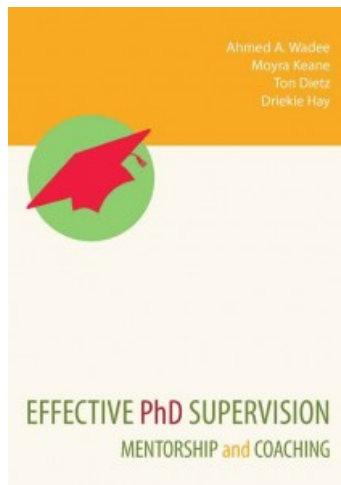


# Effective PhD Supervision - Chapter One: Introduction



## Foreword by Ms. M. Metcalfe

I am very pleased to present this second edition of the South Africa-Netherlands Research Programme on Alternatives in Development (SANPAD) Supervision Workbook.

The Workbook is yet another contribution by SANPAD towards improving the quality of supervision of doctoral students in South Africa. The Department of Higher Education and Training is particularly encouraged by these efforts, as they continue to enhance the overall quality of our PhD graduates and future academics. PhD qualifications are generally considered to be the first real entry points into the rigorous world of research. As a result, the focus on improving the academic experience of students at this level through improved supervision and mentoring will go a long way towards increasing the overall numbers of PhD graduates at our institutions.

It has become clear that although the number of students enrolling for PhD studies in South Africa has increased over the years, a large proportion of these students do not complete their studies. The reasons for this are many, among them the relationships between supervisors and their students and the overall quality of supervision. The difficulties often stem from the fact that not all supervisors have been properly trained for supervision duties. The mistake that is often made in higher education institutions across the globe is to assume that

every academic, by virtue of his or her experience in teaching or research, knows what is required to supervise postgraduate students. Studies show that this is not usually the case and, in fact, academics need proper training and support if they are to effectively carry out their supervision responsibilities. This Workbook will provide a useful guide for both supervisors and PhD candidates on how to structure their working relationships into better interaction and supervision experiences.

This book sets out to serve as a challenge for improving PhD supervision, mentoring and coaching both in South Africa and in the Netherlands. It can be utilised as a training manual for supervisors in both countries. The book is also easy to use, as it provides practical examples and scenarios. Moreover, it provides strategies on how to deal with some of the challenges commonly experienced by both supervisors and candidates during PhD supervision, mentoring and coaching. For these reasons, I offer my support for this publication.

Finally, I would like to thank the individual authors of each section of this book for their hard work in putting together such an important text. My sincere thanks also go to the people and institutions that have provided support for the production of this book. I really hope that this resource will stimulate and inform. In this way it will contribute positively to the improvement of our postgraduate students and research system.

MS M. METCALFE

DG: HIGHER EDUCATION AND TRAINING

## **Chapter 1 - INTRODUCTION**

### **1.1 Background to this Workbook**

SANPAD (South Africa-Netherlands Research Programme on Alternatives in Development) has had a proud history of over ten years in providing a platform for promoting a research culture in South Africa in partnership with the Netherlands. SANPAD's flagship programme has been its research capacity building programme for pre-doctoral candidates. Two hundred and thirty candidates were selected for the RCI programme during the period of 2002-2008; all candidates registered for their PhD degrees. Of these, 125 have graduated from their respective universities, and the remaining 105 candidates who

registered between 2005 and 2008 are expected to complete their PhDs and graduate by the end of 2010.

Following the first edition, the approaches to supervision and mentoring have evolved over time (with some new facilitators), but the essence of running the workshops from which this publication emanates has essentially remained the same. However, in this second edition, as implied by the revised title, we have included coaching as an important means of promoting graduate student success. This expands the coverage and includes numerous improvements to the original material. The first edition of this workbook filled an obvious gap at the time and met with gratifying reception from the academic community both in the Netherlands and Southern Africa, but there were areas that required further expansion and new information needed to be included. The PhD candidates, their supervisors and the facilitators in the Research Capacity programme (RCI) were a valuable source of information that motivated the authors to revise the first edition. Hence, the second addition was born. The changes in the second edition respond to the experiences of both the students and the facilitators in the SANPAD pre-doctoral programme and the input that we received from the broader academic community in South Africa over the last five years. More importantly, the book engages readers in dialogue and active reflection on the strategies of effective supervision of PhDs. Accessibly written, it encourages supervisors to reflect on and enhance their research supervision practice with a diversity of students on a variety of research projects. There is a special focus on research skills development and on supporting students through and beyond the examination process.

High quality postgraduate education is of central importance to the creation of the ever more highly skilled workforce that is necessary if our country and continent is to flourish in an increasingly complex and competitive world. It also brings great benefit to individuals and, through them, to society as a whole. Over the past decade we have witnessed some really quite dramatic and challenging changes in the shape, nature and volume of education at this level; changes that not only support our immediate needs for the workforce and knowledge-based economy but also reflect today's remarkable and rapidly advancing technology. Of course, such changes don't come for free and I am only too well aware of the various pressures to which postgraduate education is subject, pressures that in turn impact upon staff and students alike. It is against this backdrop that we

present this comprehensive workbook on supervision and mentorship.

The first edition was immensely successful, as is so evident from the positive feedback that we received. The book has been most notably recommended as reading for many postgraduate programmes on the African Continent and so has had a much wider remit. I am convinced that this new edition will be even more successful than the first, successful with both postgraduate students and their supervisors.

*'If only this book had been available when I was a PhD student'*

## **1.2 South African Perspectives on the PhD**

Since 1994, South African higher education has experienced a major transformation - particularly in redressing the educational backlogs and needs of previously disadvantaged students. A lot has been achieved in widening access for black students at the undergraduate level, specifically. However, with regard to postgraduate students and research output, the system is not yet making the progress desired, since insufficient numbers of black and women postgraduate students obtain doctoral degrees. Subsequently, institutions find it hard to reach staff equity targets and not enough black supervisors exist to serve as role models for black students. The Education White Paper 3 sounds the alert about the 'insufficient research capacity in higher education that is amongst others poorly coordinated and inadequately linked to postgraduate studies.'[\[1\]](#) This paper has also prioritised the access of black and women students to master's, doctoral and postdoctoral programmes. These race and gender imbalances are found in the demographic composition of researchers in higher education, research councils and private-sector research establishments.

The participation and completion rates of black postgraduate students are crucial in order to deal with employment equity targets and the creation of a new generation of scholars/academics in South Africa. Although progress has been made in terms of the staff compilation of higher education institutions and black academics now constitute approximately 30% of the higher education workforce, they still produce less than 10% of all peer-reviewed articles in the latter part of the previous decade. In terms of equity, black students constitute about 30% of all master's and doctoral enrolments in higher education. However, they only constitute about 20% of the postgraduate enrolments at the historically white

universities. It thus seems that in the case of research, which includes master's and doctoral degrees, it has been more difficult to break down the apartheid legacy than it has in terms of student access, research funding and staffing.[\[2\]](#)

The training of supervisors and promoters is becoming increasingly important as is the need to change dated ways of providing supervision. We need to consider how cultures meet, what kind of interactions should take place, and how applicable and acceptable the methods are for postgraduate students. The realities of a complex supervisory relationship, where colonial/West and African, the scholastically advantaged and disadvantaged, and a number of different cultures and languages interact, often with conflicting and deviating political and worldviews coming together, have not yet been researched sufficiently within the new higher education dispensation.

### **1.2.1 Complexities in postgraduate supervision**

The predominant assumptions and values that have characterised postgraduate supervisory practices in the South African higher education system are mainly derived from aspects of European culture. However, higher education is a narrow culture that rewards specific ways of knowing and instinctively discounts other ways of knowing (nonverbal, empathetic, visual, symbolic or nuanced communication are often not valued, for example). Accepted postgraduate supervisory practices usually conform to the traditional ways of knowledge creation, research paradigms and worldviews, and utilise one specific methodology to oversee postgraduate research. What has thus emerged in the South African higher education system is a lack of conscious cultural identity among postgraduate students in higher education, since in most cases a single common norm is advocated and the culture-conscious postgraduate student is viewed as frivolous.

### **1.2.2 Supervisory challenges in the Southern African context**

An array of challenges still face postgraduate supervision in the South African context, amongst them, inadequate academic literacy and writing skills, power relations, and inadequate preparation in research methodology.

#### **1.2.2.1 Academic literacy skills**

A great area of concern is the inadequate academic literacy levels of postgraduate students whose mother tongue is not English, as it is expected from them to write and articulate their ideas at the level at which they are working and thinking. Working in another language clearly hinders this. Often students need to translate what they hear and read. This slows down postgraduate students' thinking and expression, impeding thought processes.

### **1.2.3 Power relations in postgraduate supervision**

Power relations between supervisors and students usually emanate from the authority position of the supervisor, exacerbated in the case of non-traditional postgraduate students who work in English as a second (third, fourth or fifth) language. In a multi-cultural supervisory relationship, it is imperative to reflect on whether pedagogical approaches to supervision and research, and the suggested values and outcomes underpinning these, are themselves culture- and value-free or a product of cultural ideologies. In the South African context non-traditional postgraduate students and those representing first generation postgraduate students are expected to fit into the culture and practices of historically advantaged (predominantly white) higher education institutions and are expected to assimilate into these institutions' beliefs and practices. This needs to be done with great sensitivity and to be built on a relationship of trust and respect. One way of achieving this, is to draw on Vygotsky's work on mediated learning experiences.[\[3\]](#)

Vygotsky, a founding theorist on socio-cultural learning issues, reminds us that all uniquely human or higher mental functions are transformed social relationships which emerge and are shaped in the course of joint activities with others. The crux of the matter is that what people come to know, that is, how they learn to learn, to think and to act in particular contexts, is constituted in a relationship between their existing cognitive schemes, knowledge, skills and dispositions, the functional demands of the activities they participate in, and the forms of mediation they are afforded in such activities.[\[4\]](#) The implication is that, regardless of how much potential postgraduate students have, if they do not have opportunities to participate in activities that develop specialised forms of knowledge and functioning and/or are not afforded sufficient opportunities of mediation by others experienced in those activities, they are unlikely to develop such forms of functioning. Consequently, the notion of mediated postgraduate learning experiences and how they should be brought into supervisory practices

is becoming increasingly important for transforming the typical South African postgraduate context. This should be viewed against the fact that the gap in many of our postgraduate students' educational backgrounds and in their limited research training at undergraduate and honours degree levels needs to be closed by helping students along their way, in other words, closing the gap between what is known and what is to be known.

The following guidelines, drawing on the actual experiences and observations of exemplary supervisory practices within South African universities, should be considered when attempting to improve the practice of supervision: - Applying appropriate selection measurements which could include instruments that will assess the student's level of readiness to engage in rigorous postgraduate work.

- Considering the training of supervisors as a serious matter, since underprepared supervisors can hamper the quality of postgraduate work, retention and success rates. Training should include aspects such as technical, personal, legal, ethical, administrative and professional aspects of supervision.

- In addition, an induction programme for new supervisors in the field should be designed so that they gradually learn to supervise, ideally under a mentor, starting initially as a co-supervisor.

- Creating reporting opportunities for new supervisors in the field, so that they can receive constructive feedback on emerging problems and take corrective action before serious problems surface.

- Offering structured and regular opportunities for students to provide feedback on the quality and effectiveness of supervisors and on their experiences of the overall supervisory process. Such a practice will ensure that students at risk can be identified early so that necessary and timely interventions can be brought to bear.

- Ensuring that universities, faculties and departments have an updateable Handbook for Supervision which outlines the code of conduct for all involved. This will ensure that every supervisor and student is aware of and familiar with the often complex administrative regulations, requirements and deadlines that accompany this process.

- Holding supervisors accountable for the progress of supervision by requiring

regular reports on each student. A 'logbook' is often very helpful, as it keeps a record of all the meetings and interactions between student and supervisor as well as what should be done in terms of follow-up action and preparations for the next meeting.

- Looking carefully at the workload of supervisors and preventing a novice supervisor from supervising more than one or two students.

- Getting to know the postgraduate student early on. Although this is hard for cases of supervision at a distance, for those students who are nearby and on-campus, it is important to get to know the students.

- Building the confidence of the postgraduate student: students should be encouraged to put ideas on paper. This will help the supervisor to judge whether the student understands the nature of the doctorate and will provide opportunities for positive feedback.

- Dealing effectively with pressures in the supervisory relationship: there are the pressures of the developing relationship and pressures to get the student completed in the designated timeframe. Students need to understand that they must work hard early on and have regular meetings. At the end of a meeting, the next meeting needs to be scheduled.

- Keeping to timeframes. Supervisors have a responsibility to get students to stick to timelines. Establishing this habit early on in candidacy is crucial.

- Monitoring student focus. The supervisor needs to keep one step ahead of the student to keep the student from being sidetracked. If the student is going off in different directions, pull them back into focus.

- Encouraging publications from the beginning. Supervisors should encourage students to publish, although this will depend on the student and the topic. If a student is able to be published in a good journal, this will help the examination. But getting published needs to be balanced with getting the thesis written. Writing the thesis should be the first priority.

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Next Chapter: Chapter Two - <http://rozenbergquarterly.com/?p=1863>



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[1] The Education White Paper 3 (DoE 1997)

[2] Bawa & Mouton (2002): 320, 328

[3] Vygotsky (1978)

[4] Bradbury (1993)