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EXPLORING THE USE OF COLLABORATIVE COHORT MODEL OF POST GRADUATE SUPERVISION AND COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE IN A RURAL BASED UNIVERSITY: A PILOT STUDY.

PURPOSE OF THE PROJECT

The project explores the use of Collaborative cohort Model of post graduate supervision in the context of community of practice in a rural based university of Venda.

CONTEXT

The study is conducted at the university of Venda (UNIVEN). UNIVEN is a rural based comprehensive university comprising of eight (8) schools. School of health sciences is one of the eight schools consisting of four departments and one centre. Department of advanced nursing science is one of the four departments. It offers professional and academic programmes in diverse disciplines at both undergraduate and post graduate levels. At the time of this project, the staff profile consisted of 2 (two) Professors; 3 (three) Associate Professors 9 (nine) Doctors and 2 two holding masters degrees. The post graduate students are older working nurses; English second language speakers, with diverse research preparation, and many of them also fail to fully understand what is required of them. Furthermore, many live in geographical and intellectual isolation, as they often reside in rural areas with no libraries in their vicinity, and with internet connectivity either lacking or unreliable. They are generally the first generation in their families to pursue their masters and PhD degrees. Apprentice Master Model is used for supervising post graduate students. To date, UNIVEN's post graduate throughput rate is below the university's expectations.

THEORY

This project draws on Collaborative Cohort Model (CCM) of higher degrees supervision which is gaining increasing popularity internationally and, in some contexts, replacing the conventional Apprentice Master Model (AMM). Among the motivations for appropriating the CCM for postgraduate students, Mandzuk, Hasinoff and Seifert, (2003) Tareilo, (2007); Vithal, (2009); Samuel and Vithal, (2011) found that the cohort model promotes collaborative and interactive learning; social and emotional support, interdependence and shared ideology which supplement the support offered to students by one to-one supervision. In South Africa, in an attempt to maximise support for its doctoral students, the Education Faculty of UKZN has adopted CCM. Thus 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).

Secondly, the project draws on Community of Practice theory (Wenger 1998), to explore, within the UNIVEN context, the formation of a 'community of practice', which would serve as support structure to achieve a common goal for supervisors.

Rationale of the project study

How and why the Collaborative cohort model of supervision improves postgraduate throughput rate within the context of a community of practice at the university of Venda is an under researched area. This pilot study thus contributes to this knowledge gap.

METHODS

Study design

A qualitative explorative, descriptive and contextual design was adopted to achieve the project purpose as described by Burns and Groves (2016) and Brink (2018). Upon obtaining the ethical clearance from the university higher degree committee, staff members were purposively sampled.

Data collection

With the five supervisors, three meetings took place as follows: The first meeting was to officially meet and greet as community of practice members, and mainly to collect

base line data through accessing the experiences of the four supervisors regarding post graduate supervision. This was achieved through the use of naïve sketch narratives which is objective one of the project. I requested supervisors to narrate and share their postgraduate experience at UNIVEN and send these to me via email. The instruction was as follows:

- *Kindly write and share your research supervision experience as a supervisor.*

Supervisors were allowed two weeks to send their naïve sketches via email as agreed. Within two weeks all supervisors sent their narratives. Then we all met to go through and analyse the narratives as agreed.

Findings

The analysis revealed three themes namely, being a novice in supervision; workload; and students, as follows:

Novice in supervision: participants were loud regarding being inexperienced when it comes to supervision. *“I joined the university from doing bed side nursing at the hospital. I was allocated 5 master’s students to supervise. I had no orientation with regard to supervision. No background on what to do; how to do it; why do it and when to do it. I was thrown at the deepest end. I supervise with trial and error, I supervise as I was supervised”.*

Workload: The expectations and deliverables to the teaching staff were reported to be a barrier to supervision. *“The workload is too much for one person, I have 3 modules to teach undergraduates which include marking of tests, examinations and projects for 90 students per module; expected to publish, attend conferences, do community engagement and to supervise students. This is very frustrating. Every year I am allocated students to supervise on top of the once I have.*

Students: Students were mentioned to be the role players when it comes to supervision. *“The students are not doing their part, they do not take their studies serious, not prepared, they do not effect comments and do not meet deadlines. They bring their social and occupational status to class forgetting that they are students, in some cases they even send their spouses for feedback and comments sessions”.*

Based on the findings, participating supervisors agreed to pilot the use CCM as well as to form CoP. They felt working together would bring more positive outcomes in terms of learning from each other and so forth. This is supported by Wenger (1998); Samuel, 2008) and Vithal (2009) who report that the cohort model provides opportunities for novice supervisors to be inducted and mentored into supervision by working alongside their more experienced colleagues. At the same time, Lewis et al. (2010) observe that without purposeful supervisor nurturance, departmental

collaboration and administrative guidance, the cohort model simply becomes a convenience tool as it creates the formation of community of practice.

WAY FORWARD

- A Community of practice of supervisors was formed and each supervisor has the task to facilitate their own students to form community of practice (Wenger, 1998). This is objective two of the project.
- This project is work in progress of a pilot study using CCM and CoP at UNIVEN which will run for three years.

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