Doctoral Education in Context

Perspectives from Africa

Edited by
Jan Botha, Liezel Frick, Nompilo Tshuma

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4 Eccleston Place, Somerset West, 7130
Cape Town, South Africa
info@africanminds.org.za
www.africanminds.org.za

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CHAPTER 19

Enhancing feedback for effective supervision in the doctoral journey

Fraj Chemak

Tunisia has a population of 12 million. The country has 13 public universities with a total enrolment of 256 564 students (http://www.mes.tn/page.php?code_menu=13). Doctoral enrolments in Tunisia reached 9 478 in 2022 (MERST). Doctoral graduates increased from 726 in 2008 to 1 114 in 2016, with a total number of 7 130 graduates for the same period (Beït al- Hikma, 2019).

The **University of Carthage** (UCAR) was created in 1988. UCAR has 3 191 academic staff members working in 33 faculties and institutes, with a total student enrolment of 32 458 in 2022. UCAR has eight doctoral schools, 56 research laboratories and 18 research units. The national agricultural research system relies on more than 50 research structures (laboratories and units) hosting more than 500 PhD and master students (http://iresa.agrinet.tn/index.php/fr/companies/statistiques).

1. Introduction

In 2016, a master's graduate decided to enroll in a doctoral programme and she wanted to keep working with me as her supervisor. I was glad to have her as a PhD student. It was my first experience supervising a PhD and I felt responsible for providing her with conditions favourable for successful completion of her postgraduate programme. While I regard her success as mine, too, the experience should nevertheless be assessed because I think that supervising a PhD student goes beyond obtaining the graduation mainly for two reasons. First, as supervisors we are responsible for building students' capacity to potentially join the academic community, to teach students and to do research. Second, the

doctoral journey is also a two-way commitment that takes more than three years,[1] where the supervisor-student relationship could be the main factor for enhancing or hampering the student's conduct in their future social and professional environment. The mission of supervision extends beyond the academic realm, potentially concealing fundamental aspects of diversity in behaviour, including variations in values, beliefs, and practices (Grant, 2005).

In the absence of any local training in the doctoral supervision process and professional insight into what the key elements of achieving this mission are, I attended the DIES/CREST short course for novice doctoral supervisors. Attending this course constituted an opportunity to learn about the doctoral supervision process, to get a clear idea on the different stages thereof and to recognise the substantial responsibility of this mission. Specifically, this course gave me approaches and tools to reflect critically on my supervisory experience for future improvement. Therefore, as this was my first experience supervising a PhD, the main question driving me was 'Am I on the right track?'

Doctoral studies are the most important level of postgraduate education to improve scientific knowledge and to make effective advancement of research. Student and supervisor are the two main actors in this process and their joint commitment is crucial for success in the journey, sometimes under constrained and restrictive regulation, material and moral conditions. Globally, the supervisor–student relationship is mutually influential, with the quantity and quality of feedback playing a critical role in determining the success or failure of the doctoral journey. Jackson et al. (2021, p. 1) define feedback as, "information from a provider, intended to inform a receiver about the quality of his/her work in order to be able to see where improvements might occur and to signpost issues to be carried into future work". Feedback may be given orally and/or in written form to convey a message that should be considered by the receiver. In doctoral education feedback is a relevant mechanism for supporting doctoral students from the proposal design to the thesis defence and to facilitate them becoming self-regulating (Xu, 2017; Basturkmen et al., 2014). Supervisors, as the main feedback providers, are expected to improve students' performance and to assist them in the transition from being knowledge consumers to knowledge producers. Therefore, the quality and the quantity of feedback may shape the supervisor–student relationship. The supervisor fulfils not only an academic mission, but also a social role (Kleijn et al., 2014).

1 In Tunisia the legal period for finalising the doctorate is 3 years, but students might request an exemption of 2 years. In the case of the National Engineers School of Tunis the average number for the period 1996-2017 reached 5.5 years (Beït al-Hikma, 2019).

Ensuring the quality of feedback is a particularly important issue within the context of African universities where the funds set aside for research and the development of supervisory skills are limited. Hence, supervisors should play a double role in helping their students overcome scientific difficulties, as well as logistic constraints and sometimes personal issues. Feedback serves as a vital mechanism for clarifying roles and fostering strong supervisor–student relationships, grounded in a shared understanding between both parties.

Regarding my first experience, I am tried to meet all the needs of my student. I provided feedback on research advancement (e.g. methodology, research field, result analysis, chapter organisation, writing and submitting papers), as well as all the other activities (e.g. attending trainings, workshops and conferences). My feedback focused mainly on how to proceed in any stage of the PhD journey and to overcome eventual difficulties. I thought that I was sustaining a good relationship with my student, but I wondered whether I was meeting her expectations.

Within this context, this chapter provides a reflective account of the suitable gateway to sustain clear and effective supervisory process towards developing a good and trusting relationship between the supervisor and the doctoral candidate. As feedback is one key element of this relationship, I will describe doctoral students' perceptions of their study experiences at the National Institute for Agricultural Research of Tunisia (INRAT) using the Feedback Expectation Tool (FET) (Appendix B). Hence, the remainder of this chapter unfolds in three sections. The first section presents a theoretical overview of supervisory feedback. The second section is devoted to methodology. I present and discuss the results in section three, whereafter I conclude with key recommendations to improve the supervisory process in my own context within Tunisia.

2. Theoretical perspectives on feedback

Supervision remains the main pillar of the doctoral process. It is a key determinant of time-to-candidacy and the decision of undertaking a doctorate. Moreover, supervision may also determine the quality of acquired skills and the degree of student satisfaction during the doctoral journey (Pyhältö et al., 2015). Supervision quality has also been identified as a determinant in enhancing knowledge, boosting skills and guiding students' careers (Lee, 2018; Mainhard et al., 2009; Lee, 2008; Vilkinas, 2002), and traits of the supervisor–student relationship (Jenkins, 2018; Yeatman, 1995; Wadesango & Machingambi, 2011). In the United Kingdom, the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) stipulates that supervisors should possess recognised subject expertise and have

the necessary skills and experience to monitor, support and direct research student work (Wadesango & Machingambi, 2011). The supervisor assumes defined roles that should fit student expectations, which is not always the case and thus leads to problems.

Being a key factor in the doctoral journey, the supervisor–student relationship might foster progress in the PhD project and enable student satisfaction (Golde, 2000; Kam, 1997; Marsh et al., 2002; McAlpine & Norton, 2006). But it may also reveal problems that leave candidates struggling in achieving their goals (Mainhard et al., 2009). This relationship presents in various styles and may reveal tensions within the relationship (Wadesango & Machingambi, 2011; Lee, 2008). In the absence of a memorandum of understanding (MoU) to provide transparency within the relationship for both parties, differences in expectations may cause problems and may lead to disappointment (Jenkins, 2018). These differences in expectations might also become more complicated due to the students' origin (domestic, international) and to the disciplines (Egan et al., 2009; Pyhältö et al., 2015). Disagreement in this relationship might hamper the student's progress. Moreover, such disagreements in expectations might result in the institution's reputation and credibility being damaged (Jenkins, 2018). A two-way commitment and joint understanding about the supervisory relationship may provide the opportunity to develop proactive strategies, avoiding eventual conflicts and enabling doctoral candidates to succeed in their thesis journeys with enthusiasm and resilience (Pyhältö et al., 2015)

Feedback from supervisors is critical to building the supervisor–student relationship (Wadesango & Machingambi, 2011) and plays an important role in assisting students' development throughout the academic research journey (Wang & Li, 2011). The quantity and the quality of the feedback provided by the supervisor are determinants in guiding the advancement of doctoral research. By interviewing 40 postgraduate students, Wadesango and Machingambi (2011, p. 31), revealed that 75% of respondents were not satisfied with their supervisors' feedback in relation to their research work. Students estimated that they were not getting enough time with their supervisors, observing how some supervisors are overworked and/or have an outdated approach (Wadesango & Machingambi, 2011, p. 36). Perception of feedback depends on the perceived supervisor–student relationship. Kleijn et al. (2014, p. 346) found that, from students' perspectives, interpersonal affiliation is most important to perceive learning and to feel supported and motivated by their supervisors; but the role of feedback perception is most important in situations in which such a relationship could not be established.

Kumar and Stracke (2007) developed a model for analysing feedback based on three fundamental functions of speech (referential, directive and expressive). In the referential feedback function, supervisors address editorial, organisational and content concerns; while directive feedback includes suggestions, questions, and instructions. The expressive function of feedback comprises of praise, criticism and supervisors' opinions. Based on this model, the authors found that expressive feedback benefitted supervisees the most, and the interaction between both parties played an important role for the induction of the student into the academic community. By investigating the supervisory process of international doctoral students, Wang and Li (2011) identified two tendencies in students' feedback experiences: 'frustrated/uncertain', and 'inspired/confident'. The authors invited supervisors and international students to openly discuss their expectations of the supervisory relationship as well as approaches to academic writing and feedback strategies. Also, East et al. (2012, p. 3) posit that "What the student wants to receive by way of feedback may sometimes differ from what the supervisor gives, thereby creating potential tensions in the supervisor-student relationship and marring its effectiveness".

Feedback facilitates navigating the mission of supervision and enables a successful doctorate journey. Feedback could be more effective when supervisors also consider the feedback of the doctoral candidates themselves and their expectations about the supervision process. Listening to students' concerns about this process is crucial for improving it and reinforcing the supervisor–student relationship. In the rest of the chapter, I provide evidence of such a process.

3. Methodology

The Feedback Expectation Tool (FET) constitutes an important means for providing insight into the supervisory process and categorising the supervisor–student relationship. Developed and implemented by Stracke and Kumar (2020), the FET features 13 conflicting statements facilitating the dialogue between supervisors and doctoral students. Using the FET, I carried out face-to-face interviews with 13 PhD students and 3 post-docs, constituting a group of early-career researchers from different departments of the National Institute for Agricultural Research of Tunisia (INRAT). The objective is to gather their views about feedback and their perspectives on their relationships with their supervisors. Based on their own experiences, I asked the participants to identify key issues they faced with feedback through indicating their position from A=1 to B=6. I asked my student to provide her point of view as well using the FET.

In order to analyse the results, I restricted the responses of the participants to 3 positions only: (i) 'A', if the response was 1 or 2, (ii) 'Between', if the response was 3 or 4, and (iii) 'B', if the response was 5 or 6. Through comparing my student's point of view to those of the other participants, I sought to investigate the quality of our supervisory relationship. Being a first-time doctoral supervisor, I approached the results with the understanding that they could guide me to strengthen my professional relationship with my student and provide quality feedback on the work done.

4. Results and discussion

I first analysed the results of the other participants before looking at my own student's responses. Table 1 below provides an overview of the results obtained from the group of early-career researchers, as well as that of my student. The green components of Table 1 highlight where the view of my student is the same as that of the majority of participants' responses. Yellow aspects are indicative of concordance between my student's view and the second majority of participants' responses, while the red parts show significant difference between my student's response and the view of the majority of participants.

Table 1: The perception of PhD students and post-docs on feedback using the FET

Statements	My student	Group of ECRs	Split of the responses received		
			A	B	Between
The supervisor should give feedback on any aspect of the thesis (for instance, content and language). The supervisor should give feedback only on aspects the candidate asks about.	Between	Between	5	2	9
Feedback is an instruction to revise. Feedback is an invitation to revise.	Between	Between	6	0	10
The feedback must tell the candidate what they did well and what they did not do well. The feedback must give a clear direction for the candidate's future work.	Between	Between	3	6	7
The supervisor is responsible for handling issues about language. The candidate is responsible for handling issues about language.	B	Between	0	7	9
Handwritten and electronic feedback is the best way to give and to receive feedback. Oral feedback is the best way to give and receive feedback.	A	Between	5	2	9

Statements	My student	Group of ECRs	Split of the responses received		
			A	B	Between
The supervisor should give, and the candidate can ask for, feedback about sections and chapters that are not finished. The supervisor should give, and the candidate should only ask for, feedback on sections or chapters that are finished.	Between	Between	3	2	11
The candidate should regularly ask for feedback from the primary supervisor. The candidate should regularly ask for feedback from all their supervisors.	Between	Between	1	6	9
The supervisor and candidate can ask other people (for instance, peers, other academics) to give feedback. The supervisor and candidate can only ask the supervisor team to give feedback.	Between	Between	3	4	10
The candidate should handle conflicting feedback from the supervisory team and decide the right direction to take. The main supervisor should structure conflicting feedback from the supervisory team in a way so they can give the candidate clear direction.	Between	Between	2	1	13
Feedback is effective when it highlights the strengths of the candidate's work. Feedback is effective when it highlights the weaknesses of the candidate's work.	B	Between	0	0	16
The candidate should expect to get feedback quickly. The candidate should not expect to get feedback quickly.	B	Between	3	1	12
The supervisor and the candidate should consider emotions when giving and receiving feedback. The supervisor and the candidate should not consider emotions when giving and receiving feedback.	A	Between	5	2	9
The candidate should think about the supervisor's culture when receiving feedback from them. Supervisors should provide feedback that is culturally appropriate to the candidate.	Between	Between	1	2	13

The results displayed in Table 1 showed that the majority of the student participants did not exactly agree with both statements (A or B), with most responses falling somewhere in between. The perceptions of my student were similar for eight statements (see Table 1 rows in green). Regarding the statements that showed differences, it is important to highlight that the perceptions of my student align with that of the second majority of the remainder of students for three statements (Table 1 rows in yellow). Hence, the perceptions of my student differ with the others only for the two statements (statements 10 and 11, see Table 1 rows red). Regarding statement 10, my student considered feedback to be effective when it highlights the strengths of the candidate's work. This result aligns with my own practice because I usually highlight what she has

done well to encourage her and to build her confidence. Regarding statement 11, my student expected that the candidate should not expect to get feedback quickly. I do not agree with her on this point. I think that supervisors should provide feedback quickly, which is what I am trying to do with her. There might be confusion about the word 'quickly', because my student is dynamic and she wants to progress her work at her own pace, as expressed in her observation:

> "*for the PhD student the time is determinant, unfortunately the majority of people does not know that for a PhD student,1 year =1 day = Student disappointed*".

Some early-career researchers seized this opportunity to talk to me about their doctoral journey. Some of the students expressed their satisfaction as follows:

> *My supervisor monitors my research progress perfectly and usually encourages me to be able to supervise graduate student and to write scientific articles.*

> *I am Post Doc. The doctorate journey is very good. My supervisor helped me at the different stages of my journey and sometimes helped me to overcome some personnel issues.*

> *My supervisor is my friend, we discuss about all issues, always he encourages me, he supports me, and he advances me to wait for an academic post as researcher.*

Others were less satisfied, as the following responses indicate:

> *My supervisor did not encourage me, she did not allow me to attend conferences, and she wants to present my results.*

> *PhD is good but supervisors speculate and look only for their own interests.*

> *Doctorate journey is a lot of stress, sometimes I feel ill, there is no human relationship and there is no employment perspective.*

Examining these insights and varying expectations through the FET highlighted a strong interest in deeper reflection on the supervisory process. Central to this reflection is the enhancement of feedback, which plays a crucial role in identifying the strengths and weaknesses of both students and supervisors.

5. Conclusion

Tunisian universities presently do not provide any training programme towards for improving supervision skills and enhancing the pedagogy of feedback. Focusing on feedback is a relevant approach to bring together students, supervisors and the institution around suitable strategies to improve the supervisory process. The FET has surprised my colleagues, as well as the participating early-career researchers, as a novel and interesting approach to investigate the supervisor–student relationship. The findings of this study highlight the importance of gathering student feedback about the supervisory process. The FET is useful for ascertaining the expectations of both students and supervisors in developing productive student–supervisor relationships and learning about possible systemic gaps in need of address. Despite it having been a small-scale study that, therefore, does not allow us to generalize beyond the scope of the actual investigation, an important lesson from this study is being mindful of the student–supervisor relationship as a key factor for a successful doctorate journey.

In Tunisia, research on doctoral studies remains limited. More research around the determinants of the high level of doctoral attrition rates in Tunisia is necessary (see Appendix A and Beït al-Hikma (2019)). Such studies might provide more insights about the relevant knowledge and skills that Tunisian supervisors need.

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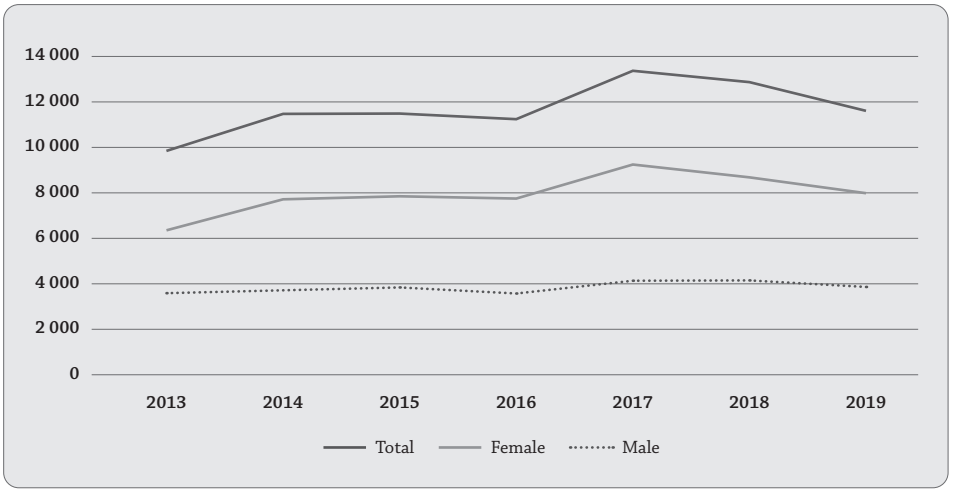
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Appendix A

Brief overview of the national doctoral system of Tunisia

In Tunisia, doctoral studies were implemented ten years after the creation of the first Tunisian university at the end of the 1950s. These studies are mainly conducted under the supervision of the Ministry of higher education and scientific research and under double supervision in the case of specific domains like the sectors of agriculture and health. The budget allocated to support scientific research in 2019 reached only 135 million TND, which represents around 0.6% of national GDP. This budget is expected to finance more than 600 research structures (laboratories and units) which host more than 11 629 PhD students, of which two thirds are female (Figure 1) and 36 290 master's students. Despite this potential, the report of the Tunisian Academy of Sciences, Letters and Arts, *Beït al-Hikma*, pointed out a higher attrition rate of doctoral students which accounted for two thirds, up to 73%, in 2013 (Beït al-Hikma, 2019).

Figure 1: Evolution of enrolled number of doctoral students



Source: UNESCO Statistics

In 2020, the budget reserved for the national agricultural research system, which is dedicated to funding 51 research structures involving 342 PhD students and 376 master's students, did not exceed 12%. Statistics (Table 2) show that the number of doctoral students halved between 2016 and 2023. The two main factors explaining this regression are the lack of funding and the low

number of supervisors. Indeed, it should be noted that if the research structure should ensure all the logistics and operating costs for carrying out research work, it does not offer a research allowance to the doctoral student who receives a government grant (TND 250/ month) for three years only. This lack of funding and the weak perspective in the academic sector do not encourage students to embark on this doctoral adventure. Therefore, facing the challenge of a doctoral journey in such conditions relies only on student willingness and the responsibility of the supervisor who will often establish problematic relationship and remains decisive for the progress and the success of the research work.

In Tunisia, the supervisor–student relationship begins when the student selects a supervisor upon enrolling for a PhD, often without a clear understanding of the key dynamics and expectations of the relationship. In fact, before submitting their application, the student has to get the prior agreement of a supervisor. The doctoral committee cannot oppose this choice unless they judge the supervisor's expertise as ill-suited to the requested scientific profile. Hence, this relationship may be filled with conflict and tension, leading sometimes to student attrition which in some way explains the decreasing number of enrolled PhD students between 2016 and 2023 (Table 2).

Table 2: Evolution of number of students enrolled in agricultural higher education in Tunisia

	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
PhD	721	699	786	605	576	342	342	333	237	241
Master	376	336	456	352	311	376	263	259	284	291
Total	**1097**	**1035**	**1242**	**957**	**887**	**718**	**605**	**592**	**521**	**532**

Source: Institute of Agricultural Research and Higher Education

Appendix B

Feedback Expectation Tool (Stracke & Kumar, 2020, p. 283)

Feedback is at the heart of any learning and teaching process. Giving and receiving written feedback during a doctoral candidature is a complex task that covers many issues. This *Feedback Expectation Tool (FET*) lists some important issues that the supervisor and candidate may face when giving and receiving feedback. The *FET* helps each to state their beliefs and expectations clearly and transparently. The *FET* aims to encourage discussion. Its objective is to establish a working relationship that is respectful during the research degree.

Each supervisor and candidate should complete the *FET* separately. They should discuss their responses at a supervision meeting. Both can use the *FET* at any time during the candidature, and as often as agreed. Both can add statements to the *FET* if these statements suit the supervisor's practice and the candidate's needs.

Use the statements below to provide your views about feedback. The statements are on a spectrum.
Circle the dot point on the far left if you strongly agree with the statement on the left.
Circle the dot point on the far right if you strongly agree with the statement on the right.
Circle one of the other dots along the spectrum if your view is somewhere in between.

1	The supervisor should give feedback on any aspect of the thesis (for instance, content and language).	●–●–●–●–●–●	The supervisor should give feedback only on aspects the candidate asks about.
2	Feedback is an instruction to revise.	●–●–●–●–●–●	Feedback is an invitation to revise.
3	The feedback must tell the candidate what they did well and what they did not do well.	●–●–●–●–●–●	The feedback must give clear direction for the candidate's future work.
4	The supervisor is responsible for handling issues about language.	●–●–●–●–●–●	The candidate is responsible for handling issues about language.
5	Handwritten and electronic feedback is the best way to give and receive feedback.	●–●–●–●–●–●	Oral feedback is the best way to give and receive feedback.
6	The supervisor should give, and the candidate can ask for, feedback about sections and chapters that are not finished.	●–●–●–●–●–●	The supervisor should give, and the candidate should only ask for, feedback on sections or chapters that are finished.
7	The candidate should regularly ask for feedback from the primary supervisor.	●–●–●–●–●–●	The candidate should regularly ask for feedback from all their supervisors.
8	The supervisor and candidate can ask other people (for instance, peers, other academics) to give feedback.	●–●–●–●–●–●	The supervisor and candidate can only ask the supervisory team to give feedback.
9	The candidate should handle conflicting feedback from the supervisory team and decide the right direction to take.	●–●–●–●–●–●	The main supervisor should structure conflicting feedback from the supervisory team in a way so they can give the candidate clear direction.
10	Feedback is effective when it highlights the strengths of the candidate's work.	●–●–●–●–●–●	Feedback is effective when it highlights the weaknesses of the candidate's work.
11	The candidate should expect to get feedback quickly.	●–●–●–●–●–●	The candidate should not expect to get feedback quickly.
12	The supervisor and the candidate should consider emotions when giving and receiving feedback.	●–●–●–●–●–●	The supervisor and candidate should not consider emotions when giving and receiving feedback.
13	The candidate should think about the supervisor's culture when receiving feedback from them.	●–●–●–●–●–●	Supervisors should provide feedback that is culturally appropriate to the candidate.

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