

Expectations of postgraduate nursing students : an inquiry

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Keywords:

Postgraduate students, supervision, supervisor, supervisory relationship

Abstract: *Curationis* 31(3): 44-50

Postgraduate supervision in South Africa currently takes place in the context of university transformation with a notable increase in concern for quality. The latter is determined by the extent to which students' expectations within a supervisory practice are met. This study investigated students' expectations regarding their research supervision in a postgraduate nursing programme. A 48-item questionnaire was mailed to 24 postgraduate students, of which 22 (92%) responded, to determine their expectations within a supervisory relationship. Items in the questionnaire included students' perceptions of the responsibilities of the institution, the department, the supervisor and students' responsibilities regarding their supervised postgraduate studies in the School of Nursing Science. Descriptive statistics, namely frequencies and percentages for categorical data and means and standard deviations or medians and percentiles for continuous data, were calculated. Findings indicate that more than 80% of the postgraduate students in the study expected the university and the department to provide them with structures that would enable them to succeed in their studies. They also believed that the student had a major role to play in ensuring that studies were completed. Recommendations included making a code of practice for postgraduate supervision available to students and the use of a learning contract to clarify roles and expectations in the supervisory process. It was also recommended that supervisors should be trained to supervise students.

Introduction and problem statement

South African universities, like other universities throughout the world, are experiencing an increase in the number of postgraduate students. This increase is in line with the aim of the National Plan for Higher Education (NPHE) to increase enrolment and research output at master's and doctoral level. Within this growth, challenges of attrition and completion rates of postgraduate students are becoming statistics of vital concern due to several factors, namely the rapid transformation process in South African higher institutions, lack of financial support and an increasing proportion of postgraduate students from previously disadvantaged backgrounds

(Lessing & Lessing, 2004:74). There is general consensus that postgraduate students experience many hardships at the commencement of their studies, and that these difficulties delay completion or prevent students from completing their studies (Lessing & Schulze, 2003:159; Delamont, Atkinson & Parry, 1997:27).

Supervisors and students struggle with uncertainty and confusion, partly due to disjunction in expectations (Malfroy, 2005:165). Most students enter tertiary education with unrealistic expectations related to supervision. If these expectations are not met, most will discontinue their studies, which not only leads to a waste of their time but also their money. Universities also stand a chance of losing subsidies when

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students discontinue their studies, since the subsidy for research at universities is influenced by their research output (Lessing & Lessing, 2004:73). The School of Nursing Science of the North-West University has recently experienced an increase in the number of postgraduate students, mostly from disadvantaged backgrounds. Ofi, Sowunmi, Edet and Anaraldo (2008:244) postulate that there has been remarkable growth in nursing research in the past four decades and that nurses study research methods to acquire skills in research. Most of the postgraduate nursing students are mature (in their thirties) and have completed their first degree through telematics, a distance-learning system (Bisschoff, 2001:228). These students are at a disadvantage as they lack sufficient experience in research according to Ngcongco (2000:211). Challenges emerge when roles are not clarified and expectations are not met. Role clarification is one of the most important requirements for enhancing supervisory practices. This study therefore investigated the expectations of postgraduate students registered in the master's programme of a School of Nursing. It was believed that by determining the expectations of these novice researchers, knowledge of their expectations could be used for the purpose of facilitating their throughput in their postgraduate programmes. The following central questions were asked:

- *How do students perceive the role of the supervisor, department and institution within the supervisory relationship?*
- *How do they see their own role in this relationship?*

Literature review

Lessing and Schulze (2003:159) claim that successful experiences of postgraduate studies occur only through significant efforts by both supervisor and student and problems that arise within this relationship are attributed to both. There are expectations of both supervisors and students within this pedagogical practice. Thompson, Kirkman, Watson and Stewart (2005:283) maintain that expectations, roles and responsibilities of both the students and supervisors should be clarified early in the partnership, which should operate in an atmosphere of respect, commitment collegiality and maturity. Malfroy

(2005:165) explains that there is often a struggle with uncertainties and confusion, partly due to disjunction in expectations. For the same reason Johnson, Lee and Green (2000:135) postulate that lack of clarity regarding expectations within a supervisory relationship is often marked by feelings of neglect, abandonment, and lack of support, guidance and motivation. Ngcongco (2001:54) is of opinion that supervisors can also exhibit behaviour that can hinder the fulfilment of students' expectations such as delaying the return of submitted work, poor feedback, resisting students' views that are different to theirs as well as imposing ideas on students. Several studies reveal that supervisors also complain that students expect too much support. In fact, some highlight the issue of overdependence and lack of ownership of research studies, and emphasize that learning contracts that clearly define the roles and responsibilities of both supervisors and students need to be adopted (Lessing & Lessing, 2004:76; Dysthe, Samara & Wesrheim, 2006:299; Malfroy, 2005:170).

Clarification of concepts

Postgraduate student

Postgraduate refers to higher degrees, namely Master's and Doctoral level (Lessing & Lessing, 2004:73). In this study postgraduate students are those that are registered at the university to study for a Master's Degree in the School of Nursing.

Supervisor

A supervisor is a critical friend guiding the student through the scholarly maze of doctoral examination and graduation (Pearson & Brew, 2002:139). A supervisor is an academic member with a research qualification who is allocated to supervise a postgraduate student.

Postgraduate supervision

Postgraduate supervision refers to the guidance of a postgraduate research student by a supervisor to obtain a recognized postgraduate research degree (Lessing & Lessing, 2004:74). There are different models of supervision. Pearson and Kayrooz (2004:110) view research supervisory practice as a facilitative process involving a range of educational tasks and activities. The single supervision model is the best known in South Africa, where one candidate is

allocated one supervisor on a thesis or dissertation (Le Grange & Newmark, 2002:52).

Methodology

Study design

A quantitative, non-experimental, descriptive design was used to collect data from postgraduate students in the Master's programme of the School of Nursing.

Population and sampling

The specific participants in this study were all Master's students enrolled in the postgraduate programme in Nursing Science. All students registered in the Master's programme between the years 2005-2007 were asked to participate in the study (Burns & Grove, 2005). Convenient sampling of three respondents was done by selecting those who reside close to Potchefstroom in the North-West province to pilot the study. The manager of the postgraduate programme contacted the students and made an appointment with them to complete the questionnaire at the School of Nursing. These students were not included in the main sample.

Instrument used

A structured questionnaire (self-completed) was used to collect data. A total of 24 questionnaires was finally mailed to the participating postgraduate students registered in the Master's programme of which 22 (92%) responded. Content validity was ensured by submitting the questionnaire to research and education experts (Polit & Beck, 2004:422).

Data Analysis

SPSS software was used to analyse data. Descriptive statistics, namely frequencies and percentages for categorical data and means and standard deviations or medians and percentiles for continuous data, were calculated.

Ethical issues

Included with the questionnaire was a consent form asking students to participate in the study. The aim of the study was explained, that participation was voluntary, and that anonymity would be maintained by using codes only. It was further explained that only the researcher and the statistician would have access to the raw data. This study was conducted for quality purposes

within the postgraduate programme and therefore ethical clearance to conduct the study was obtained from the university's research ethics committee

The context

This investigation was conducted in the School of Nursing within the faculty of Health Science with a steadily growing number of Master's degree students. Full-time students were expected to complete the taught component and a dissertation within a year and part-time students within at least two years. Each student was allocated a supervisor whose expertise was matched to the student's topic. A very high proportion of the students were pursuing their Master's dissertation on a part-time basis due to their employment status.

Findings

Twenty-four (24) questionnaires were posted and a total of 22 were returned, indicating a 91.6% response rate. Characteristics of the study population are discussed according to Table 1 and they include age, primary language used by respondents and whether they study full-time or part-time.

Table 1 represents the characteristics of 22 postgraduate nursing students in the sample. The sample comprised a diverse population of students who spoke different languages. 20 (91%) of the students' primary home language was indigenous African and 2 (9%) were English. The majority, 20 (91%), were over the age of 40 years and 95.5% of them studied part-time as they were employed full time. In this particular group of students 21 (95.5%) were female and only

one was male (4.5%). This is typical of the demographics of nursing students in this profession (Parker, 2005:65).

Support structures within the university (N-22)

Perusal of Table 2 reveals that some students seemed to think that the university was not responsible for assisting them with finances as indicated by 68.2% of the responses. However, 91% were of the opinion that the university should help them with the improvement of their language and computer skills. All of the respondents expected to have access to the library with a skilled librarian. Relating to the School of Nursing, 21 of the students (95.5%) expected to be informed about what to expect in the Master's programme before embarking on their studies. 19 respondents 86.4% also expected to be provided with policy guidelines for supervision and academic support as well as information on which platform to use when in conflict with their supervisor. Another expectation mentioned by 20 (91%) of the students was that supervisors should give them sufficient time to select their research topic. All students indicated that they should be informed about potential supervisors so that they could choose who should supervise them. They also expected to have supervisors who were trained to supervise them.

The role of the student

Expectations regarding the role of the student are reflected in Table 3. These roles and responsibilities were said to be crucial for successful completion of their studies.

Findings from Table 3 revealed that students accepted responsibility for their studies as almost all of them agreed that they should keep to deadlines for submitting work, and should inform their supervisors if they could not honour appointments. All 22 (100%) respondents also agreed that they should take responsibility for contributing towards the development of their proposals and familiarizing themselves with all procedures and regulations concerning postgraduate supervision as well as accepting that supervisors should guide them and not tell them how to conduct their studies in a highly controlled manner. 21 respondents (95.5%) believed that they should be held responsible for monitoring their own progress. Only 2 (9%) felt that it was not necessary to seek support from colleagues and that they did not need to attend formal classes on research.

Expectations related to the supervisor

Students indicated their expectations that were related to the role of the supervisor. They also stated their opinions of what they thought were not the responsibilities of the supervisors. See Table 4.

According to Table 4 students expected some responsibilities to be apportioned to supervisors. All 22 (100%) expected the supervisors to guide and direct them in their studies and advise them on their progress and standard of work as well as provide them with the deadlines or completion dates so that they could submit their dissertations on time. 18 respondents (81.8%) wanted their supervisors to assist them with proposal writing and expected that supervisors should initiate meetings with them. 21 respondents (95.5%) preferred to have a purely professional relationship with their supervisors, while 8 respondents (68.1%) wanted to select their own research topics and 59.1% stated that they did not want the supervisor to make the final decision about the appropriate theoretical framework for their studies. Results also revealed that 16 respondents (72.7%) expected supervisors to monitor their progress.

Discussion of findings

Postgraduate supervision in South African Higher Education institutions takes place in a context characterised by an increase in the number of students

Table 1: Characteristics of the study population

Characteristics		F	%
Age	22-24	2	9.1
	24-39	9	40.9
	40 and above	11	50.00
Primary home language	English	2	9.1
	Indigenous African	20	90.9
Type of registration	Part-time	21	95.5
	Full time	1	4.5

Expectations related to the university and the School of Nursing

Expectations related to the institution	Disagree F (%)	Agree F (%)	Expectations related to School of Nursing	Disagree
Offer bursaries	7 (31.8)	15 (68.2)	Students should receive the necessary information about the Masters Program before embarking on postgraduate studies	1 (4.5)
Should make an effort to improve language skills of its students	2 (9.0)	20 (91)	Students should be made aware of the policy guidelines for supervision of the School	3 (13.6)
Academic development for students should be available	2 (9.0)	20 (91)	Academic support should be available	-
Library should be accessible, computer facilities should be available for inquiries	-	22 (100)	Computer laboratories should be available	4 (18.2)
Guidelines for supervision should be provided	1 (4.5)	21 (95.5)	Guidelines related to student/supervisor conflict should be provided	1 (4.5)
Students should be properly trained for postgraduate studies	-	22 (100)	An opportunity to interact with other postgraduate students should be facilitated	-
			Students should be given no less than 2 months to select a research topic	2 (9)
			Information about possible supervisors should be made available	-

time with the use of information technology when they enter university and struggle with the use of English as the medium of instruction. The findings of this study reveal that the majority of respondents are non-English speaking and unfortunately they have to attend classes and write up their studies in English. Studies conducted on postgraduate supervision have shown that most of the problems experienced in postgraduate work relate to language as students are not proficient in English. This is a common problem in South Africa due to its multilingual nature (Holzhausen, 2005:89). It was not surprising that respondents in this study felt that the university should make an effort to help them improve their language skills as 90.9% were non-English speaking, and the medium of instruction in the Master's programme is English. Another coexisting factor is the increase in the number of mature female students in Higher Education institutions particularly in this study due to the fact that nursing is a predominantly female profession. Findings suggest that most students study part-time and tend to be older and non-white. This is contrary to what was found in the previous academic culture that had always reflected the dominant discourse of the student as white and male (Read, Archer & Leathwood, 2003:261). Being female and mature in age has its own unique challenges. Some authors quantify maturity as being over 21 while others stipulate 40 years (Boucher & Smyth, 2004:346; Barnacle & Usher, 2003:350). Denicolo and Pope (1994:124) affirm that these

Table 3: Expectations regarding the role of the student

therefore have to study part-time as in 95.5 % of the respondents. This practice is very common in the South African context where the majority of professional nurses cannot afford full-time studies especially in this era of staff shortages. Wiskers, Robinson, Trafford, Warnes and Creighton (2003:385) emphasize that not all students have research time allowance and that they have to juggle full-time work with part-time studies. Deem and Brehony (2000) argue that part-time students do not have the same experience as full-time students and may have different motivations for their study. However, Wright and Cochrane (2000:184) point out that there are studies that show that age and gender have little or no relationship with the withdrawal rate of students.

The findings suggest that students expected to find structure and support which would facilitate the successful completion of their studies. Academic institutions are bound to provide structure and support for successful supervision to take place. A number of measures should be in place such as providing students with a basic grounding in research techniques, ensuring quality supervision and support, financial assistance, and computer and library facilities to assist them to successfully complete their studies. If these measures are not in place, students can experience problems that may delay them or prevent them from completing their studies. Wright and Cochrane (2000:184) stress the interconnectedness of personal and structural considerations when viewing the problems experienced by research students.

The result informs us that students have expectations when they enter into a supervisory relationship. Wiskers *et al.* (2003:384) argue that mismatches between students' expectation and preconceptions could cause difficulties in student-supervisor relationships. Expectations cannot be separated from responsibilities. The literature explains the roles of supervisors in terms of such responsibility. It is common for the supervisors to take more responsibility in terms of guiding the students at the beginning of their studies especially in master's degrees as these students need more structure and support. Thompson

Expectations regarding the role of the student The student should:	Disagree F (%)	Agree F (%)
Take the initiative in raising problems or difficulties with their research	1 (4.5)	21 (95.5)
Maintain the progress of the work in accordance with stages agreed with the supervisor	1(4.5)	21 (95.5)
Submit the proposal by the required deadline	-	22 (100)
Inform the supervisor when absent	-	22(100)
Familiarize him/herself with all procedures and regulations concerning postgraduate work	-	22 (100)
Be responsible for the original contribution to the development of the proposal whilst under the guidance of the supervisor	-	22 (100)
Take responsibility in familiarizing him/herself with the latest developments, trends and controversy in the chosen topic	-	22 (100)
Be in a position of "taking of" on their own line of thinking and initiatives	-	22 (100)
Take courses in written and or spoken English if necessary	1 (4.5)	21 (95.5)
Develop informal contacts with peer postgraduate students on their own accord	2 (9)	20 (91)
Understand the difference between guidance from the supervisor rather than being told step by step what to do	-	22 (100)
Attend all workshops planned for Research Methodology	2 (9)	20 (91)

et al. (2005:285) emphasize that while students are assured of support and help with difficulties that may arise during their candidature, the degree of responsibility and control should gradually shift from the supervisor to the student. This position is supported by Pearson and Brew (2002:140). The student needs to learn how to address the problems and the unknown. Lessing and Lessing (2004:78) declare that supervisors expect their students to take ownership of their research.

The study showed that students had expectations regarding their own roles and those of their supervisors. Studies conducted revealed that postgraduate students' expectations regarding aspects of supervision were not entirely met. Frequently cited problems were inadequate supervision, lack of communication between supervisor and student, poor guidance and lack of

supervisory skills (Lessing & Schulze, 2003:159; Zeelen, 2003:140). Literature mentions that there are reasonable expectations of both supervisor and student that are important in making supervision a success (Delamonte *et al.* 1997:24). Some of these expectations are straightforward requirements of students to exercise responsibility for progressing with the task at hand (Anderson, Day & McLaughlin, 2006:157). Results showed that students accepted full responsibility and ownership of their studies by monitoring their progress, familiarizing themselves with procedures of postgraduate work and by being responsible for developing a research proposal as well as raising problems relating to their studies.

Several authors support this assertion by adding that students are expected to master specific research skills and evaluate their own work and further insist

Table 4: Expectations related to the supervisor

Expectations related to the supervisor The supervisor should:	Disagree F (%)	Unanswered F (%)	Agree F (%)
select the research topic	8(68.1)	2(9.1)	5(27.8)
decide what theoretical frame of reference is most appropriate for the students' research	13(59.1)	2(9.1)	7(31.8)
direct the student in the development of the study	2(9.1)	2(9.1)	18(81.8)
Supervisor-student relationship should be purely professional	1(4.5)		21(95.5)
initiate frequent meetings with students	4(18.2)	-	18(81.8)
know at all times which problems the student is working on	6(27.3)	-	16(72.7)
terminate supervision if she/he thinks the project is beyond the student	5(22.7)	3(13.6)	14(63.6)
insist on seeing drafts of every section of the proposal	4(18.2)	2(9.1)	16(72.7)
assist in writing of the proposal	2(9)	2(9.1)	18(81.8)
always give guidance about the nature of the research and the standard expected	1(4.5)	-	21(95.5)
always give guidance about the planning of the research programme	-		22(100)
give all the detailed advice on the completion dates of successive stages of work so that dissertation may be submitted on time	-		22(100)
make the student aware of the inadequacy of his/her progress and standards of work	-	-	22(100)

that it is not the task of the supervisor to write the thesis and edit the language but that students should take responsibility for their own studies. They also indicate that students must not wait for their supervisors to tell them what to do, but are expected to initiate discussions and ask for help when they need it (Lessing & Schulze, 2002: 140; Lessing & Lessing, 2004:7).

All students in this study indicated that they wanted a trained supervisor to guide them. This notion is supported by Lessing and Lessing (2004:76) when they assert that students are aware of their educational rights and are more likely to demand competent and accessible supervisors. This demand will increase as more knowledgeable postgraduate students such as academics completing their doctoral studies increase (Denicolo, 2004:694), who will expect their supervisors to be competent.

Study limitation

There were only 24 postgraduate students registered in the master's programme. These were students from only one university in South Africa, and with only 22 respondents, the findings cannot be generalized to other settings where postgraduate supervision takes place.

Recommendations

In view of the findings of the study, the following recommendations are made: A code of practice for supervision of doctoral and research master's candidates should be available and made known to all, reflecting the following:

- Responsibilities at institutional level

- Responsibilities at Departmental and Faculty level
- Responsibilities of the supervisor
- Responsibilities of the candidate
- Measures for addressing conflict in the supervisory relationship.

Training of supervisors

- Formal induction programmes should be provided as such structured programmes can be of considerable support to inexperienced supervisors.
- Academic policies that address responsibilities, degree requirements, registration research ethics, and postgraduate procedures must be in place to prevent

ambivalence.

A learning contract should be drawn that clarifies the "ground rules" of expectations and behaviour during the supervisory process.

Conclusion

Overall findings indicate that students have expectations which they believe are necessary to assist them with their progress in their studies. The quality of supervision is measured by the extent to which the needs and expectations of postgraduate students are met. Unclear, conflicting and incompatible expectations of students are some of the reasons why postgraduate supervision is experienced negatively. Lessing and Schulze (2002:139) state that clarity about the roles and responsibilities of supervisors and students is of utmost importance. Wiskers *et al.* (2003:385)

assert that some difficulties of misconceptions and expectations experienced by students indicate their need for guidance and reliance upon their supervisors. Postgraduate supervision should be understood as a nurturing relationship where students, particularly novice researchers, should be provided with structured support. Both supervisors and students' role expectations should be clarified from the commencement of students' studies.

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