

# **SUPERVISOR-SUPERVISEE RELATIONSHIP: A ROSE WITHOUT THORNS?**

C.S. Masembe and Mary Goretti Nakabugo (School of Education, Makerere University)

*“You know, both of us will probably cry before this is over!”* (Supervisor to incoming doctoral student)  
(Burton and Steane, 2004: 30)

*“Academic partnerships should be seen as business relationships which can run out of steam, not as marriages with emotional baggage”* (Delamont, et al. 2004: 83)

## **Abstract:**

*In this article the authors highlight the challenges of graduate supervision from both the supervisor and supervisee perspective. They illustrate some of the complexities involved in the supervision process, and assert that the nature of relationship existing between the student (the supervisee) and the supervisor is a major factor in the successful completion of graduate research projects. It is so important, that disruptions to that relationship are very damaging to the progress, and the quality of the thesis. Notwithstanding the fact that the stand-alone style of supervision has stood the test of time, the authors argue for an institutional model. A process that doesn't only involve the supervisor and the supervisee, but one in which the student's successful completion is seen as an institutional obligation, they contend, is likely to loosen the tension that usually exists between supervisors and their students. In a situation where an institution might choose to stick to the stand-alone model, then the roles/responsibilities and expectations of each of the parties (supervisor and supervisee) should be clearly spelt out and comprehended by both.*

## **Introduction**

Just as is the case with any other companionship, the supervisor-supervisee “marriage” in many institutions all over the world is characterised by several challenges. This is mainly attributed to the ever-increasing diversity in the graduate student population; an increase in graduate student numbers; and an increased awareness on the students' part of their rights. These factors have greatly put pressure on the student-supervisor relationship.

The stand-alone supervisor model of supervision common in many African institutions, including Makerere University, has also created many problems. It places all the onus and responsibility on the supervisor for guiding a student's research to a successful conclusion. Therefore, in the absence of the supervisor, there's inadequate provision to the student, despite the fact that, the Faculty/Department might be aware of the absence. By contrast, our counterparts in the United Kingdom have put in place a more Nelleke (2003), though some institutions have such publicised 'codes of practice' on the web, they are not yet up to the standard in spelling out the entire research process. The

Mr'\_PÑ-È;z10M

information publicised, though also very important, mainly centers, almost exclusively on closing dates, formats, and financial obligations.

Accordingly, therefore, there're many common uncertainties surrounding the supervisory task, rendering the supervisor-supervisee relationship even more challenging.

### **Uncertainties surrounding the supervisor-supervisee relationship**

A study that was commissioned by the Graduate School of Humanities, University of Cape Town (Muller et. al, 2001) to study the graduate research process in South African institutions of higher learning highlights several doubts surrounding the supervisory process. Many of these are likely to be shared by various institutions worldwide, Makerere inclusive.

The supervisors' concerns that were uncovered by the study centred around the following issues:

- Some of the supervisors did not know where to start off with the supervision task
- There was inadequate training for the supervisors
- Some of them believed that 'once you have been supervised, you can also supervise!' Some did not see the real importance of training
- Many supervisors were in isolation from other supervisors
- Several of them had wrong or poorly defined expectations of their students
- There was also the question of whether the supervisor must be an expert in the topic chosen by the candidate

Similarly, the students were found to have even more serious worries in the supervisory process. These concerns were also usually related to the supervisors. They included the following, among others:

- Some students were allocated supervisors who obstructed rather than helped them get their degrees
- Some felt intimidated by their supervisors, which prevented them from asserting their own views early in the relationship
- Some of the supervisors did not give adequate guidance and feedback
- There was also a reported break-down in the student-supervisor communication
- Some supervisors gave students under their supervision excess freedom when the students wanted greater guidance.

Muller et. al.'s 2001 study also revealed concerns about the entire research process, which had the potential to create severe problems in the supervisor-student relationship. Such concerns included:

- Some of the students had difficulty in choosing a research topic
- Some of the students didn't understand what postgraduate research entailed
- Some students were not adequately prepared and equipped for working on a thesis

- Some students were anxious about not being able to meet their deadlines at the expense of producing quality work.

What the above outlined concerns clearly show is that the effectiveness of the supervisor-supervisee relationship would partly depend on the understanding by the concerned parties (especially the supervisor and the supervisee) of what their roles are in the research process. Baseless expectations of each other are likely to result into unnecessary frustrations. Both the student and the supervisor have different roles and/or responsibilities to fulfill in the research process, and these have to be comprehended by both parties if their relationship is to be smooth.

**The roles and/or responsibilities of a supervisor:**

A good supervisor who is likely to cultivate a positive relationship with his student(s) and be able to sustain it is one who does not only know what his/her roles are, but one who also has the wisdom to know how and when to take on which role.

2000s) iudeniftiesfour ie

p2(ist.)-7( )JTJ EMC /P <</MCID106 >>BDC /TT1 1 Tf 0 Tc-12.235 -1.15 Td ( )Tj E

Unlike Mouton (ibid.) who seems to imply that supervision roles and relationships are universal, Phillips and Pugh (1993) and Burton and Steane (2004) contend that styles of supervision will vary across disciplines and universities. For example, they observe that in the science disciplines much research is conducted in laboratories, mostly working in close proximity with the supervisor. The work of the research students in science is often a component of a supervisor's own research, perhaps funded in full or in part by the supervisor's grants. All these factors make the supervisor-supervisee relationships in the sciences to be very close. On the contrary, research students in the arts and social sciences are in most cases working on a research topic of their own choosing, which may be only marginally related to the supervisor's own research interests. In this case the relationship tends to be a bit distant because the students work primarily at home, with less frequent contact with the supervisor.

It is therefore useful to understand these differences in supervision patterns, because otherwise students can become frustrated when they see friends in other disciplines receiving a much more close style of supervision.

### **The student's tasks/responsibilities**

As is important for the supervisor to know his/her roles and responsibilities, it is equally important for the students to know their roles if the supervisor and supervisee are to complement one another.

For many students, the first critical decision in the successful undertaking of postgraduate research is the choice of a supervisor, and the effective management of relationship with him/her (Burton and Steane, 2004:30). Choosing the wrong supervisor would add further tensions to the usual stresses of a thesis, and in the most extreme cases could result in students dropping out or restarting on a new topic with another supervisor, causing a substantial delay in completion. But how can one tell the "right supervisor"? How can the students find their way out in contexts where the supervisors are allocated by the Department or faculty?

Although most universities just allocate supervisors, it is also acceptable for students to influence the process. One can investigate the personnel at the faculty and suggest a supervisor he/she thinks may be a good match for his/her research topic and personality. It is also possible and acceptable for one to change an appointed supervisor. But this should be done early enough to avoid time wastage, and one needs some expertise in finding his/her way out. Burton and Steane (2004:33-38) have made the following suggestions on how one can identify who might be a good supervisor, how to target that supervisor, and how to make oneself attractive to a potential supervisor.

- While you're trying to choose the supervisor who will be right for you, academics are trying to identify students whom they are prepared to work with. So part of your process of choosing the right supervisor should consist of making yourself appear to be a 'good' student. To that end, it is helpful to think about how supervisors choose students, and ways in which you can try to convince potential

- Should you choose your supervisor first, and

Bluntly put, sustaining a positive supervisor-supervisee relationship is mainly the supervisee's task. However keen your supervisor is, your thesis is more important to you than it is to them. If you treat your supervisor like a boss at work whom you want to please, and aim to cause them the least possible irritation, you're likely to have a much more profitable relationship. This may sound quite unreasonable, because many people expect that the supervisor will put equal effort into the relationship, but this is not usually the case. The fact is that the more the supervisor feels the student is worth the effort, and the easier that the student is to work with, the more the student is likely to get out of them.

That said, in an ideal supervisor-supervisee relationship both parties would have expectations, i.e. just as students have expectations of their supervisor, supervisors will have expectations of their students. The relationship, therefore, ought to be mutual. A partnership or what Kruger and van Niekerk (1991: 108) rightly refer to as a "two-way traffic" between the supervisor and the supervisee needs to be established. This implies mutual trust, respect and acceptance. A shared sense of responsibility and commitment between supervisor and supervisee is a precondition for the success of such a partnership.

Nelleke (2003) and Burton and Steane (2004: 42) have for example observed that supervisors would generally like:

- Students who point out the main areas that they want feedback on.
- Students who have ideas and opinions, and can justify them on the basis of a critical understanding of both the literature and the research.
- Well organised students who seem to value the supervisor's time.
- Students who initiate contact and request meetings with the supervisor.
- Students who turn up for appointments, prepared for them
- Students who know and understand all the institutional and formal requirements and rules relevant to their study. These among others include, ethical matters, format and style of the thesis and matters relating to intellectual property rights.
- Students who write regularly, and share the draft material
- Students who tell the truth about work done and not done
- Students who deliver texts that have been proofread for spelling and grammar errors
- Students who keep in touch
- Students who do the research tasks that have been mutually agreed upon and scheduled.
- Students who uphold acceptable levels of interest and commitment to their work throughout the degree.

On the other hand, Burton and Steane (*ibid.* p.43) have outlined put-offs for supervisors thus:

- Students who submit a second draft of a chapter that doesn't address issues that the supervisor identified in a previous draft.

- Students who submit a long chapter two hours before a meeting and expect feedback on the chapter!
- Students who submit poorly written work, which hasn't been spell- or grammar-checked and that does not appear to have been proof-read.
- Students who ask complex questions without appearing to have done any work themselves.

Similarly, students have also got their own expectations of the supervisors, and sensible supervisors should be aware of some, if not all of these expectations, if a mutual relationship is to be maintained.

Graduate students who were interviewed by Muller, et. al. (2001), said they comfortably worked with supervisors of the following qualities:

- Supervisors who read their work well in advance
- Supervisors who were available when needed
- Supervisors who were friendly, open and supportive
- Supervisors who were constructively critical of their work
- Supervisors who possessed good knowledge of the research area
- Supervisors who structured supervisory meetings well
- Supervisors who were personally approachable
- Supervisors who were not directive, but set deadlines to structure the research and thesis process
- Supervisors who encouraged conference attendance and publications
- Supervisors who had a hand in making important resources available
- Supervisors who were the humble 'guide by the side'.
- And most important of all, supervisors who helped them achieve success.

Some authors such as Nelleke (2003) have in fact advocated that a kind of research contract be drawn up between supervisor and student that formalises and strengthens the supervisory relationship. Such a contract would signify that consensus has been reached between the two parties on matters such as, the topic, research objectives, design and methodology, time frame, etc. and would spelt out clearly each one's expectations. Mouton (2001), however, rightly argues that, many of the contents of Nelleke's proposed contract are in fact covered in the standard research proposal. It's on this argument that he considers a research proposal as a contractual document between the student and his/her supervisor, and therefore, sees no need for a separate contract.

## **Conclusion**

No student or supervisor is perfect, and there are ups and downs in many, if not all student-supervisor relationships. While ideally the supervisor would put as much effort into nurturing an effective relationship with his/her student, in the end it is the student's thesis, and in most cases the supervisors will have many other demands on their time. So in the end the onus is largely on the supervisee to make use of the supervisor's time and input most efficiently and effectively, and to extract the most value from the relationship.

Supervisors would also benefit from a lesser stand-alone style of supervisor or what Delamont et. al. (2004: 83) referred to as “intellectual isolation”. Working co-operatively with other colleagues in the Department/Faculty would enable the supervisor know of alternative approaches to the successful supervision of research students. And in the case of a misunderstanding or lack of expertise in a given aspect of the research, the supervisor would find it much easier to refer the student to a more knowledgeable colleague.

### **References:**

Aguinis, H., Nesler, M., and Quigley, B. (1996) Power bases of faculty supervisors and educational outcomes for graduate students. *Journal of Higher Education*. Vol. 67, No. 3.

Burton, S. and Steane, P. (2004) Choosing and working with a supervisor. In Burton, S. and Steane, P. (Eds.) *Surviving your thesis*. London: Routledge.

Delamont, S.; Atkinson, P. and Parry, O. (2004) *Supervising the doctorate: A guide to success*. Berkshire: Society for research into higher education & Open University Press.

Kruger, E. G. and Van Niekerk, L. (1991) Accompanying research students. *South African Journal of Higher Education*. Vol. 5, No. 1.

<http://www.ocip.carleton.ca/infofac/supstuguide.html>

Mouton, J. (2001) *How to succeed in your Master's and Doctoral Studies: A South African Guide And Resource Book*. Cape Town: Van Schaik Publishers.

Nelleke, B. (2003), *Completing your Thesis: A practical guide*, Johannesburg: Van Schaik Publishers.

Phillips, E. and Pugh, D. (1993) *How to get a PhD*. Buckingham: Open University Press.

Muller J., Kaunda L., de Wet J. and Mendelsohn R. (2001) *The Supervisor-Student Relationship: A Report to GRAPRO by the Graduate Supervision Sub-Committee*, Cape Town: Graduate School of Humanities.s

[www.iah.bbsrc.ac.uk/supervisors\\_training/](http://www.iah.bbsrc.ac.uk/supervisors_training/)

[www.ioe.ac.uk/doctoralschool/code.htm](http://www.ioe.ac.uk/doctoralschool/code.htm)