# An exploration of postgraduate student-supervisor relationships at the School of Education, University of Namibia

**[1]Frans N. Haimbodi and [2]Martha Nahole**
[1&2]University of Namibia, Rundu Campus
[1]fhaimbodi@unam.na and [2]mnahole@unam.na

*Abstract*

*This study explored postgraduate supervisory relationships at the University of Namibia and was aimed at describing the relationship challenges that were experienced by postgraduate supervisors and students. The study adopted a case study design with an exploratory qualitative approach. The study used a convenient sample of 5 supervisors and 17 postgraduate students. The sample was conveniently picked as the authors selected the participants that were known to be enrolled as postgraduate students as well as lecturers who were engaged in postgraduate student supervision. Individual telephonic interviews were conducted with the academic supervisors, while the postgraduate students received questionnaires via a link to Google forms. The findings revealed that supervisory relationships often broke down due to different expectations from the parties involved mostly leading to power struggles. This study concludes that supervisory relationships at postgraduate level are crucial for successful and timely research outputs. It is thus important that both supervisors and students nurture good relationships to enhance success. The study recommends that communication guidelines be established to enhance the quality of supervision.*

**Keywords:** *postgraduate students, supervision, relationships, supervision expectations*

## Background

The student-supervisor relationship is key in realizing successful research supervision. Supervision refers to a process where the supervisor oversees a research project by guiding a student through academic reading, developing logical and critical thinking pertaining to requirements associated with appropriate academic writing and disciplinary research knowledge worth certification (Rugut, 2019). Supervision requires both the supervisor and student to interact with great professionalism, mutual respect, and tolerance (Gruzdev et al., 2020). In agreement, Hamid and Shah (2018) note the importance of healthy academic interactions between supervisors and research scholars to ensure the successful completion of the research projects. At the University of Namibia (UNAM), there have been concerns about student-supervisor relationships. These concerns have been linked to students' low motivation, high attrition, delayed progress, and broken student-supervisor relationships leading to some students changing supervisors. A breakdown in the communication or relationship between the student and supervisor will likely affect the study progress. Student dissatisfaction with supervision and poor supervisor-student relationships have resulted in high failure rate for postgraduate studies, and this affects university rankings and completion rates (Le et al., 2021). The University of Namibia (UNAM) runs multiple postgraduate degrees, and as such, there is a high number of students conducting studies under the mentorship of supervisors.

Supervision is a social interaction between student and supervisor(s) who might have differing opinions from time to time although the goal is the same (Zaheer & Munir, 2020). As such, supervision plays a crucial role in the realization of the research goals and the relationship between the student and supervisor influences successful completion of the research work. The relationship between student and supervisor involves "selecting a topic, planning the research, identifying and acquiring the necessary resources, managing the project, actively conducting the research, carrying out the literature review, analysis and interpretation of the data, writing the thesis, defending it and possibly publication" (Abiddin et al., 2009, p. 14). To manage through all these stages, both parties need to be open to criticism, willing to listen and discuss openly. The first step in realizing effective supervision has to do with creativity and involves being open to negotiations and change. Secondly, the supervision should ensure the student is geared towards completion of the project. That kind of

approach towards supervision may enhance the effectiveness of the collaboration and the outputs.

Research supervision at academic institutions mostly comprises one student linked to one supervisor and, on some occasions, to two supervisors (main and co-supervisor). The relationships, if not correctly nurtured, may disempower students and retard the research progress (Abiddin et al., 2009). Abiddin et al. further point out that usually there is a lack of clarity between the student and supervisor as to what is expected from each side during the research process which unfavorably affects the progress. Rugut (2019) reports that student-supervisor relationships have been emphasized as a crucial aspect in postgraduate supervision and the completion of studies. However, statistics point to a "very low completion rate of postgraduate studies in Africa" (Rugut, 2019, p. 344). It is further reported that most postgraduate students fail to complete their studies on time due to lack of supervision and mentoring capacity, which slows down the completion rate and increases the attrition rate (Grossman & Crowther, 2015). The present study thus sought to explore the student-supervisor relationships at the University of Namibia and document experiences, challenges, and expectations of students and supervisors.

The authors of this paper are academics at the UNAM and have keen interest in evaluating student-supervisor relationships on post-graduate programmes at this university. The authors' interest in this topic was aroused by students' concerns regarding their relationships with study supervisors. The study therefore seeks to:

1. Explore student-supervisor relationships.
2. Determine strategies to enhance student-supervisor relationships at the University of Namibia.

**Social theory of learning**
The study was guided by Wenger's Social Theory of Learning which views learning in the context of one's lived experiences and participation in the world and challenges the assumption that learning is an individual activity (Wenger, 2009). The practice of postgraduate supervision in universities where a knowledgeable being is assigned to supervise the projects of 'novice' individuals is positioned in the Social Theory of Learning. The study used the theory to explore the

student-supervisor relationships at the School of Education of the University of Namibia.

**Literature**
Supervision is essential for the realization of students' research goals (Egan et al., 2009). Without proper supervision, institutions risk high rates of attrition and delayed completion of studies. In their study, Egan et al. (2009) explored relationships between the perceived effectiveness of postgraduate supervision and concluded that there was a need for personal and holistic style of supervision to maximize learning and quality outputs of the postgraduate students. Holistic supervision is realizable with enhanced student-supervisor relationships. Gruzdev et al. (2020) recently conducted a study on PhD supervision styles and student satisfaction in Russian universities and among their focus was student-supervisor relations. They reported that PhD students indicated that they were dissatisfied with the conduct of research supervision amidst higher demands to complete their study projects. Moreover, Walker and Thomson (2010) highlight a tension within the supervisory relationships whether students should be given autonomy in determining their own work and the extent to which their supervisors should give guidance. Such tensions are linked to students' feeling that their expectations of the degree to which supervisors need to be involved in the study projects are not met.

Supervision is a two-way interactional process that requires both the student and the supervisor to participate professionally, respectfully and with broad-mindedness (Hodza, 2007). Hodza's (2007) study sought to offer sociological perspectives on the intricacies of managing the student-supervisor relationship for successful research supervision. The results revealed that supervision is a complex social encounter which involves two parties with both common and diverging goals. It is therefore necessary that a balance is reached between these interests for the successful completion of postgraduate research projects. One factor affecting student-supervisor relationships is power differences (Hodza, 2007). Hodza argues that such power differences are certainly part of the academic arenas arising from positions in agency hierarchies. "If not managed well, power discrepancies may negatively affect the student's progress" (Frick et al., 2010). Supervisors at UNAM often experience pressure from their institution

regarding research outputs which might influence them in being more directive in the research output of their students. Power differences could also arise via conflicting expectations between student and supervisor ultimately affecting the style and approach to the supervision process (Frick et al., 2010). The supervisors might lay out too many expectations for students which may not be deemed by the students as immediately aligned towards realizing the immediate completion of the project. The students could also be expecting more of the supervisors' involvement in the study as they at times wish for easier routes to the completion of projects and avoid 'research adventures'. It is necessary that students be motivated to make decisions and be provided with opportunities to investigate and produce information in respectful environments (Frick et al., 2010). Supervision is a space for students to explore their potential, to build and/or test theories and supervisors should desist from acting as the all-powerful but rather nurture a spirit of guidance.

In another study that explored the practices and difficulties faced by novice supervisors, Vereijken et al. (2018) revealed four types of dilemmas which had a potential of influencing research supervision practices. The dilemmas listed were namely; questions regarding regulation, the needs of students, the student-supervisor relationships, and the supervisors' professional identity. Vereijken et al. (2018) recommend improved initiatives for enhancing the professionalism of supervisors. The literature reviewed in this study points out shortfalls within student-supervisor relationships from different areas of the globe. There cannot be a specific formula for dealing with student-supervisor deficits; the relationship is dependent on the "characteristics of the parties involved, disciplinary differences in the ways knowledge are advanced, and the different learning tasks facing students due to the demands of their field" (Abiddin et al., 2009, p. 15). Similar problems could be ongoing yet remain to be uncovered and addressed at institutions of higher learning.

## Methodology

A case study design with an exploratory qualitative approach was used in an attempt to evaluate the student-supervisor relationships and draw recommendations that might enhance student-supervisor relationships at the University of Namibia. The population comprised academics and postgraduate students from the School of Education of the University of Namibia. The study used a convenient sample of 5 supervisors and 17 postgraduate students. The sample was conveniently picked as the authors selected the participants that were known to be enrolled as postgraduate students as well as academics who were engaged in postgraduate student supervision and agreed to participate in the study. Individual telephonic interviews were conducted with the academic supervisors, while the postgraduate students received questionnaires via a link to Google forms. The interview items sought for supervisors' experiences with student supervision as well as their expectations of students. The questionnaire items targeted to determine the experiences and expectations of the postgraduate students regarding their relationships with academic supervisors. The instruments further sought views on how to enhance student-supervisor relationships. Informed consent of the participants was obtained prior to data collection. Further assurance was given to the participants that the information they provide would not be identified with their names to eliminate possible victimization. The authors audio recorded the interviews and later transcribed them for analysis. The data obtained through Google forms were coded to generate themes. The data were independently coded by the authors to strengthen the reliability of the findings. The authors then compared the coding and categorised the data into the following themes: supervisors' expectations, students' expectations, power relations and mending relationships. A notable limitation to the study is a low number of postgraduate supervisors who participated in the study. Although many supervisors had agreed to participate, some could not establish a suitable time to be interviewed. The next section presents the findings of the study.

## Findings

This section presents and interprets the results on student-supervisor relationships at the University of Namibia. The data were thematically analyzed according to the subheadings: supervisors' expectations, students' expectations, power relations, and mending relationships. The participants also suggested possible ways on how to improve student-supervisor relationships.

### Supervisors' experiences and expectations

Supervisors indicated problems with students' failure to stick to deadlines given. This affected the schedules of the supervisors and resulted in delayed feedback, even to the other students who might submit their work on time. Further, supervisors indicated that the students should be self-driven and own their research. They noted that often students seemed to be unsure and relied on supervisors' comments instead of taking a lead on their research work.

Furthermore, supervisors indicated that some students lacked the required academic writing skills. As a result, the supervisor has a double job guiding the study and language editing. The supervisors recommended that the postgraduate students should develop the skills of proof-reading their work or consider language editing before sending their work to the supervisors. The supervisors also indicated that students should understand that their supervisors often have busy schedules and therefore should be given reasonable time to respond and give them quality feedback. Supervisors noted that some students often sent too many correspondences asking for the supervisors' response. Lastly, the supervisors emphasized the need to sign a clear memorandum of understanding stipulating what is required of students and descriptions of what postgraduate supervision entailed.

### Students' experiences and expectations

Firstly, the postgraduate students indicated that they have experienced cases where the supervisors took weeks to acknowledge an email and even longer to give feedback. Students indicated that they expected regular communication with supervisors and immediate feedback. Secondly, the postgraduate students indicated that they expected their supervisors to monitor students' progress, compliment and encourage them to keep working on their studies. The postgraduate students believed that the supervisors should get to know their students on personal levels and accommodate them in cases of late submissions. One student remarked: "*Each student is an individual. We are adult students with different experiences in life and hence no one-size fits all*". In addition, students expected supervisors to guide and direct them to sources related to their studies. Another student wrote: "*Supervisors should keep students on task and ensure that they stick to set timeframes and due dates*". Students further suggested that supervisors should be friendly in dealing with students and be concerned about a student's well-being as a person. This practice might develop better bonds and enhance relations. Lastly, the postgraduate students indicated that supervisors must not expect "*perfection*" from the students as research is a learning process that students must gradually undergo for them to grow in both content and confidence. One postgraduate student stressed that some supervisors tended to "*ridicule the students' work or make a mockery of their students' writing efforts*". The students expected professionalism from their supervisors.

### Power struggles

The power struggles are difficulties experienced by both students and supervisors based on hierarchical academic positions. On one hand, students usually regard supervisors as senior people with high academic knowledge and often students are not sure as to how to relate to them. Students thus feel a need to build bonds with the supervisors as they mostly have a fear of communicating their needs to the supervisors. For instance, postgraduate students experienced difficulties with requesting prompt feedback from the supervisors or to ask for elaborations on comments given as part of the feedback. Students further noted that at times the supervisors' comments seemed to autocratically re-direct their focus but out of the seniority of the supervisors and fear of breaking communication relations they submit. Postgraduate students remarked that supervisors should watch for and address signs of students' dissatisfactions. The remark suggests that students could be concealing their feelings of dissatisfaction in fear of breaking their relationships with the supervisors. Furthermore, the postgraduate students expected that supervisors should show respect to students and address them appropriately.

On the other hand, the supervisors indicated that they were angered by the failure of students to correctly attend to the given comments. The supervisors noted that often students deleted some given comments without attending to them. This practice made supervisors feel that their comments were deliberately disregarded. Additionally, supervisors indicated another power struggle predicament case where students mistook guidance as 'witch-hunting'. For instance, when the supervisor bombards students with

many questions with intend to elicit critical thinking and a better shape for the study, students felt intimidated and undermined as if the supervisor was proving to them that they had little understanding of their own topic. The points highlighted by both academic supervisors and postgraduate students point to the prevalence of power struggles between students and supervisors during supervision. Both parties had their own expectations of how the relationship should be. For the timely and successful completion of studies, such discrepancies might need to be addressed.

### *Mending relationships*

Supervisors and students agreed that challenges are inevitable in areas where humans work. However, if such challenges occur the students and supervisors should consider taking steps towards understanding the problem and/or differences or refer to university policies and then live up to their respective responsibilities. Some participants indicated that they did not sign a memorandum of understanding although it is within the policies of the university. Participants noted a few cases where the differences between student and supervisor escalated to the extent that the two parties 'divorced' and the department started looking for a new supervisor to take over the supervision. Often the new supervisor would skeptically take on the student with an inherited stigma resulting in doubts about how their student-supervisor relationship will be. The participants suggested that students and supervisors should try to amicably resolve their differences without them disowning each other. In some instances, supervisors and postgraduate students fell out due to inappropriate language usage. Supervisors need to be considerate and respectful of their students. Additionally, students need to develop communication etiquette and present their grievances or dissatisfactions clearly so as not to sound as if questioning their supervisors' credentials.

### Discussions

The findings concur with those by Vereijken et al. (2018) that research supervisors seem to struggle in demanding urgency from their students. Sometimes supervisors tended to go soft in asking for responses from students as an attempt to not harm relations. An agreement between student and supervisor is thus needed in place highlighting expectations of each side. The students expect prompt responses from

supervisors. Successful completion of the thesis within stipulated time frames depends on timely responses from the supervisor(s). The completion rate and the quality of the thesis can be enhanced by improving the student-supervisor interactions (Zaheer & Munir, 2020). Frick et al. (2017) note that too often the students remain powerless in the supervisory relationship. This affects the choices they make, as they may not feel fully in control of their projects. A prompt response from the supervisor may make the student feel more valued.

The students noted that the meetings seemed infested with the fear of harming relations. The students respected the autonomous positions of the supervisors and as such were often reluctant to engage supervisor(s) out of fear of sounding disrespectful. Similar results were found by Hodza (2007) who recommended that supervisors should display genuine care toward the students for a positive relationship to be maintained. Supervisors should thus see to it that students are respected as members of the academic class in pursuit of knowledge creation and dissemination. The students must therefore be regarded as capable and knowledgeable learners competent enough, and aware of what they want and how to achieve it. Opposed to the traditional hierarchy power relations between the student and supervisor, Wood & Louw (2018) proposed a participatory action learning and action research paradigm for "guiding postgraduate to reduce tensions on dialogical conversations vital to the supervision process and help equalize power relations and democratize knowledge creation through a reflexive dialogue between students and their supervisors" (p. 286).

Another crucial point raised in the results was the role of students versus the roles of the supervisors in research projects. It appears that both students and supervisors have different expectations of each other. On one hand, students need supervisors to be more involved, while on the other hand, the supervisors need students to be more resourceful and explore further for knowledge. The findings suggest that supervisors must consider determining the initial developmental stage of the student, the student's needs, and put forward his/her expectations as the supervisor (Hodza, 2007). The Social Theory of Learning requires a supervisor to be accommodating in his roles and expectations to

meet the needs of the student and always encourage critical thinking and problem-solving skills to develop the student (Wenger, 2009). Lessing (2011) suggests training of supervisors on research supervision, co-supervision and mentoring to enhance the quality of the supervision process. The attainment of skills by students should be regarded as professional learning conducted under students' management and as such students must take responsibility (Abiddin et al., 2009). Supervisors should not have to feel like they are 'pushing students around' to do their academic work. Scholars (see Lessing, 2011; Lee, 2008) emphasize that students should not wait for supervisors to tell them what to do but should initiate discussions, ask for help when they need it, and argue about what they should be researching. It should therefore be accepted that supervisors are right to expect students to diligently work hard so that their research projects can contribute to the academic environment. Students must read relevant literature within their research focus and fully own the projects.

Both students and supervisors wish for a collaborative relationship towards the successful completion of the study. A collaborative relationship is where the student and the supervisor harmoniously work together, and have a relationship of understanding, for a faster and timely successful completion of the research project (Rugut, 2019). A relationship of understanding provides a supportive working environment that enables the student and the supervisor to work better and faster for timely completion of studies (Radloff, 2010; Krauss & Ismi, 2010). A supportive working environment is a key component of learning settings as emphasized by the Social Learning Theory.

## Conclusion

Both students and supervisors suggested that the students and supervisors should first sign a memorandum of understanding where expectations from each side are clearly spelled out. Students and their supervisors must develop a relationship based on clear expectations and mutual respect from the beginning of the project. Mutual understanding, respect, endurance, and tolerance is the responsibility of both parties i.e., there should be symbiotic relationship between student and supervisor. Furthermore, it is important that the supervisor has a verbal discussion on the topic of the student to have a general understanding of the topic and focus of the student for proper guidance. The supervisor should also build/enhance better relationships so that the students can freely approach them. The students should appreciate the efforts of the supervisors and understand that apart from supervision the supervisor might also be occupied with other tasks such as own research work, teaching, and marking tasks of undergraduate courses and community engagements. Therefore, students should allow supervisors reasonable time to respond on their submitted work. Moreover, supervisors should be democratic and allow students to do their research and differ with the provided comments where necessary. Such may avoid diverting the study from the student's focus. Lastly, it is crucial that both students and supervisors should be mindful of the fact that the projects will be successful when student-supervisor relationship is properly nurtured. This study, therefore, recommends that the School of Education, at the University of Namibia should adopt communication guidelines where postgraduate students receive periodical reminders of the expected student outputs and deadlines, to increase the students' efforts. Such communication guidelines should also encourage students to express their concerns regarding the quality of the supervision.

## References

Abiddin, N. Z., Hassan, A., & Ahmad, A. R. (2009). Research student supervision: An approach to good supervisory practice. *The Open Education Journal, 2*(1), 11-16.

Egan, R., Stockley, D., Brouwer, B., & Stechyson, N. (2009). Relationships between area of academic concentration, supervisory style, student needs and best practices. *Studies in Higher Education*, *34*(3), 337-345.

Frick, L., Albertyn, R., & Rutgers, L. (2010). The Socratic method: Adult education theories. *Acta Academica Supplementum*, *1*, 75-102.

Grossman, E., & Crowther, J. (2015). Co-supervision in postgraduate training: Ensuring the right hand knows what the left hand is doing. *South African Journal of Science*, *111*(11/12), 1-8.

Gruzdev, I., Terentev, E., & Dzhafarova, Z. (2020). Superhero or hands-off supervisor? An empirical categorization

of PhD supervision styles and student satisfaction in Russian universities. *Higher Education*, *79*(5), 773-789.

Hodza, F. (2007). Managing the student-supervisor relationship for successful postgraduate supervision: a sociological perspective. *South African Journal of Higher Education*, *21*(8), 1155-1165.

Krauss, S., & Ismi, A. (2010). PhD students' experiences of thesis supervision in Malaysia:
Managing relationship in the midst of institutional change: *The Qualitative Report*, *15*(4) 802-822.

Lee, A. (2008). How are doctoral students supervised? Concepts of doctoral research
supervision, *Studies in Higher Education 33*(3), 267-281.

Le, M., Pham, L., Kim, K., & Bui, N. (2021). The impacts of supervisor-PhD student relationships on PhD student satisfaction: A case study of Vietnamese universities. *Journal of University Teaching & Learning Practice*, *18*(4), 1-18.

Lessing, A. C. (2011). The role of the supervisor in the supervisory process. *South African Journal of Higher Education, 25*(5), 921-936.

Radloff, A. (2010). The synergistic thesis: Students and supervisors' perspectives.

*Journal for Higher and Further Education, 25*(1), 97-106.

Rugut, C. K. (2019). Expectations of the student-supervisor relationships in doctoral studies. *International Journal of Research and Innovation in Social Science, 3*(11), 344-350.

Vereijken, M. W. C., van der Rijst, R. M., van Driel, J. H., & Dekker, F. W. (2018). Novice supervisors' practices and dilemmatic space in supervision of student research projects. *Teaching in Higher Education*, *23*(4), 522-542.

Walker, M., & Thomson, P. (2010). *The Routledge doctoral supervisor's companion: Supporting effective research in education and the social sciences* (1st Ed.). Routledge.

Wenger, E. (2009). A social theory of learning. In *Contemporary theories of learning* (pp. 217-240). Routledge.

Wood, L., & Louw, I. (2018). Reconsidering postgraduate "supervision" from a participatory action learning and action research approach. *South African Journal of Higher Education*, *32*(4), 284-297.

Zaheer, M., & Munir, S. (2020). Research supervision in distance learning: Issues and challenges. *Asian Association of Open Universities Journal*, *15*(1), 131-143.