

## Quality Assurance of the Supervision Process of Doctoral Education at the Zimbabwe Open University.

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IJMSSSR 2022

VOLUME 4

ISSUE 4 JULY - AUGUST

ISSN: 2582 - 0265

**Abstract:** Studies have shown that half of doctoral candidates who enroll for studies complete their studies (Golde, 2001). One of the sources of long time-to-degree rates include the supervision process related factors. European University Institute (2017:15) underlines the critical role of research supervision by expressing that, "... the success of a PhD usually stands or falls by the quality of supervision." Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU) quality assures the supervision process for doctoral education to provide confidence to stakeholders that service is provided as carefully planned. This research sought to provide evidence on the efficacy of the quality assurance system in providing accountability and continuous improvement of the supervision process of doctoral education at the Zimbabwe Open University. Data was generated through focus group discussions with doctoral candidates from three regional clusters. Six in Bulawayo and Marondera cluster and five at the Midlands cluster. Three supervisors were interviewed from the three clusters, two members of the Higher Degrees, and two from the Quality Assurance Directorate. Institutional documents were examined to determine if there were policies and procedures on supervision of doctoral education. The research found that the supervision process is documented although some dimensions such as the contact time between candidates and supervisors is not determined. Candidates were satisfied with the supervision process premised on progressive approaches to supervision. The researchers recommend Higher Degrees organisesupervisors' and candidates' development workshops and stipulate minimum supervisor-candidates contact times.

**Keywords:** quality assurance, doctoral supervision

### 1.0 INTRODUCTION

Studies have shown that half of doctoral candidates who enroll for studies complete their studies (Golde, 2001). An even smaller number complete their research projects within three years (Lubbe, Worrall and Klopper, 2005). There are several sources of the poor and high time-to-degree rates that include chief among others, the supervision process related factors. European University Institute (2017:15) underlines the critical role of research supervision by expressing that, "... the success of a PhD usually stands or falls by the quality of supervision." LERU (2010) notes that effective supervision is an important part of teaching with bright graduate outcomes and timely completion thus avoiding wastage of time and resources. Supervision executes the institutional strategy in a manner that should benefit the institution and candidate through quality for the former and timely completion for the latter. Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU) quality assures the supervision process for doctoral education to provide confidence to stakeholders that service is provided as carefully planned. Doctoral education supervision process is also quality assured as a way of continuously improving the process so that some of the quality indicators can be improved on.

### 2.0 STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

ZOU put in place a quality assurance system on the supervision of doctoral education. However, no evidence has

been produced to demonstrate the efficacy of the quality assurance system for accountability and continuous improvement purposes.

### 3.0 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This research study focuses on the questions;

- To what extent does the institutional supervision framework support the progress of doctoral candidates at ZOU?
- How progressive are the institutional supervision approaches to doctoral education?
- How supportive are the supervision approaches adopted by supervisors in the research training at ZOU?
- What are the identified roles of the doctoral supervisors at ZOU?

### 4.0 REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

#### 4.1 Conceptual framework

##### Quality

Clinical and Laboratory Standards Institute (2020) defines quality as the degree to which a set of inherent characteristics fulfills requirements. The definition includes characteristics of doctoral education as building the concept of quality. The characteristics make a distinction between services. Two doctoral programmes may have the same approach, but may be distinguished by the characteristics they have. Clinical and Laboratory Standards Institute's definition elaborates that a quality service must satisfy standards set by institutions, quality assurance bodies, professional bodies and academic bodies. This shows that quality does not reside in characteristics, but that these should satisfy the purpose for which they were designed. The satisfaction of requirements alludes to the existence of stakeholders with stated or implied needs. Education is a transformative process, because learning leads to permanent change in behaviour. From that perspective, doctoral education stakeholders view quality as having the ability to produce astute researchers. In this research quality is viewed as the totality of the attributes of doctoral education that fulfill the current and future needs of internal and external stakeholders.

##### Quality assurance

Harvey (2020) defines quality assurance as 'the collections of policies, procedures, systems and practices internal or external to the organisation designed to achieve, maintain and enhance quality'. The definition shows the elements of quality assurance. The use of quality assurance mechanisms enables the institution to provide traceable evidence of policies, procedures and practices for clear accountability to the state and other stakeholders. Documenting policies and procedures provides confidence to external stakeholders that service provision is executed according to plan and reduces variability in processes and products. Adherence to documented policies, procedures and systems facilitates the development of a quality culture as the beliefs, values and work ethic starts with a common accepted and repeated way of doing things (Byrne et al 2013). Quality assurance of the supervision process entails documentation of the supervision processes, procedures and how these are fulfilled in practice.

##### The supervision process

Ballard and Clanchy (1993) define research student supervision as a blend of academic expertise and the skilled management of personal and professional relations. The definition of student supervision concedes the dominating part played by the supervisor in the supervision process. Initially, the supervisor has to come up with enriching academic activities that will aid the candidate to sail through the research process. Secondly, the supervisor has to manage the relations between him/her and the candidate. The definition places emphasis on two aspects, that is, academic activities and the relations between the two parties. Laske and Zuber-Skerritt (1996) point out the importance of communication in the research supervision. It can be argued that relations are better managed through effective communication between the candidate and the supervisor. The academic activities alluded to by Ballard and Clanchy, may include face-to-face or one-on-one interaction between the supervisor and

the candidate, the candidate doing specially assigned assignments by the supervisor, taking part in research conferences, taking part in professional development activities, taking part in teaching assistant assignments, and doing research for publications in collaboration with the supervisor as articulated by Kansas State University (2018). Research supervision in this research is conceived as the process of blending institutional strategy for research teaching with the supervisor's expertise in sharpening the doctoral candidate's scientific inquiry skills towards certification in research. The centrality of the supervisor's expertise in the supervision process needs no further emphasis, and a new question then arises on whether there is a clear-cut theory that supervisors can adopt in the supervision process to make it more systematic and scientific too.

Any meaningful practice is guided by policy pronouncements. Supervision is no exception. The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (2011:17-20) promulgates a list of indicators for doctoral supervision. These act as signposts of best practices in doctoral supervision.

- Higher education providers appoint supervisors with the appropriate skills and subject knowledge to support and encourage research students, and to monitor their progress effectively.
- Each research student has a supervisory team containing a main supervisor who is the clearly identified point of contact.
- Higher education providers ensure that the responsibilities of research student supervisors are readily available and clearly communicated to supervisors and students.
- Higher education providers ensure that individual supervisors have sufficient time to carry out their responsibilities effectively.

The list of indicators reflect on how the national quality assurance body can guide practice in doctoral supervision. The indicators also highlight how the supervision process can be monitored from the input phase, that is, the quality of the supervisors. The process is managed through team approach to the supervision process and also relating to the support that supervisors have to provide to candidates. The last indicator relate to the monitoring of how supervisor provide services to the doctoral candidates. This research's first port of call under this section focuses on the documentation of the quality assurance process on the supervision of doctoral candidates. The investigation moves on to understand the practice of doctoral supervision.

#### 4.2 Codes of Practice

Salzburg Principles of doctoral training stressed the need for transparent, binding and mutually shared and agreed rights, roles, and responsibilities of the doctoral supervision actors (EUA 2010). To ensure that the rights and responsibilities are adhered to, parties sign contracts (Sursock 2018). For fair practices to be achieved, graduate schools need to articulate clear codes of practice and guidelines on the conduct of doctoral supervision as proposed by Partnerships for African Social Governance Research (PASGR, 2017). The codes of practice have already been adopted in African university as reported by PASGR (2017) and Australian universities (Helfer and Drew, 2019). These outline key regulations, requirements, and guidelines on supervision of doctoral candidates. The guidelines provide for the whole organization of the supervision arrangements including the clear paradigm shift from the master-apprentice model to the team supervision approach (PASGR, 2017). In Zimbabwe, the Women's University in Africa has a Handbook for PhD Researchers 2018-2019 which outlines the rights and responsibilities of doctoral candidates and supervisors. It also draws the programme of activities from year one to year four. ZOU (2013) Handbook and Regulations for Higher Degrees articulates the admissions, induction, supervision, rights and responsibilities of the supervisors, candidates and the institution. It is through documentation that quality culture can be entrenched in the teaching system. EUA (2013) explains that quality culture in doctoral education is established through propagation of systems which are meticulously executed. This part of the research will then interrogate to what extent the documented quality system is adhered to.

#### 4.3 Team supervision

LERU (2014) stresses the importance of team supervision by noting recommending that candidates should be overseen by a supervisory team which may involve experts beyond the awarding university. The team supervision approach is evident in the Zimbabwean context as outlined in the ZOU Handbook and Regulations for Higher Degrees (2013) and Women's University in Africa Handbook 2018-2019 (2018). The ZOU (2013) states that every

candidate is supervised by one core-supervisor aided by a co-supervisor and one technical expert in the area of specialization. The Women’s University (2018) states that the doctoral candidate has a principal supervisor with the associate supervisor offering second opinion. ACUP (2012) notes the complication of effectively achieving team supervision. The report explains that Sub-Saharan African universities have challenges in retaining senior academics who can run PhD programmes and research teams an issues described by MacGregor (2013) as a conundrum, where there is a need to produce more PhD graduates but for that to happen there is need to have sufficient supervisors.

The challenge of lack of supervision affects most universities in Africa (Mohamedbhai, 2013). Institutions have been found to use sole supervision (British Council, 2018). The question of suitably qualified supervisors posed challenges in Mozambique, Cross et al. (2015) where some candidates got assistance from one supervisors. The authors aver that in instances where there was team supervision challenges were noted related to the over-reliance on the guidance of one supervisor. A further complication was noted where the two supervisors were actively involved, there was lack of coordination between the two. An example was where a candidate was twisted and turned between the two. In the example, the second supervisor asked the candidate to abandon the topic and proposal developed with the aid of the first supervisor leading to the development of a new topic and proposal. Upon going back to the first supervisor, the first supervisor asked the candidate to revert back to the first arrangement and this led to a delay of two years. The power differential was felt as the supervisor from the better resourced funding institution’s voice had the power to stall progress (Johansen et al., 2019).

Mohamedbhai (2013), ACUP (2013) and IAU (2010) propose to address the challenges through collaborations nationally, regionally and internationally still sound attractive In view of benefits and challenges of team supervision, this section interrogates how team supervision is executed in the ZOU.

**4.4 Models of Doctoral Supervision.**

The success of doctoral candidates has been described as being influenced by input factors such as funding EUI (2017), the research environment Cross et al (2015), supervisor’s competencies among other factors. Personal factors such as the motivation of the candidates have been found to be contributory factors to success and satisfaction (Sverdlik, Hall, McAlpine and Hubbard, 2018). According to Kumar and Kaur (2019), there is still little knowledge on the supervisory practices that are likely to lead in the promotion of intrinsic motivation in doctoral candidates to carry them throughout the doctoral research journey. In this research, consideration was given to the essence of models of supervision in order to interrogate the policy and practice of doctoral supervision in philosophical context of the institution.

Lee’s (2010) New Model of Doctoral Supervision

Lee (2010) propounded a new model to doctoral supervision. The model has five approaches. The model is diagrammatically illustrated below.

**Table 2.4: A framework of approaches to research supervision**

	PROFESSIONAL		PERSONAL		
	Functional	Enculturation	Critical Thinking	Emancipation	Relationship Development
Supervisor’s Activity	Relational progression through tasks	Gatekeeping	Evaluation, challenge	Mentoring, supporting constructivism	Supervision by experience, developing a relationship/team
Supervisor’s Knowledge and Skills	Directing, project management, negotiation.	Diagnosis of deficiencies, coaching	Argument, analysis	Facilitation, reflection	Integrity, managing conflict, emotional intelligence
Possible	Obedience	Role modelling,	Constant	Personal growth,	A good team member,

Student's Reaction	and organized negotiation.	apprenticeships	inquiry, fight or flight	reframing	emotional intelligence
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Source: Lee, A (2010). New approaches to doctoral supervision: Implications for educational development.

Lee (2010) proposes the functional approach to doctoral supervision. This approach involves developing skills that enable doctoral candidate to go through the research project and function as a researcher beyond the doctoral thesis. The approach proposes the development of skills such as planning, directing, resource mobilization, getting the work done and monitoring an approach valued by doctoral candidates (SuperProfDoc, 2017). One more important role played by the supervisor indicates to the availability. The supervisor was accessible to the participant. Doctoral supervisors should display advisory competencies that include guiding research and available to the candidate whenever needed. Kumar and Kaur (2019) explain that functional approach entail development of providing quality and timeous feedback.

The functional approach is effective where the supervisor is knowledgeable in the area of research of the candidate. Helfer and Drew (2019) observations in Australia where candidates expressed dissatisfaction with supervision due to lack of supervisors' knowledge of the field being supervised. Lack of knowledge in the candidate's area of research was found to exist in South Africa where Cloete, Mouton and Sheppard (2015) that sometimes had to supervise candidates outside their area of specialization thereby weakening the effectiveness of functional approach to supervision.

Grant, Hackney and Edgar (2014) explain that there are disciplinary boundaries, with divergent practices. Lee (2010) identifies the enculturation approach to research supervision. The approach revolves around the supervisor passing on to the doctoral candidate disciplinary research traditions, customs and beliefs (Grant, Hackney and Edgar 2014). The approach lends itself to traits of the master-apprentice approach where the doctoral candidate acquire professional and interpersonal knowledge within a discipline (Lee 2010). SuperProfDoc (2017) contends that communities of practice provided professional and personal learning, motivation and support. Jones (2013) corroborates on the importance of socialization into the research communities that boundaries are dissolved and the feeling of isolation is reduced. Jones elucidates on the importance of enculturation as an initiation process into the current and future environment by acquainting with the rules, culture, knowledge, skills, values and attitudes of the society they are about to join. Enculturation enables new members to function effectively without experiencing culture shocks along the way. While it is acceptable to learn disciplinary cultures and produce an expert in the discipline, these should not develop incompatibilities of working in interdisciplinary teams.

Critical thinking is one of the key skills doctoral candidates should develop during their programme (European Science Foundation 2012, Nerad 2012, OECD 2012, Rudd, Nerad, Morrison and Picciano 2008, and Irish Universities Association, 2006). Critical thinking approach to supervision that encourage analysis, suggestions and motivating for and against them (Lee, 2010). The origins of this approach to supervision are both dialectical and dialogic. Lee further explains that they are dialectic in as far as it looks for contradictions between or amongst theories. Dialogical in as far as analysis of theories leads to a discovery of the latent logic. The model is on point in developing the highly rated skill, described as a must by. It also suggests that activities such as critiquing and questioning the candidate may be used by the supervisor. It may also be inferred that they supervisors are experts and need to be trained to be able to conduct effective training on critical thinking, as suggested by the (Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education 2004). The need for critical thinking skills was demonstrated in a research by Nerad (2015) where it was found that 80% of graduates between 5-10years post-graduation testified that critical thinking skills were needed in their careers whichever area of occupation they were in, and development of the same skills was rated as very good by 75% of the participants. For critical thinking skills to be developed there is need for the right supervisory fit (Davies, 2019).

Lee (2010) proposes the emancipation approach. This approach involves supporting and challenging the doctoral candidate. Support fosters personal growth of the candidate, while challenge is meant for the candidate to reflect and independently articulate their own philosophy. Kumar and Kaur (2019) opine that respect and trust that candidates could work on their own at some stage were indications of emancipation. Crawford (2020) explains that emancipation supervisory practices are evident through championing self-regulation, categorizing priorities and completing calendar events. Data collection needs a lot of creativity where people skills are very important. Lee (2010) further identifies supervisor activities as including mentoring and supporting, while the supervisor

applies knowledge and skills such as facilitation and reflection. The doctoral candidate on the other hand achieves growth and reframing through awareness of his/her abilities and dispositions in research.

Lee (2010) identifies relationship development as the fifth approach that supervisors could adopt. Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (2015) contend that weak relationships between supervisor and doctoral candidates have been responsible for poor completion rates. Mafa and Mapolisa (2012) used the analogue of the mid-wife and pregnant woman to describe the relationship that should subsist between supervisor and doctoral candidate. Close, careful watching (Mouton 2012), assisting and assuring are words which may be used to describe the action of the supervisor if equated with the mid-wife Barnes et al (2010) concluded that candidates rated highly supervisors who were accessible, helpful and caring.

Davies (2019) reported that candidates perceived the qualities of supervisors as affective relatedness. Kumar and Kaur (2019) made similar findings where they found that doctoral candidates perceived the psychological dimensions such as support, availability, interest and enthusiasm as effective supervisory practices. The importance of relatedness was demonstrated by Lovitts (2001) who found that 70% of students who dropped out cited personal problems. Crawford (2020) contends that it is the role of the supervisor to carry cognitive load of the candidates. Doctoral candidates are often confronted with challenging and frustrating issues associated with the different levels of their thesis. There are academic issues and personal issues to deal with especially for the ZOU doctoral candidate who is a distance learner. European University Association (2007) explains that poor relationships can arise because of unarticulated and unmet expectations on the part of the doctoral supervision parties, that is, supervisors, candidates and institution. In relationships are rights, roles and responsibilities which should be fulfilled. Lee (2010) explains that the supervisor is expected to supervise the candidates using experience and developing relationships and teams. The supervisor uses the knowledge and skills of managing conflict, integrity and developing emotional intelligence in the candidate, with expected outcomes of the same from the candidate.

After going through several models of supervision, it looks compelling that there is no one ideal approach to doctoral supervision (Lee 2012). Also, lessons can be derived on how the supervision process is organized and practices emerge from the theoretical background. These include rights, roles and responsibilities of supervisors, candidates and institutions to guide relationships (EUA 2010) and the need for professional development of supervisors. Mieccka (2010) concurs with these ideas by pointing out that quality of supervision is determined by selection of supervisors, infusing co-supervision, training supervisors, regulating the supervision load, and participation of external supervisors in the supervision process. The themes are dealt with in the following sections.

#### 4.5 Roles of Supervisors in the Doctoral Supervision Process

Lee (2010) from table 2.1 on the framework of approaches to research supervision, a number of roles can be derived, such as tutoring, assessment, support, mentoring among others. Mafa and Mapolisa (2012) recommended teaching (qualitative and quantitative research) counselling, coaching, collaboration, guiding, encouraging and monitoring to the list of duties of doctoral supervisors.

Brown and Atkins (1988) produced a list of the roles and descriptions of that supervisors display during the supervision process.

**Table 2.5 : Role of supervisors as described by Brown and Atkins (1988)**

Role	Brown and Atkins role descriptions
Director	Determining topic and method, provide ideas
Facilitator	Providing access to resources or expertise, arranging field work
Advisor	Helping to resolve technical problems, suggesting alternatives
Teacher	Teaching research techniques
Guide	Giving feedback, identifying critical path for data collection

Critic	Of design inquiry, of draft chapters, of interpretations of data
Freedom giver	Authorizes candidate to make decisions, supports candidate's decisions
Supporter	Gives encouragement, shows interest, discusses candidate's ideas
Friend	Extends interests and concern to non-academic aspects of the candidate's life
Manager	Checks progress regularly, plans work, gives systematic feedback,
Examiner	Internal examiner, interim progress reports

This section of the research investigated which descriptors are used by ZOU doctoral candidates on effective doctoral supervisors, in comparison to those offered by Brown and Atkins (1988).

### 5.0 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND DESIGN OF THE STUDY

The qualitative methodology enabled the researcher to explore and gain understanding (Creswell 2007) of the nature supervision of doctoral education at the ZOU. The nature of supervision can be understood in the context in which participants work (Yin 2011). The qualitative research was ideal in establishing the effects of quality assurance which might have been difficult through experimental designs (Goodyear et al 2014). The maximum variation sampling was employed not to generalise the population (Onwuegbuzie and Collins, 2007), but to get insights from a multiplicity of groups with different experiences regarding the supervision process of ZOU doctoral candidates (Holloway and Galvin, 2017 and Yin, 2011). The sampling procedure was used to identify common patterns cutting across the spectrum of doctoral education stakeholders at ZOU (Patton, 2015). Data was generated through focus group discussions with doctoral candidates from three regional clusters. Six in Bulawayo and Marondera cluster and five at the Midlands cluster. Three supervisors were interviewed from the three clusters, two members of the Higher Degrees, and two from the Quality Assurance Directorate. Institutional documents were examined to determine if there were policies and procedures on supervision of doctoral education.

### 6.0 PRESENTATION OF RESULTS

Analysis of the supervision policies and practices was conducted on the ZOU Handbook and Regulations of Higher Degrees' provisions and the supervisory styles, roles and competencies as they shape the relationship between the supervisor and the candidate.

#### Team supervision

The ZOU Higher Degrees Handbook and Regulations (2013) Sections 3.2.0.0 to 3.4.0.0 provide and explain the roles of the supervisory team, the core and co-supervisors and the mentor respectively. The section outlines that the core supervisor has the overall responsibility of the progress of the candidate with the assistance of the co-supervisor, while the mentor is the subject specialist whose interests rests on the technical depth and breadth of the content of the project. In an interview the same conditions were described by HDD2 that every doctoral candidate must be supervised by at least two supervisors, one being the core, the second being a co-supervisor. Johansen, et al. (2019) made similar findings, where they found that team supervision was in place with well clarified and understood responsibilities between the main supervisor and the co-supervisor. Contrary to these findings, in Mozambique, Cross et al. (2015) reported that doctoral candidates received assistance from one supervisor. The situation of one supervisor has to be understood from a contextual perspective. While the same authors pointed out that there were lack of sufficient numbers and quality to supervise all the doctoral candidates, this challenge was being addressed by the use of visiting scholars from Sweden. Plausible to understand that even with the international aid the institution was receiving there were not enough supervisors to cope with the demand (Elmgren et al, 2016).

In a clear demonstration of the codes of practice, the ZOU Handbook and Regulations (2013) Appendix I is a contractual agreement between the supervisor and the institution in protecting the rights of the candidate.

Appendix II is a contractual agreement between the institution and the candidate in protecting the supervisor. Similar observations were made in Australia by Helfer and Drew (2019) where they found that team supervision was facilitated by the existence of codes of practice for the supervisor and the doctoral candidates. The codes of practice create a platform for clear delineation of the relationships that should subsist between the supervisor and the candidate, absence of which creates despondency as observed in Kenya, the British Council (2018)

In emphasizing the importance of team supervision, HDD2 contended that;

*Every candidate has two supervisors to assist in the research. There is a core and co-supervisor. Each supervisor has a maximum of five candidates. The reason is that the weaknesses of one supervisor may be mitigated by the other supervisors.*

The findings in this research concur with Garwe (2015) who found that supervisors were at different levels of technical knowledge and ability of supervision in Zimbabwe. Some supervisors are researchers and supervisors of repute yet others are at entry point of research and supervision thus they still need guidance on how to supervise, and this they can do with the help they give to candidates as guided by the more senior core supervisor. The HDD further explained that team supervision is not only meant for candidates, but also for supervisors.

One interesting concern raised by doctoral candidates was the issue of conflicting comments made by supervisors,

*MAFGDP4: The requirement that candidates be supervised by at least two supervisors is most welcome as this aids in the quality of the research process. There are instances where there have been conflicting views on the research process.*

The participant draws attention to the fact that team supervision has its own challenges that have to do with group dynamics. These have been reported also by Johansen et al (2019) who observed that there are power differentials in team supervision, but they have not really been a cause for concern. A serious case was reported in Tanzania by Cross et al. (2015) where lack of coordination resulted in a candidate being tossed between two supervisors. The issue involved the more powerful supervisor being from the funding country asking the candidate to change the research proposal yet the supervisor from the host institution insisted the research was in line with the national needs.

While there are candidates who reported that there was a supervisory team in place, some participants reported that they had one supervisor. In one focus group discussion with 6 participants, 3(50%) reported that they had one supervisor;

*MFGDP1 “One supervisor was assigned to guide me”, MFGDP2 “one supervisor was appointed to guide me”, and MFGDP3 “the supervisor that was allocated to me...”* At least one candidate from the other two research sites made similar comments. This shows that while the majority had two supervisors, some did not have two supervisors during their study periods. The British Council (2018) noted that in some institutions in Sub-Saharan Africa sole supervision was more prevalent than team supervision, owing to lack of sufficient numbers and quality (Garwe, 2015) of supervisors might have been the challenge.

The challenge of lack of supervision seems to be with ZOU as much as it affects most universities in Africa (Mohamedbhai, 2013). There is need to come up with a good response to the challenge. The responses propounded by Mohamedbhai (2013), ACUP (2013) and IAU (2010) of using collaborations nationally, regionally and internationally still sound attractive.

## 6.2 Effectiveness of the supervision process.

*MFGDP1: Enthusiastic in offering help. Always has enough time for whenever we meet.*

*MAFGDP1: My supervisor spent enough time with me whenever I asked for assistance. Pace of progress depends on the ability of the supervisor and candidates.*

*BFGDP5: My supervisor confided with me that he has five PhD candidates so has ample time with me. His turnaround time whenever I submit work is superb. Actually I am working behind his schedule*

*MFDGP5: The supervisor is highly knowledgeable in research methods.*

*MAFGDP2: The supervisor was able to provide expert service in research methodology.*

*MFGDP3: The supervisor that was allocated to me is a PhD holder with vast research experience, I guess, given the proficiency demonstrated in research methodology.*

*MFGDP3: I have benefited from the advice, comments and services of other experts both from the university faculty and those outside ZOU*

*MFGDP4: The supervisor had challenges in providing guidance in areas of conceptual and theoretical frameworks and also the depth I had to cover in my research. I had to seek assistance from experts outside university arrangements for such issues.*

The main aspects hailed by participants were mainly availability, time spared for the candidates. Participants held in high esteem supervisors on the grounds of the advice, guidance and teaching they offered. Participants expressed dissatisfaction where supervisors were not conversant with the theoretical and conceptual issue of the research. Participants had a way of dealing with the deficiencies of the supervisors such that progress was not compromised.

These findings concur with studies reported by Hyatt and Williams (2011) that doctoral supervisors should display advisory competencies that include guiding research and available to the candidate whenever needed. Helfer and Drew (2019) made similar observations in Australia where candidates expressed dissatisfaction with supervision due to lack of supervisors' knowledge of the field being supervised. Candidates need their research to be correctly pitched and technically accurate from the view point of experts in their areas of research. The dissatisfaction may be a result of lack of expertise in the area the candidate is researching (Mohamedbhai, 2013) also common in Zimbabwe (Garwe, 2015). In another study in South Africa, Cloete, Mouton and Sheppard (2015) reported that (45%) of their participants agreed that they sometimes had to supervise candidates outside their area of specialization. It can therefore be viewed that the issue of scarce expertise is common place in Africa.

All participants were satisfied with the time they had with their supervisors. Barnes, et al. (2010) concluded that candidates rated highly supervisors who were accessible, helpful and caring, also concurring with the findings in this research. However, the ZOU Handbook and Regulations for Higher Degrees (2013) does not specify the minimum number of contacts between the supervisor and the candidate. An emerging trend points to the need to set a minimum number of meetings or a minimum number of hours that candidates and supervisors can meet. In a study by the EUA (2019) they found that 40% of the participating institutions had minimum number of meetings while 27% did not have such a policy. The current practice did not make much meaning for the participants in this research, but in the interest of promoting quality and standardization it makes sense to set a minimum number of meetings between candidates and supervisors.

### **Communication between the supervisors and candidates.**

Another interesting strand that appeared in this research was the communication channels available to the doctoral candidates and supervisors. Participants shared their views on communication;

*MFGDP1: We sometimes communicate through the voice calls and email, depending on the matter at hand. This increases our frequency of communication.*

*MAFGDP2: Communication is also facilitated by the use of email in some instances.*

Previous researches have emphasised quality, time and mode of feedback such as Devos et al (2015), Kumar and Kaur (2019) but no special attention has been afforded the importance of communication. There is communication between candidates and supervisors and with the institution. Effective supervision is buttressed by communication that offers the most promising results in the situation. Participants in this research were satisfied with the channels of communication in use. Document analysis showed that while the main document does not address the issue of communication, the signed supervisor and candidate contracts provides for communication through tele/cellphones, email, post and face to face interaction Handbook and Regulations for Higher Degrees (2013) Appendix 1 and 2. Candidates and supervisors adhered to the provisions of this section. Participants expressed dissatisfaction with the communication between candidates and the university.

*MFGDP1: The communication between candidates and higher degrees leaves a lot to be desired.*

The ZOU Handbook and Regulations of Higher Degrees (2013) does not explicitly provide for communication between the candidate and the university. Implied is that the candidate may use the same platforms with the

Higher Degrees Directorate as they use with supervisors. Analysis of other institutional documents revealed that the ZOU Quality Policy Manual (2013:13) provides for the internal communication within the university stating the various means of communication available such as, "...cellular phones, emails, circulars, notice boards, meetings and signposts." The importance placed on internal communication should have been attached to communication between the university and candidates. In view of the importance of communication especially in an ODeL there is need to put in place mechanisms that will ensure candidates will have several means of getting information on communication channels available to them.

Participants specifically mentioned that they used emails as a way of improving their communication with supervisors, while DSG1 suggested the use of MyVista, in addition to the teaching and learning function considering that MyVista is currently being used in undergraduate and postgraduate taught courses.

*DSG1: MyVista will provide interaction space for supervisors and candidates to discuss, communicate effectively and even go a step further to include defense workshops on the platform. Chat groups can be organized too.*

The participant clearly observed the underutilization of the platform especially for doctoral education as most of these functions are in place for the first two cycles.

*MFGDP3: Documents that one needs to use should be online. There is need to create a PhD page on the ZOU MyVista platform.* The use of MyVista as an additional means of communication among candidates, university and supervisors was emphasized. Documents that the candidates need throughout their study can be put on MyVista such as the Handbook, reporting instruments, programme requirements, notices and platforms for direct communication with supervisors.

#### 6.4 Resolving supervision conflicts

Grievances are inevitable wherever a relationship subsists. The ZOU Handbook and Regulations for Higher Degrees (2013) section 16.0.0.0 provides for the grievance handling procedures. It only states that when grievances arise the candidate has to attempt to resolve the issues with the supervisor. But there are also instances that are evident in this research which shows the gap in this quality assurance procedure. For instance,

*MAFGDP4: The requirement that candidates be supervised by at least two supervisors is most welcome as this aids in the quality of the research process. There are instances that there has been conflicting views on the research process.*

*MFGDP1: There are a lot of conflicting reports made by the different markers which makes it difficult for the candidate to effect changes. Evaluation of thesis should be more systematic with comments that can be easily effected.*

The grievances raised here have two forms, the first being conflicting reports by supervisors or markers. If the conflicting reports have been made by supervisors it is possible to resolve the matter as a committee. If conflicting reports are coming from the markers maybe the supervisor will give direction, but already it is a question not defined in the procedures. The second line which is also equally vexing is where candidates feel there is system inconsistencies such as preferential treatment of candidates. This is a concern which again cannot be resolved by the supervisor nor any guidance coming from the quality assurance system. Rules regulations and procedures should be unambiguous so that there is a consistent and standard manner in dealing with issues

#### 7.0 CONCLUSIONS

- The supervision process is documented in the ZOU Handbook and Regulations for Higher Degrees, which provides some confidence that the service provided is planned, auditable and can be improved on from time-to-time.
- There are no research workshops, conferences or seminars specifically for teaching and learning for candidates and supervisors. Research workshops that are assessment oriented have the disadvantage on focusing on only those presenting, yet even candidates defending their theses are not at ease making their learning of issues not related to their research not that strong. Only a limited number of supervisors are invited which comprises on the quality of supervision as they lack development activities.

- There is no grievance handling procedure for issues that cannot be solved by the supervisor, yet such information is available in other university documents candidates do not have access to. There might be some cases of dissatisfaction not known to the institution. Candidates may find it difficult to register their grievances as there is no procedure and the institution may not rectify to satisfy and retain candidates.
- Supervisors are overloaded with work. The work overload stems from their duties at lower levels and the rest of the other university work. Work overload leads to can be a source of stress and compromises on the time and roles the supervisor can provide to the candidate thereby compromising on the quality of supervision.
- Supervisors have been found to be performing the following roles, director, facilitator, advisor, teacher, critic, freedom giver, supporter, manager, friend and examiner. These have been found to describe effective supervisors. These suggest that the supervisors sampled were effective.
- The quality management system does not stipulate the number of meetings or the number of hours candidates should spend with their supervisors. They may be variations in the time spent between candidates and supervisors. The amount of time spent may determine the breadth and depth of issues covered which have an effect of quality.

## 8.0 RECOMMENDATIONS

- The Higher Degrees Directorate should organise research workshops, conferences or seminars specifically for teaching and learning for candidates and supervisors.
- The Higher Degrees Directorate should assign doctoral supervisors work that is more related to research work and assign it to junior academics without impeding their academic growth.
- The Higher Degrees Directorate should equip supervisors to be perform the identified roles of director, facilitator, advisor, teacher, critic, freedom giver, supporter, manager, friend and examiner.
- The Higher Degrees Directorate quality assurance system should stipulate number of contact hours between candidates and supervisors.

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