

THE CHALLENGES OF PHD SUPERVISION IN AN EMERGING ODL CONTEXT: A STUDY AT THE OPEN UNIVERSITY OF MAURITIUS

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ABSTRACT

With open education providing accessibility, equality of opportunities and transparency to further studies, many individuals who could not pursue their postgraduate studies in the conventional universities of the country, embark on postgraduate studies through the blended learning mode of education at the only public University of Mauritius. For effective postgraduate research, there needs to be effective and sufficient supervision. However, in the context of PhD supervision in ODL African universities, the insufficient number of academics lacks the necessary supervisory skills and therefore supervision is a challenging task. This paper explores the challenges that supervisors face in guiding PhD candidates in an emerging ODL African University. For the purpose of this study, the exploratory and inductive qualitative research approach was used to gather in-depth information from 10 academics who are involved in online PhD supervision. The individual in-depth semi-structured interview was used. In the context of an emerging ODL institution in Africa, it was found that PhD supervisors face various challenges, namely a lack of research culture, a lack of mastery methodology skills, insufficient online discussion meetings, the divergent lens of academic research and an absence of an online PhD research protocol. The findings suggest that an emerging ODL institution must adopt a systemic approach to PhD supervision, adopt other models of supervision than the apprenticeship model, establish a database protocol for supervision data, and design and use a Feedback Explanation Tool and a Memorandum of Understanding to ensure a good supervisory relationship and process.

Keywords: African University, Challenges, Emerging ODL context, PhD Supervision

INTRODUCTION

Over the last twenty years, the concept of e-learning has been on the agenda in many African universities (Nakayiwa, 2020). Online and distance learning is a delivery mode of teaching and learning that is characterized by the physical distance of the tutor and the student in place and time for the teaching and learning process; teaching and learning are mediated by e-learning technologies, and there is often the possibility of face-to-face tutorial sessions for interactions among students and between the student and the tutor. The Commonwealth of Learning (2015) defines it as two-way didactic communication. This type of learning is fundamentally important in the context of higher demand for University degrees in Africa (Mohamedbhai, 2018), with only 14 million students in its higher education, representing 6.4% of global tertiary education enrolments (Kigotho, 2018), and the existing problems of a lack of physical infrastructure, qualified teaching staff in universities, and a lack of research and innovation. The ODL context allows addressing "the double bind" situation of African universities in the 21st century (Kigotho, 2018). From this perspective, the ODL, with its virtual learning environment, allows eliminating

the gap between the teachers and students and among students (Mfidi, 2019). Moreover, it removes the barriers to access to learning through the flexible delivery of education, facilitates student-centeredness and student support through the teaching and learning process (Unisa, 2008).

The context of this study is the Open University of Mauritius (OUM), which is a public-owned University focusing on the ODL, with the blended mode of delivery. It is the only open University in the country and it is in operation since 2013. It has around 8 000 registered students. It enrolls students from foundation courses to PhD courses. It is the only public University in Mauritius with an increasing trend in student enrolment of 37.8 % in 2017 (Tertiary Education Commission, 2018). As per Statistics Mauritius (2019), the total number of Doctoral enrolment in 2017 was 521 in the five public higher education institutions, as follows: OUM (329), University of Mauritius (24), University of Technology Mauritius (16), Mauritius Institute of Education (71), University of Mascareignes (25). The OUM has the highest number of Doctoral candidates. Indeed, the ODL and e-learning approaches to delivery have created opportunities for more students to pursue postgraduate studies in ODL institutions (Roets, 2016a). However, it is interestingly important to examine the supervision practices at the OUM, which has only 22 full-time academics, with only two of them with a Doctorate and a contingent staff of 400 of whom 50 hold a Doctorate. Besides, from the first Doctoral degree registration in 2013 to 2019, 22 PhD candidates and 22 DBA candidates have completed their thesis and graduated. Within the ODL context, there is a problem of supervisory capacity (Mfidi, 2019), poor supervisor-student relationship, longer completion time, and high drop-out rates and low throughput, which would be the result of poor supervision (Heeralal, 2015). Indeed, when universities move towards ODL, it impacts directly on the supervisory practices and the quality of supervision of Doctoral students (Roets, 2016a). Though Van Rensburg, Meyers and Roets (2016) and Manyike (2017) assert that the supervisor-student relationship is enhanced in this context, yet there are likely to be numerous challenges that the students and the supervisors may encounter (Mfidi, 2019). The challenges in ODL are related to the accessibility and affordability of the students to ICT, low adoption rate of technology, poor postal services (Mafa & Mapolisa, 2012), non-availability of electricity, limited IT skills (Kashangura, 2011), and travelling expenses for supervisory meetings (Chirume, 2011).

Various studies have examined the PhD supervision experiences from the students' perspectives, but the limited evidence is there from the supervisors' perspectives (Jones, 2013; Ndayambaje, 2018). Literature on the experiences of the PhD supervisor within the ODL context is very limited (Roets, 2016b; Hammond, Ryland, Tennant & Boyd, 2010). There is a need to have insights into this phenomenon in the African ODL context.

This study aims to examine the challenges of PhD supervision in the ODL context. The main research objective is as follows:

To examine the specific challenges of PhD supervision at the Open University of Mauritius, from the supervisors' perspectives

LITERATURE REVIEW

Online supervision is a challenging task for the supervisors of PhD thesis. Kumar, Kumar and Taylor (2020) reported that it is difficult to build trust and personal connection in the supervisory

relationship between the supervisor and the student due to the absence of informal interactions and non-verbal cues. Supervisors are overwhelmed because PhD candidates do not have a good understanding of academic processes, research ethics, accepted academic practices and their responsibilities that make the PhD very rigorous (Kumar & Johnson, 2014). Besides, it is very challenging to provide distance education students with only written feedback without verbal feedback (Kumar & Johnson, 2019). It is thus a vicious circle: on one hand, students do not understand the feedback that the supervisor finds challenging to provide them online. This is likely to lead to a high rate of incomplete PhD research.

In a mixed-methods study, using the case study strategy, at the Open University of Tanzania about the challenges faced by 36 supervisors and 65 postgraduate students, Bushesha, Mtae, Msindai and Mbogo (2012) found that students disappeared completely once the thesis writing process started until the supervisor enquired for their research progress; they sent their draft work late and they put much pressure on the supervisor to guide them at the time of submission so that they could graduate. Besides, the student-supervisor relationship was poor because of the undignified manner in which they approached their supervisors. Other challenges were external supervisors' academic background and experiences were completely different or incompatible with the supervision guidelines of the Open University of Tanzania; students' poor writing skills and low language proficiency; students hardly visited the University subscribed sources of literature; low honorary supervision fees that brought low job satisfaction and motivation to invest themselves in the supervision process.

In another qualitative study, using case study and document analysis research design, at the Zimbabwe Open University about the experiences of 25 PhD and M Ed supervisors, Mafa and Mapolisa (2012) found that the supervision process was hampered when students and supervisors had limited ICT skills; when the students had little mastery of research proposal writing techniques; the students underestimated the amount of academic effort and time to do acceptable research of good standard; rare consultation of the supervisor by students, who submitted drafts with many inconsistencies, as they undertook research for the sake of passing the course only. Indeed, doctorateness is more than doing a research project; it is rather a shared educational Endeavour (van Schalkwyk, Murdoch-Eaton, Tekian, Van der Vleuten & Cilliers, 2016). It should be a transformative learning process (Mezirow, 2003) that would change the student from being a novice to an expert, from being a dependent researcher to becoming an autonomous researcher (van Schalkwyk et al., 2016).

A study on the supervisory relationship between the supervisor and the student was conducted in three South African universities using the ODL mode to supervise postgraduate students. Ten Doctoral students and five supervisors were interviewed. Govender (2018) found that the supervisor's style, ethnicity, age and personality characteristics might influence their relationship; incompatibility between the student and the supervisor concerning their communication level and practice experiences and their divergent worldviews on the chosen topic or research theme; PhD candidates believed that they should complete the research during the shortest possible time and so there is no need to learn from the supervisor's academic knowledge, research skills and experience in the academia.

In a qualitative study, using the deductive approach and exploring the numerous issues and potential challenges that supervisors faced in two ODL universities in Pakistan, Zaheer and Munir (2020) found the following challenges: limited student-supervisor interaction; the diversity of the student cohort; geographical remoteness between the student and the supervisor;

online discussions among students and blogs direct their research methodology; students' perception that online research at PhD level is difficult; there is no room for academic collaboration between the student and the supervisor as the student disappears once the thesis is completed.

In a study conducted at the University of South Africa, an ODeL institution, by Manyike (2017), the in-depth interviews with ten postgraduate supervisors revealed that supervisors did not know the research capabilities and needs of their supervisees; the latter were academically unprepared for postgraduate studies with a lack of proficiency in English, access to technology and the effective use of technological skills; and supervisors struggled to have a good understanding of their student's work and the latter do not understand their feedback. This represented an obstacle to creating a community of practice between the supervisors and the supervisees in the context of ODL in Africa. This state of affairs may lead to academic failure for the PhD candidate (Mouton, 2011).

The challenges of the supervisor are closely related to the nature of the relationship between the student and him/her. It is only when this relation is positive and engaging that there may be effective supervision.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research design

This is a qualitative study using an explorative and inductive approach. The qualitative research method allows the study to examine the challenges of PhD supervision in the open and distance learning setting in which the key participants are involved. The basic qualitative research is used as it examines how people interpret their experiences, how they perceive the world and what meanings they give to their own experiences (Merriam, 2009). It allows the researcher to ask additional specific questions about their experiences (Kvale, 1997). The researcher may draw a realistic picture and an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon (Yildirim & Simsek, 2011) of PhD supervision at the Open University of Mauritius, which is the research setting. The research is context-bound

Participants

10 supervisors were selected for this study. Convenience purposive sampling was used to identify the key informants. In this type of sampling, only those who best suited the purpose of the study and who had the relevant information about the phenomenon were selected (Sekaran & Bougie, 2010). The participants consisted of only two full-time academics who were PhD holders of the OUM and eight contingent supervisors of PhD OUM candidates, who worked full-time in local conventional universities and the industry. The demographic profile of these supervisors is as shown in the Table 1:

Table 1: Demographic profile of participants

Participant Number	Gender	Age range	Workplace	Position	Experience
1	Male	30-40	ODL	Lecturer	2 years
2	Male	40-50	ODL	Lecturer	3 years
3	Male	40-50	ODL	Instructional Designer	2 years
4	Male	30-40	ODL	Lecturer	2 years
5	Male	40-50	MoE	Non-academic	2 years
6	Female	60-70	MoE	Non-academic	2 years
7	Male	40-50	Conventional	Non-academic	4 years
8	Male	40-50	Conventional	Non-academic	3 years
9	Male	60-70	Conventional	Lecturer/HoD	5 years
10	Male	40-50	Conventional	Lecturer Senior Lecturer/HoD Lecturer	3 years

Note: ODL: Open and Distance Learning; MoE: Ministry of Education; HoD: Head of Department

Data collection and data analysis

The semi-structured interview was conducted with the informed consent of the 10 selected participants to collect data. A semi-structured interview is structured enough to give more importance to the research topic and flexible enough to allow key informants to give new dimensions to the topic under discussion (Galetta, 2013). In a qualitative study, a sample size between 5 to 25 is acceptable (Steinar, 2007). Before the individual interviews, the interview schedule was piloted with 2 contingent OUM PhD supervisors. This ensured its trustworthiness. With no changes in the content, the main open-ended question in the schedule were as follows:

What are the challenges that you experience when you supervise PhD candidates at the OUM?

Each interview was done by using the Zoom video conferencing platform and it lasted around 30 minutes. It was automatically recorded by the researcher-host, transcribed and kept safely in his custody.

The researcher used the following stages suggested by Creswell (2013) for analyzing the qualitative data of the study. First, he organized and prepared the gathered information by transcribing the interviews, optimally scanned them, and catalogued each of them. Secondly, he read them carefully to get a sense of the information and to make meaning of them. Then, he coded the information by categorizing the text and labelling the categories with a theme. Fourthly, the coding process was used to describe the people, the setting and/or the categories and themes. Thick descriptions were identified in this process to confer the outcomes of the findings. Finally, the findings were interpreted in light of the main research objective.

The content analysis technique was used to interpret the data. Content analysis is qualitative data reduction and interpretation for the determination of the basic consistencies and meanings

(Patton, 2014). Verbatim statements were used; the participants' anonymity, privacy and confidentiality were guaranteed; and debriefing and member check were used to ensure the reliability and trustworthiness of the findings. The findings are not generalizable, but they are transferable if the readers find the characteristics of the OUM consistent with those of their universities. Indeed, the challenges that are faced in online supervision may be different depending on the context and the participants involved in the given context (Kuma, Kumar & Taylor, 2020).

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

From the analysis of the qualitative data, the participants highlighted aspects of their supervisory experiences that were challenging. From the emerging themes of the study, the challenges of PhD supervision at the OUM are discussed in the foregoing paragraphs.

Lack of research culture in ODL

PhD research is a learning process that allows the students to change their thinking and doing, and to transform their identity into autonomous researcher (van Schalkwyk *et al.*, 2016). However, in the ODL context, the PhD students are working adults with many other commitments than researching that "*they look at the goal and not at the road*", as pointed out by Participant 9. They are more concerned with the certification, and therefore they outsource the thesis writing or part of it, as there is no *viva* thesis defense. They have a spoon-feeding culture, heavily depending on the supervisor, as they lack critical thinking skills and creativity. They are not to be blamed, as they come from the previous elitist education system of the country (Belle, 2016). As such, supervision becomes challenging, as Participant 3 voiced out:

"My student is not academically engaged and committed to do research of an acceptable standard. So, I must put in much efforts to motivate, encourage and spoon-feed him so that he meets the agreed deadlines."

This is also the result of the belief that they cannot attain the completion time (low efficacy of online students), which make the supervisors double their supervision input (Zaheer & Munir, 2020). In the same vein, Mouton (2011) supports the lack of a research culture by pointing out that many PhD students, having completed their Master's degree in a conventional University, are new to the ODL context and therefore they lack the rigor in research, which makes the supervisor's supervisory task more challenging.

Lack of mastery of research methodology skills

The OUM provides 45 hours of face-to-face tutorials for each of the modules – research issues; systematic literature review; and quantitative methods (Open University of Mauritius, 2018). Since one of the pillars of ODL is flexibility, tutorial attendance is not compulsory at OUM. The PhD students, therefore, lack research methodology techniques and skills. The supervisor must spend hours explaining the research methodology concepts and application in their own research (Zaheer & Munir, 2020). From this perspectives, Participant 6 argued:

"The students do their research on a trial and error principle, without knowing whether he is right or wrong, despite the guidelines on research writing, found on the OUM websites. So, with little previous experience, they are confused and lost, at the time of writing their methodology chapter."

Supervision is more challenging for supervisors who master only one research design when the allocated PhD student chooses to do another type of research design that neither of them master. The supervisors would have to find time to learn together with the supervisee to be able to give the proper guidance. In this sense, Participant 5 complained:

“I must provide my students with additional resources to help them understand research methodology. But, since I am not in academia, it is sometimes difficult for me to search for them, and it takes me much time to learn them first.”

It is obvious that in this ODL context, the findings revealed that supervisors have not yet recognized supervision to be an ongoing process of ontological formation. They need to relearn their discipline and rethink the relevance of their understanding of research as a discipline (Halse, 2011).

Insufficient online discussion meetings

This study revealed that PhD supervisors use video conferencing platform such as Zoom and Skype, as well as Google Drive, Google Docs and WhatsApp to meet online for discussion on the research of students. However, such meetings were not regular for numerous reasons, namely lack of money to afford internet connection packages and supervisors, and students avoid such meetings which they perceived as a threat to their personal and family life. The ethical challenge was illustrated by Participant 4:

“It happened that I was with my family on a Saturday evening when I received an urgent call for research advice from one of my female students. I spend half an hour to guide the student, but I had a serious problem with my upset wife.”

Supervisors, therefore, were not prepared to accept the “ethic of hospitality” at a distance (Ruitenberg, 2011, p. 32); they found it difficult to give space to their online students at a distance. This explains the theme of connection and disconnection in online supervision (Sheail& Ross, 2016). On the other hand, the supervisors complained that online PhD students used the video-conferencing platform with their video off, so they could know the authenticity of neither the student (MacKeogh, 2006) nor the draft work submitted for feedback to them. Besides, without the non-verbal interaction, feedback is less meaningful to both of them, and therefore, it was difficult to give timeous and effective guidance to the supervisee, transforming him from a novice to an autonomous researcher.

Therefore, supervisors privileged to provide written feedback through emails, Google Docs and Google Drives. However, they noticed a feeling of demotivation and hostility from the students. *“Online supervision becomes an opportunity for students to run away from the supervisor and to look for friendly feedback from their peers’*, explained Participant 2. Students were reluctant to ask questions or clarifications, and they would rather wish the meeting to be over as soon as possible. Some of the supervisors also asserted that some of their students lack the technical skills to use technological tools proposed by them for supervisory meetings, and the latter often missed the gist of their written feedback. This situation is illustrated by the statement of Participant 7:

“As a receiver on the other hand of the computer, the student may not decode my written feedback correctly. This misunderstanding by the student results in resubmitting a patchwork of a unit of research.”

This implies that the geographical distance between the supervisor and the supervisee still acts as a barrier to effective learning and supervision in the ODL context, though the primary purpose of ODL institutions is to “erase” the distance (UNESCO, 2002) to facilitate learning with the help of digital technologies (Ngalomba, 2020). The theory of transactional distance supports the findings of this study.

Divergent lens of academic research

In the context of the openness of education, most of the PhD and DBA students of the OUM are matured, adults and professionals. However, from the demographic profile of the participants of this current study (Figure 1), most of them are novice supervisors. There are many cases of supervision whereby the DBA students, who are very experienced professionals in the industry, are older than the supervisors, who are new in supervision. This gives rise to relational and positional conflicts that negatively impact on the research process and progress. Govender (2018) maintained that demographic factors such as age, gender and ethnicity influence supervisory relationship in the context of ODL. This conflicting situation is elaborated by Participant 1:

“I always try my best to give the most appropriate academic guidance to my students. However, my DBA students cannot do away with their professional identity in their research. They reject my academic feedback on the ground that it is a business-related problem.”

Indeed, the relationship is influenced by the incompatibility between the supervisor’s and the student’s professional experience and their divergent world views of the research topic (Govender, 2018). It becomes very challenging for the supervisor to “change the student’s world view” (Lee, 2018, p. 884), and see the research process as a transformative learning process that goes beyond knowledge to how learning takes place (van Schalkwyk *et al.*, 2016).

The absence of an online PhD research protocol

The findings of this study revealed that supervisors embarked on the supervision without any comprehensive PhD supervision guidelines about their roles, duties, responsibilities and those of the PhD candidate; the requirements for the thesis writing; the supervision time intervals and duration in terms of hours of meeting; and the record of the meeting. However, in the context of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) and based on the Salzburg principles for Doctoral Education, accountability is a key component for effective supervision (Byrne, Jorgensen & Loukkola, 2013). Undefined or not clearly defined tasks for supervisors is an institution-based challenge (Mbogo, Ndiao, Wambua, Ireri & Ngala, 2020) that is faced mostly by supervisors who are external to the University and who are non-academics. Participant 3 (a non-academic) stated:

“I am a professional in the industry, but with my experience in the field with an earned doctorate, I tried my best to guide my PhD student. However, often, I feel that I lack the academic rigor in terms of the academic requirements for an online PhD. An official PhD supervision handbook would have helped me.”

Supervisors also complained about the PhD students’ attitudes towards them. They showed no courtesy, no respect, and no etiquette in their corresponding mails to the supervisor. As an illustration of this lack of savoir-vivre, Participant 10 pointed out with much vehemence:

“A student asked me in a mail to me, following my written feedback, ‘What do you imply by this?’. How can she address me like that? This is disrespectful.”

Participant 8, who is a supervisor in a conventional private University, added:

“My PhD student from a conventional University never disrespects me when I meet them personally on campus. But in the ODL context, students lack good manners.”

This finding is consistent with Bushesha, Mtae, Msindai and Mbogo (2012) who found PhD students at the Open University of Tanzania to approach their supervisors in a disrespectful manner, so much so that the result is a poor student-supervisor relationship.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the Kadusian model of postgraduate supervision (1976) which emphasizes education, administration and support as the key components of supervision, it is recommended that the ODL University must adopt a systemic approach to PhD supervision whereby a supervision handbook with all the guidelines in terms of the roles, responsibilities and duties of both the supervisor and the PhD students are properly defined; the expectations of the University of the PhD supervision; the academic support to facilitate the students and external supervisors in terms of free access to high-rated e-journals, plagiarism, reference techniques and publications; setting up a center of excellence in research where the online study of research methodology is compulsory for all PhD candidates and there is the creation of a community of researchers, made up of supervisors (peer support) and PhD candidates (collaborative support). Lave and Wenger (1999) called it “a community of practice” which is characterized by the collective competencies and the ability of the supervisors and the supervisees to co-learn; their ability to discuss research matters of common concern, and bring out solutions to the problems encountered by the supervisor and the research activities or processes encountered by the supervisee in the supervisory process; and the existence of shared repertoires of resources for effective or successful research (Wenger, 2012). This will promote a culture of research. This is likely to ensure “The critical role of supervision and assessment” and “In embedding the institutional strategies and policies” of the Salzburg I recommendations be implemented. In addition, workshops and seminars may also be organized through webinars for the training of supervisors in online supervision, the effective use of innovative technological tools, the promotion of positive supervision relationship among others. Moreover, the ODL University must establish a database protocol about how to capture and use research and supervision data on online supervision and record online meetings. Also, due to the lack of experienced PhD supervisors, it is recommended that the ODL University adopts other models of supervision than adopting the apprenticeship model, which is not effectively sufficient for online supervision which is challenged by the diversity of PhD students. Besides, the OUM must also make it compulsory for supervisors and their PhD students to sign a Memorandum of Understanding and discuss a Feedback Expectation Tool at the very initial stage of the supervision process so that there is a honeymoon period between them. This is essential as students and supervisors often bring different expectations to the nature of the supervisory relationship (Manyike, 2017). This will allow them to establish a good supervisory relationship, that is made of care and assistance, according to the theory of enactment (Kalbfleisch, 2002).

This study contributes to the existing literature by examining the challenges experienced by supervisors of PhD students in an emerging ODL context, where there is a lack of supervisory capacity due to an insufficient number of experienced internal qualified supervisors. The findings of this study are of great insights to other emerging ODL educational institutions in

Africa, namely the Namibian College of Learning and the Botswana Open University. ODL African universities have some common features in terms of poor research output (1% of the world's research publication), a shortage of Doctorate qualified teaching staff to supervise research and qualifications that are not relevant to the industry (Mohamedbhai, 2018). The findings may be used to generate a framework for promoting online PhD supervision in African universities. This would be a stepping stone towards the massification of research, by bridging the gap between the geographical distance, pedagogy, research output and socio-economic development among African countries. However, further research on online supervision may be made in other emerging ODL for comparison purpose and generalisation to develop an online supervision model for African universities.

CONCLUSION

The study was conducted in an attempt to have some insights into the challenges of online supervision of PhD students and some recommendations were made to understand the way forward to improving this key process to successful PhD research completion in ODL contexts. It brought to light challenges that are systemic and structural to an emerging institution, but which may be found in other emerging Universities on the African continent. These findings, indeed, may be transferable to similar ODL context. These challenges can only be overcome with the synergy of the governments' initiatives for research funding, investment in University infrastructures and provision of educational resources. Providing such universities with the necessary resources is sine qua non, especially with the sudden shift to pure online teaching and learning as well as supervision, in both ODL institutions using the blended mode of delivery and the conventional universities which are also new to online supervision following the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic.

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