

Humanising Postgraduate Education: Exploring key success Factors at a Higher Education Institution from the Postgraduate Student's Perspective

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Abstract

The skills of educated Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) professionals are in high demand in South Africa, and postgraduate students are perceived to be vehicles of crucial societal change. Accordingly, South Africa needs to increase its postgraduate production rate to build a knowledge-based economy positioned between developed and developing countries. Therefore, this exploratory study set out to identify the barriers to success and the critical success factors affecting postgraduate research students' performance. By qualitatively probing student perceptions, our study reports on essential factors that impact postgraduate students in two faculties at a Higher Education Institution (HEI) in the Western Cape, South Africa. Two focus group interviews (n=4) and (n=4) were conducted with students from two different faculties (the Faculty of Applied Science – FAS and the Faculty of Engineering and the Built Environment – FEBE) at the HEI. Following transcription, data was thematically coded and analysed to detect themes. Data saturation and peer review were used to ensure validity in this qualitative study. Ethical clearance for this study was secured through institutional channels. The findings suggest that postgraduate challenges were aggravated by the COVID-19 pandemic, which added another layer of complexity to an already complex postgraduate context. Postgraduate students emphasised the importance of suitable supervision mechanisms and the critical role of postgraduate student support services as key to their success. Moreover, individual characteristics of postgraduate students were also highlighted as factors that influence academic success.

The data shows that humanising postgraduate pedagogy is a potential solution to overcome the barriers experienced by our doctoral students. It is an approach where supervision is centred on the development of the postgraduate student rather than on the production of a thesis. Humanising pedagogy in postgraduate education should not be an attempt to integrate, accommodate, or assimilate postgraduate students within the institutional structures at a higher education institution or even into social practices that could leave them feeling marginalised or discriminated against, but rather, our practices (both supervisor and postgraduate students) should facilitate the transformation of the very structures and practices that could potentially lead to exclusion, especially in the face of challenges presented by unexpected events such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

Keywords

Humanising pedagogy, postgraduate success, postgraduate supervision, higher education, Higher education institutions

1. Introduction

South Africa has a history of inequality in almost all sectors, including natural resources, economic development and even access to education. Efforts have been made to address the gaps, but when disaster strikes, the country is always found wanting. Such was the case during the COVID-19 pandemic, where access to basics such as water and shelter

suddenly became enormous challenges for low-income communities. The education sector was not spared as academic institutions needed to reframe their approaches to teaching, all the way to even postgraduate supervision. The need to rethink postgraduate pedagogy became urgent for many institutions, particularly approaches to humanizing postgraduate supervision during adverse environmental conditions. Latecka (2023, 643) argues that in South Africa, *“the question of pedagogy being humanized or re-humanized seems a no-brainer, considering its dehumanizing apartheid past”*. However, during the pandemic, there was limited information on how effective supervision could still be achieved without compromising the relationships between students and supervisors. Against this backdrop, this study sought to explore the challenges and complexities influencing students' performance by interviewing postgraduate students engaged with varying phases of study in the Faculty of Applied Science (FAS) and the Faculty of Engineering and the Built Environment (FEBE) at a Higher Education Institution (HEI).

1.1 Background

The low completion and elevated attrition rates in postgraduate programs can be attributed to several causes. Research has highlighted some factors contributing to these low completion rates (Graham 2020; Jiranek 2010; Elgar and Klein 2004). These factors include, among others, a) individual factors, b) supervisory factors and c) personal factors. Individual factors encompass obligations related to employment and financial constraints faced by students and students' personal characteristics (Hadi and Muhammad 2019), for example, competency in learning skills, motivation towards finishing the studies (Astin 1999) and learning environment (McKenzie and Schweitzer 2010). Supervisory factors could involve instances of limited engagement and support from supervisors (Bitzer 2010; Arabaci and Ersözlu 2010); and institutional factors is characterized by a dearth of research amenities and resources offered by universities. Ismail, Abiddin, and Hassan (2011) further stated that postgraduate scholars face challenges in managing their studies due to inadequate support and comprehension from their supervisors, alongside inflexible program structures.

Meanwhile, some may contend that the deficiency in completion rates among postgraduate students can be partially attributed to deficient supervision. The realm of postgraduate supervision is an ever-changing and intricate endeavor. Over time, scholars, practitioners, and experts have tried to understand and interpret the intricacies of the world through diverse viewpoints. Among these, the task of research supervision stands out as a notably intricate and demanding involvement (Grant 2014).

The complexities of modern research training bring forth a series of challenges that impact the dynamics of the supervisory relationship and subsequently affect management, research, and education within the realm of postgraduate supervision (Parker 2009; Lee and Green 2009). These challenges are entwined with an emphasis on accountability and completion rates, the diversification of postgraduate student cohorts, variations in the modes and contexts of knowledge generation, the originality of doctoral research contributions, the cultivation of generalizable skills, and the philosophical development of students. Such challenges intricately shape the domain of postgraduate supervision, the nature of the supervisory rapport, the patterns of interaction, the trajectory of postgraduate research endeavors, and the ultimate outcomes of the acquired qualifications (McAlpine and Norton 2006; Manathunga, Lant, and Mellick 2007; Maxwell and Smyth 2011; Boland 2016).

Studies show the importance of humanizing supervision as critical in the research journey. Roach, Christensen, and Rieger (2019, 1243) report two essential aspects of this in their research findings: *“that students valued academic integrity, constructive feedback, open communication, and bonding as the most preferred supervisory attributes”* and *“students preferred supervisors who fostered caring/supportive relationships over those who focused more strictly on instrumental functions”*. According to Fragouli (2021), several benefits accrue to the students, supervisors, and institutions from humanizing postgraduate supervision. It helps the student balance the studies with other demands and interests, leading to greater satisfaction and engagement in their learning experience. Thus, this exploratory study set out to identify the barriers to success and the critical success factors affecting postgraduate research students' performance. Our primary research question was *“What are the current supervision practices, and how can they be improved to humanize postgraduate education from the Induction phase, into the developmental phase and finally the launch phase?”*

1.2 Objective

The objective of this qualitative study was to explore critical success factors and barriers affecting postgraduate students' performance at a HEI in South Africa, with a specific focus on understanding how supervision practices can be humanized across different phases of the postgraduate journey.

2. Conceptual Framework

Supervision is complex, with very many layers influencing the supervision relationship. Lee and Green (2009, 617) contended that a particular supervision pedagogy has to be flexible and “*optimally responsive to the changing dynamics of candidature and research practice*”. Jones and Blass (2019) stated that the relationship is unique, and it changes and evolves as the developing researcher’s student identity and self-efficacy shift from ‘becoming’ to ‘being’ an independent researcher. The student should be at the center, and the supervisory environment should be one of support and empowerment to enable effective postgraduate supervision. This approach embodies a humanizing pedagogy”, where the conscientious supervisor needs to become sensitive to the student they are supervising and guide them into conversing in the language of research and practicing the skill of research in the discipline” (Khene 2014, 74). Moreover, the institutional role in administrative support and streamlining the postgraduate student’s academic journey contributes to a humanizing supervisory approach.

Khene (2014) argues that supervision teaches a postgraduate student to become a researcher and ultimately to become better than the supervisor in the chosen field. Khene's (2014) framework provides this study with a structured approach to performing data analysis, as it delineates the graduate research journey into three distinct phases: Induction, Developmental, and Launch. If a humanizing supervisory approach is adopted, the supervisor realizes and will be sensitive and respond appropriately to the three developmental phases of a student’s postgraduate journey. Each phase has a unique purpose and is characterized by a balanced interplay of supervisor guidance and student autonomy specific to that phase.

Khene (2014) describes the Induction phase as the hands-on initiation for postgraduate students into the realm of research. Frequent meetings occur in this phase, typically a weekly cadence of collaboration between student and supervisor. Khene (2014) asserts that this phase sets the tone for the student-supervisor relationship. During this phase, the supervisor's role is expert, coach, mentor, and sponsor – ultimately, the student’s primary support. The supervisor provides the student with very detailed, almost granular feedback. The completed research proposal is the milestone signifying the end of this phase.

Progressing to the Developmental phase, the student’s transformation continues. Supervisor involvement takes on a subtler hue, granting the student increased autonomy. Meetings, now less frequent but still regular, have become a platform for discussions to help students manage technicalities related to the research. The supervisor and the student engage in critical dialogues during this phase; however, the supervisor's role shifts, mirroring that of a guide and catalyst, a mentor, and a sponsor. Simultaneously, the student's abilities broaden to encompass improved literature review, data collection, and data analysis skills.

In the final phase, the supervisor provides proactive guidance with a hands-off approach, guiding students toward the highest point of their academic journey. Meetings occur less frequently. During the meetings, the supervisor offers opportunities for reflection and refinement. Khene (2014) explains that conversations during this phase revolve around shaping the student's distinctive research direction and scholarly identity. At this juncture, the supervisor's role evolves into that of a facilitator and reflector, lending support as the student shapes the conclusive chapters of their research. These final stages encompass finalizing elements such as data collection, analysis, and the ultimate embodiment of the student’s research findings, the final write-up of the thesis. This highlights the culmination of the research process.

Ultimately, Khene's (2014) framework offers a well-structured, adaptable, and student-centered approach to conducting a postgraduate supervision research study. Its emphasis on progressive development, clear milestones, and effective supervision makes it easy to use and therefore a valuable resource to explore humanizing postgraduate education.

Given the interpretive nature of this qualitative study, the literature review is deliberately integrated throughout the findings and discussion section rather than presented as a standalone section. This integration allows for a more nuanced analysis where theoretical insights directly inform and contextualize the emerging themes from our data.

3. Methods

This qualitative study explored the expectations of postgraduate students as they navigate their doctoral studies during the three stages of the postgraduate journey viz. the initiation stage, the developmental stage and finally, the launch

stage Khene (2014). An interpretive philosophy was adopted to construct meaning as the researchers engaged with the participants as “...there is more than meets the eye, and this can only be brought to our understanding if we engage with participants and enquire about how they construct their worldviews” (Chowdhury 2019, 104). The explorative research strategy and focus group interviews were employed, which presented researchers with opportunities to gather data. This data collection strategy is purposeful and allows the researcher to interact with participants and play a key role in generating the group discussion (Morgan 1996). This strategy enabled participants to tell their stories and give meaning to their postgraduate academic experience at the HEI.

4. Data Collection

Two focus group interviews (Focus Group 1 – FG1 and Focus Group 2 – FG2) were conducted with postgraduate students from two different STEM faculties, i.e., FAS and FEBE at the HEI to gain insight into their postgraduate journey at a HEI. These students were masters’ students at different stages of their academic journey and registered ranged from the first year of study to the third. One student had been in the university system for eight years. These focus group discussions were held online via Microsoft Teams as the virtual medium. This was the most practical and efficient way to bring these postgraduate students together after the COVID-19 global pandemic, allowing researchers not to impede too much on their academic time and resources. With the assistance of postgraduate research coordinators and faculty offices in their respective faculties and departments, the researchers extended a Teams online invitation and link to all postgraduate students in the two STEM faculties. The focus groups were small, viz four postgraduate students each from the two STEM faculties. This was sufficient to gather the different individual perspectives and practicable for the researcher to collect data (Rabiee 2004). The researchers requested voluntary participation, and the study's objective was clearly explained in the invitation. One volunteer each was randomly selected from the respective departments, and none of the postgraduate students selected to participate were students supervised by the researchers. The researchers obtained individual consent from the postgraduate student research participants before commencing the focus group discussion. Relevant personal information pertaining to their academic journey was collected, and these student participants did not receive any rewards for participating. Participants were informed that they may withdraw from the study at any given time without penalty, and the researchers were granted ethical clearance from the STEM faculties to conduct the study.

The semi-structured focus group discussions were guided using an interview schedule with ten open-ended questions. The open-ended questions focused on students' expectations of the self and their roles as students, the supervisors, the institution, challenges and opportunities during the postgraduate journey. The semi-structured focus group discussions, which lasted about 90 minutes each, afforded opportunities to address other issues emerging from the conversation (DiCicco-Bloom and Crabtree 2006). The recordings of the online focus group interviews were transcribed and anonymized. The data was evaluated using thematic analysis whilst using the postgraduate supervision framework proposed by Khene (2014), which partitions the postgraduate supervision process into three distinct phases, namely, The Induction, Development and Launch phases, as a guide. The analysis assessed the extent to which the supervisory approach promoted access and success.

5. Results and Discussion

We found a distinct array of activities that hallmark each respective phase. Notably, some activities occur in all three phases. Additionally, specific roles – student, supervisor, or both – undertake varying activities throughout the phases. The ensuing section presents our findings, extracted from transcripts, and discusses each sequential phase.

5.1 Induction phase

Each postgraduate journey starts with induction. Findings derived from our study accentuate the induction phase as a critical period of paramount significance. This phase emerges as pivotal in establishing the initial tone for the dynamics between student and supervisor, thereby providing the basis for the student’s postgraduate journey. In this phase, the student and supervisor typically have several one-on-one discussions and consider the role each will have and the respective responsibilities for those roles.

An observation that emerged from most of the students within both focus groups was that while the supervisor assumes the primary repository of knowledge during the induction phase, the students also assume a participatory role in this context. As evidence, a quote from FG2P4 emphasized the central nature of the supervisor role: “*the supervisor needs to start telling you what to do from scratch*”. Another participant (FG1P4) described how lost she felt during the transition from undergraduate to postgraduate level, saying, “*Because there's a lot of aspects that you don't understand*”.

- how the postgrad is, how it's designed and what you need to do, who you need to speak to, where you need to go", and articulated the necessity for substantial engagement of her supervisor during her induction process. Notably, however, two participants felt that students could take more responsibility. FG2P4 also said, "...the students should... act more like a professional person, you should know more than the undergraduates. So, when you are relating with your supervisor, you should have a better understanding as well."

The results of our study indicate that in the induction phase, the supervisor and student negotiate terms if expectations are not aligned. Examples of topics that form part of discussions are milestones (with a timeline), deadlines, resources and potential funding opportunities, progress reports and how records of interactions will be kept. In this regard, student-supervisor discussions are a collaboration. The discussions provide a foundation for the relationship.

A further finding of this study is the 'discussions' referred to above are captured in a document known as the student-supervisor agreement (SSA). This document is essentially a memorandum of understanding between student and supervisor and an instrumental cornerstone for the relationship between student and supervisor. Underscoring its importance, FG2P1 says, *"the SSA is useful - I think students don't know where [to] focus, after a while they have no idea - from a priority perspective, what is more important"*. Moreover, FG1S1 pointed out that both parties need to realize that the SSA is not a static document, stating, *"The agreement was a working document"*, and added that this is something that both student and supervisor should realize. As the PG journey progresses, the relationship between student and supervisor evolves during the journey, resulting in their interaction and the research experience. Therefore, a deduction of this study is thus, to align the SSA with an authentic human experience and thereby humanize postgraduate pedagogy, it is in the best interest of both student and supervisor to periodically review the SSA as many times as needed.

Induction is, however, more than just developing an SSA. Aligned with the view of Bitzer and Albertyn (2011), this study's research participants were in concurrence that the fundamental duty of a postgraduate supervisor is to induct students into the 'discipline of research'. This is a complex role as it entails supporting my student with the cognitive aspects of his/her research project, organisational aspects, the social aspects of being a postgraduate student and emotional aspects of the research journey. In Focus Group 1, all the research participants expressed their belief that, especially in the initial stages, postgraduate students need more motivation from the supervisor than in later stages when they are more established. FG1P4 pointed out, however that motivation is a 'two-way street', saying *"you [need] to be able to motivate yourself and your supervisor to be able to motivate you and guide you"*. Aligned with this view, FG2P1 voiced that, to make progress, the student ultimately needs to take responsibility *"...to work independently but still under the guidance of the department and, more specifically my supervisors. I also take on responsibility to, let's say to, contact my supervisor and contact the department where there are protocols set out. I also need to be responsible for the physical written work ... so we have that basis to work from."* Similarly, FG1P2 said, *"I think my role is to let my supervisor know when I get when, basically when I have barriers, when I have difficulty in understanding the material and when I need help and to meet all my deadlines"* about the induction phase.

From these findings, our study deduces that 'supervision' is a partnership where, although the student consults with the supervisor, both student and supervisor travel the research journey side by side. The supervisor role is a mélange of mentor and coach with expertise in the field of research being undertaken, facilitator, soundboard and sponsor. This emphasizes that supervision is an interactive, collaborative process where both the supervisor and student grow throughout the research process.

Khene (2014) opines that the induction phase typically lasts about six months, during which the supervisor plays a very hands-on role and frequent meetings occur. Contemplating this, FG1P2 shared her appreciation for group work during the induction phase. However, she supplemented her viewpoint by noting that in the present era, marked by heightened technological adoption since the COVID-19 pandemic, alternative modes of communication - enabled by technology - are equally valuable. She said, *"I like the old [days], like sometimes we have group meetings. That really works for me and the WhatsApp groups is a really good resource and like you know something you need to get a date, you need to see where to go for something"*. Generally, research participants agreed that the pivot to using technology has several advantages, such as having record of what was said in online meetings. However, significantly, we noted that FG2P1 articulated feeling lost because of the lack of human contact in the initial stages of her research journey. She said, *"I think that's difficult for me, because I went into face to face and then literally, I think a few weeks later we went into locked up [sic]. But there is an aspect of face-to-face contact with students at the initial stage that I think is extremely important"*. Thus, a deduction from this study is, that while it is possible to facilitate online postgraduate

supervision, an element of face-to-face contact is crucial. Simultaneously, we also deduced that the group work element during the induction phase, whether face-to-face or virtual, lays a foundation for developing supportive relationships among the postgraduate students, which may add tremendous value to them (and to the supervisor) as the research journey progresses.

Related to a recommendation of Khene (2014) that when feedback is given in the induction phase, it should be very detailed with a focus on introducing the 'doing' of research, the findings of this study imply that group work enables peer review which supplements the supervisor's feedback. Due to institutional pressure related to throughput and research output, supervisors cannot always provide granular feedback. Students reported that when working in groups (face-to-face or virtually), the feedback from their peers augmented feedback given by the research supervisor, which is regarded as especially valuable in this stage of the research journey and a mechanism to humanize postgraduate education further.

5.2 Developmental phase

The developmental phase follows the induction phase. Khene (2014) believes that the developmental phase only commences once the proposal has been approved. However, this is only sometimes the case since official proposal approval only occurs at quarterly Faculty Higher Degrees Committee (FHDC) meetings at this HEI. Thus, the time between proposal approval at the departmental and FHDC levels could be as long as a year if the process is delayed due to administrative issues. This (forces) supervisors to start the next phase as soon as possible after departmental approval so as not to prejudice the postgraduate student.

The HEI employs a digital management and tracking system to monitor and record postgraduate students progress and facilitate all administrative procedures that are part of the postgraduate journey. It is worth noting that a significant and influential aspect of being a postgraduate supervisor (or student) at an HEI is the delicate process of maintaining the balance between student progress and university administrative procedures.

Students reported a significant challenge for them was needing help to make progress and stay motivated, because of exceptionally the long lead times they experience with steps in the HEI postgraduate process. The progress can be delayed due to technical reasons, as evidenced by this quote by FG1P3: *"The lead times when we ask for certain information, whether it's login details, whatever it can be, those long lead times affect our lead times and therefore we cannot meet our deadlines and that needs to also be taken into consideration"*. A deduction made from this is that the HEI currently has systems that dehumanize the postgraduate research process, resulting in the students being frustrated and demotivated.

In this study, when asked what activities participants were engaged with together with their supervisors or the institution worked and which did not work, there was consensus on administrative aspects of the learning process that was challenging. FG1P1 response illustrates this, *"...so those that are not working, ...I must say that the administrative process is not working right from the administration right down to we need reach, I always use the examples, almost like Telkom, each one's got a different department, and no two people could give you the same answer. So, if you stuck here, it causes a lot of frustration"*. FG2P4, on the other hand, felt a need for face-to-face interactions as online interactions with the supervisor were inadequate. *"I think what doesn't work for me is not seeing people face-to-face. I think as much as you grasp a lot online but, I think there are certain things that just need to be face-to-face. And with the pandemic, it has deprived us of having regular face-to-face sessions and things like that"*. Based on this, this study concluded that the HEI has administrative systems in place to meet institutional goals related to throughput and cope with heavy workloads, which dehumanizes postgraduate education. The participants' responses in the focus groups indicate their varying needs/requirements. These requirements must be identified early in the postgraduate student-supervisor interactions to mitigate the negative impacts of trying to treat all the postgraduate students the same. This speaks to humanizing the postgraduate supervision process. The supervisor needs to remain the custodian of the human aspect of postgraduate research. It should be at the heart of our practice - to not forget the human we need to serve.

Moreover, during the developmental phase, the student's research skills (and that of the supervisor) are further developed and refined as they become more immersed in the research literature to familiarize ourselves with aspects of the research. The supervision approach should still be hands-on, but less so than in the induction phase. Some participants in the focus groups identified the need for training to heighten their research readiness. For instance, FGP4 stated *"On my side. Whatever trainings that come up or any courses that do come up, my supervisor will always share*

that, whatever she feels is beneficial and will aid in my research.” This sentiment was echoed by FG2P2, who stated *“I agree with everything everybody is saying, the workshops really, I really like that. There's a list of workshops so you can basically plan and register for each training you want to attend or that you feel like you want to attend, and my supervisor also advise me on, which ones are useful once to attend.”* A sentiment echoed by the other two participants in the focus group.

Schulze (2012) argues that the task of supervisors is to encourage learners to become critical and creative thinkers on their path to self-discovery and empowerment. This was evident in the response by FG2P4 to one of the questions posed during the focus group interviews, vis *“...what I actually meant was that the students should be, like now that you're a postgraduate student you should act more like a professional person, like a lecturer, like you should know more than the undergraduates. So when you are relating with your supervisor you should like have a better understanding as well, with what your supervisor is so I was in teaching you and you know explaining to you it should not be like OK, the supervisor needs to, start telling you what to do from the scratch.”*

Facilitated by the mandatory institutional ethical clearance submission required by FHDC, (prior to proposal submission), the student and supervisor would have engaged at length around the ethical aspects of their respective research projects in the induction phase. However, it is in this developmental phase of the research journey where abstract thoughts and intentions of ethical conduct during research becomes a reality.

A critical constituent for a postgraduate student's development is engagement with feedback. Postgraduate research is a complex task and cyclical process entailing deep learning (de Kleijn, Mainhard, Meijer and Brekelmans 2012); thus, feedback plays a critical role in identifying areas to improve, ultimately enhancing and supporting the learning process. In a research masters project, the importance of feedback is magnified since feedback represents the primary, sometimes the only form of formative assessment for Master students before the final assessment takes place.

In general, research participants in this study confirmed that supervision practices in the developmental phase are less ‘hands-on’, allowing the student to make mistakes, mentoring them into identifying and reflecting on mistakes. This is consistent with the view of Khene (2014), who advances that supervisors should attempt to help build their student's confidence by creating a safe space for them to question aspects of literature and research design, including the supervisor (respectfully so) if the need arises. A supervisor should attempt to refine the student's ability to develop a critical eye for their research by critiquing their work. However, the critique in whatever format used should be as empathetic and as personal as possible to build the student's confidence rather than break it down. Our findings allow us to deduce that this is at the core of humanizing pedagogy in the developmental phase.

5.3 Launch phase

Furthermore, the findings of this research study suggest that in the ultimate phase of the research journey, the students begin to develop their own academic identity and realize their full potential. We noted that some students were not immediately aware of the power shift, even though the student took the ‘lead’ whilst the supervisor shifted to a back seat, guiding the refinement of the final postgraduate research stretch. This is illustrated by a quote of FG1P1, who when speaking about his supervisor, stated *“She drives the bus and sometimes she allows me to drive the bus. So, it's that continuous two-way that we've got. And then she would tell me, listen, you are the driver now. We've got this schedule, and I took it from there”*.

Responses from the participants of this study allowed us to deduce that definite timelines or fixed schedules did not characterize this phase. Instead, each student's unique circumstances and disposition dictate when the student will transition into the next phase - graduation. Moreover, data from the two research participants (FG1P4 and FG2P3) who were in the process of their final write-up allowed us to deduce that these students are showing signs of confidence in their ability and starting to find their voice. FG2P3 offered in this phase, more so than in previous phases, there is a sense of urgency: *“...we do have a responsibility to show up, to be on time, to give feedback to our supervisors”*. Significantly, Khene (2014) argued that this phase should signal the supervisor to step aside and give the student command of the research space to reflect knowledge and the confidence to write. However, this still happens under the supervisor's guidance, with the student at the center of the process, creating a humanizing supervisory environment. Our research participants confirmed this.

It is worth noting that FG1P4, one of the students in the final phase (work in for examination at the time of this study), expressed an understanding of the supervisor's schedule that students in earlier phases did not articulate. Concerning

communication in the final phase, he mentioned, *“I think it's also for my responsibility to report correctly [timeously] in terms of having issues or delays or always keeping that communication line open, knowing and then supervisor also informing you if there are huge deadlines that she needs to attend to”*

Consistent with the experience of Khene (2014), our research participants reported that in this final phase of the research journey, facilitation is hands-on and hands-off in approximately equal proportions, as the student only needs to refer to the supervisor for a second opinion and ultimate approval, as opposed to assistance with the development and management of features of the project. Discussions between the student and supervisor are predominantly about student progress, technical issues and administrative matters. The focus shifts towards publication, and the supervisor assists the student with identifying opportunities to showcase their work and try to find funding to present at conferences or perform additional research activities. Regarding this, FG2P3 expressed frustration *“I feel that they [supervisors] should be more proactive when it comes to helping students to get the right funding. You know if the students have the right frame of mind, and with a relaxed mind, they will be productive. Not working to publish three to four papers, and you're [the student] still struggling to have a laptop. A supervisor should be able to help students in that regard because you've been producing, you've been fighting, like bringing money somehow into the system and then you are still struggling even to write the next publication because you don't even have the right materials”*.

Contemplating this, our study highlights the importance of having good administrative skills to be a successful supervisor. We deduce that coordination and planning are essential skills supervisors require to support students, thereby humanizing postgraduate education. Considering the preceding discourse, and a sentiment shared by FG1P4, which was, *“I'm saying it quite confidently because we've run this thing for two and a half years through COVID we've done this electronically and it was frustrating in the beginning, but we had to push through. And only now do we see that it is actually beneficial because the whole world is moving in that direction.”* We are also able to conclude that in the wake of the COVID-19 lockdown and the growing dependence on technology, it has become imperative for supervisors to possess proficient technological acumen. This proficiency enables them to navigate unforeseen crises, such as the COVID-19 pandemic or any other unexpected disruptions.

5.4 Validation

To ensure the trustworthiness of our findings, we employed several validation strategies. Data triangulation was achieved by collecting data from two different faculties (FAS and FEBE), allowing us to compare perspectives across different academic contexts. Member checking was conducted by sharing preliminary findings with participants to verify our interpretations accurately reflected their experiences. Peer debriefing sessions among the researchers helped challenge assumptions and refine the analysis. Additionally, we maintained detailed audit trails of our data collection and analysis processes, including recordings and transcripts of focus group discussions, to ensure transparency. Data saturation was reached when no new themes emerged from the focus group discussions, indicating sufficient data collection for our analysis.

6. Limitations and future research

In our study, we observed no significant correlation between the duration a student has been a postgraduate and their current phase. For instance, FG1P1 and FG1P4 held postgraduate status for an equivalent period. Nonetheless, participant responses indicate that FG1P1 was positioned in the launch phase, while FG1P4 was in the induction phase. While our study was not specifically focused on investigating the reasons behind this disparity, it does suggest a potential avenue for future research in this area.

7. Conclusion

This study reflects on the three phases of the postgraduate journey and emphasizes the importance of self-awareness and metacognition in supervision practice. We have deduced that these are the two most fundamentally essential ingredients for success if one's goal is humanizing pedagogy in postgraduate education. In agreement with Khene (2014) that a humanizing approach focuses on dialogue as standard praxis, we believe that humanizing pedagogy in postgraduate education is not an attempt to integrate, accommodate, or assimilate postgraduate students within the institutional structures - or even into social practices that could leave them feeling marginalized or discriminated against. Instead, the practices of both supervisor and students should facilitate the transformation of the structures and practices that potentially lead to exclusion.

Effective supervision is widely accepted as a primary contributing factor to successful and timely completion (Jones and Blass 2019). Therefore, a trend seen across South African institutions is that HE institutions provide more supervision training; however, Jones and Blass (2019) argue that much of this training focuses on compliance issues and degree processes, not on developing the supervisor's pedagogical approaches. Furthermore, the authors assert that being a successful academic does not equate to being an effective supervisor since good supervision requires an additional complex skill of being aware of one's insecurities and anxieties. This confirms the importance of the two critical ingredients mentioned above - self-awareness and metacognition.

Essentially, it is only when the supervisor becomes conscientious (self-aware and aware of student needs) and sensitive to the student that they are supervising that they can adequately guide them into conversing in the language of research and practicing the skill of research in their respective disciplines. Thus, our position on humanizing pedagogy is an approach where the focus of supervision is centered on the development of the postgraduate student rather than on the ultimate thesis product.

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