Recentering Postgraduate Supervision as a Knowledge Co-sharing Pursuit in the 21st Century

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Abstract

While it is generally accepted that postgraduate supervision is fundamental to the production of new knowledge, numerous aspects of postgraduate supervision have remained understudied and under-theorised. This lack of theory has presented postgraduate supervisors with limited understanding of the model(s) of supervision they should adopt. In light of this, postgraduate supervisors tend to adopt the 'learning-by-doing' approach. Thus, while postgraduate supervision is key to knowledge co-creation, knowledge production, and knowledge sharing, there are limited theoretical frameworks that address the nuances of postgraduate supervision at different levels. Recognising this paucity of theoretical approaches on postgraduate supervision, this paper explores ways in which postgraduate supervisors can address postgraduate supervision. This paper examines how postgraduate supervision can be re-imagined as a knowledge sharing activity rather than an academic attempt to guide a student to a postgraduate degree completion.

Keywords: postgraduate, higher education, supervision, knowledge co-sharing

Introduction

Matters of postgraduate supervision in academic research have been gravely overlooked because many academics tend to place more focus on their primary professional disciplines. Thus, important as it is, postgraduate supervision continues to receive limited scholarly attention. It is within this context that this paper addresses the paucity of theoretical approaches on postgraduate supervision, an area which is key to the production of new knowledge. Ngulube (2021: 255) argues that "supervisory practices are fundamental to the production of research in higher education, but these practices are under-theorised and poorly understood, and that academia needs to understand and engage with supervisory pedagogies to reinforce their importance in knowledge production and the development of a knowledge society". While Ngulube's (2021) placed emphasis on supervision practices and models, the present study addresses the theoretical approaches. Although the researcher makes recourse to Ngulube's work, the fundamentals of his study and the current study are majorly divergent in that while Ngulube

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addressed supervision practices and models, I address theoretical approaches.

Given that this study dwells on knowledge co-sharing, it is important to create a context for the concept especially since scholars have explained knowledge co-sharing from different backgrounds and disciplinary perspectives. Yi (2009) defines knowledge co-sharing as a set of behaviours that involves the sharing of one employee's work-related knowledge with another employee, with the aim of achieving organisational goals. Amayah (2013) adds that knowledge co-sharing focusses on the knowledge of 'how' to help others and solve problems within the organisation. Wang and Noe (2010) stipulate that knowledge co-sharing involves two parties namely: the 'knowledge contributor' and the 'knowledge searcher'. Of these definitions, Wang and Noe's is more appropriate to the current study. One can think of the postgraduate supervisor as the 'knowledge contributor' and the postgraduate student as the 'knowledge searcher'. It is also worth noting that some scholars have adopted other terms such as 'knowledge exchange' and 'knowledge transfer' to refer to 'knowledge co-sharing'. While 'knowledge exchange' fundamentally denotes 'knowledge co-sharing', 'knowledge transfer' suggests moving knowledge from one source to the other without reciprocation.

Numerous gaps remain in research supervision (Ngulube, 2021) because academics have undertaken limited research in the area (Mouton *et al.,* 2015). To worsen the situation, postgraduate students rarely undertake research on postgraduate supervision (Wilkinson *et al.,* 2016). Ali *et al.* (2019) suggests that several critical areas in postgraduate supervision need to be studied and debated to ensure quality supervision of postgraduate students. For many postgraduate students and supervisors, the core expectation of postgraduate supervision remains fuzzy, and it is increasingly becoming difficult to ascertain the purpose of postgraduate supervision. Oftentimes, students and supervisors have different views and expectations This study is not an attempt to delve into the core values of postgraduate supervision but to produce a detailed discussion of that singular aspect.

The questions that guide this study are as follows: what is postgraduate supervision? What are the factors that influence knowledge co-sharing in postgraduate supervision? How can the postgraduate supervision process ensure knowledge co-sharing? What should knowledge co-sharing in postgraduate supervision entail?

Postgraduate Supervision: An Overview

Postgraduate supervision remains theoretically blurry across different fields in the academy because of limited theoretical approaches that guide the practice. In addressing the fuzziness of the field, this section aims to situate the concept of postgraduate supervision in existing literature. Oparinde and Govender (2019) espouse the view that postgraduate study is the level where new researchers are born. Chan (2008) intimates that this is the stage in the academic development of students where mentoring and supervision are offered. To supervise is to advise, motivate, and guide students to become habitual researchers in the future, so that they can in turn contribute competently to the growth of the literature available in their fields. Jorgensen (2012) observes that in Europe, doctorate-trained researchers are essential to 'smart, sustainable, and inclusive growth', while in Southern Africa, East Asia, and Latin America, research students are considered central to the development of 'knowledge societies'.

scholars have developed various models of supervision from different perspectives. While some scholars referto models of supervisions, others refer to styles (such as Phillips and Pugh, 1994) of supervision, while some (such as Lee, 2012) refer to postgraduate supervision approaches. Interestingly, the models, styles and approaches always overlap creating further confusion on whether they are entirely different or they refer to the same concept. Ngulube (2021) established that each supervision model has its own peculiar challenges. On the otrher hand, Guerin *et al.* (2015) rightly pointsout that no singular supervision model is better than the other. In fact, some supervision models are more popular in some countries than in others. For instance, Chiang (2003) and Backhouse (2010) state that the individualistic postgraduate supervision model is most predominant in the United Kingdom, while in places such as Australia, they prefer team supervision approach (Buttery *et al.,* 2005; Robertson, 2017).

Ngulube (2021) dwells specifically on the individualistic supervision model and the team supervision model. The former is a model where a supervisor oversees the research of a postgraduate student while the latter involves co-supervision between two or more academics. Although co-supervision has its own challenges, Ngulube still argues that the positives far outweigh the negatives. The sole supervision method has been criticised for being individual-centred, thus hindering knowledge sharing and innovation. According to Ngulube (2021: 257), the team supervision

model creates a communicative space where "learning conversation about supervisory practices" (Wisker, 2012) may take place. It creates communication which helps supervisors to learn certain supervision practices collectively (Carter 2016). This study aligns with Ngulube' work regarding the team supervision model because it fosters knowledge sharing. Ngulube (2021: 257) explains why a student would require multiple supervisors. The team supervision model is effective in:

i. "Enhancing the experience of the student by bringing in specialists from various disciplines to give input on theoretical, methodological, and content knowledge matters" (Ngulube 2021: 257).

ii. "Ensuring that supervisors monitor one another and watch the student, with the goal of holding the principal supervisors accountable" (Ngulube 2021: 257).

iii. "Facilitating greater access to intellectual and practical support" (Ngulube 2021: 257).

iv. "Bridging the gap created by differences in knowledge, expertise, and supervision experience" (Ngulube 2021: 257).

v. "Facilitating communication and oversight when either the student or the supervisor is operating from outside the home faculty, especially in another country" (Ngulube 2021: 257).

vi. "Training of novice supervisors by experienced colleagues" (Ngulube 2021: 257).

vii. "Providing supplementary expertise" (Ngulube 2021: 257).

viii. "Serving as an academic mobility 'safety net' to ensure that the student does not remain without a supervisor when the supervisor is on extended leave, relocates or retires" (Grossman and Crowther 2015: 6).

Agu and Odimegwu (2014: 3) argue that "postgraduate research can be likened to a form of apprenticeship performed under the mentorship of experienced academics, and this is considered a major avenue for sustaining and preparing students to become independent researchers, whilst also effectively initiating them into the academic community". Ali *et al.* (2019) notes that quality supervision is enables postgraduate students to make an original contribution in their respective fields. Similarly, Sidhu *et al.* (2013) argue that supervisors should help the supervisees to acquire appropriate research skills and competence.

Over time, postgraduate supervision has changed in norms and forms compared to the traditional way of supervision which considered the

supervisor as superior and the student as inferior. Traditionally, the role of the supervisor was to teach the student research skills and oversee the students' research work. According to Ganzer (2007), this approach to supervision places the supervisor and supervisee in a hierarchical relationship in which the supervisor is positioned as an expert who teaches research skills and guides the supervisee about the best way to accomplish his or her research project. This primitive approach, although still sparsely present in today's supervision techniques, favours a hierarchical approach to supervision over the collaborative approach and therefore limits the several other possibilities of supervision practices and supervisory relationships (Ali *et al.* 2019). The approach sees the supervisor as an authority that exerts his/her own knowledge, methods, and approaches on how a student should carry out research. This approach does not provide room for the supervisor to engage with the students to discuss new knowledge. Atkins (2002) states that the traditional approach perceives supervisees as 'docile bodies' whose capacities and abilities for originality and creativity are seriously damaged.

Ali *et al.* (2019:17) captures this notion appropriately:

"When supervision is carried out in a hierarchical structure, the freedom and space open to supervisees are limited. Supervisee functions as a passive recipient of knowledge and received wisdom without his/her independent agency. In a hierarchical and power-centred supervisory relationship, the notion of independent thinking and learning become alien for students. The point to be stressed here is that the issues faced by supervisees and supervisors are very complex and need contextual qualitative and quantitative assessments (Ali *et al.* 2019:17)."

In the 21st century, the traditional approach to supervising postgraduate students is becoming unfashionable. Not only does the approach have a negative impact on the students' confidence, but it also limits their capabilities. More importantly, the experiences of such students may shape their future practices when they also become supervisors. Beckmann and Cathcart (2018) maintain that with the rapidly changing conceptualisations of academic work, postgraduate research students should be acknowledged as emergent academics whose experiences during candidature will strongly influence their future paths. Beckmann and Cathcart (2018) further note that today's postgraduate research students will be tomorrow's academics and future leaders of higher education institutions as well as significant contributors to business and

society. As such, the author recommends that higher education institutions should begin to recontextualise research supervision by bringing to the fore new approaches to postgraduate supervision that will benefit postgraduate students, supervisors, and academia at large. Universities need to reposition postgraduate supervision as a knowledge co-sharing pursuit.

Theorising Knowledge Co-sharing in Postgraduate Supervision

Many scholars have established that postgraduate research and supervision deal with knowledge. For Ngulube (2021), postgraduate students and supervisors are creators of new knowledge when they participate actively in the knowledge society and economy. He recognises that postgraduate students cannot do this on their own, and as such, they need to work in tandem with their supervisors to create new knowledge. This is where cross-pollination of knowledge is meant to occur. While scholars such as Ngulube have established that knowledge sharing is paramount, little or no attention has been paid to the factors that promote the sharing of knowledge between the supervisor(s) and student(s). The notion of knowledge-sharing seeks to move postgraduate supervision away from the traditional way of supervision where the supervisor is considered an authority whose opinions and views must be always accepted. This study proposes three important factors that supervisors ought to consider to foster knowledge sharing in postgraduate supervision, namely: Discursive factors, integrative and collaborative factors, and technological factors.

Discursive Factors

Knowledge co-sharing in postgraduate research and supervision can be fostered through strong discursive strategies. Foucault's (1969) theorises discourse as ways of constituting knowledge, together with the social practices, forms of subjectivity and power relations which inhere in such knowledge production and relations. Since discourse deals with the way knowledge is negotiated, the discursive factor is key to knowledge co-sharing in that it encourages knowledge creation through reason or argument rather than intuition. The discursive factor is integral to the co-creation because effective communication is important in postgraduate supervision. Van Rensburg *et al.* (2016) argue that one of the key elements in the supervisor-student relationship is communication, especially feedback on research work submitted by the student. In a similar vein, Yousefi *et al.* (2015) stipulates that adequate

communication is an influential factor in the effectiveness of supervision, and as such, it is important to ensure effective communication between the supervisor(s) and the students. The willingness of the supervisor to engage in constant productive communication is the first step to knowledge co-sharing. Through such discursive engagements, the supervisor can interrogate the student's understanding with the intention of making reasonable arguments based on logical thinking. The supervisor's ability to simplify complex issues through discussions with the student, as well as the opportunity to exchange knowledge, will not only benefit the students intellectually, but also allow the supervisor to detect deficiencies in the student' knowledge while also allowing the supervisor to learn from the students' perspectives and experiences. For Copeland, Dean and Wladkowski (2011), supervisors should make supervision an intellectually stimulating experience for the supervisees.

Integrative and Collaborative Factors

Integrative and collaborative factors are integral to knowledge co-sharing and involve the integration of academic colleagues as well as postgraduate students in deliberations regarding academic research and discussions. The common supervisory practices is power-centred and it considers the supervisee as a passive recipient of knowledge devoid of opportunities to explore knowledge development themselves. This practice discourages independent thinking among students (Ali *et al.,* 2019). As such, Ali *et al*. (2019) recommends a new approach to supervision at postgraduate level which will contribute to the knowledge economy. The co-supervision model encourages knowledge co-sharing and cross-pollination of knowledge. Authors such as Maor and Currie (2017) prefer the team and project approach where postgraduate students are taught in groups rather than as individuals affiliated to particular supervisors. This approach encourages postgraduate cohorts to work on a specific area and collectively produce knowledge. It is within this context that Ali *et al.* (2019) advises that universities and /or other research institutions should prepare detailed policies that provide effective grounds for the transference of quality research skills and the production of original contributions to knowledge.

Technological Factors

In recent times, the advent of technology has permeated several sectors of the world, and academia is no exception. If deployed effectively during postgraduate supervision, technology can be a great tool for knowledge

co-sharing. Maor and Currie (2017) investigate how the use of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) and a more collaborative pedagogy could improve supervision. They discovered the need for an increased use of ICT and its integration with supervision pedagogy. They argue that several changes have affected the way graduate students undertake their research, and the use of technology especially should be inculcated into postgraduate research. Stubb, Pyhältö, and Lonka (2014) have earlier established that the research journey in Finland was shifting from a product-oriented (thesis production) to a process-oriented undertaking, and from an individualistic to a community-centred approach where students are further developed as professionals in their field.

Different types of online platforms are now being used for research, and postgraduate supervisors need to engage with their students using these platforms. According to Maor and Currie (2017: 3-4), a wide variety of technologies are now being used in supervision such as: Skype, Elluminate, Wimba, Second Life, telephone, MSN messenger, Wikis, Microblogging, Social Bookmarking, email, ePortfolio, Microsoft Office Share-Point for collaborative writing and WebCT. There are also technology changes that are rapidly affecting research techniques, including predictive analytics, software, and data management tools (such as Nvivo, CAQDAS, QDA Miner and MAXQDA)."

They report that through the use of these new forms of technology, students may serve unofficially in the role of tutor to their supervisors and speed up the process of dissemination of their research results through technology. Maor and Currie (2017) conclude that a collaborative-based technology in which students and supervisors interact will deliver a sense of connectedness and promote social and academic achievement.

To sum up the discussion, the aspects of knowledge co-sharing in postgraduate supervision discussed in this study fall within Ali *et al.'s* (2019: 16-17) proposition that quality supervision "involve[es] regular meetings between supervisees and supervisors, devotion of quality time to supervisees, keen interest in supervisees' research project(s), demonstrating a supportive and encouraging attitude, accepting and correcting students' errors, appreciating students' ideas, and directing them towards the completion of their research work(s)". Quality supervision, if practised in a precise and ethical way, has the natural ability to foster knowledge co-sharing. However, observations in recent

times have shown that postgraduate supervisors get preoccupied with teaching and assessment responsibilities, or too many postgraduate students, to be able to devote adequate time to the genuine expectation of quality supervision. Therefore, the idea of team supervision is encouraged in this study because one supervisor can compensate for the weaknesses of the other(s). Supervisors should also be aware of the necessary rudiments of quality supervision, and higher education institutions should endeavour to make supervisors aware of the expectations of a postgraduate supervisor as a knowledge co-sharer or co-creator. A postgraduate supervision approach that focuses on quality as opposed to quantity, will successfully drive postgraduate supervision towards the knowledge sharing direction.

Conclusion

Postgraduate education is not a mere attempt at producing qualifications. It is an intentional endeavour to promote knowledge co-sharing and the co-creation of knowledge. When postgraduate education is seen quantitatively by simply adding numbers to postgraduate qualification holders, the qualitative aspects suffer, and the postgraduate supervision endeavour becomes counterproductive. The present researcher's experience is that postgraduate supervision has been addressed as an activity that produces postgraduate qualification holders and little attention has been put into the quality of postgraduate students. In some instances, postgraduate supervisors perform e their duties for their own professional development. Carrying out the postgraduate supervision for self-advantage and personal glorification rather than the development of postgraduate students is counterproductive.

This study argues that a wrong attitude towards postgraduate supervision from either the supervisor(s) or the student(s) presents athreat to knowledge production. The study further argues that there is a need to re-centre postgraduate supervision to serve its core purposes by repositioning it as a knowledge co-sharing pursuit where the supervisor and the student can exchange ideas, views, and knowledge with the intention of deriving new ways of contributing to knowledge rather than the secondary intention of producing more people with postgraduate qualifications. When the primary objective of knowledge is taken care of, the secondary objective of adding to existing postgraduate qualifications will naturally materialise.

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