

Effective Communication in Postgraduate Supervision: Shaping Experiences and Overcoming Challenges

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Abstract: Although postgraduate supervision relies on effective communication, it has become increasingly challenging due to various factors, including the cultural, ethnic, and educational backgrounds of both the supervisors and supervisees. As a result, institutions of higher learning are struggling to attract and retain these students. In addition, students often feel frustrated by the pressure to balance their academic and social lives during their studies. Therefore, this study explores the impact of effective communication on postgraduate supervision in higher learning institutions in Lesotho and South Africa. The study adopts an interpretive paradigm and uses a qualitative approach rooted in a case study design. Face-to-face interviews were employed as the data collection tool, and latent thematic analysis was used to analyse emergent themes. The findings reveal several factors that hinder effective communication in postgraduate supervision, including cultural dominance, lack of mutual respect, insufficient training, and a lack of professionalism, among others. Based on these findings, the study recommends that experienced supervisors be assigned to students and that there be a focus on two-way communication and training to develop the necessary skills for a respectful supervisor-student relationship.

Keywords: Effective communication, postgraduate studies, supervision, transactional model, transformative learning.

1. Introduction

Postgraduate supervision is an integral part of higher education that relies heavily on effective communication. This is because it involves the exchange of important information that is crucial for the supervision process. Written, verbal, and non-verbal cues are just a few examples of the various communication strategies that inform supervision (Knapp et al., 2013). Communication in postgraduate supervision has evolved from being solely focused on information exchange to serving multiple functions in the supervision process. In support of the notion, Mahlangu (2021) asserts that communication holds significant value in the realm of postgraduate supervision as it serves to eradicate any potential ambiguities or misconceptions that may arise during the exchange of information. Within this particular context, effective communication allows supervisors to engage in meaningful dialogues with their supervisees, thereby facilitating the provision of clear instructions, constructive criticism, and opportunities for critical thinking (Laksana & Nurhaliza, 2023). Furthermore, Adedokun and Oyetunde-Joshua (2024) highlight the importance of emotional support through communication, positing that such support plays a pivotal role in assisting students in navigating and mitigating anxiety and burnout that may manifest throughout the course of their studies. This demonstrates how communication stabilises the supervision process by allowing both sides to express their opinions regarding the ongoing study.

However, there are significant communication challenges in postgraduate supervision. Abdaoui's (2021) study results revealed that poor communication in supervisory relationships has rendered

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supervisees helpless, and they have even resorted to peers for clarification and guidance. Moreover, delays in research project completion can significantly decrease student satisfaction (ibid, 2015). Additionally, poor communication can hinder the development of critical thinking and academic writing skills, negatively impacting students' overall educational experiences (Baker et al., 2019). Addressing these challenges requires a clear understanding of the barriers that impede effective communication in postgraduate supervision. When communication is used appropriately with minimal challenges, it can assist both parties in achieving their goals. Furthermore, Ramrathan et al. (2023) suggest that cultivating trusting relationships between supervisors and supervisees is crucial because students will feel a sense of belonging, which, in turn, will greatly contribute to their self-belief and self-worth.

Moreover, the field of postgraduate supervision faces communication problems that have a negative impact on students' educational experiences despite its fundamental significance. The complexity of research communication and feedback often leads to misunderstandings and unmet expectations, which can hinder the progress of both supervisors and students (Tsoetsi & Omodan, 2020). Additionally, supervisors and supervisees bring different challenges from their unique perspectives, such as varying communication styles, a mismatch between the supervisor's research goals and the students', power imbalances, unavailability of the supervisor, different supervisory philosophies, and students who lack commitment to their work, among others. Furthermore, supervisors lack training to enhance their knowledge and skills in dealing with these challenges (Kiley & Wisker, 2009; Letsie et al., 2023). However, there are challenges that need to be addressed in order to facilitate effective communication (Harrison, 2018; Garcia & Martinez, 2018).

1.1. Problem statement

Ineffective communication in postgraduate supervision is a significant issue that this study addressed. It is a complex problem that can have negative impacts on university productivity and student dropout rates. It can also lead to unmet expectations and insufficient feedback. A lack of communication may cause students to feel isolated and disconnected, ultimately hindering their ability to learn and be creative (Smith & Laslett, 2019). Additionally, a study by Jones et al. (2020) found that ineffective communication affects students' enthusiasm, productivity, and understanding of their research projects. Furthermore, Quecano et al. (2024) add that poor communication and lack of adequate guidance signal students' dropout rates in higher learning institutions. Therefore, it is crucial to identify the underlying causes of ineffective communication in postgraduate supervision in order to reduce student dropout rates and increase university completion rates, as observed by experienced researchers. This study aims to identify these barriers to effective communication and propose solutions and strategies to improve communication quality, leading to more productive, respectful, and beneficial supervision.

1.2. Research questions

To respond to the above problem, the study thus sought to answer the following questions:

- RQ1: How does effective communication shape postgraduate supervision?
- RQ2: What challenges does ineffective communication pose to postgraduate supervision?

2. Theoretical Framework

This study was guided by the Transformative Learning Theory (TLT), which stipulates that learning is a unique experience for individuals. Therefore, supervisors must understand how learning happens because students can thrive with this approach (Western Governors University, 2020). Jack Mezirow's theory (TLT), which leans on adult education and young adult learning, states that students are adaptive and can change their thinking patterns based on new information (Western Governors University, 2020).

Mezirow views transformative learning as a process that focuses on two main tenets: instrumental learning and communicative learning (Western Governors University, 2020; Fleming, 2018). Expanding on instrumental learning, Fleming (2018) postulates that this tenet dwells on problem-solving tactics and evaluation of relationships, while communicative learning is aligned with how individuals communicate their needs, feelings, and desires. Additionally, Western Governors University (2020) writes that these two tenets are critical in transformative learning because students are able to challenge their previous knowledge and understanding as they gather new knowledge during supervision and engagement. Furthermore, Fleming (2018) remarks that transformative learning addresses the struggles for recognition as motivation for learning. Fleming (2018) further adds that this theory emphasises the need for communicative learning, which involves an exploration of the meaning behind communication in the learning process. Although Collard and Law (1989) and Clarke and Wilson (1991) claim that this theory is overly concerned with individual change, thus ignoring the constitutive relationship between individuals and their environment, Mezirow (1994, 1997) was quick to respond to that critique by arguing that students should be guided to analyse their problems through participatory research.

Based on the above postulations, we believe that effective communication has the potential to positively transform postgraduate supervision. This theory provides a relevant perspective that helps us understand the impact of effective communication on postgraduate supervision. TLT highlights the importance of communicative learning and the need to challenge prior knowledge. It emphasises the significance of open dialogue and critical reflection in facilitating transformative learning experiences. Promoting effective communication fosters a supportive and collaborative environment, enabling students to express their needs, receive constructive feedback, and engage in collaborative problem-solving with supervisors.

3. Literature Review

The literature discussed in this chapter will focus on the following sub-topics: effective communication, communication models, successful postgraduate supervision and instances of ineffective communication within postgraduate supervision.

3.1 Effective communication

Nature places communication at the centre of human interactions and engagements (Dar & Dar, 2019; Ghosh, 2022). Additionally, Joshi (2020) and Bhasin (2023) state that the medium of communication is used to facilitate interactions and develop a common understanding between conversing parties. While communication is dynamic and influenced by environmental factors, Joshi (2020) and Bhasin (2023) note that it is effective when it is two-way. This means that supervisor and supervisee interactions, as well as engagement, will be futile without reciprocal communication as stipulated by the TLT tenet on communicative learning, which highlights the importance of students' ability to express their feelings, needs, and desires during their study (Fleming, 2018). Furthermore, Bucăța and Rizescu (2017) stress the need for effective communication during interaction, where engagement should be mutual. In addition, Sharma and Sharma (2015) assert that effective communication is informed by different types of communication, such as verbal, non-verbal, written, and visual, with each playing a unique role in enhancing message delivery to the recipient.

Furthermore, Malik and Girdhar (2018), Malik and Girdhar (2018), and Robinson et al. (2023) argue that despite messages being brief, communication can be effective if the shared messages use common, simple, and precise language for clarity. Although effective communication is a critical component in human interaction, its relevance in postgraduate supervision has received a lot of attention due to eminent challenges that have surfaced as a result of race, gender, personal beliefs, and religion (Holloway, 2016). Therefore, for communication to be effective in postgraduate

supervision, both the supervisor and supervisee ought to adopt an appropriate model of communication that encourages a high level of interaction.

3.2 Models of communication

Communication models facilitate the communication process and provide a basis for effective and efficient communication during human interactions (Kapur, 2020). These models can be grouped into three categories: Linear, Interactive, and Transactional (Drew, 2023). In the linear model, communication flows in one direction from the sender to the receiver without including feedback in the process (Jan-Mendoza, 2020). On the other hand, both the interactive and transactional models emphasise the importance of two-way communication with feedback as a crucial element for effectiveness (Boyd & Dare, 2014). However, in the transactional model, both participants swap positions during communication, allowing each of them to initiate communication (Jan-Mendoza, 2020). In the context of this study, this means that both the supervisor and the supervisee have the opportunity to initiate communication to enhance engagement for effective supervision. There are several models within the transactional category, such as Dance's Helical Model and Barnlund's Transactional Model of Communication. However, we believe that the latter is the ideal model for supervision because it advocates for swift feedback between communicators (Tariq, 2023; Bragg et al., 2021). With communicators exchanging positions during communication, this model is particularly suitable for the supervisor and supervisee, as immediate feedback will enable smooth progress on the research project (Tariq, 2023).

3.3 Effective postgraduate supervision

Effective postgraduate supervision is crucial for the quality and successful completion of postgraduate studies. According to Van Rensburg et al. (2016), a professional commitment between the supervisor and supervisee is necessary for effective supervision, as it creates a level playing field throughout the course of study. Emilsson and Johnsson (2007) and Thompson et al. (2005) further suggest that effective supervision is led by competent supervisors who possess appropriate research qualifications and experience. Thompson et al. (2005) also argue that inexperienced supervisors should be paired with senior supervisors to enhance their professional growth and yield better results for students. We believe that co-supervision has the potential to bring novice supervisors up to speed while providing students with diverse perspectives. However, Kimani (2014) argues that this approach may create conflicts and compromise the quality and completion rates of students.

Furthermore, Van Rensburg et al. (2016) emphasise the importance of a negotiated supervisory agreement guided by institutional supervision frameworks. However, Singh (2011), Strauss (2012), Lessing, and Schulze (2003) argue that this agreement can be influenced by variables such as the student's knowledge of research methods, academic literacy, and limited research experience. Therefore, we believe that a supervisory agreement can facilitate a smooth relationship between the supervisor and supervisee if the student is familiar with basic research writing.

Moreover, Van Laren et al. (2014) and Van Rensburg et al. (2016) call for increased student support, suggesting that a supervisor should manage various aspects of the relationship. Similarly, Manathunga (2007) and Hodza (2007) mention that mutual respect, power balance, and effective communication are crucial between the student and supervisor. Additionally, Van Rensburg et al. (2016) propose that communication shapes the supervisor-student relationship and leads to constructive feedback for effective supervision. This aligns with the idea that students have the flexibility to adjust their thinking in response to novel information, such as constructive feedback, as proposed by the TLT. We contend that when the supervisor and supervisee have a harmonious relationship, feedback will be perceived positively, leading to a smooth progression of the study.

3.4 Ineffective communication in postgraduate supervision

It is evident that inadequate communication, whether verbal or by email, affects the supervision process (Yousefi, 2015). Poor communication leads to misunderstandings and misinterpretations. When communication is unclear, supervisees receive ambiguous feedback, which hinders their understanding and ability to address corrections effectively. This can result in delays in completing the study and mistakes that may frustrate the supervisor (Rauf, 2016; Mikkelsen & Einarsen, 2018). Additionally, individuals with diverse backgrounds may have different communication styles, leading to further misunderstandings. For example, a supervisee from a foreign culture may rely on subliminal and indirect clues, while the supervisor prefers direct and unambiguous communication (Smith, 2019; Hattie & Timperley, 2007). This misalignment with the principles of TLT, which promote problem-solving and relationship building, can cause frustration and confusion for both the supervisor and supervisee.

The supervisor-student relationship is currently in a poor state, leading to high dropout rates due to the lack of mentoring agreements (Quecano et al., 2024). Moreover, Van Rensburg et al. (2016) suggest that the supervisory agreement, which must adhere to institutional framework requirements, should be negotiated. Westein (2023) further states that the absence of a negotiated agreement and the power imbalance between supervisor and supervisee can negatively impact the supervisory relationship, making it difficult for the two parties to reach agreements. Therefore, we argue that this power imbalance may result in students losing motivation to continue their studies, particularly when they do not feel engaged.

Additionally, these dynamics are often present in one-on-one supervision, where power imbalances can inhibit effective communication (Kiley & Wisker, 2009). However, Tsoetsi and Omodan (2020) argue that a balance between support and autonomy is necessary for effective supervision. This is supported by interactional models of communication, which emphasise the importance of two-way communication between supervisor and supervisee for achieving their goals. The TLT theory also emphasises the ability of supervisors and supervisees to openly communicate their needs, feelings, and desires. Thus, we propose that two-way reciprocal communication serves as the foundation for transformative supervision.

In the supervisory process, conflicts may arise due to inadequate verbal and written instructions from the supervisor. Effective communication with the supervisor is crucial because the supervision process relies on constructive criticism, active listening for clarifications, and the acceptance of opinions and suggested corrections (Yousef et al., 2015). Supervised students need clear guidance and support from their supervisors to overcome academic challenges. If a supervisor fails to provide clear direction and support, instead offering confusing advice and delaying the resolution of complaints from the supervisee, it can have detrimental effects on the supervisee's performance and credibility (Lee & Kam, 2015). In such situations, supervisees often become confused and frustrated due to the lack of clear direction, which contradicts the idea of instrumental learning as emphasised in the TLT tenet, which prioritises problem-solving and building relationships. These situations also prevent students from challenging their existing knowledge and understanding, as they are unable to acquire new knowledge due to poor guidance.

Supervisor's delays in communication and negative feedback continue to haunt postgraduate supervision, as students jump ship as pressure mounts in their studies (Cekisi et al. 2019; Chugh et al. 2022). A lack of support and helpful criticism undermines their confidence and excitement, thereby affecting their overall academic achievement. Furthermore, inadequate communication can impact the timely completion of research projects. This is supported by Chugh et al. (2022), who state that unclear and ineffective feedback has become a source of conflict in the supervisor-student relationship and impedes academic progress. In essence, within the framework of this study, we believe that ineffective communication negatively affects the supervisory relationship. It erodes

mutual trust and respect, hinders teamwork, and leads to interpersonal problems. Therefore, we advocate for the incorporation of the interactional model of communication in supervision, as it encourages constructive feedback among communicators and supports the timely completion of research projects.

4. Methodology

This study employed a qualitative research approach because qualitative methods are used to understand people's beliefs, experiences, attitudes, behaviour, and interactions, generating non-numerical data (Pathak et al., 2013). According to Anas and Ishaq (2022) and Nair and Prem (2020), this approach is used to better understand people's beliefs, experiences, and personal stories through observations, attitudes, and interactions. Furthermore, an interpretivist paradigm was used to construct experiences and social realities (Pervin & Mokhtar, 2022). Pervin and Mokhtar (2022), Alharahsheh and Pius (2020), and Omodan (2022) add that interpretivism deals with interpretation and understanding while also emphasising a person's personality and involvement in social and cultural life using biblical materials in philosophy. This study also employed a case study design. The qualitative case study, as explained by Creswell (2012), focuses on an event, location, issue, time, or other physical limitations and explores difficult subjects in their natural setting to gain a better understanding of them (Heale & Twycross, 2018; Nkhi, 2022).

The study sample consisted of 38 participants, including two postgraduate coordinators, six supervisors from the only institution in Lesotho offering postgraduate courses, and 30 supervisees from four institutions in South Africa (SA): Central University of Technology (CUT), University of the Free State (UFS), University of Johannesburg (UJ), and the University of South Africa (UNISA). The rationale behind this sample is that most coordinators and supervisors in Lesotho were trained in South African institutions, while the supervisees are local students, some of whom are studying in the above-mentioned universities.

Data were collected through in-depth face-to-face interviews. According to Creswell (2014), interviews can be conducted face-to-face, telephonically, or in a focus group setting to obtain relevant and rich data from participants. The researchers obtained permission from the participants, who signed consent forms before the interviews. Participants were informed that participation was voluntary and they were free to withdraw at any time. Furthermore, participants were given pseudonyms, such as SP for Supervisor, SS for supervisees, and PC for postgraduate coordinators, to ensure anonymity (Creswell, 2014). Moreover, the study adopted latent thematic analysis to analyse emergent themes. Braun and Clarke (2012) and Gupta and Shaheen (2019) define thematic analysis as a popular qualitative research method technique for systematically identifying, classifying, and providing a clear explanation and interpretation of the themes and patterns in a data set as researchers make sense of the shared meanings and experiences.

5. Data Presentation

Data in this study were presented thematically based on the research questions stated above.

5.1. How does effective communication shape postgraduate supervision?

The following themes were identified from the data collected during the interviews: good support, importance of negotiated agreement, study quality, wealth of knowledge, research training, professional relationship, effective communication in supervision, interaction during supervision, and anticipated feedback in supervision.

Theme 1: Good support

Participants revealed that the institution's highest level of support to students, which is backed by effective communication and mutual respect from the supervisor, results in seamless study progress.

This support is demonstrated through the acknowledgement of the student's prior knowledge and experience. The participants also mentioned that basic research skills and a proportional student-supervisor ratio could speed up the study's progress. Additionally, participants expressed the view that students' support should extend beyond academics to include psycho-social support, which can help students perform better. This perspective was confirmed by the participants:

"It means having good support and engagement from the supervisor, and it should be based on sharing of ideas and knowledge between the supervisor and supervisee" (SS 3).

"I might be a student, but I have gathered knowledge and experience through the years. I just need my supervisor to acknowledge that I have something to share" (SS 8).

"Communication at this level is important. Some supervisors will literally ignore your email until your face turns blue, but if they choose to respond, their feedback turns to belittle us as students" (SS 10).

"Support comes in many forms. Psycho-social support is critical. We are adults, and in adult learning, we are burdened with social responsibilities. Without this support, it becomes a challenge to even think that I will complete my studies" (SS 14).

"Sometimes I feel like I want to throw in the towel, I get overwhelmed, especially when the supervisor is too demanding. I do appreciate that they are pushing for quality, but I also have my limits" (SS 27).

"Training is another aspect of support we yearn for. I could be an exemplary student if I could get basic training on research" (SS 30).

Some participants expressed the following:

"Institutional structural support and fair allocation of students are important so that all students' needs are met" (SP 1).

"All supervisees deserve quality time with supervisors, but the fact that the supervisor-student ratio is not balanced makes students frustrated" (SP 4).

"I fully understand the student's frustration when it comes to getting timely feedback, but in most instances, my hands are tied. I can only do so much to assist my students" (SP 3).

"I fully appreciate the importance of communication, but I also know that I do not have the guts to give false information to my students" (SP 2).

Another participant added that:

"Effective communication is the backbone of postgraduate supervision" (PC 1).

The responses above suggest that students' support through training and psycho-social assistance, combined with effective communication, could yield the best results in supervision. Additionally, the student-supervisor ratio should be considered to ensure that supervisors have a manageable workload in order to attend to all their students' needs.

Theme 2: Importance of negotiated agreement

Participants agree that a negotiated agreement between the supervisor and supervisee is important. This agreement sets the ground rules for how the project will be carried out, ensuring that both parties are held accountable. The participants also recognised that this agreement helped to eliminate and diffuse tension between supervisors and students. In confirmation, some participants stated the following:

"With the agreement, we will not step on each other's toes. Remember, we have our own commitments, and this should also be another engagement that we have to commit to" (SS 7).

"Without laying down the rules in any relationship, surely one is bound for disaster. I know it can sometimes be a sensitive topic to discuss, especially when the relationship is in its infancy, but it should come sooner" (SS 11).

"With rules set, we all honour them, and this leads to harmonious relations, as one is able to stick to what has been agreed upon" (SS 2).

"No matter how lazy I might get or feel demotivated, there is something that pushes me. I don't want to disappoint my supervisor, simply because the agreement was negotiated not imposed" (SS 29).

"I cannot image a situation where my supervisors impose their wishes on me. I will be frustrated to the core knowing that I cannot change anything" (SS 12).

Some of the participants expressed the following:

"Settling on clear rules of engagement will eliminate tensions between the supervisor and supervisee and will reduce dropout rates in postgraduate, or delays to complete the study" (SP 4).

"Setting the rules might seem uptight, but believe me, it works. We should never underestimate the importance of having such an agreement" (SP 6).

"Study completion will not be a pipedream when both parties have agreed on the route to follow" (SP 1).

Other participants added that:

"As coordinators, we understand the importance of drawing up a clear schedule, as this results in harmonious relations and allows both to stick to the plan" (PC 1).

"I am not burdened with complaints from both parties because if the agreement fails, it is their responsibility to work it out" PC 2).

The statements above imply that study participants value the negotiated agreement between supervisor and supervisee because it ensures that both parties fulfil their obligations. This theory is supported by Van Rensburg et al. (2016), who found that a binding agreement contributes to the successful completion of the study.

Theme 3: Co-supervision improves study quality

The majority of participants praised co-supervision as a critical component in postgraduate supervision because it enhances the quality of the process. The participants also acknowledged that co-supervision benefits novice supervisors by helping them develop their skills and providing a fresh perspective on the study. However, some participants argued that co-supervision can be challenging for students when supervisors fail to collaborate. To support this, the participants made the following statements:

"I feel there is a need for co-supervision, especially when a supervisor is new in supervision because they sometimes make us to correct one thing more than 4 times; this shows that they are not yet sure of what is needed from us" (SS 9).

"Who says no to extra support and knowledge? Co-supervision is the way to go" (SS13).

"I believe that co-supervision helps to better shape the study. We are talking about individuals from different backgrounds and their view and perspective on the study is bound to differ, and that is where the quality of the study will improve"(SS 19).

"Contradicting views from the supervisors give me a nudge to read further, and in the process, I am able to improve the quality of my study as I continue to immerse in literature" (SS 20).

"Comments from two supervisors give me confidence that my study will be thorough" (SS 22).

"Having two supervisors work in my favour. When one is engaged, the other is available, so there is no pressure on me, meaning that I have time to work harder to get the desired quality" (SS 15).

"I like the collaboration; you gain new insights into study, by the end, you become a new being. That is the fulfilling part of my job" (SP 2).

"The support you get from the colleague, is amazing, and I know that is where growth is, and this is seen in the quality of the work the student delivers as a result of quality guidance" (SP 5).

"Having rookies in supervision, the seasoned ones lead the process and train the newbie to perfect the supervision process" (SP4).

On the contrary, other participants argued that:

"Although having guidance from two individuals may be helpful, I had a bad experience with lead supervisor undermining the other. I was literally puzzled" (SS22).

"I was caught between a rock and hard place, I didn't know whose comments and suggestions to take or incorporate them into my study. I had to please both, but also trying not to compromise the quality of my study" (SS 28).

"Two experts with varying views on my study are too much. I get overwhelmed" (SS 11).

"People differ despite their responsibilities, so people do not want to share information nor to work with the other, so when supervisors cannot work cooperatively, this frustrates their students" (SP 3).

"I know how it feels to work with someone who is senior and who cannot be corrected when they are wrong" (SP 1).

Another participant further added that:

"For quality work, I think it is necessary because it will assist the novice in the process" (PC 2).

"It relieves pressure on one supervisor, thus the quality of the study is guaranteed to improve" (PC 1).

The above statements imply that most participants support co-supervision because it enhances the quality of the study and helps develop the skills of inexperienced individuals. This viewpoint is supported by Thompson et al. (2005), who emphasise the significance of pairing novice supervisors with experts in the field. However, some authors, like Kimani (2014), argue that this approach might be harmful to students due to conflicting perspectives from supervisors and their lack of collaboration.

Theme 4: Wealth of Knowledge

The participants revealed that experienced supervisors help their students finish their studies in record time without compromising the quality. This is because their extensive research knowledge proves to be effective for students. Participants supported this statement by expressing the following:

"Students who experienced supervisors supervise always finish on record time and do not have as many back and fore like the ones from supervisors with no experience" (SS 2).

"I am continually exposed to new ideas, some of which I never knew existed in research. I want to applaud these people for their experience and knowledge" (SS 4).

"The knowledge I have acquired on research thus far is attributed to my supervisors; their vast knowledge on research shapes my study for the better" (SS 7).

"Their combined knowledge on different phases of research gives me confidence that my study is coming out alright" (SS 10).

"I am amazed by the amount of knowledge my supervisors have, they push me to the edge" (SS 16).

"I am always on my toes, trying to catch-up with what they are suggesting. My efforts are beginning to pay off, I know I making a steady progress in my studies" (SS 23).

Other participants added that:

"Nothing beats experience in supervision; you have multiple ways to manoeuvre especially when confronted with supervision challenges" (SP 5)

"I have seen so much in my years of supervision; I am in a better position to groom my supervisee accordingly" (SP 3).

"Experience gathered through the years does not fail me. I now appreciate my job better, because I am familiar with the ins and outs of this task" (SP 4).

Another participant added the following:

"Quality of student output is highly dependent on knowledge and experience of the supervisor. In my view, progress would be quick" (PC 2).

From the above interviews, it is evident that experienced supervisors help students to complete their studies on time while also ensuring the quality of the student's output.

Theme 5: Research training

The majority of the participants indicated that many students enrol in postgraduate programs with little research knowledge. They suggested that providing training to students would help expedite their research progress, as receiving negative feedback can be demoralising for them. The participants made the following statements:

"Training on research, academic writing, research chapters, how to search for the most relevant information and credible information, and referencing is necessary for postgraduate students" (SS 6).

"I know how completely clueless I was when I started my journey, if it wasn't for training, I would still be in the dark" (SS 8).

"I have plenty of ideas but don't know how to put them down in an acceptable manner. I hate getting feedback with everything edited. I hate the script that will be bleeding from the first page to the last" (SS 14).

"My supervisor was complaining about the old references, and what I had presented was to the best of my ability" (SS 17).

"Am beginning to lose patience with my supervisors, each time I submit, there is that nagging feedback that I should improve my academic writing" (SS 21).

"I am becoming their laughing stock, they complaining about my writing style and the references I consulted. I feel disrespected at times" (SS 30).

Adding to the importance of training, supervisors noted:

"I sometimes feel for students because I know academic writing can be very tricky. I exercise a lot of patience to ensure my supervisees follow my lead" (SP 4).

"At times, I wonder how a student made it through undergraduate if they fail to construct basic sentences with clear attribution or citations. I know a lot of assignments in undergraduate require academic writing. The academic writing trainings are a lifeline to our students" (SP 6).

Another participant added:

"I am beginning to appreciate the research training offered to students; this goes a long way to mould them into better academics" (PC1).

"Training is a necessity in postgraduate studies in order to avoid clashes between the supervisor and student regarding the quality of submissions in the course of the study" (PC 2).

The aforementioned perspectives illustrate that providing research training to students could contribute to enhancing their academic performance and reducing the occurrence of negative

feedback from supervisors. Moreover, this implies that students could acquire the essential skills to effectively conduct literature reviews in their academic pursuits.

Theme 6: Professional relationship

The study participants revealed that the student-supervisor relationship should be built on mutual respect to be able to discuss issues that are likely to affect study progress. The supervisees stated:

"I might be a student but am an adult; I need the supervisor to treat me as though I am a friend, colleague or a sibling" (SS 2).

"Just because one is a supervisor does not make them super-beings. They can make mistakes along the way, so if we have a professional relationship, it will be easy to communicate such" (SS 6).

"I want to be heard; I need a supervisor who listens and respects my views. I might be wrong, but the supervisor should be polite enough to lead me on the right path, not ridicule me" (SS 11).

"My supervisor should try to reason with me. I need to know that she's got my back. When I raise my concern, she should understand my point of view because we should cooperate towards the end" (SS 13).

"We are from different cultural backgrounds, and even our communication styles vary; I don't want to be ordered around like a child, but rather be engaged in a civil conversation to resolve any issues in the relationship" (SS 19).

"I love to be treated with respect because I also do the same, and that is in my nature. If that side of the relationship is sorted, then we will go far" (SS 20).

Emphasising the importance of professional relationships, Supervisors stated that:

"Professionalism is critical in this context. I know we might be impatient or feel the need to speed-up the process. Students' needs come first and these are founded on mutual respect" (SP 5).

"Supervision is a collaborative effort; you don't expect anyone to be dragging their feet while the other party has applied maximum effort. This is the foundation of mutual respect, because if not addressed, then the relationship will suffer" (SP 2).

"Its quite intriguing how some supervisees want to be treated with respect, yet their conduct says otherwise. Respect is replicated" (SP 3).

Another participant added:

"Professionalism sits well with me. I want students to be respected. If they selected our institution and faculty, it means they entrusted us with their future, so let's make their dreams come true" (PC 2).

The responses from the participants above suggest that prioritising mutual respect in supervisory relationships is crucial for ensuring smooth study progress. Rensburg et al. (2014), Joshi (2020), and Bhasin (2023) support this viewpoint, highlighting that effective communication fosters interaction and helps establish a shared understanding among all parties involved.

Theme 7: Effective communication in supervision

Participants stated that effective communication is crucial in supervision. This is because it enables all parties to exchange ideas and discuss important supervisory information. Failure to communicate effectively can have a demoralising effect on both the supervisor and supervisee. The participants provided the following justification:

"We cannot downplay the importance of communication. Good relations are based on good communication. What will transpire during this process lies in how we can communicate with my supervisor, and this will lead to study completion" (SS5).

"Effective communication is when there are less distractions and interruptions in our communication. Communication between us is explicit; I get the intended message, not otherwise" (SS 3).

"I prefer to be understood, it is thorough clear communication that we are able to nurture relations. So I prefer a supervisor who keeps regular contact to check my progress" (SS 7).

"I want to complete my studies, and I have no intentions of dropping out, but sometimes I feel like I made a mistake when I enrolled for postgraduate studies. I had a clear plan towards the completion of my studies, but now I am drowning" (SS 10).

"I know how critical communication is, but sometimes I am too embarrassed to communicate with my supervisor, especially when I fail to submit as per our schedule" (SS 26).

Addressing the value of effective communication in postgraduate supervision, Supervisors explained:

"Effective communication allows a smooth transfer of information between the two parties and lays the ground on what to expect and helps in setting the timeframes" (SP4).

"I am a stern believer of communication; I believe that if we constantly communicate, we are able to clear the air" (SP 5).

"With set timeframes, we are working around the clock, but I lose hope in a student who fails to communicate, especially when they are confronted with challenges. I will only discover when I probe further, even issuing threatening messages to student" (SP 6).

Another participant added:

"Effective communication is the backbone of postgraduate supervision" (PC 1).

The responses from the participants indicate that effective communication is integral in postgraduate supervision because ineffective communication could result in student dropout or a delay in completing the programme.

Theme 8: Interaction during supervision

The majority of the participants disclosed that two-way communication is necessary for effective supervision, as both parties may possess critical knowledge regarding the ongoing research. Additionally, the participants stated that they felt valued and respected in the process. The supervisees provided the following rationale in support of this:

"It has to be a two-way form of communication that has to have direction of scheduled communication like feedbacks and submission times as well as a proper channel of communication which can be used by both effectively" (SS3).

"There should be a dialogue between us, in that way, I know we will reach a common understanding. Communication cannot be unidirectional, but multidirectional" (SS 5).

"I prefer two-way communication for better interaction and engagement. I don't expect anything less" (SS 6).

"It's quite fulfilling to engage in a discussion with a supervisor because you feel respected and heard. I mean, this person is miles ahead of me in academia, but the fact she listens, that is all I need" (SS 13).

"Communication is only effective if it is two-way. If we fail to interact in this fashion, I don't know what will work for my study. I know what I want, but I equally need guidance to get there" (SS 18).

Supervisors also admitted that:

"To keep harmonious relations for better progress, I know two-way communication works best for me. I need to know and understand my supervisee, and it is through two-way communication I can achieve that" (SP 2).

"Two-way communication is the way to go. If you want to get rid of stress in supervision, this should be considered by supervisors" (SP4).

"Reciprocal kind of communication that considers the opinions of each party and responds accordingly" (SP5).

Another participant reported:

"Dialogic communication. We should emphasise the importance of feedback, that's how it should be" (PC 1).

The preceding comments suggest that improved interaction and engagement between the supervisor and supervisee could be effective if both parties engage in dialogic communication.

Theme 9: Anticipated feedback in supervision

Most participants stated that they expect to receive constructive criticism during the supervision process. They believe that this feedback will provide insight into how the study can achieve its goals and how to address the criticism in order to improve the outcomes. Some participants emphasised the importance of supervisees knowing the truth. The participants expressed the following:

"Constructive criticism involves verbal and written feedback because with verbal it is easy to forget what one is supposed to do if one does not work on the feedback immediately, so we can always refer back to the written feedback, so both feedbacks are" (SS2).

"All I need is to accomplish my goal; that is what I am looking for at the moment. Feedback means progress to me because all I need to do is address the comments. However, I dread negative feedback, it makes me feel useless" (SS 7).

"I need feedback that gives me the urge to push harder, not the kind that literally drains your energy. I have other commitment and stressors, feedback should not compound into my misery" (SS 10).

"I just need positive vibes. I don't want to feel like enrolling in postgraduate studies was not a mistake" (SS 11).

"Surely postgraduate studies is not walk in the park, and I know at time we deserve some tough love from the supervisors, but it should not be a regular occurrence. I need constructive feedback" (SS 15).

Other participants mentioned that:

"Positive. You can point out the mistakes in a respectful manner. Feedback should empower the student not break them down" (SP 1).

"I am the fan of the truth. I tell it as it is. I cannot afford to sugarcoat anything, lest my feedback is misinterpreted in the process. I do give praises where they are due; hence my students know how I operate" (SP 4).

"Constructive feedback encourages the supervisee to work harder and are able to engage with the supervisor on areas that needs clarification" (SP 6).

Another participant said:

"Constructive feedback is important. Students should experience the Aha moment, meaning they are beginning to gather new insights in research" (PC1).

The assertions above stress the need for constructive feedback to encourage students' performance. However, some participants seemed to suggest that students should be given feedback that reflects their work, irrespective of whether it is positive or negative.

5.2. What challenges does ineffective communication pose to postgraduate supervision?

The following themes, namely the effects of poor communication and conflicts resulting from poor communication, were identified from the data collected during the interviews. The participants should be given feedback that reflects their work, regardless of whether it is positive or negative.

Theme 1: Effects of poor communication

Most participants mentioned that ineffective communication negatively affects the supervisory process as it often leaves the role player inactive due to a lack of guidance. On the other hand,

effective communication helps minimise errors during supervision. The participants provided the following evidence to support this claim:

"Where there is no clear communication: we do not know when to submit what, supervisors give feedback very late and students this frustrates students because they value feedback as it enables them to improve their performance" (SS9).

"This should be collaboration, so if we fail to communicate, then I don't understand how we will reach our goal" (SS 10).

"Sometimes am idle, I don't know what to do, especially when my supervisor is mute. I wish there was something to do to remind her that I have my own timeline. I cannot be a career student" (SS 13).

"Poor communication makes me want to give up. I sometimes feel helpless" (SS 19).

Other participants stated:

"Communication is key in supervision. I want to be kept abreast; I don't want surprises from my supervisees" (SP 2).

"We can only achieve our goal if we communicate; therefore, there is no room for people who want to be chased around to get answers from them" (SP 4).

"I don't want students who are lazy communicators, only to find out later that they are experiencing challenges with their projects. This stalls the process" (SP6).

Another participant commented:

"Poor communication stifles study progress because students might not meet deadlines and supervisors might also be frustrated if students show signs of lack of commitment" (PC2).

The aforementioned views clearly indicate that inadequate communication leads to frustration among supervisors and students and also hampers study progress. Moreover, these views strongly suggest that effective communication plays a crucial role in minimising supervision errors.

Theme 2: Communication conflicts

A substantial number of participants shared various conflicts related to communication that arise during supervision. Cultural backgrounds, which influence specific approaches towards individuals in positions of authority, contribute to these conflicts. In supervision, supervisors expect to be treated with respect by their supervisees, while students believe that they should be treated as adults. The participants confirmed this, stating the following:

"Cultural background. Sometimes you might be dealing with a person who wants to be worshipped just because they are old, or they are far ahead in academia. I find this disturbing" (SS7).

"It's simply because supervisors are defensive, and you cannot question them because 'they know it all'. I just don't want to deal with such characters" (SS 11).

"I don't have the energy to engage with someone who is ready to shoot my views down at any given time" (SS 21).

"I find it difficult to question my supervisor, simply because I know that he is old" (SS 25).

"My supervisor belittles me. She treats me like a child, simply because I am young enough to be her grandchild. I wish it could dawn on her that I am a student not one of her grandkids" (SS 29).

Other participant added that:

"Stubborn students with little knowledge, who also want to dictate how communication and engagement should run. That truly beats my understanding; I also turn to ignore such advances from students" (SP2).

"Dealing with students from different cultural backgrounds. Some are straight talkers and that can be offensive, thus I just let them be" (SP 3).

"I expect students to chin-up, I know this might not be smooth, but I can guarantee that this is coming from a good place" (SP 4).

Another participant explained that:

"Sometimes language that students use when communicating becomes so casual that supervisors feel uncomfortable and disrespected thus conflict may arise"(PC1).

The discussions above suggest that culture plays a significant role in hindering postgraduate supervision. This is because supervisors and supervisees may have different interpretations of issues, leading to potential misunderstandings.

Theme 3: Supervisors' dominance

The majority of participants confirmed that supervisors hold the upper hand in all aspects of supervision. This means that they dominate the entire process and enforce one-way communication, which is rooted in their individuality. This is another problem that emerged from the data and was strongly disliked by the participants. However, some participants argued that it is not dominance but rather taking control and leading the process. The participants provided the following explanations to support this viewpoint:

"Sometimes supervisors think they are the only ones with knowledge so they do not want to give us chance to explain what we think or want to achieve, so this causes conflict" (SS1).

"Supervisors think they have a right to control our studies and sometimes they force us to change our direction to what they want" (SS5).

"Sometimes they do not respond to our emails or they give us rude answers which frustrate us" (SS9).

"Some are control freaks, it is their way or the highway...You are perplexed by this practice, beaten and defenceless. That's how sometimes I feel" (SS17).

"If I knew it all I wouldn't be here. I choose to follow my supervisor's lead, because at the end, she is the one who calls the shots" (SS 20).

Other participants avowed:

"It's not dominance; it is taking the lead in the process. I know it might not be easy for some, but it has to be done the right way" (SP 1).

"My integrity is at stake. If allowed to get away with everything I would have missed the plot. I was appointed to lead because of my skills and expertise; thus, I should be respected and deliver as expected" (SP 3).

Another participant confirmed:

"Personality clashes, unprofessionalism, laziness that's what leads to conflicts at this level of study" (PC2).

It is evident from the above responses that supervisees dread supervisor dominance in supervision. However, the supervisors believe that compromising the quality of the study would highly question their integrity.

6. Discussions of Findings

The findings of this study suggest that effective supervision requires the supervisor to provide student support, engage in effective communication, and demonstrate mutual respect by acknowledging the student's prior knowledge and experience. This aligns with Transformative Learning Theory (TLT), which is rooted in adult education and considers the ability of students to challenge their existing knowledge and understanding as they acquire new knowledge through supervision and engagement (Western Governors University, 2020). In addition, Bucăța and Rizescu (2017) emphasise the importance of effective communication for creating better interactions and

engagements. The study also revealed that providing research training to students and ensuring a fair distribution of supervisees can lead to effective postgraduate supervision.

The results further emphasise the significance of a negotiated agreement between the supervisor and supervisee, as it serves as an accountability mechanism for both parties. Van Rensburg et al. (2016) support this idea by stating that an agreement guided by the institutional framework creates a binding commitment that ensures the successful completion of the study. However, Singh (2011), Strauss (2012), and Lessing & Schulze (2003) argue that this agreement can be influenced by factors such as the student's familiarity with research methods, academic literacy, and research experience. Additionally, the study revealed that co-supervision plays a critical role in postgraduate supervision, as it improves the quality of the study and allows inexperienced supervisors to develop their skills. Thompson et al. (2005) confirm this perspective by suggesting that novice supervisors should be paired with experienced supervisors to refine their abilities. However, some participants expressed concerns about co-supervision, particularly when supervisors fail to collaborate or reach agreements on specific issues. Such disagreements can negatively impact students' work. Kimani (2014) supports this view by stating that conflicting views among supervisors can lead to student frustration and lower completion rates.

Highlighting the importance of experienced supervisors, the results show that students complete their studies in record time without compromising the quality. This finding is supported by Emilsson and Johnson (2007), Thompson et al. (2005), and Mantai and Marrone (2022), who found that effective supervision is led by competent supervisors with appropriate research qualifications and experience. Additionally, the findings reveal that support for students should focus on research training, as many students who enrol in postgraduate studies lack academic writing and basic research skills. By enhancing these skills, student performance can be improved, and the number of unfavourable comments from supervisors can be reduced. Furthermore, the results indicate that student support should extend beyond academics to include psycho-social support, as this can enhance student delivery (Govender, 2023; Letsie et al., 2023). In line with this, Van Laren et al. (2014) and Van Rensburg et al. (2016) call for increased student support, emphasising the need for supervisors to manage various aspects of the relationship.

When it comes to the student-supervisor relationship, the findings highlight mutual respect as a critical element in discussing issues that may affect study progress. Rensburg et al. (2014), Joshi (2020), and Bhasin (2023) support this finding by emphasising the value of communication in the supervisor-student relationship and how it facilitates interaction and shared understanding. Similarly, Manathunga (2007) and Hodza (2007) agree that mutual respect, power balance, and communication patterns should be understood between the student and supervisor. This finding is also consistent with the Theory of Language in Text (TLT), which places a strong emphasis on communicative learning and asserts that people express their wants, feelings, and goals through communication. Therefore, we argue that effective communication is essential for successful supervision, as relying solely on expectations makes achieving the goal challenging. The findings emphasise the significance of effective supervision, which relies on two-way communication between both parties. Jan-Mendoza (2020) supports this idea, noting that transactional models of communication underscore the value of exchanging positions and giving each other an opportunity to start a conversation. Therefore, we argue that mutual communication leads to favourable outcomes.

The results also highlight the importance of constructive feedback during supervision, which can contribute to achieving the study's objective. Barnlund's Model supports the idea of instant feedback, as it facilitates the advancement of the research project (Bragg et al., 2021; Govender, 2023; Tariq, 2023). Feedback is necessary to assess whether both parties are on the right track and are understanding each other. Poor communication, on the other hand, hinders the supervisory process

and provides little guidance. Cekisi et al. (2019), Chugh et al. (2022), Rauf (2016), and Mikkelsen and Einarsen (2018) highlight the consequences of a supervisor's delay in communication and provision of negative feedback. This can lead to demoralised and frustrated students and supervisors, ultimately resulting in incomplete projects. Additionally, the results demonstrate that conflicts in supervision can arise when supervisors assert their authority and demand to be treated as such. However, Joshi (2020) and Bhasin (2023) argue that effective communication, even in the presence of environmental factors like cultural background, must still be two-way. Therefore, in order to achieve the goals of supervision, professionalism and two-way communication that allows all stakeholders to voice their opinions are necessary (Govender, 2023).

Despite the emphasis on two-way communication, the findings indicate that some supervisors continue to impose one-way communication and control the supervisory process. This approach relies on a linear model that excludes feedback and only allows information to flow from the supervisor to the supervisee (Jan-Mendoza, 2020). This one-sided communication hinders the desired outcomes by blocking potentially innovative and useful ideas from the supervisee, which could enhance the study's value.

7. Conclusion and Recommendations

The study findings highlight the importance of effective communication, mutual respect, and negotiated agreements between supervisors and supervisees for an effective supervisory process. It can be concluded that if these factors are not honoured in the process, the supervision process is bound for disaster. Therefore, the study recommends that institutions emphasise the need for effective communication in postgraduate studies. Furthermore, the study reveals that students often enrol in postgraduate studies without adequate knowledge of research methods and academic writing. This lack of knowledge frustrates both the student and the supervisor, leading to delays in supervision and study progress. To alleviate this issue, institutions should provide a series of research and academic writing training to facilitate study progress. The results also highlight the importance of experienced supervisors and co-supervision in aiding study progress and providing guidance to novice supervisors. However, co-supervision can have its challenges, such as a lack of cooperation among supervisors. Therefore, it is crucial for supervisors to discuss and agree on feedback before sharing it with the student to eliminate conflicts and minimise frustration. Institutions should engage experienced supervisors to lead the supervision process, as their expertise is essential for efficient study progress. Furthermore, the study reveals that establishing platonic relationships between supervisors and students in postgraduate supervision leads to study completion within the stipulated time. Institutions should encourage supervisors to develop harmonious relationships with students to reduce postgraduate dropout rates.

In conclusion, it is clear that establishing two-way communication that creates a feedback-friendly environment is critical for the supervisory process. This type of communication facilitates the generation of diverse and helpful suggestions, which are necessary for study progress. Therefore, it is advised that supervision prioritise efficient communication through an open channel and establish clear guidelines for communication schedules. Additionally, it is crucial for communication under supervision to be professional, respectful, and free from any sense of class or cultural biases.

8. Declarations

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