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## **Experiences of nursing students regarding interdisciplinary postgraduate supervision at a University of Technology in KwaZulu-Natal Province, South Africa**

M.N. SIBIYA

*Department of Nursing, Durban University of Technology, South Africa.  
E-mail: nokuthulas@dut.ac.za*

### **Abstract**

The quality of the relationship between post graduate students and supervisors directly influences the quality of the post graduate education experience. Due to a lack of capacity in terms of nurse academics with the required credentials to supervise post graduate students, almost 50% of students in the participating university's department of nursing have supervisors from other academic departments within the same university. Therefore, the aim of this study was to explore and describe the experiences of nursing post graduate students regarding interdisciplinary supervision. The participants were selected on a voluntary, convenience and purposive basis. In-depth one-on-one interviews were conducted with 16 consenting post graduate students who registered for the first time as nursing post graduate research students during 2012 and 2013 academic session. The themes identified were support of students, accessibility and availability of supervisors and knowledge and expertise in the field of nursing. Although some of the participants reported experiences that had negative impacts, others reported positive experiences in their interaction with interdisciplinary and nursing supervisors.

**Keywords:** Interdisciplinary research, postgraduate nursing education, post graduate supervision, postgraduate student-supervisor relationship.

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### **Introduction**

The supervisor-student relationship is one of the most important aspects of post graduate studies (Manathunga, 2007; Zhao et al., 2007; Ezebilo, 2012). The quality of the relationship between post graduate students and supervisors directly influences the quality of the post graduate education experience. An unsatisfactory supervision relationship is strongly implicated in many students' decisions to abandon their post graduate studies (Wadesango & Machingambi, 2011; Wisker, 2005; Li & Seale, 2007; de Beer & Mason 2009). Public funding of higher education in South Africa is linked to the attainment of key policy goals identified by the National Plan on Higher Education (Department of Education, 2001) as follows: (a) producing the graduates needed for social and economic development in South Africa; (b) achieving equity in the South

African higher education system; (c) achieving diversity in the South African higher education system; (d) sustaining and promoting research; (e) restructuring the institutional landscape of the higher education system. In South Africa, government funding, in the form of subsidies, is directly linked to the graduation of post graduate students. Therefore, the pressure to ensure progress and the successful completion of students' post graduate studies increase the burden of both the supervisor and the student (De Beer & Mason, 2009). Post graduate research supervision is a shared emotional, intellectual and learning journey involving mutual expectations and responsibilities from the student and the supervisors (Wisker, 2005; Li & Seale, 2007). Successful completion of a doctoral study depends on the quality of supervision and the interaction between supervisors and students, in addition to the student's dedication, diligence and sustained academic progress. The findings of a study, conducted by Li & Seale (2007), on managing criticism in PhD supervision, revealed that sometimes supervisors' criticism might cause the student to abandon his/her studies in order to avoid face-to-face interaction with the supervisor. Whereas the South African higher education system has enhanced access to students, the same cannot be said about retention or graduation of post graduate students. Approximately 50% of both undergraduate and postgraduate students drop out of the education system before they complete their studies (Wangenge-Ouma, 2013). South Africa has high attrition rates (Council on Higher Education, 2009; Lewin & Mawoyo, 2014).

The collaboration between supervisor and student can be characterized as one involving a long term engagement. This relationship ideally fosters the development of trust and the negotiation of meaning around a jointly chosen research project that ultimately leads to the creation and communication of new knowledge (Whitelock et al., 2008).

In an attempt to improve completion rates, researchers have examined a number of factors to determine their relationship to the successful completion of qualifications. Factors such as attendance status, level of available research funding, age, discipline areas and gender have been investigated and linked to the successful completion of postgraduate studies (Seagram et al., 1998; Wright & Cochrane, 2002; Bourke et al., 2004; Gasson & Rayes, 2004). Other factors identified as significant predictors of completion include suitability of research topic, intellectual environment of the department and access to equipment and computers (Acker et al., 1994; Latona & Browne, 2001; Harman, 2002). There are many elements that influence the performance of the supervisors and their relationships with their post graduate students. Supervisors, for example, must have research knowledge and related skills as well as management and interpersonal skills. They need to develop supportive relationships among the research students themselves (Mouton, 2001; Vilkanas, 2008).

The Department of Nursing, at the South African university where this study was conducted, had 38 post graduate students who registered for full research studies in the Faculty of Health Sciences during 2012 and 2013. Due to a lack of academics in the Department of Nursing who had the required credentials to supervise post graduate students, almost 50% of students had supervisors who were lecturers in other departments within the same university. Out of these 38 post graduate students, five students de-registered from their studies of which four had external supervisors. Two students interrupted their studies for a period of 12 months but never resumed their studies. One of these two students had external supervisors. In 2013, 14 post graduate students were registered for the first time. During 2014, four students terminated their studies due to poor progress and three students had external supervisors. Interdisciplinary post graduate supervision is an expanding phenomenon. Government, industry and universities increasingly support interdisciplinary research that addresses complex real life issues. Manathunga et al. (2006) argue that there is confusion about the precise definition of the term 'interdisciplinarity'. According to Lyall et al. (2008), interdisciplinary research is not a single, homogenous entity but takes different forms depending on the research question. These authors state that interdisciplinary research can be within the social sciences, within the natural sciences or between the social and natural sciences. The aim of the study was to explore and describe the experiences of post graduate nursing students regarding interdisciplinary supervision at the Durban University of Technology in South Africa. The main research question of the study was: "What were your experiences as a student regarding external supervision?"

## **Methodology**

### *Design and setting*

A descriptive exploratory qualitative study was used to explore and describe experiences of post graduate nursing research students regarding interdisciplinary supervision. In the Department of Nursing, 10 of the 18 academic staff members were involved in post graduate supervision. There were 10 supervisors from other departments within the Faculty of Health Sciences who supervised post graduate nursing students. These supervisors were from the following departments:

- Department of Basic Medical Sciences
- Department of Biomedical and Clinical Technology
- Department of Community Health Studies
- Department of Homeopathy
- Office of the Faculty of Health Sciences.

### *Population, sampling process and sample*

The participants were selected on a convenience and purposive basis (Polit & Beck, 2012). The number of participants in a qualitative study is adequate only when saturation of information is achieved in the study area (Burns & Grove, 2007). Data collection continued until data saturation was reached. Data saturation is when themes and categories in the data become repetitive and redundant, such that no new information can be gleaned by further data collection (Polit & Beck, 2010). The sample consisted of 16 consenting post graduate nursing students who had external supervisors. The sample consisted of:

- Post graduate nursing research students who were registered for the first time in 2012 or 2013 that had one or two external supervisors.
- Post graduate nursing research students who had one or both external supervisors but had de-registered or had their studies interrupted either during 2012 or 2013.

### *Data collection process*

Participants' permission was obtained to audio-tape interviews. Notes were written during the interview. Each interview session took 30-45 minutes. Students' interviews were conducted by the researcher either at the university on the day that students came for consultation with their supervisors or at their workplaces since these students were full-time employees. Interviews were conducted in a quiet private room to avoid disturbances.

### *Data analysis*

The data were analysed by using qualitative content analysis, which is a method for interpreting qualitative data through a classification process of coding, categorising and identifying themes (Polit & Beck, 2012). The researcher began by listening to the audio taped interviews repeatedly in order to become familiar with the content of the interviews, after which the interviews were transcribed. The transcripts were read several times in order to become more familiar with the contents. The transcripts were summarised and coded. The codes were re-grouped several times until suitable themes emerged.

### *Trustworthiness*

As qualitative research has an element of subjectivity, and is open to criticism, it is important that the study and the findings provide evidence of validity and reliability (Polit & Beck, 2012). To ensure credibility in this study, notes were documented during the interview, and detailed notes were written immediately

after the interview. An audit trail was maintained through safe keeping of raw data of each interview for future reference (the audio taped interviews and the verbatim transcriptions thereof) in order to ensure dependability. In qualitative research, confirmability focuses on the characteristics of the data gathered in the study by utilising an audit trail. Following the transcription of the voice-recorded interviews, each participant was given an opportunity to review the transcribed interview and requested to confirm whether the notes were a true reflection of his/her views regarding the supervision experiences. Voice recordings were done to reflect the participant's voice. To ensure transferability, rich and thorough description of the research setting and of the research processes was provided.

### *Ethical issues*

Permission to conduct the study was sought from the university's Director of Research and from the Deputy Head of Department of Nursing. Written informed consent was obtained from all participants. Data collected were stored securely and no reference was made to participants' names. Participants were allocated a code to maintain confidentiality.

## **Results and Discussion**

The themes identified were support of students, accessibility and availability of supervisors and knowledge and expertise in the field of nursing.

### **Support of students**

Students' supervision experiences varied. The results revealed that four of the 16 participants who received extra support from their supervisors, reported to have enjoyed the supervision experience.

*"My external supervisor supported me throughout the journey. She was more supportive compared to my nursing supervisor"* (Student #11).

The majority of the students reported that they had challenges with regards to external supervision. They mentioned frustrations about the nature of supervision they experienced, which they described as "irritating", "useless", "annoying" and "non-existing".

*"I would refer to my external supervisor as a passenger supervisor. I do not recall a time when I spent more than 15 minutes with her. All she did was to correct my English and grammar"* (Student #15).

*"I would say my external supervisor was non-existing. She was useless. I think she did not understand nursing issues"* (Student #16).

Some students found the nursing supervisors not as supportive as the external supervisors as reflected on the quote below:

*“My nursing supervisor is silent. Even when the three of us have a meeting, she just sits quietly and does not contribute to the discussion”* (Student #14).

Close supervision and guidance are important for interdisciplinary students to encourage genuine integration and prevent students from slipping back into monodisciplinary comfort zones (Lyall, Meagher & Tait (2008). Completing a post graduate study is a process that depends on a close, working relationship between students and supervisors (Manathunga, 2007; Zhao et al., 2007; Ezebilo, 2012). However, Lee and McKenzie (2011) argue that students might be unwilling to share negative information about their supervisory experience due to concerns regarding anonymity and the need for a sustained good relationship throughout their academic careers.

#### *Accessibility and availability of supervisors*

The majority of the students reported that the external supervisors were not always accessible or available for support. Students reported that geographical distance posed some challenges and they felt that the external supervisors were not always available to guide them.

*“My supervisor did not have time for me. She would always tell me that she has about 15 minutes for consultation”* (Student #6).

*“I felt neglected by my external supervisor. She always complained that she had a huge number of students that she is supervising”* (Student #3).

The supervisor has a major role to play in coaching, guiding and mentoring of the post graduate student (Nulty, Kiley & Meyers, 2009; McCallin & Nayar, 2012). Supervisors are mentors whose main duties are to guide students in intellectual matters including the appropriateness of the research design, the validity of the research problem and the choice of the data collection tools.

#### *Feedback from supervisors*

Students who had primary supervisors in nursing and external co-supervisors reported that there was inconsistent feedback from both supervisors. These participants were of the opinion that the supervision process was not discussed at the outset when mutual expectations should have been specified and ideally a student-supervisor contract should have been signed by all parties concerned:

*“I was so confused because I would now and again receive conflicting feedback from both supervisors”* (Student #13).

*“There was no time when the three of us had a meeting. These two supervisors always had other commitments” (Student #15).*

#### *Knowledge and expertise in the field of nursing*

Some participants reported that the external supervisor lacked knowledge and expertise in the field of nursing. They were of the opinion that the lack of support resulted from a lack of understanding nursing issues. This was mentioned more often by students who did not have nursing supervisors.

*“I was disadvantaged because both my supervisors were external supervisors. I felt that they both lacked understanding of nursing issues. There was a time when I felt that I did not even understand nursing terminology. When there was no progress, I decided to apply for the interruption of studies for 12 months” (Student #16).*

*“I recommend that nursing students must be supervised by nursing supervisors because external supervisors are not clued up with current nursing issues (Student #3).*

Brown (2007) suggests that to supervise effectively, one has to be a competent researcher and to be able to reflect on research practices and analyse the knowledge, techniques and methods that make them effective. The supervisor requires knowledge of or a shared interest in the research focus of the student’s field of study (Lee, 2010).

#### **Conclusion**

Interdisciplinary post graduate supervision is ideal in order to improve research output in South Africa. This study explored the experiences of post graduate nursing research students. Although some of the participants reported experiences with some negative impacts, some participants reported positive experiences in their interactions with their supervisors.

Supervisors should develop feedback strategies that will help to generate information regarding their performance from their students. Therefore, it is important at the outset to discuss the supervision process, particularly when there is more than one supervisor. The supervision experience should be mutually reviewed at least annually to provide an opportunity for constructive feedback. Secondly, external supervisors require updates regarding the current nursing issues. This could take the form of the orientation at the beginning of the academic year before the supervision process begins.

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