Doctoral Education in Context

Perspectives from Africa

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CHAPTER 18

Supervisee to supervisor: 'Trial and Error'?

Caroline Kinuu Kimathi

The **Republic of Kenya** is on the eastern coast of Africa. With a population of about 50 million, it is the 27th most populous country in the world and 7th in Africa. There are 61 universities in Kenya, 36 public and 25 privates.

The **United States International University-Africa** (USIU-Africa) is in Nairobi, Kenya. It is the most diverse university in East and Central Africa with about 6 000 students from over 60 nations. USIU- Africa is the only university in sub-Saharan Africa whose degree programmes are accredited by both the Kenya Government and the American Government. USIU-African has six schools and 140 faculty members. In 2020 USIU-Africa had 161 doctoral enrolments and 26 doctoral degrees were awarded.

1. Introduction

Completion rate and satisfaction of doctoral candidates is partly dependent on the quality of the supervision the doctoral candidates get from their research supervisors (Bitzer, 2011). The supervisor's role is therefore crucial in that the supervisor is expected to meet the candidate's needs and expectations; the expectations of the university and the quality demands of a doctoral degree (Bøgelund, 2015). Wichmann-Hansen et al. (2012) observe that a good supervisor should create a conducive environment which enables personal and academic growth in a PhD candidate. Therefore, doctoral supervision, which is regarded as one of the highest levels of scholarly activity within the academic

profession, puts high demands and expectations on the supervisor (Fillery-Travis et al., 2017).

Vilkinas (2002) views doctoral supervisors as managers of the PhD process of their students but is also keen to conclude that the role of a supervisor as compared to that of a business manager is more complex, because of the autonomy and (often) little experience of the student, thus an additional role of an integrator is expected of the supervisor. The supervisor is required to integrate all these roles to ensure the PhD process is successful. In addition to the various roles a supervisor has, Lee (2008) argues that the power of a supervisor lies in their own experiences as a doctoral student. These experiences could have positive or negative implications on the approach they take in their supervisory styles. Gatfield (2005) intimates that supervisory management styles change according to the different stages of the supervisory period and process. Consequently, the supervisor must keep abreast of the changing dynamics within the supervisory process.

Teferra (2015) further indicates that the quality of the PhD defines the quality of a country's research standards. Countries, especially those in Africa, are thus seeking to improve the quality and standards of their PhD programmes to match those of the universities in countries of the Global North, through investigating contextually appropriate doctoral supervision models (Cross & Backhouse, 2014). These models are dependent on universities' capacities to provide adequate and knowledgeable supervisors to students.

As part of this drive towards quality assurance in doctorate programmes, universities have put measures in place such as how many postgraduate students a supervisor can take on at a time. The Kenyan Commission for University Education (CUE) guidelines indicates that "the maximum number of students an academic staff shall supervise in any academic year shall be 5 masters and 3 doctorates" (CUE, 2014, p. 63). However, these regulations have not been strictly followed as is evident in the recent case of Jomo Kenyatta University of Agriculture and Technology where it was discovered that some supervisors had more than 15 doctoral students to supervise in an academic year (Kihu, 2019). Many of these students do not progress through the system quickly. Alneah (2018) explains why some doctoral students in Kenyan universities were registered for a decade and frustrations by supervisors was cited as one of the major reasons as to why the doctoral completion rate in Kenya was so low. Heavy supervisor workloads, different supervisor orientations, and poor communication between supervisors and their students were reported as leading to high student dropout rates (Omunga, 2017).

In addition to this guideline, in 2014 CUE directed all universities to hire only PhD holders as teaching staff from then onwards. Those who were already

teaching without doctoral degrees were given a grace period with a deadline of October 2019 (CUE, October 2014). However, this goal is yet to be achieved.

Amid all these directives, guidelines and challenges, this chapter seeks to understand the place of the supervisor in ensuring that quality of the PhD degree is upheld. How do doctoral supervisors get inducted into doctoral supervision? Are they aware of their roles and responsibilities? If they are, how did they learn of their roles and responsibilities? Amundsen and McAlpine (2009) describe learning how to supervise as trial by fire, to indicate the challenges the novice supervisors encounter and to also communicate that much needs to be done to ensure supervision quality.

Novice doctoral supervisors in Kenya are often confronted with having to supervise with little experience, and no mentors or formal training programmes to guide them (Ayiro & Sang, 2011; Mbogo et al., 2020), despite international trends showing increased formal training, monitoring and accountability of doctoral supervisors elsewhere (Halse, 2011; Emilsson & Johnsson, 2007).

This chapter therefore investigates how supervisors learn to supervise and the challenges they face at the beginning of their careers as supervisors. The study reported here also sought to understand where and how the supervisors in selected Kenyan universities learned how to supervise.

2. Background to the study

There is a growing body of literature on the importance of supervision to doctoral success and on the development of doctoral supervision capacity. Wichmann-Hansen et al. (2012) postulate that for a PhD process to be successful, there must be reciprocity between the key players. Their paper gives insights on how supervisors and their students can work together to ensure a successful supervision process and ensure quality of the dissertation. Kumar and Stracke (2007) noted that feedback given to PhD candidates impacted on the relationship of the supervisor and the candidate depending on the type of feedback used in the supervision process. Bitzer (2016) explained the contextual, administrative and academic as factors that influenced doctoral provision and education; and supervision of the candidates was intertwined in these three factors, thus emphasising its importance. Pyhältö et al. (2015, 2012) highlighted challenges that both the supervisor and doctoral student face, and their perceptions of the doctoral supervision process. These studies all indicate the importance of the supervisor as a key player in doctoral education and supervision.

Lee (2008) investigated how doctoral students were supervised, and what influenced the methods, and styles of supervision. Amundsen and McAlpine's

(2009) study on learning supervision provides insights on the perceptions of new academicians and the challenges they face when they begin their roles as doctoral supervisors. Similarly, Turner (2015) explored the experiences of new academics as they begin their careers as doctoral supervisors, the challenges they face as they develop their expertise and experiences in doctoral supervision. Turner's paper was especially insightful for the current chapter in its exploration of how more needs to be done to induct new academics. Gatfield (2005) highlighted the different supervisory management styles that ensured high quality supervision and the changes within the supervisory period.

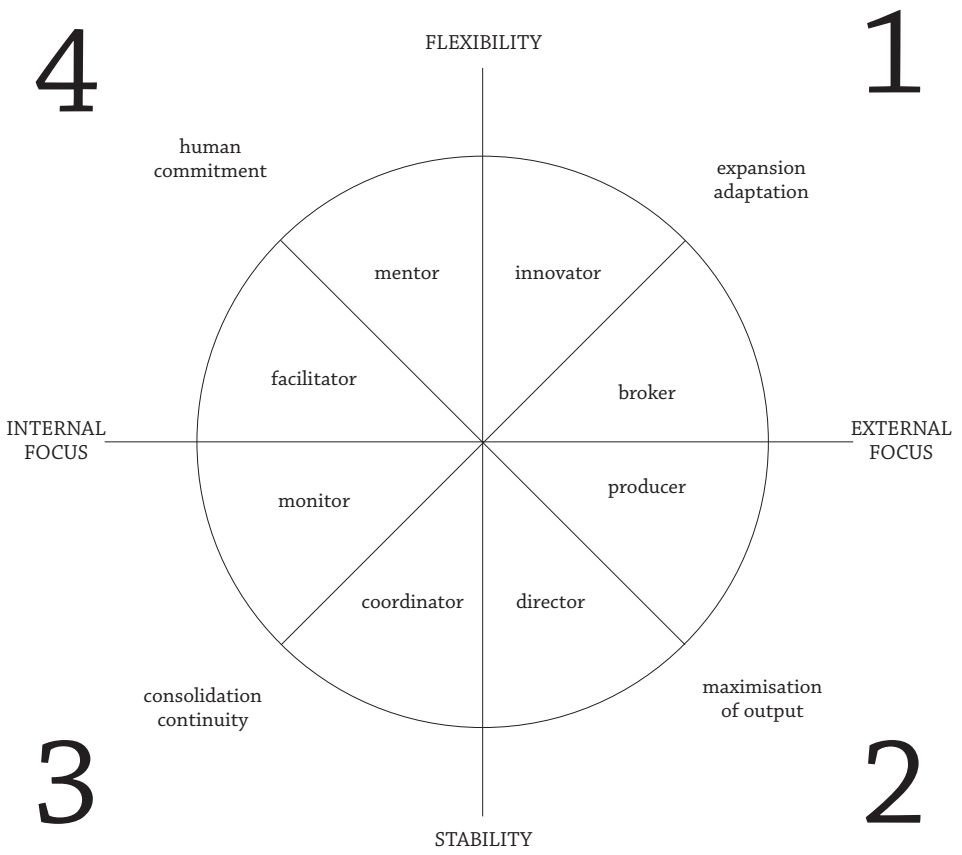
However, many proposed models of doctoral supervision might not always fit African contexts well. The models and programmes, according to Szanton and Manyika (2002) as seen in their review of PhD programmes in sub-Saharan Africa, are models that heavily depend on the guidance, knowledge and input of the supervisor. Cross and Backhouse (2014) noted that the various doctoral education models that were available did not seem to meet the needs and demands of African universities. They proposed a framework to evaluate the suitability of doctoral educational models within African contexts; one of the key elements in the framework being resources and funding as a way of ensuring quality supervision.

Szanton and Manyika (2002) are of the opinion that this framework might not be economically viable depending on the number of enrolled candidates. They noted that an individual supervision model made it possible for institutions that were struggling financially to offer doctoral programmes. This places the role of the supervisor on the African continent as one that is crucial in the doctoral programme.

This chapter used the modified competing values framework (Vilkinas & Cartan, 2001) which was a modification of the management framework by Quinn et al. (1996). This framework was modified to incorporate the role of the supervisor, who is viewed as a manager, as well as an integrator – the balance required to operate successfully (Vilkinas, 2002, p. 132). This model is used as a representation of the expectations and roles of a supervisor.

Although models of supervision from the Global North may not always be suitable for Global South contexts, this framework outlines the roles that supervisors take on, particularly that of an innovator and broker, to ensure effective supervision by adapting to diverse settings and environments.

Figure 1: Modified competing values framework (CVF) (adapted from Vilkinas & Cartan, 2001, p. 178)



3. Methodology

This study reports on semi-structured interviews that were conducted with eight participants. The interview questions were partly influenced by the theoretical framework, especially on whether the supervisors were aware of their roles in the PhD process. The eight purposively sampled participants were drawn from various universities in Kenya namely: The Catholic University of Eastern Africa, Machakos University, Kenyatta University, Mount Kenya University, Laikipia University and Daystar University.

The participants were supervisors who had supervised at least one doctoral candidate to completion or were currently supervising a doctoral candidate.

The participants had completed their doctoral degrees in different years, therefore having varied supervision experience. They had also acquired their doctoral degrees from different universities in the world. In addition, they were also from different disciplinary backgrounds. These variations were targeted to ensure diversity in the issues under investigation and to also find out whether novice supervisors from different academic disciplines and regions in the world went through the same challenges and experiences when not adequately or formally inducted.

4. Results and discussion

As a background to making sense of the data, Table 1 provides an overview of the eight participants from various universities in Kenya included in the study.

Table 1: Overview of study participants

Participant	Gender	Year PhD attained	Master's supervised to completion	PhD candidates supervised to completion	PhD candidates currently supervising
Participant 1	Male	2014	5	3	4
Participant 2	Male	2013	2	0	1
Participant 3	Female	2017	3	0	1
Participant 4	Female	2014	7	1	2
Participant 5	Male	2003	31	12	6
Participant 6	Female	2013	12	1	3
Participant 7	Male	2010	25	9	6
Participant 8	Male	2012	8	0	1

Participants' perceptions of their roles as supervisors were discussed to ascertain knowledge of their roles and supervisory practices. Results indicated that the participants were aware of their roles, but more needed to be done to improve awareness of their importance in the supervision process. Lee (2008) indicates that a supervisor plays a definite role in students' success. The supervisor must be aware of their roles to qualify to supervise a doctoral candidate. One of the participants (Participant 6) indicated that their university normally took them through their responsibilities as supervisors and this helped her a great deal especially as a novice supervisor.

According to Vilkinas (2002), the supervisor is a manager and plays various roles to ensure that the supervision process runs smoothly and that by the end of the process the PhD candidate produces a dissertation of quality and within the time stipulated. In their interviews, all participants stated that their role was to help the candidate formulate the topic, give instruction on methodology,

and generally guide the candidate in all areas of the dissertation writing as described here by Participant 6:

> *I ensure that the thesis is put together; I give direction, but I can't do work for them; ensure we meet often albeit challenges and prepare them to defend their proposals and dissertations.*

Participant 2 touched on supervisors being mentors and said their major role was to encourage the doctoral student, as many students dropped out because of feeling discouraged by their supervisors, while others felt that the PhD was too tough for them. This response gave insight to the concept of liminality in the doctoral student experience (Maistry, 2015; McKenna, 2017). This phase calls for the supervisor to be there for the student, to ensure that their candidate can find their way out of this liminal phase and complete their degree successfully and within the minimum period. Pearson and Kayrooz (2004) argue that there is more to supervision such as progressing the candidature, mentoring, coaching the research project, and encouraging student participation in academic practice.

The participants were asked how they learned to supervise. From the participants' perspectives, a new supervisor with no mentorship and guidance from experienced supervisors would struggle which could affect the completion rate of PhD candidates being supervised by novice supervisors. It is therefore the responsibility of the university to ensure that new supervisors are adequately informed of their role. Participant 3 noted a lack of clear guidelines to assist in supervision:

> *Immediately I joined the university, I was given a doctoral candidate to supervise and I had no mentor as I am actually the first supervisor. Mine is trial and error, asking colleagues and reading a few books here and there. My co-supervisor is not a full-time staff member in my university, meaning that we have limited time to discuss the candidate's work. The candidate has not graduated.*

Amundsen and McAlpine (2009) note that most supervisors learned how to supervise through experience. Participants in this study had many challenges at the beginning, but eventually figured out how to supervise through trial and error. Most participants asserted that they learnt how to supervise through experience. They said that each candidate came with their varied personalities and the way a supervisor handled one candidate would not be the same way

they handled another. They argued that since they were endowed differently as individuals, different styles of supervision were necessary for each candidate. According to Pearson and Brew (2002), there is a need for effective supervision through training and supervision development to deal with such differences.

This assertion was confirmed by Participant 2 who has supervised two master's students to completion and is currently supervising one doctoral student:

> *I pity my first student that I supervised because I did it just the way my supervisor had done it with me. This I realized later was subconscious. At the time I thought this was the best way. I was more of an editor than a supervisor and the student had to follow my ideas and everything I wanted. However, I left for South Africa (post doc) and did training on supervision and I was shocked at how wrongly I had done supervision. When I came back, I was different. The training opened my eyes.*

This participant highlighted that supervisors also learn how to supervise from the experiences they had as students themselves. These sentiments were also echoed by other participants. This view is confirmed by Lee (2007), who asserts that novice supervisors may copy their doctoral supervisors in the way that they were supervised. This is an indicator of the need for some form of formal training to induct novice supervisors to contextually relevant supervision. Participant 3 articulated this aspect as follows:

> *I learnt more of my supervision from my master's first supervisor than my PhD supervisors. My master's first supervisor was German. She was a very good listener, kind, and well informed in her area. You simply had to keep time. I use those skills from her.*

Participants also indicated that some universities had unstructured mentorship programmes whereby new supervisors worked under the supervision of seasoned supervisors until they were ready to supervise on their own. However, sometimes the seasoned supervisor would be so busy that the novice ended up supervising the doctoral candidate alone. The progress report expected of the mentor could take a year or more. The importance of mentorship in research supervision cannot be overemphasised. Robertson (2017) views mentorship as an important role in doctoral supervision, with collaboration as a key ingredient in the mentoring of novice supervisors by experienced supervisors and in team supervisions.

Finally, participants indicated that they learnt how to supervise through asking and inquiring from their colleagues. This is in line with the findings of Amundsen and McAlpine (2009), who postulated that new supervisors relied heavily on their colleagues for guidance, input and advice on how to supervise. Participant 8 noted:

> *Anytime I felt stuck I would quietly approach a colleague whom I knew would not embarrass me for not knowing. Sometimes it would be one not in my field of study. To begin with I found it a bit embarrassing, but I realized everyone was at one point asking someone.*

The participants all accepted that one learns on the job and that the input and suggestions of other colleagues have kept their supervision alive. They also agreed that discussing with colleagues on the challenges they were facing always provided relief and assistance on how to deal with the challenges. Eraut (2007) suggests that most people gain experience and informal training in their workplaces through the assistance of colleagues and others around them in their workplace.

Participants were asked what challenges they faced when they first began supervising master's or doctoral candidates. All the supervisors noted that ensuring that the candidates completed in time as a challenge. This aspect of supervision was characterized by a myriad of issues such as lack of doctoral student funding and huge supervisor workload, among others.

Participants further indicated that the lack of funding was a major concern to them and their students. Most doctoral candidates personally finance their studies, and the doctoral programmes are relatively expensive. There is little funding allocated to doctoral studies in Kenya as compared to other universities in Global South countries like South Africa. Lack of funding forces doctoral candidates to drop out or take too long to complete. For a new supervisor, who is still not familiar with the challenges, this could be discouraging and disillusioning. Participant 8 commented on this challenge:

> *I was allocated one PhD candidate to supervise (first supervisor) five years ago yet this student has never graduated. He keeps dropping out and coming back which is now really discouraging. The worst is when you cannot be given another because you have not seen the only one given to you to completion and the university doesn't want to understand. I am stuck with my student.*

The funding problem is also highlighted by Szanton and Manyika (2002) as they acknowledge that universities are poorly funded, thus the model that seems to work for most sub-Saharan African universities is one of individual research under the guidance of one supervisor. While this is often the go-to model within these universities, it is debatable whether this model is necessarily the best suited. A distinction needs to be made between financial considerations, and quality teaching and learning at the doctoral level. Due to this lack of funding, most doctoral candidates must work to fund their studies, forcing them to be part-time students. This leaves them with little time to meet with their supervisors as required, which slows the completion process.

Participants also found it difficult to juggle supervising many students (master's students included), their teaching workload, and other administrative duties. This workload seems to be the norm for universities in Kenya, especially the recently chartered universities where there are reports of under-staffing (Mukhwana & Koskei, 2017). This issue should be seen within the wider context of growing numbers of doctoral candidates and other degree programmes at universities all over the world. Participant 7 explained the situation as follows:

> *Immediately after I completed my doctoral studies, I left for South Africa for a post-doctoral programme which lasted six months. I then came back to Kenya, got a job at the university and was immediately appointed head of department. I felt overwhelmed, but we still have very few PhD holders in our university. The work is too much.*

Most of the participants found themselves in a similar predicament and had to also struggle with multiple responsibilities as they learned how to supervise. The participants furthermore received relatively low remuneration by the government, with poor working conditions and infrastructure, which has caused a brain drain of Kenyan PhD holders to countries that provide better pay and working conditions (Mukhwana & Koskei, 2017).

Working with co-supervisors (mentors) that are insensitive to the novice supervisors' needs and the needs of the candidates being supervised was also cited by some of the participants as a concern. Some participants said that their mentors behaved like small gods; they ordered them around since they held senior offices. This situation eventually created a destructive relationship between them and the supervisee.

Participant 4 noted that she looked for someone to mentor her in her department, but no one was willing to do so as the experienced supervisors were already overwhelmed with their own workloads. She had to 'sink or swim'. She

finally managed to supervise one doctoral candidate to completion, but she felt that she had struggled too much.

Finally, most participants talked of having low self-esteem at the beginning because they were venturing into the unknown and so much was expected of them despite their limited knowledge. There were no clear guidelines to assist them. They were also always anxious when giving feedback to students. Participant 8 explained:

> *I had to learn to trust my guts! As a doctoral student I had a terrible supervisor, whom I dreaded so much, so I didn't even know how to behave with my student. All I knew is that I did not want to be like my most dreaded supervisor to my student.*

Participants also had to deal with their own relationships with the candidates and enforce work ethics. Some described some of their students as 'cheeky and lazy'. This made working with them somewhat stressful, especially learning to create that balance in the relationship between cordial and being firm on the quality of their work.

5. Conclusion

The transition from being a doctoral candidate to becoming a doctoral supervisor is a pertinent issue that has not been given much weight in Kenyan universities. With the increasing demand for quality doctoral degrees, supervision must be urgently addressed.

This study established that there were no definitive methods or programmes set for inducting novice supervisors into the doctoral supervision process in most Kenyan universities. A few universities have a set of guidelines on the responsibilities and roles of postgraduate supervisors, while others have vague mentorship programmes. The findings also suggest that many supervisors did not fully understand the diverse roles of a doctoral supervisor, which hindered the progress of the supervision process. The few novice supervisors who understood their roles either learnt through their past experiences as doctoral students with their supervisors or 'trial and error' with their first postgraduate students. This situation has caused frustration to both the novice supervisors and the students, causing many students to drop out of their PhD programmes or relocate to other universities abroad. The completion rate has also been affected, with some students taking as many as ten years to complete the doctoral programme.

What is still not well established is whether the experienced doctoral supervisors are aware of their roles and responsibilities as supervisors. Further research should be done on the experiences of doctoral students who have been supervised by novice supervisors in African universities. A comparative study should also be carried out to investigate the quality of doctoral supervision done by a novice doctoral supervisor who has gone through a formal induction programme and an experienced supervisor who did not go through any induction programme as is the case of most seasoned doctoral supervisors in Kenyan universities.

In conclusion, for Kenyan universities to ensure doctoral degree quality that is recognized worldwide, the vital role supervisors play must be recognised. Workshops targeting supervision, courses ensuring development for supervisors and induction courses and workshops for novice supervisors with strong mentorship programmes must be put in place. Clear guidelines on the doctoral supervision process must also be drafted by the faculties and followed to minimize uncertainty of both the supervisors and the doctoral candidates.

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