only plenary sessions also means that little time can be devoted to each person. Some breakaway sessions in smaller groups (based on research area, stage of research, or methodology), and/or more individual attention from time to time, might be useful. (Student F)*

*If I am listening to someone whose topic is totally different from mine, it is a total waste of time. [They should] put us into groups with common research areas and allocate cohort supervisors specialising in that research area. (Student A)*

However, the issue of breakaway groups in terms of similar research areas was challenged in an interview with the 2010 (overall) co-ordinator of the PhD seminar sessions. She was of the opinion that it would be counterproductive and limiting in terms of what the Faculty intended to achieve with the cohort system. It was her view that grouping students narrowly into similar research areas or topics would prevent them from being exposed to diverse methodologies and different research approaches.

Respondents, some of whom are currently participating in the cohort programme as cohort supervisors, also raised the issue of the waning interest of students in the second and third year seminar sessions. They indicated that these students were far more advanced in their studies than their cohort peers and were of the opinion that attending seminar sessions that focus on stages of research that they have already surpassed was futile, and besides, they wanted to forge ahead in their own studies.

Some of the alternative strategies proposed by respondents included:

- Students should be given the freedom to select which sessions they should attend.
- Advanced students should be allowed to attend some sessions to guide peers through those phases of the research process that they have already covered through sharing their own experiences with their peers.
- Students should be given time off during seminar sessions to work in Computer Labs on their own study with other students at the same stage of research; this was trialled in the 2010 cohort seminar sessions.

Regardless of the diversity of research interests and varied foci of research studies within a cohort, the literature (Potthoff *et al.*, 2001) reveals that cohorts remained cohesive. They identify defining features of cohorts as being group cohesiveness, group support, solidarity and interpersonal bonding, which result in the forging of friendships that last beyond the completion of the doctoral degree. It might appear from the students' responses that group cohesiveness has not really occurred in the case of some of the cohorts in question as opposed to other cohorts in the doctoral programme. However, before making judgements of

group behaviour, it is instructive to heed the cautioning of McCarthy, Trenga & Weiner (2005), who contend that the limited degree to which group behaviour is predictable makes positing generalisations difficult.

### Diverse perspectives in seminar sessions – Beneficial or problematic?

Pothoff *et al.* (2001) and Tareilo (2007) allude to the creation of an intellectually stimulating environment within a cohort which allows not only for incisive inputs from professors and other senior scholars but also allows for lively debate and discussion as well as sharing of diverse views. Responses from the majority of the students indicate that they were offered varying perspectives on their proposed study which they found enriching and empowering. It provided them opportunities to approach their study from new and refreshing angles or to clarify their research focus with benefit of multiple insights.

However, one of the students found the differing, at times conflicting, perspectives offered by the cohort supervisors problematic rather than beneficial. The constant changes made to his proposed study made it difficult for him to clarify his focus. According to him, very often, he was left directionless at the seminar sessions. He believed that he was at the mercy of academics who were intent on showcasing what each knew rather than assisting him. This, he maintained, had delayed the finalisation of his research proposal. The following response captures that position:

*In the cohort classes I couldn't get the focus of my study. Although there were 6 supervisors present but every time I presented, they kept changing it. I had to rewrite several times as my topic changed – I wasn't getting anywhere. I think they came with their own expertise based on the area in which they lecture and each person wanted me to look at it in a way which would push that person's viewpoint and this did not address my issue. (Student A)*

Some of the participants in the Focus Group who are current cohort supervisors were of the opinion that there were too many supervisors allocated to each cohort and this, in addition to submerging student voices, pulled students in too many different directions, often leaving them confused. In addition, students were forced to submit to pressure from the cohort supervisors to change the focus of their studies against their own inclinations. It was suggested that cohort supervisors be trained to facilitate rather than dominate seminar sessions and that they allow students more room to engage in debate, contestation and adequate defence of their own research foci. The following response from one of the participants of her experience of being diverted from the initial focus of her study and the experience of another student who resisted submitting to the pressure to change her study reflect this position:

*Somebody said to a student in a cohort session, 'What I really think you should be doing is writing life histories about these teachers.' And then she just exploded and said, 'I refuse to be pushed into writing life histories just because this faculty favours that.' ... It happened to me. There were various exciting possibilities presented to me that I had never considered and I said, 'Oh yes! I wanted to do that!' But after a year I realised that this was not what I wanted to do. I eventually came back to what I wanted to do. It was a long way round but I think I was more enriched for that. (Student I)*

The issue of forcing students into using particular research genres and working within pet paradigms and favoured methodologies of cohort supervisors was frowned upon by the Focus Group. In particular, they raised the matter of the anti-quantitative stance of the Faculty and negative attitude shown by some supervisors to students using quantitative research methods.

The issue of too many, sometimes disorienting perspectives of cohort supervisors was raised with the co-ordinator of the seminar sessions. According to the co-ordinator, the role of cohort supervisors is to expose students to multiple views and frameworks. Students are expected to be selective in what they take from the sessions. She added that the cohort sessions are designed to develop independent scholars and critical thinkers. She laments that some students tend to take everything that is offered in the sessions indiscriminately. She also expressed the concern that some students may be overreliant on the sessions, believing that six weekends will provide all the solutions when the seminars should really be deep, reflective experiences. Her views are borne out by the experience of Student L who conceded that

while she was initially distracted from the chosen focus of her study, the different perspectives offered in the seminar sessions contributed to her development as a student, a lecturer and a supervisor.

### Support from cohort peers

The defining feature of cohorts is mutual support and protection (Weise, 1992), with students feeling buoyed by and protected by this solidarity (Lewis *et al.*, 2010). In a study of student teachers working within a cohort, Mandzuk *et al.* (2003) discovered that members of the cohort were of the opinion that they could count on each other during times of academic and personal stress, and they perceived this social and emotional support as a major advantage of the cohort. Tareilo (2007), reflecting on her experiences of belonging to a doctoral cohort, speaks of an emotional safety net that develops within cohesive groups.

The participants in the Focus Group reflected on the cohesiveness of their cohorts which resulted in the seminar sessions creating social and academic spaces outside the seminars, bringing together members of a cohort over weekends to socialise but which inevitably resulted in their engaging in academic discourses. Apart from welding the cohort, this also enabled cohort members to take each other's studies forward between seminar sessions. The seminar sessions, they indicated, provided the stimulus for this, as indicated in the following response:

*One of the unexpected gains from the cohort system is that it is not only a social space but it is a kind of academic discourse space where you find like-minded people who have common interests. We would meet over weekends; it gave us a chance to engage in some kind of academic chit-chat. We took the discourse from the cohort space into other spaces. (Student I)*

### Reconciling support from cohort supervisors with support from appointed supervisors

In interrogating practitioner narratives about experiences of being co-supervisors in higher degree research, Spooner-Lane, Henderson, Price & Hill (2007) discovered that while co-supervision suggests collegiality, the relationship between principal and co-supervisors can and often results in conflict which is exacerbated if supervisors have different personalities and do not get on well. However, practitioner stories (Spooner-Lane *et al.*, 2007: 47) also reveal positive co-supervision experiences, as captured by the following comment:

*I see the benefit of supervisors bringing different viewpoints when examining a student's work. I have also valued the feedback from my co-supervisors who have been very collegial and supportive and expressed thanks for my contribution, as have my students.*

The role of cohort supervisors within the doctoral programme in the Education Faculty of UKZN is in some ways similar to the role of co-supervisors who are conceptualised as working in a spirit of collaboration and collegiality with the students' appointed supervisors in guiding and supporting the students through their research studies. Likewise, the appointed supervisors are expected to be part of the community of practice created (or ostensibly created) within the cohort programme, with appointed supervisors valuing feedback on their students' work from cohort supervisors. While the experiences of two of the students reveal this collaboration and collegiality with one of the students stating, "my supervisor always asks me to look into the suggestions given and to try to incorporate them as far as possible" (Student C), the other students spoke about conflicting guidance and support and tensions between appointed supervisors and cohort supervisors.

Five of the students indicated that the guidance provided by the cohort supervisors conflicted with that provided by their appointed supervisors. Two of these students indicated that despite this, they were able to mediate between the support from the cohort supervisors with that from their appointed supervisors and they maintained that engaging with contradictory views helped them to strengthen their ideas. One of these students stressed the need to take a firm stance on one's study despite the opposing and at times contradictory support. Their comments are captured below:

*During the proposal development phase, the comments from the cohort seminar group sometimes provided different insights into my study that my supervisor and I may not have considered, which helped strengthen my work. This year, as I progress into my study, I feel that the cohort facilitators may not be very familiar with my study and the advice is sometimes quite contradictory to that from my supervisor. However, reconciling different views is part of the research process. (Student F)*

*My study was going along well. I did some analyses and presented at a seminar session and was complimented and I very happily took that to my supervisor. He said, 'This has been done before! Why are you doing this? What made you do that?' I was devastated. So I had to make that really difficult decision of which way I wanted to go. So I did decide. I did at times feel torn (between the cohort and my appointed supervisor). You get coerced into going into a direction you didn't want to but that is not necessarily bad – it opens your study up to different interpretations. (Student I)*

Tensions between her appointed supervisor and the cohort supervisors were also reported by the fourth of these five students. In her case, tensions ran so high that her supervisor advised her to ignore the suggestions made in the seminar sessions and focus only on what was discussed in their one-on-one supervisory sessions. The student was of the opinion that she was being pulled in different directions and while she was keen to follow the guidance of her appointed supervisor, she maintained that the support she received from the cohort supervisors was useful in helping her shape her proposal. The following comment reflects this tension:

*The cohort supervisors helped to push me to prepare and complete my proposal. They felt I was ready to submit and defend this proposal but my supervisor threw it out. Now that the proposal is ready for submission after changes were made by my supervisor, my supervisor does not want me to discuss this with the cohort. But the cohort lecturers felt they needed to give the nod of approval before my defence of the proposal ... my supervisor told me I must not listen to Dr X as (this cohort supervisor) was not in tune with my study. My supervisor was upset when I sent the final proposal to Dr X I think she felt threatened. (Student D)*

The last of these five students did not mention tensions between his supervisors and the cohort supervisors, but believed that the guidance provided in the seminar sessions seriously conflicted with the support given by the appointed supervisors which frustrated his progress. He perceived that he was forced to make unnecessary changes which delayed the finalisation of his proposal. He believed that the guidance given at the seminar sessions “goes off at a tangent” and “sessions with my supervisors are more directed. I can see where I am going – there is gradual development of my work” (Student A). This student indicated that after six or seven fruitless revisions to his proposal, he was forced to go into a closed session with one of the cohort supervisors and his appointed supervisor where he was finally able to clarify his research focus.

Participants in the Focus Group discussion who are also staff members and exposed to an earlier version of the cohort model spoke about being allocated supervisors later in their first year of study rather than when they entered the programme. This, they believed, allowed students to derive full benefit from inputs from cohort supervisors and prevented possible tensions between cohort and appointed supervisors. They suggested reverting to this system. The following response captures this position:

*Late allocation of supervisors allows you to build up confidence so that you aren't going into possible conflicting situations between your group and your supervisor. We learnt so much in those first few months. It created a sense of you know where you are going and you can confront issues more confidently. (Student L)*

The issue of tensions between cohort and appointed supervisors and conflicting guidance was raised in the interview with the co-ordinator who believed that students could not mediate between what was given at seminars and what happens with the supervisor and as a result tensions develop. She maintained that students needed to take a firm position on their own study and defend that position. She also conceded that when a supervisor has pet paradigms and methodologies, it could create tensions between the supervisor and student and the appointed supervisor/s and cohort supervisors.

## Reconciling support from principal supervisor with support from co-supervisor

The study by Spooner-Lane *et al.* (2007) is relevant in understanding the relationship between principal and co-supervisors of three of the students interviewed. They contend that “power relations” between principal and co-supervisors can be proactive, enhancing both the research student’s achievement and the supervisor’s professional development. However, some of the practitioner narratives of co-supervisors recounting their experiences as doctoral students working with principal and co-supervisors reveal the tensions that existed between the supervisors which impacted negatively on the students.

Of the twelve students who participated in this study, three students (Students A, D and L) had two appointed supervisors. One of the supervisors played the role of principal supervisor while the other was the co-supervisor. One of the students (Student L) reported that “between (the principal and co-supervisor) there was a reasonable amount of coherence in terms of the advice that I was given”. She added that the two supervisors complemented each other, with the principal supervisor guiding her through the main body of her research and the co-supervisor assisting her to refine the thesis. However, the experiences of the other two students revealed a lack of collaboration and collegiality between the two supervisors which affected the students adversely. Both students reported experiencing difficulty in reconciling supervisory support received from the principal supervisor with that given by the co-supervisor.

Student A reported that while he had joint meetings with his supervisors, at which common guidance and support were provided, there were other occasions when he received conflicting advice from one or other of his supervisors. In particular, he raised the issue of choice of a data-collection tool which he claimed that his principal supervisor did not reject at a joint meeting with the co-supervisor, but in a private conference with him expressed aversion for the tool.

Unlike Student A, Student D did not have joint meetings with her supervisors and this created greater conflict between the support she received in separate meetings from each of these supervisors. She claimed that her principal supervisor advised her to ignore the suggestions and advice given by the co-supervisor and focus only on what they (principal supervisor and student) discussed. The student’s difficulty with working with two supervisors is reflected in the following comment:

*When I discussed with (my principal supervisor) what (my co-supervisor) had discussed with me, she rejected it out of hand – when one has two supervisors, it is difficult when the supervisors do not have a common understanding of one’s research study. (Student D)*

This student reported that she now has just one supervisor, her principal supervisor, as her co-supervisor was promoted to a senior position at another university in South Africa.

## Emerging insights – working within or outside communities of practice?

An analysis of the data generates the following insights in terms of whether the doctoral cohort programme is underpinned by collaboration and collegiality and whether genuine learning communities were created within the cohort programme:

- Academic input during seminar sessions from the cohort supervisors, in particular, provided an intellectually stimulating environment within which students were able to benefit from collaboration and collegial support. This was particularly the case in the proposal generation phase of the cohort programme.
- While there is not much evidence of cohesiveness within some cohorts, cohort peers supported each other academically and emotionally.
- Collaboration and collegiality between cohort supervisors and appointed supervisors was not always evident. Possible tensions between cohort supervisors and appointed supervisors and between principal and co-supervisors threatened the creation of genuine learning communities within the cohort programme.

- Late allocation of appointed supervisors would alleviate possible tensions between cohort supervisors and appointed supervisors.
- Reducing the number of supervisors per cohort and training of cohort supervisors in effective facilitation would obviate opposing and at times contradictory perspectives offered by cohort supervisors and minimise student confusion.

The findings of this study confirm Vithal's (2009) comments on the challenges and difficulties facing the cohort programme. In particular she notes:

*Both students and staff who come from diverse backgrounds must find common ground and create the kind of space in which diversity becomes a resource ... Not all students are able to mediate and manage conflicting advice and knowledge within seminars and between seminars and their individual supervisors. Each team of supervisors is also not neutral and ideological preferences do get expressed, for example, a bias against some methodologies. (Vithal, 2009: 7).*

Vithal (2009) adds that not all academics and certainly not all senior academics agreed or chose to participate in the doctoral programme at UKZN. Some actively undermined the programme. The low levels of doctoral productivity in South Africa relative to its developing country counterparts compel academics and policymakers to explore alternatives to the traditional model of doctoral supervision, which is no longer in itself adequate in improving throughput. The authors endorse Vithal's contention that in seeking alternative models, "what is needed is a *critical number of academics* who are committed and dedicated to doctoral studies, find enjoyment in the intellectual challenges and engagement, and are willing to support students" (Vithal, 2009: 8).

## Conclusion

This paper, based on a study of the cohort model of doctoral supervision at UKZN, documents and analyses students' experiences against the frame of what Lave and Wenger (1991) and Wenger (1998) term communities of practice. Providing rich opportunities for collaborative research learning, the success of the cohort model is indeed contingent upon successful collaboration and collegiality, the absence of which generates potential for conflict and sometimes frustration.

However, an equally significant dimension of the cohort model is that the potential for conflict generates simultaneously a productive space, where students negotiate the multiple and sometimes contradictory voices of cohort supervisors, appointed supervisors and peers as students find and affirm their own voices. While there is evidence of potential weaknesses in the model which undermine its potential value, such as supervisors and students working in isolation; some supervisors working counter to other supervisors, and power dynamics between supervisors, the evidence suggests that the Cohort provided opportunities for deep research learning, superseding those provided by the traditional model alone.

Hence, while these limitations can and do threaten the creation of genuine communities of practice, they are often symptomatic of individual teaching and learning styles and preferences rather than with the robustness of the design of the cohort model. The solution lies in developing a larger critical mass of academics engaging critically and creatively with the model as an intellectual project to meaningfully address the low levels of PhD productivity while simultaneously elevating quality.

The small sample used to generate the analysis renders this an exploratory study. Hence, the findings are tentative and subject to contestation as more evidence becomes available. Consequently, there is a need for further research (using larger samples of both students and supervisors) across faculties which have appropriated the cohort model, to explore the strengths, limitations and challenges of the model. Equally instructive would be tracer studies of different cohorts to document levels of success, productivity and intellectual fulfilment experienced by students and supervisors.

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### **(Endnotes)**

- 1 See Academy of Science of South Africa (ASSAf) study on doctoral productivity in South Africa (2010).
- 2 For more detail of the seminar programme model, see Samuel & Vithal (2011).