TEACHING ADVANCEMENT AT UNIVERSITY (TAU) FELLOWSHIPS:

Draft individual report

Reflections on the supervision process

by

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Aim of the project

The project seeks to interrogate some Central University of Technology, Free State postgraduate supervisors' experiences and notions of supervision and to suggest training strategies and practices (drawing on a Community of Practice Model: CoP). I anticipate that the CoP could enhance their supervisory capacity through encouraging collaboration among supervisors, students and other stakeholders in higher education.

Supervision approach

Poole (2010: 60) opines that supervision is "a cornerstone in the development of practical skills for human service professionals". Academics are such professionals. Chikasha (2013) views it as a tri-pedal relationship among supervisor, supervisee and the host institution. Regrettably, human relationships are fraught with tensions. Some tensions in the supervision process emanate from supervisory approaches that 'do not work'. Hence Poole's (2010:65) thesis that "Human dynamics demand that human service providers be well versed in the skills and knowledge that is required to address challenges and to identify strengths". Traditional supervisory approaches, for instance, have been found to be less effective. This may stem from the academics' apathy towards professional development (Makunye & Pelser 2012). Many academics prefer staying with traditional approaches to teaching because they are apathetic towards new developments. Hence Makondo's (2012:105) observation and plea that "the caliber, attitude and mindset of lecturers in institutions of higher education need drastic improvement and change if academic excellence is to be attainable and sustained in the 21st century". Today's contemporary student is different from that of yesteryear. Despite having unfettered access to massive knowledge sources, today's student still faces ~~some~~ challenges some of which are compounded by academics. Some conflicts in the supervision journey for instance, stem from misconceptions of the supervision process. Our approach should enhance the process of 'identity formation' (Grant 2010; Petersen 2007). The candidate is ~~thus~~ expected to operate in the realm of deconstructing myths within the social science domain by being able to explain, analyse, synthesise and evaluate information. Ho, Watkins and Kelley (2001) have thus advocated a conceptual change approach regarding the way supervisors frame teaching and learning. Such supervision approaches should capacitate individuals to operate in the knowledge domain. I prefer the 'direct inactive' mode of supervision (Grant 2010). It enables the supervisee to direct his/her learning through self-regulated learning by discovering new knowledge and insights.

Processes / Methods

A qualitative approach was adopted. The intent was to enlist postgraduate supervisors' narratives regarding their impact on supervisory practices and processes. I conducted structured interviews with my colleagues regarding postgraduate supervision. I requested them to complete a structured questaview (questionnaire) on postgraduate research supervision. The questionnaires were sequentially numbered from S1 to S17 ("S" for Supervisor and the numeral

for sequence). On the 21st of November 2018, I organised a workshop on research supervision on the Bloemfontein campus of the Central University of Technology, Free State. An external expert was enlisted to offer technical and conceptual support on issues of supervision. The participants evaluated that specific workshop. So, through this two-pronged approach, I was able to get a sense of their experiences and notions of supervision. It was my hope that enlisting their perceptions would assist us in coming up with solutions and strategies for strengthening supervision practices.

Outcomes
Through the workshop evaluation and the questionnaire, several themes came out distinctly. Below I outline these.

Supervision as alienating the Postgraduate candidate
There are several aspects that act as obstacles in the postgraduate journey. These challenges stem from the changing local and international contexts (Makunye & Pelser 2016). Most challenges are structural and human. University policies for instance, are a structural aspect that promotes or curtails student progress. Policies express power relations. Policies are a control measure meant to make the learner compliant. They are a tool for ensuring that the participants comply with university rules and regulations. Importantly, they are meant to ensure high throughputs in a university setting. It is anticipated that the student be conversant with the various policies governing the postgraduate process. Policies can place undue pressure on the candidate just much as they can lessen the burden on the same. It is thus imperative that the candidate familiarises him/herself with all policies governing the journey lest he or she ends up being alienated by the supervisory processes. I have often observed that very few candidates are conversant with forms or protocols relating to issues such as Proposal or title registration, funding and submission for final examination.

Alienation appears to emerge also from supervisees' lack of awareness of institutional policy. Paradoxically, most supervisors confirmed this assertion. I posed a question to the supervisors regarding challenges they experienced. Strangely, they were unanimous that the greatest impediment was the postgraduate student they supervised. My take is that the 'blame the student' approach is actually part of supervisors' unwillingness to modify their pedagogical approaches. All respondents except S1, S7, S15 and S17, blamed or viewed the postgraduate candidate as the source of the challenges. Hence my preceding submission that this could stem, partly, from students' lack of knowledge regarding institutional documentation. In blaming the student for not adhering to supervision policy guidelines, the following statements were made:
S3 said: *students are sometimes reluctant [or] non-compliant when the expectation is created that they should engage in reading for their study.*
S4 said: *All my students are part-time [and] employed, they struggle to juggle between their work and studies and end up lagging behind with their projects*
S9 …*Students who are not committed and struggle with research writing*
S 10…. *Had a student…. No committed until … dropped out*
S16…. *Student do not submit work or pitch unannounced to see supervisor*

The preceding sentiments reveal that some students struggle with the research process. Some lack knowledge of the research process, lack time and are not committed to their studies. My submission is that students embark on this journey before fully grasping the policy and practical imperatives that lie in wait. Academics are thus expected to be conversant with the real and potential policy impediments on the supervision journey. On the other hand, students need to conform to the status quo, i.e. to supervision protocols. Supervision presents little room for maneuver as the candidate was initially never a willing participant in the promulgation of the policies. Hence Makunye and Pelser (2012) citing Steyn (2010) opined that teacher professional development seems to be the answer to some of these challenges.

How the postgraduate student is recruited
Each institution has its own recruitment method. The selection of candidates should be transparent and above board and done to one's expectation. Respondent S9 declared that "*We*

need to be strict in admitting students… requirement(s) … must be transparent". Incidentally, S10 posited that *"..currently [at CUT, Free State] everything is transparent …concerning student's allocation".* I prefer recruiting my desired and targeted candidates. Concomitantly, the candidate should be grounded in one's area of expertise. By being in the same field of expertise, both of us will have [similar] areas of epistemological and ontological convergence. I am always involved in the selection and recruitment of the postgraduate candidates at my university. So far in 2019, I have recruited one Doctoral and three Master's degree candidates. Such an approach may mitigate challenges symptomatic of power relations in postgraduate studies

Power relations in postgraduate student supervision

The supervision milieu is fraught with power dynamics that can never be ignored. The supervisor has positional power essentially meant to empower the postgraduate candidate. If power dynamics are not contained, they can adversely affect the supervisory process. A good supervisor should strive to act above board and exude high ethical standards. The candidate should be constantly be reminded of the contract, and other protocols, and about professionalism and the need to create original work. Supervision should be anchored in a strong framework of mutual trust and support. Hence our advocacy of a Community of Practice as a way forward. Positional power (Poole 2010) for example, can easily be abused if wielded by an unprofessional supervisor. There are other instances wherein the candidate brings to the equation his or her work-related position or organisational power and tries to impose it on the supervision equation. I recently supervised a 'social notable' in the mould of a school vice-principal. He saw me as one of his subordinates (*I will meet with you on Thursday at 3pm…. Have you marked my Chapter 2? Did you get me an article that I can read?*) he would occasionally declare. Worse still, he somehow thought he was older than me (given that physically, he looked older!). Moreover, he at one point claimed he had 'ditched me in preference of another supervisor'. For the record, the candidate was two years my junior and failed in his bid to deploy himself to a preferred supervisor (due to his glaring misunderstanding of institutional procedures). The journey was rough to say the least.

The dynamics of power relations in the supervision milieu stem from the participants' perception of supervision (both supervisors and supervisees). I posed a question to the supervisors regarding what they viewed postgraduate supervision to be. Their narratives were an expression of the dynamics of power relations. Most supervisors viewed supervision as guiding (which essentially, is the exercising of explicit or subtle 'power over' the supervisee.) Below are some excerpts:

S2:*… to guide the student through…his/her research study*
S4:*… the support and guidance of the supervisor*
S5:*… guiding the student through the process of scientific writing*
S11:*… provide direction… a springboard for student ideas*
\S13:*… leading the student to manage and complete… study successfully*
S15:*… Assist student in successful completion of a dissertation or thesis*
S17:*… process wherein… a student is guided…on how to achieve.. results*

It is noted from above that 'power over' and power relations are expressed when the supervisor renders support, guides, gives direction, oversees and assists the supervisee on that journey. Through guided scientific writing, the candidate should successfully complete a dissertation or thesis. The power in question should empower rather than alienate the candidate.

Community of Practice approach

Adopting a Community of Practice approach to supervision has been suggested as an effective strategy to increase performance (O'Byrne & Rosenberg 1998; Palincsar *et al* 1998; Wenger 2004). Wenger (2011:1) defined a CoP as "groups of people who share a concern or passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly". The role of CoP in education is in the study and improvement of practice as a model of professional development (Palincsar *et al* 1998:5). When developed among academics, it is anticipated that its off spins will impact on creating good dissertations and theses. I view and advocated for co-supervision as an element of a Community of Practice. The CoP is so structured as to bring together all postgraduate supervisors to share their triumphs and tribulations. They are no longer operating as silos. Co-supervision is thus an element of a CoP. My respondents suggested and view co-

supervision as a good strategy for impacting on supervisory practices. We have embarked on co-supervision in the spirit of establishing a vibrant CoP since the beginning of 2019. The following are some positive sentiments on postgraduate research co-supervision from members of our CoP:

S2:…*to assist main supervisor…[and]…. Also to learn from the supervision on how to work with student*

S4:..*has huge benefits for both supervisors & students…when managed accordingly*

S5…*good idea that helps novice researchers…to learn from the …experienced*

S9:…*Co-supervisors are involved for their expertise in disciplinary knowledge*

S11:…*the best way for capacity building. … student get to benefit from different people*

S13:…*a good practice (..with a lot of complications…needs to be managed cautiously)*

S15:…*co-supervision is fine…A good team effort where both supervisors …discuss the work of the student*

The respondents are generally agreed that co-supervision presents an information sharing platform that strengthens the supervision process. These "peer to peer professional development activities" (Wenger 2011:5) involve the sharing of ideas and thus enrich one's knowledge base. Through TAU, I believe that such a 'group approach' strengthens the supervisory process. One needs to overcome the identified institutional impediments that might curtail its effective use or implementation. My strategy is to periodically meet with other academics as a group to take the registered candidates through their paces. A workable strategy begins with recruiting good candidates. One will then team up with one or more supervisors (co-supervision) in the spirit of professional development and in promoting a vibrant Community of Practice at the institution. Currently, I have constituted a Community of Practice, wherein faculty members share ideas regarding supervision with view to churn world class academics. The CoP has allowed us to team up as supervisors through co-supervision in the spirit of professional development and in promoting a vibrant Community of Practice at my institution. The next stage is to create a regional or national CoP whose nucleus are the sister institutions: the University of South Africa (UNISA) and the University of Venda (UNIVEN).

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