

Enhancing novice mentee postgraduate supervision in open distance e-learning: Adaptive systems and transformational processes

L. M. Methi*

Department of Psychology of Education, College of Education

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8584-9243>

N. M. P. Dlamini*

Department of Curriculum and Instructional Studies, College of Education

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6152-5607>

T. A. Chauke*

Department of Adult Community and Continuing Education (DACCE), College of Education

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4891-0017>

T. R. Mkhize*

Department of Educational Foundations, College of Education

<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3549-2714>

* UNISA

Pretoria, South Africa

ABSTRACT

There is a widespread assumption that newly appointed academics at universities have the qualifications and experience to fulfil the requirements of postgraduate supervision. This study explored the adaptive systems and transformational processes critical to helping supervisors and students navigate the complex and evolving landscape of academic research and development in an Open Distance e-Learning (ODEL) institution. Six novice mentee postgraduate supervisors were carefully selected from a pool of freshly hired academics from diverse departments of the College of Education at this ODeL institution in South Africa. Constructivist learning theory served as a theoretical underpinning for the transformational paradigm. The data were collected using an open-ended questionnaire and a follow-up semi-structured interview (conducted face-to-face) with five of the six participants. A thematic analysis was conducted to identify key themes. The findings emphasise the benefits of adaptive systems and transformational processes in postgraduate supervision, raising concerns about experienced mentors' communication abilities as a potential risk. The study proposes establishing a supportive institutional culture that values mentorship, diversity, equity, and inclusion. The study contributes to policy formulation, training, and the successful implementation of modified systems and transformational processes to support novice mentee postgraduate supervisors in their academic and professional development.

Keywords: adaptive systems, novice mentee postgraduate supervisors, Open Distance e-Learning (ODEL), resilience, transformational processes.

INTRODUCTION

Recent literature confirms that newly appointed university faculty members possess the requisite training and experience to meet the demands of postgraduate supervision (Cekiso et al 2019; Blose, Msiza, and Chiororo, 2021). According to Mhlahlo (2020), the global rise in postgraduate education necessitates newly recruited academics to assume supervisory and publishing roles shortly after their appointment. This urgency is underscored by the growing emphasis on improving research output and productivity inside academic institutions (Khunou et al 2019) and the fast rate of global change, highlighting the critical necessity to modify supervisory procedures.

Ngulube (2021) notes that a significant feature of postgraduate supervision is creating an interactive learning space in which seasoned supervisors (mentors) and inexperienced novice mentees engage in an ongoing, dynamic, mutual learning process. Moreover, supervisors are central to guiding novice mentees through the research process and to providing specific outcomes and expectations (Alkhatnai 2023, 20). In addition, Adedokun and Oyetunde-Joshua (2024) point out that adequate supervision does not only involve imparting knowledge; mentors should approach their roles holistically, providing encouragement alongside critique and connecting inexperienced postgraduate supervisors with psychological support.

Phaswana-Mafuya (2023) explains that a novice mentee postgraduate supervisor mentoring a postgraduate student may be unfamiliar with the demands and standards of postgraduate study, the research procedure, and academic etiquette. Building a collaborative and respectful relationship is essential for adequate supervision and support. Tangco-Siason et al. (2022) stress the importance of equipping novice mentee supervisors with the skills necessary for practical academic guidance.

Effective postgraduate supervision in ODeL institutions is crucial, particularly in the ever-changing landscape of distance education (Mdakane, Ngubane, and Dhlamini 2022; Shikulo and Lekhetho 2020). In the view of Blose et al. (2021) and Jones and Smith (2022), the assumption that newly appointed academics inherently have the necessary supervision skills is inaccurate. While recruiting, universities prioritise research outputs and teaching experience, often without evaluating specific postgraduate supervision competencies. According to Blose et al. (2021, 29), this omission results from the misconception that supervisory proficiency may be inferred from research experience and a solid academic background. Thus, novice mentee postgraduate supervisors must navigate rigorous academic roles, gain interdisciplinary skills,

and learn to thrive in a competitive job market (Adedokun and Oyetunde-Joshua 2024). This study closes the gap by exploring the adaptive systems and transformational processes inherent in novice mentee postgraduate supervision.

Okeke-Uzodike (2021, 1175) regards postgraduate supervision as critical to producing quality research and well-trained postgraduates and generating knowledge, especially in areas relevant to African challenges and sustainable development. Most African institutions have similar challenges, such as scarce resources, hierarchical structures, and the need for effective mentorship initiatives. By learning the successes and shortcomings experienced in South African institutions, other African countries can adapt these approaches to fit their unique contexts (Samodien, Du Plessis, and Van Vuuren 2024). In addition, the study highlights the importance of transformational leadership in enhancing institutional performance. Incorporating transformational leadership and knowledge management systems (KMS) has proved to be a productive outcome in private South African organisations. Findings of the research study by AlQhtani (2025) revealed significant salient domains required to transfer innovation skills among novice mentees. These included leading a learning culture with new knowledge and abilities towards innovation, applying the latest pedagogy practices and digital technology, creating learning communities, building industry connections, collaborating globally, and translating knowledge into serving society. AlQhtani (2025) maintains that global policies increasingly drive universities towards organisational change and innovation to spur the knowledge economy. By facilitating transformational leadership, institutions can create an innovative culture and responsiveness.

As Phaswana-Mafuya (2023) points out, mentors should possess several values or qualities, including having integrity, being approachable, and being committed to the development of others. Such virtues have the potential to empower novice mentee postgraduate supervisors. In addition, with the guidance and motivation of mentors, mentees develop passion and commitment to postgraduate supervision and succeed in becoming self-reliant (Abetang et al. 2020, 304). Face-to-face meetings, webinars, training workshops, discussion forums, panel sessions, virtual sessions, and e-mentoring are strategies suggested by Kaba et al (2023) to help improve research capacity. Furthermore, Ehinola and Akomolafe (2022) contend that the frequency of interaction and skills acquisition is increased when there is a connection between the mentor and mentee, which helps the mentee perform better.

In contrast to the traditional model's transmission-based perspective of mentoring (Békés 2022), an adaptive system adjusts its behaviour or structure based on environmental changes. Andriopoulou and Prowse (2020) add that it recognises the dynamic nature of supervisory relationships. Incorporating adaptive systems in postgraduate supervision can significantly

enhance mentees' learning experience by providing personalised support and fostering an environment that adapts to the individual needs of each mentee (Mbatl and Mphahlele 2024, 21). In mentoring postgraduate supervision, an adaptive system might involve developing flexible structures, processes, or strategies that mentors can use to respond effectively to their mentees' diverse needs and challenges (Andriopoulou and Prowse 2020). These systems leverage advanced technologies and methodologies to ensure that novice postgraduate supervisors receive the guidance they need to succeed. Akiri and Dori (2022) and Li and Li (2023) believe that adaptive systems foster continuous communication, feedback, and guidance to support novice mentee postgraduate supervisors. These systems should assist them and nurture their growth into independent, competent supervisors.

Transformational processes in postgraduate supervision refer to strategies and actions that can effect significant positive changes in improving the mentoring of novice postgraduate supervisors (Dorner, Misic, and Rymarenko, 2021; Omodan and Tsotetsi, 2020). These could involve significant changes in thinking, behaviour, or identity that can lead to personal or professional growth and development. It includes setting clear expectations for mentors and novice mentee postgraduate supervisors, developing a mentorship plan and defining roles and responsibilities (Mullen and Klimaitis 2021). As Thaba-Nkadimene (2020) notes, setting goals and developing a mentorship plan should be done jointly by the mentors and the inexperienced postgraduate supervisors. Transformation goals should include feedback mechanisms (Motala and Menon 2020), adaptive critical thinking, and teamwork skills (Siew 2022). Putting transformative methods into practice is a dynamic, continuous process that requires institutional support and dedication. In general, transformational processes in postgraduate supervision can improve the personal and professional growth of inexperienced/mentee postgraduate supervisors and help them produce more creative and significant research outputs.

To provide clarity, adaptive systems refer to minor, incremental adjustments by organisations to address immediate problems and simplify existing processes. These changes are largely incremental and aim to make minor adjustments without fundamentally altering the organisation's design (Sott and Bender 2025). Examples include making administrative processes more refined or simplifying communication channels. Transformational processes, however, refer to extensive, end-to-end changes that fundamentally alter the organisation's strategy, culture, structure, or processes. Significant outside drivers usually induce such changes and require visionary leadership to make the stakeholders adapt to the new path. Rathmell, Brown and Kilburg (2019). A few examples are restructuring the institutional framework or adopting a new education model.

Problem statement

Mentorship is widely regarded as a valuable asset for supporting inexperienced mentee postgraduate supervisors. However, its potential is limited in under-resourced and hierarchical institutional environments. These institutions do not have the support infrastructure and resources required to sustain high-quality mentorship schemes (London 2023; Bonini et al. 2024). Therefore, mentorship limitations must be carefully considered, and alternative or complementary strategies must be pursued to support novice supervisors. Rethinking the developments in mentoring practice, this study intended to examine the adaptive systems and transformational processes within novice mentee postgraduate supervision. The aim was to better support the mentees in navigating the complex and evolving demands of academic and professional research environments.

Research questions

The article adopts the following related research questions as a guide:

- What are the adaptive systems and transformational processes in ODeL institutions?
- How can adaptive systems and transformational processes enhance the practice of novice mentee postgraduate supervisors in postgraduate supervision?
- In an attempt to respond to these questions, the following objectives are outlined:
- To explore and understand adaptive systems and transformational processes in ODeL institutions
- To understand how the implementation of adaptive systems and transformational processes enhances the practice of novice mentee postgraduate supervisors

METHODOLOGY

Research design

We opted for a single case study to illustrate how a group of identified mentee postgraduate supervisors in one ODeL institution shared their experience collaborating with their mentors. According to Yin (2018), sample sizes in case studies are typically small. We aimed to focus our research on a specific case within the confines of space and time. We applied the Constructivism Learning Theory within the transformation paradigm (Brau 2020). The central assumption of this theory is that knowledge is actively constructed by individuals, rather than passively received from an authoritative source. It emphasises the supervisor's role as a learning process facilitator, guiding new, inexperienced postgraduate supervisors to critically engage with their postgraduate supervision and construct their understanding of the process. The study

was located in the transformational paradigm to provide valuable insights into how ideas and practices evolve, offering opportunities for growth, innovation, and positive change within the postgraduate supervision context, as Omodan and Tsotetsi (2020) explained.

Population and sample

The study population comprised sixty newly appointed academics in the ODeL institution and their mentors from the College of Education. Only twenty of the newly appointed academics were from the ten departments of the College of Education. From the ten departments represented, we selected six participants already involved in supervision as novice mentee postgraduate supervisors. The study involved a single college in an ODeL institution to pick a small sample size, which may restrict the generalisability of the results to other inexperienced mentees within the same college or organisation. Their responses were typically subjective and varied as they reflected on their thoughts, feelings, experiences, and perceptions about being novice mentee postgraduate supervisors (Roberts 2020).

Data collection instruments

The data gathering was divided into two phases. In phase 1, qualitative data were collected from six participants using an open-ended questionnaire sent to participants via password-protected e-mail since most academics were working from home, and responses were returned via a similarly protected e-mail. The researcher uploaded their responses digitally on Google Forms to facilitate data analysis. In phase 2, follow-up face-to-face interviews with five of the six participants were done to triangulate data and strengthen the study's credibility and validity (Flick 2018; Lincoln and Guba 1986).

Data analysis

Thematic analysis was employed in this study. Clarke and Braun (2017, 297) describe thematic analysis as a “method for identifying, analysing, and interpreting patterns of meaning within qualitative data, ensuring rigorous and high-quality outcomes.” The authors repeatedly read the dataset to become familiar with the data. Then, they generated codes by creating meaningful labels and identifying specific dataset segments to develop themes. The authors collaboratively organised the data, which involved reading, characterising and interpreting it, and categorising it into codes and themes. According to Maguire and Delahunt (2017), thematic analysis is appropriate for study in the broad subject of postgraduate supervision since it is flexible and not tied to a specific theoretical perspective.

Ethical consideration

The study adhered to ethical guidelines, including informed consent, privacy and confidentiality, voluntary participation, and full disclosure. Ethical clearance was obtained from the Research Ethics Committee (Ref: 2018/03/14 90060059MC). Before completing the online questionnaire, participants were informed that they could withdraw from the study at any time, without penalty. They provided informed consent online and were assured that only the researcher would know the content of their comments.

PRESENTATION OF RESULTS

In this section, we present the findings of the results on the adaptive systems and transformational processes to support and enhance the postgraduate student supervision practices of novice mentee postgraduate supervisors in an ODeL institution. The following themes were developed during the thematic analysis: creating collegiality, care, and support; critical thinking and reflective practice; and ongoing support and developing resilience.

Creating collegiality, care, and support

To ensure that the advantages of these contacts are fully realised, we argue that it is important to properly structure mentoring relationships within the context of professional growth and teaching enhancement. The adaptive systems identified in the study include creating collegiality, care, and support.

Creating collegiality

Creating collegiality means establishing cooperative interaction among colleagues. Collegiality is the relationship between colleagues who share responsibilities and feel they belong to a mutually respected community of scholars. The participants were asked the following questions to establish their relationship with their mentors:

What qualities should novice mentee postgraduate supervisors have that can facilitate a good mentoring relationship?

The novice mentee postgraduate supervisors reported on their individual experiences (responses are presented verbatim):

“My mentor is always available and supportive. He provides support and advice to me on supervision, and he also offers support by being present during supervision meetings with my M and D students.” **(Participant 6)**

“The affirmations that the mentor used helped to enhance my confidence. He always gives me constructive feedback that includes both criticism and praise. He provides support and advice to me on supervision, and he also offers support by being present during supervision meetings with my M and D students.” **(Participant 4)**

To elucidate the assertion above, the participants were asked if they felt at ease expressing their needs or preferences to their mentors, and how they perceived their mentors’ responsiveness to their feedback. The participants displayed different opinions in their responses.

“Yes, I am comfortable doing so, and they are also responsive, although creating a balance in accommodating each other has been difficult due to the competing demands of academia.” **(Participant 6)**

“No, I do not think my mentors adapted their approach to accommodate me. I had to fall into their approach.” **(Participant 2)**

“By taking full responsibility for my academic journey, I am attending workshops or training on what I feel is needed for me to move forward in academia. The experience has taught me that I am on my own and I need to figure out how to navigate this competitive space” **(Participants 1 and 4).**

“Mentees must be teachable, disciplined, and attentive. Also, be active, do not expect the mentor always to lead you, and take the initiative sometimes.” **(Participant 5)**

In the interviews, the participants reflected on how they felt their postgraduate supervision as novice mentee postgraduate supervisors significantly contributed to their personal or professional growth.

“I opine that I engage in what my mentor has been doing, and I have not been able to show my identity in the programmes.” **(Participant 2)**

“I learnt about writing from my thesis, which was eye-opening.” **(Participant 1)**

“I learnt to be independent.” **(Participants 2 and 6)**

The data highlight the significance of carefully structuring mentoring relationships within professional development and improving teaching practice to ensure that the benefits of these interactions are fully realised. Nevertheless, mentoring is crucial in helping inexperienced supervisors to adjust to their professional role in postgraduate supervision. The study sheds light on the mentoring process and the bonds that form between mentors and novice mentee postgraduate supervisors. The findings provide insightful information about how to foster supportive partnerships.

Care and support

The participants were asked:

What should be included or considered in the mentorship guidelines for Open-Distance e-Learning?

The novice mentees' responses were consistent in the interviews and questionnaires. They all viewed the mentor as a "caring figure" who should always be available to them for emotional and professional support.

"A mentor must be someone you are free to share success stories or your challenges with during the mentoring process. They should empathise with their mentees' experiences, validating their feelings, offering support, and understanding." **(Participant 3)**

"At least, a mentor must be someone who is strictly from your department because such a person will be knowledgeable about how and what is expected in that particular department. As a mentee, such a person can groom you to become a better version of the academic you want to be if they are generous in sharing their knowledge, insights, and resources." **(All participants)**

"A good mentor is someone who genuinely enjoys seeing others do well in work and life overall. They should not be someone who competes with those they mentor or holds them back. Instead, mentors should listen attentively to their mentees, creating a safe space to express their thoughts, concerns, and aspirations without judgment." **(All participants)**

"Mentoring should be a relaxed interaction between the mentor and mentee to enhance the effectiveness of their supervision." **(Participant 1)**

Learning from experienced supervisors through observation and assistance is critical for building self-confidence and understanding the nuances of mentoring. The most effective mentoring experiences occur when mentors provide pedagogic and emotional support to inexperienced mentees. Nonetheless, a mentor should not be viewed as an analytical person but as an active listener who helps the novice to make his or her own decisions. Good mentoring entails developing a trusting connection, providing direction and support targeted at mentees' specific requirements, and encouraging them to attain their potential.

Critical thinking and reflective practice

The goal of transformational processes in ODeL institutions is to equip novice postgraduate supervisors with the capacity and information required to supervise postgraduate students successfully. The leadership skills that novice mentee postgraduate supervisors develop are shaped by the experiences they gain. This study found that novice mentee postgraduate supervisors were exposed to diverse experiences that could help enhance the transformational

processes of promoting their critical thinking skills and reflexivity in supervision. One of the participants reflected on this as follows:

“The university must organise a conference, where mentors and their mentees will meet to get to know each other better. That space should be made strictly for no other business to undertake. This will improve mentorship relations and help them to know each other better” **(Participant 2)**

Furthermore, for transformative growth to be demonstrated, the participants indicated the following:

“The institution should develop an open policy towards mentoring. For example, mentoring should not be limited to professors, because it burdens them. As a mentee, when you arrange a meeting with the professor, he/she tells you about the commitments s/he has, instead of providing mentoring to you as a mentee.” **(Participant 6)**

The participants reiterated and expressed a strong need for mentoring policies to be developed in the interview session:

“If there can be policies and programmes to enhance mentorship in place, it would be great, and this would help many emerging and developing academics.” **(Participant 4)**

“Mentoring must be made a standard procedure where the roles are clearly outlined. The newly appointed are to sign the contract with the mentor right from the start after their appointments.” **(Participant 4)**

Through transformational learning, mentors can share a vision that motivates and inspires mentees to do more. The participants believe that inclusivity, dedication, and good listening skills are key attributes in supervision. The participants listed the following desirable qualities of a mentor:

“The mentor should be a good listener, an independent thinker, a decision maker and a committed individual. He should display dedication, volunteering, and a desire to know.” **(Participants 2, 3 and 4)**

“He must be an active, good listener, provide honest feedback, be knowledgeable and kind, have a respectful attitude, and be enthusiastic about helping others.” **(All participants)**

“A mentor must be open-minded. He must have a good heart, be able to work under pressure, have effective communication skills, have good listening skills, honesty, inclusion, and effective communication.” **(All participants)**

To achieve this, they proposed:

“There should be an incentive for the progressive mentoring relationship and a monitoring mechanism to detect shadow mentoring relationships. Provide more training, resources, and

support. Implement mentoring programmes for distance learning instructors and an inclusive and transparent strategy.” **(Participant 3)**

In an interview, the participants indicated the following:

“Mentoring can be helpful only if it is structured and when learning outcomes and criteria are co-constructed.” **(Participant 6)**

In a follow-up question, the participants were asked to share any instances where their mentors had encouraged them to think critically. This allowed them to reflect on their learning experiences, leading to transformative insights or perspectives. Some of the responses:

“My mentor questioned me about time management and prioritisation of postgraduate supervision. This enables me to reflect on how I view my supervision performance and identify areas I need to improve.” **(Participants 3 and 4)**

“Reflecting on past experiences, I noticed that my mentor rarely gave feedback; however, I noticed how staying abreast of best practices in supervision can contribute to becoming a more effective mentor. I relied on my peers for feedback, which helped me reflect and improve on my challenges.” **(Participant 2)**

In summary, the participants emphasised their understanding of mentorship and the nature of the transformational processes that should ideally be part of the mentorship programme for novice mentee postgraduate supervisors. They believe that achieving transformative mentorship would require a higher education structure and culture shift, enabling novice academics to contribute towards a thriving and creative institution.

Participants highlighted the significant influence of postgraduate supervision on their personal and professional development, acknowledging their role in steering their academic journey. They underscored the importance of effective mentorship, suggesting a proactive role for managers in matching mentors with mentee postgraduate supervisors to ensure optimal support and guidance in academia.

Ongoing support and developing resilience

Resilience is a dynamic attribute that may be cultivated and enhanced over time. Developing resilience can help novice postgraduate supervisors adapt to adversity, manage stress, and continue to provide effective mentorship. Our participants emphasised that they could benefit from ongoing support, training, and self-awareness to become resilient postgraduate supervisors who can effectively guide and support their postgraduate students, even in the face of challenges. The participants identified features they considered to be enabling processes and behaviour:

“For us to cope, we suggest several mentoring meetings between a mentor and a mentee per year. Moreover, there should be timelines and evidence to prove that mentoring exists.” **(Participants 2 and 5)**

“At least, a mentor must be someone strictly from your department as a mentee because such a person will be knowledgeable about how and what is expected in that particular department. As a mentee, such a person can groom you to become a better version of the academic you want to be.” **(Participant 6)**

“Some participants suggested that mentoring can function as a catalyst to enhance reflection and the sharing of success stories of mentorship. The mentees were willing to disclose general information about their experiences. They openly discussed the risks experienced: You are not involved in the process, and you will be requested to fill in the forms of mentee and mentor just to confirm that there is such a thing. In reality, there is no mentoring relationship.” **(Participant 4)**

“Power relations are real. My mentor is a male and the leader of our department; this does not make it easy for me, being new in the academic world and inexperienced at approaching him in any way. He, however, made time whenever I got the guts to approach him. Also, as a mentee, especially if you are still new, it is better if the mentor guides you in the beginning stages.” **(Participant 1)**

In an interview, the participants were asked what resources or support mechanisms they found most helpful in overcoming the challenges of postgraduate supervision and how they believed these contributed to an adaptive mentoring environment.

“ODEL needs to strengthen its e-mentorship whereby mentors must submit quarterly reports to the Chairs of Departments showing how they have assisted their mentees.” **(Participant 2)**

This is in keeping with what the participants had expressed on this topic:

“Mentoring should be continuous, and mentors and mentees should rotate to expose mentees to different mentors with different skills.” **(Participant 1)**

“Mentees must be provided an opportunity to reflect on their experiences with their mentor regarding whether they are achieving what they wanted to achieve from their mentors. Also, the university's management should monitor mentorship to assess its effectiveness.” **(Participant 3)**

“I suggest that academics should be workshopped or trained on what it is exactly that is expected from them if he/she become a mentor. Because, as though our mentors have no idea what is expected of them as our mentors.” **(Participant 6)**

“I feel that psychological safety in an environment should be created so the mentees feel comfortable expressing themselves and enhancing their capacity and effectiveness.” **(Participant 4)**

Mentors should listen attentively to their novice mentee postgraduate supervisors, creating a safe space for them to express their thoughts, concerns, and aspirations without judgment. Most

importantly, the mentors are crucial in motivating novice mentees and postgraduate supervisors, encouraging them to persevere through obstacles and stay focused on their goals.

In this section, we present the study findings regarding the challenges that novice mentee postgraduate supervisors experienced in their relationship with their mentors in ODeL institutions. The following theme was identified during the thematic analysis:

Lack of communication

The participants were asked:

What are the obstacles that hinder effective mentoring in Open-Distance e-Learning?

All the novice mentee postgraduate supervisors who participated in the study had mentors, and a significant majority reported encountering communication issues. The subsequent responses express the novice mentee postgraduate supervisors' frustration:

“Since we are now working remotely, you have time to ask for assistance from your mentor at any time. Unlike the contact university, where you can easily go to one's office and talk formally and informally. In most cases, the teams' conversations are limited to a formal interaction with your mentor.” **(Participant 3)**

“Lack of communication leaves me to find my way and work through trial and error due to my uncertainties on my supervision journey.” **(Participant 2)**

“My mentor was constantly researching and had little time to guide me. He focused solely on his research and neglected other key areas.” **(Participant 6)**

The participants' general sentiment in this regard is indicated in the following response:

“There is no communication between the mentee and mentor ... that is, there is a lack of communication and a failure to set realistic goals and timelines.” **(Participant 2)**

From the novice mentee postgraduate supervisors' account, an additional risk factor that indirectly impacted them was senior mentors' delayed responses to e-mails. The delayed feedback caused them to feel disheartened and less motivated. The following quotes provide supporting evidence:

“Where there is no physical interaction with other colleagues, including my mentor, failure to set realistic goals and timelines, lack of time management and mismatched expectations, professional mentoring that involves a bifocal vision of attending to immediate issues of improving mentoring skills, as well as to long-term goals for novice mentees, is far-fetched.” **(Participant 1)**

“I was not involved in the plan due to a lack of communication and dishonesty. I have never met my mentor in person. She is busy, and finding her, even on her phone, is hard.” **(Participant 4)**

“I have encountered a few challenges. For instance, you find that your mentor is unfamiliar with your research field because her research field is different from yours. As much as she provides feedback on your writing, I sometimes pick up some deficiencies because of a difference in our research field.” **(Participant 5)**

The study revealed that novice mentee postgraduate supervisors should actively engage in supervision, reflecting on their experiences and learning from their interactions with students and colleagues.

In the interview, the participants reflected on how their postgraduate supervision practice as mentees significantly contributed to their personal or professional growth:

“I realised my supervisor was not the captain of my journey, but I was. I learnt that I am responsible for my progress, and the sooner I realise that, the sooner I can work effectively. I learnt about writing from my thesis, which was a revelation. I have not experienced the fruitfulness of a mentorship.” **(Participant 2)**

“This happens because everyone is required to have a mentor, leading to mismatches. However, if the chair of departments leads the process and assigns the novice mentees to mentors who are experts in their field, it can benefit the mentees’ academic growth.” **(Participant 6)**

While Participant 2 appears to have had a profound understanding of autonomy and accountability in one’s academic career, Participant 6 made a significant remark concerning the efficacy of mentorship in supervision contexts. Mentorship can be highly beneficial; however, mismatches between mentors and novice mentee postgraduate supervisors can occur, resulting in unsatisfactory outcomes. Novice mentee postgraduate supervisors should understand the value of taking responsibility for their advancement and learning rather than relying exclusively on their supervisor.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

This study investigated adaptive systems and transformational processes to support novice mentee postgraduate supervisors in an Open Distance e-Learning (ODEL) institution. Within this context, inexperienced postgraduate supervisors are encouraged to engage actively in their supervisory roles, explore diverse perspectives and consider multiple viewpoints. The findings align with constructivist principles, which advocate for mentee autonomy and independence in learning. Novice supervisors suggested a hybrid approach to their development, combining formal training, experiential learning, and robust support networks (Manyike 2017). According to Mhlahlo (2020) and Ngulube (2021), mentoring is a competitive advantage that can be achieved by establishing an effective support system to develop emerging supervisors and contribute to academic growth across Africa. Ngubane and Makua (2021) underscore that active

participation, through interaction, sharing of knowledge, and mutual experience, enhances learning outcomes, transforming the supervisory relationship into an interdependent and collaborative endeavour. Supervisory practices primarily focus on task-oriented responsibilities, whereas mentoring encompasses broader dimensions such as emotional support, role modelling, and fostering long-term professional development (Dreer 2021). The study recommends that senior management oversee pairing mentors with mentees to reduce power imbalances in the supervision process. However, challenges persist, as some assigned mentors may lack adequate time or suitability to meet mentees' diverse needs (Sarabipour et al. 2022). Participants emphasised that mentors should ideally be from the same department as their mentees, to ensure contextual relevance and alignment with departmental expectations. Sarabipour et al. (2022) further highlight that mentors should focus on recognising mentees' strengths and challenges while fostering confidence and competence. As Daramola (2021) points out, effective mentoring requires balancing academic rigour with a humane and empathetic mentor-mentee relationship – a responsibility supervisors must approach intentionally.

Transformational postgraduate supervision promotes significant shifts in novice mentee supervisors' perspectives and professional identities by encouraging critical reflection and challenging assumptions. Participants advocated for structured mentoring programmes with clearly defined roles, emphasising the need for explicit supervision policies and guidelines to reduce ambiguities in supervisory practices (Daramola 2021; Tlali et al. 2022). Reflective practice is rooted in constructivist principles and involves drawing on experiential knowledge and comparing one's practices with industry standards (Brau, 2020; Narayan et al., 2013). Furthermore, given the constraints of ODeL, the study identified virtual mentorship programmes as an innovative solution to support novice supervisors. Briscoe (2019), Lasater et al. (2021) and Lloyd (2023) note that virtual programmes can reduce barriers associated with traditional mentorship models while promoting professional development, reducing burnout, and increasing mentees' confidence and readiness. These programmes enable global connections and flexibility, fostering meaningful mentor-mentee relationships despite the physical distance.

Educational institutions have a significant limitation problem, particularly in developing nations. The study highlighted several challenges novice supervisors face. Resource constraints are a major challenge faced by educational institutions, particularly in underdeveloped nations. These constraints include less financial input, inferior infrastructure, and inadequate human resources. These constraints could prevent introducing new programs and innovative practices (Iloh et al. 2019; Kalyvaki and Bacimanova, 2022; Oladunjoye et al. 2024). For instance,

budgetary constraints can affect providing the necessary training, equipment, and support for such programs. Organisations may find it challenging to finance professional growth, technology renewal, and other essential aspects of these changes (Lee, 2023). To counteract this, organisations can rank-priority critical programs and seek substitute funding, such as grants, partnerships, and community funding (Radebe, 2023).

The participants emphasised the importance of emotional support alongside academic guidance, advocating for policies that make provision for the unique stressors of supervision. Overly critical mentoring approaches were found to harm mentees' self-esteem, while affirming and supportive mentorship enhanced their confidence Burger, Bellhäuser, and Imhof, 2021). To improve mentorship effectiveness, it is essential to establish flexible and responsive supervisory frameworks tailored to the specific demands of ODeL environments. These frameworks should integrate diverse learning styles, dynamic feedback mechanisms, and adaptive support structures. By fostering transformational processes, novice supervisors can become independent professionals with critical thinking skills and reflective practices, contributing to sustainable academic growth. Ubuntu philosophy has been successfully infused in mentorship programs to accomplish a sense of community and mutual dependence. With the emphasis on interdependence and mutual assistance, mentors and novice mentees build strong, supportive relationships that enhance the whole mentorship experience (Kotze, 2025). To ensure transferability occurs, institutions can incorporate indigenous philosophies like Ubuntu in mentorship programs to plan culture-sensitive and supportive environments. This approach can help to build trust and a feeling of belonging among novice mentees with diverse backgrounds (Geber and Keane, 2017; Gumbo, 2024).

Drawing on indigenous mentoring philosophies, such as Ubuntu, is beneficial in further grounding the argument in culture. Ubuntu, being an African philosophy, centres on the interconnectedness of humans and the requirement for community support. Ubuntu's precept, which is ordinarily summarised as "I am because we are," emphasises the collective responsibility and care within a community (van de Kerkhof 2024). In mentoring, Ubuntu can guide the development of constructive and cooperative mentor-mentee relations. Mentors can help novice supervisors feel valued and supported by fostering shared humanity and interdependence. Such a practice resonates with values of trust, respect, and collective development at the heart of successful mentorship (Kotze 2025).

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

The study's scope was limited to a single college and a small cohort of novice supervisors appointed in 2021. Consequently, its generalisability to other institutions or experienced

supervisors is restricted. Future research should include a broader sample and explore seasoned supervisors' perspectives to better understand adaptive and transformational systems in postgraduate supervision.

CONCLUSIONS

In this study, we have attempted to demonstrate how postgraduate supervision practice in an ODeL institution necessitates adaptive systems and transformational mentoring processes. While these processes offer significant benefits, challenges such as setting ground rules, project planning, and dealing with administrative hurdles prevail. Both novice postgraduate supervisors and experienced mentors require comprehensive training and open discussions to navigate these challenges effectively. The interaction between supervisors should be characterised by professionalism, respect, collegiality and open-mindedness. Through opportunities for communication, mentee postgraduate supervisors become more self-regulated, confident and insightful, while mentors develop higher self-esteem, leadership skills, and personal gratification. This reciprocal relationship ultimately advances both parties academically and professionally.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the results of this study, the following recommendations are proposed:

- Develop and implement strategies to improve adaptive systems and transformational processes tailored to the unique challenges of ODeL institutions.
- Focus on equipping novice mentee postgraduate supervisors with tools and frameworks to navigate their supervisory roles effectively.
- Prioritise mentorship by promoting diversity, equity and inclusion within the institutional framework.
- Allocate dedicated resources to sustain mentorship programmes and practices.
- Recognise and reward exemplary mentorship efforts to encourage a culture of excellence.

DECLARATIONS

Author contributions

Each author collected data from their respective mentee postgraduate supervisors (newly appointed in their departments) and took part in the organisation of the data, including reading, characterising, interpreting, and categorising it into codes and themes. The corresponding

author analysed and interpreted the data, revised the findings of the article, and wrote the Discussion section. All of the researchers read and approved the final manuscript. Raw data were generated at one African higher education institution. Derived data supporting the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author on request.

Conflict of interest

The authors have no conflict of interest to declare. The views and opinions included in this article may not accurately represent the official policy of any linked agency.

REFERENCES

- Abetang, M. A., R. N. Oguma, and A. P. Abetang. 2020. "Mentoring and the Difference It Makes in Teachers' Work: A Literature Review." *European Journal of Education Studies* 7 (6).
- Adedokun, T., and F. Oyetunde-Joshua. 2024. "Navigating the Academic Odyssey: Exploring the Role of Supervisors in Supporting Postgraduate Students." *Journal of Culture and Values in Education* 7 (1): 1–18. <https://doi.org/10.46303/jcve.2024.1>.
- Akiri, E., and Y. J. Dori. 2022. "Professional Growth of Novice and Experienced STEM Teachers." *Journal of Science Education and Technology* 31 (1): 129–142. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10956-021-09936-x>.
- Alkhatnai, M. 2023. "Mentoring in Saudi Higher Education: Considering the Role of Culture in Academic Development." *International Journal for Academic Development* 28 (1): 20–30. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1360144X.2021.1963734>.
- AlQhtani, F. M. 2025. "Knowledge Management for Research Innovation in Universities for Sustainable Development: A Qualitative Approach." *Sustainability* 17 (6): 2481. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su17062481>.
- Andriopoulou, P., and A. Prowse. 2020. "Towards an Effective Supervisory Relationship in Research Degree Supervision: Insights from Attachment Theory." *Teaching in Higher Education* 25 (5): 648–661. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13562517.2020.1731449>.
- Békés, E. Á. 2022. "International Perspectives on Mentoring in English Language Education." *Argentinian Journal of Applied Linguistics* 10 (2): 97–100. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13611267.2019.1630989>.
- Blose, S., V. Msiza, and F. Chiororo. 2021. "Developing a Supervisor Identity through Experiential Learning: Narratives of Three Novice Academics Working in a South African University." *Journal of Education* (82): 28–43. <https://doi.org/10.17159/2520-9868/i82a02>.
- Bonini, A., C. Panari, L. Caricati, and M. G. Mariani. 2024. "The Relationship between Leadership and Adaptive Performance: A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis." *PLoS ONE* 19 (10): e0304720. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0304720>.
- Brau, B. 2020. "Constructivism." <https://open.byu.edu/studentguide/constructivism>.
- Briscoe, P. 2019. "Virtual Mentor Partnerships between Practising and Preservice Teachers: Helping to Enhance Professional Growth and Well-Being." *International Journal of Mentoring and Coaching in Education* 8 (4): 235–254. <https://doi.org/10.1108/IJMCE-02-2019-0023>.
- Burger, J., H. Bellhäuser, and M. Imhof. 2021. "Mentoring Styles and Novice Teachers' Well-Being: The Role of Basic Need Satisfaction." *Teaching and Teacher Education* 103: 103345. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2021.103345>.

- Cekiso, M., B. Tshotsho, R. Masha, and T. Saziwa. 2019. "Supervision Experiences of Postgraduate Research Students at One South African Higher Education Institution." *South African Journal of Higher Education* 33 (3): 8–25. <https://doi.org/10.20853/33-3-2913>.
- Clarke, V., and V. Braun. 2017. "Thematic Analysis." *The Journal of Positive Psychology* 12 (3): 297–298. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17439760.2016.1262613>.
- Daramola, O. 2021. "Lessons from Postgraduate Supervision in Two African Universities: An Autoethnographic Account." *Education Sciences* 11 (7): 345. <https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci11070345>.
- Dorner, H., G. Misic, and M. Rymarenko. 2021. "Online Mentoring for Academic Practice: Strategies, Implications, and Innovations." *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences* 1483 (1): 98–111. <https://doi.org/10.1111/nyas.14301>.
- Dreer, B. 2021. "Teachers' Well-Being and Job Satisfaction: The Key Role of Positive Emotions in the Workplace." *Educational Studies*: 1–17. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03055698.2021.1940872>.
- Ehinola, G. B., and B. B. Akomolafe. 2022. "In-Service Training Programmes and Mentoring for Improving Teachers' Job Performance." *International Journal of Education Research Review* 3: 1–7.
- Flick, U. 2018. "Triangulation in Data Collection." <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781526416070.n34>.
- Geber, H., and M. Keane. 2017. "Ubuntu and Transformational Mentoring in South Africa." In *The SAGE Handbook of Mentoring*. Los Angeles: SAGE.
- Gumbo, M. T. 2024. "Postgraduate Student Supervision in Open and Distance Learning." In *Global Perspectives on Decolonising Postgraduate Education*, 166–178. IGI Global.
- Iloh, G. U. P., M. E. Chukwuonye, O. N. Onya, and E. U. Godswill-Uko. 2019. "Mentoring in a Resource-Constrained Context." *Nigerian Postgraduate Medical Journal* 26 (1): 38–44.
- Jones, J., and H. A. Smith. 2022. "A Comparative Study of Formal Coaching and Mentoring Programmes." *International Journal of Mentoring and Coaching in Education*. <https://doi.org/10.1108/IJMCE-03-2021-0054>.
- Kaba, M., Birhanu, Z., Villalobos, N.V.F., Osorio, L., Echavarría, M.I., Berhe, D.F., Tucker, J.D., Abdissa, A. and Abraha, Y.G., 2023. Health research mentorship in low-and middle-income countries: a scoping review. *JBIE evidence synthesis*, 21(10), pp.1912-1970. <https://doi.org/10.11124/JBIES-22-00260>.
- Kalyvaki, M., and N. Bacimanova. 2022. "Overcoming Barriers to Digital Transformation." In *Competitivitatea și Inovarea în Economia Cunoașterii*, 168–180.
- Khunou, G., H. Canham, K. Khoza-Shangase, and E. D. Phaswana. 2019. "Black in the Academy." In *Black Academic Voices*, 1–10.
- Kotze, C. J. 2025. "'I Am Because We Are': Novice Teacher Mentoring Support Needs." *International Journal of Mentoring and Coaching in Education* 14 (1): 54–70.
- Lasater, K., C. Smith, J. Pijanowski, and K. P. Brady. 2021. "Redefining Mentorship in an Era of Crisis." *International Journal of Mentoring and Coaching in Education* 10 (2): 158–172. <https://doi.org/10.1108/IJMCE-11-2020-0078>.
- Lee, Z. 2023. Overcoming Challenges in Corporate Training: A Framework for Effective Training Initiatives. *Open Journal of Business and Management*, 11, 2472-2487. doi: 10.4236/ojbm.2023.115137.
- Li, X., and Y. Li. 2023. "Individualised and Innovation-Centred General Education." *Education Sciences* 13 (8): 846. <https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci13080846>.
- Lincoln, Y. S., and E. G. Guba. 1986. "But Is It Rigorous?" *New Directions for Program Evaluation* 1986 (30): 73–84. <https://doi.org/10.1002/ev.1427>.
- Lloyd, P. 2023. "The Impact of Mentoring Practices." *Education Theses and Dissertations*, Paper 15.

- London, M. 2023. "Causes and Consequences of Adaptive Leadership." *Psychology of Leaders and Leadership* 26 (1): 22.
- Maguire, M., and B. Delahunt. 2017. "Doing a Thematic Analysis." *All Ireland Journal of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education* 9 (3): 3351–3365.
- Manyike, T. V. 2017. "Postgraduate Supervision at an Open-Distance Institution." *South African Journal of Education* 37 (2): 1–11. <https://doi.org/10.15700/saje.v37n2a1354>.
- Mbati, L., and R. Mphahlele. 2024. "Innovative Multimodal ODeL Supervision Practices." *Journal of Learning Development in Higher Education* (30). <https://doi.org/10.47408/jldhe.vi30.1057>.
- Mdakane, M., S. A. Ngubane, and Z. S. Dhlamini. 2022. "Incarcerated Students' Experiences." *South African Journal of Higher Education* 36 (3): 91–108. <https://doi.org/10.20853/36-3-4548>.
- Mhlahlo, A. 2020. "Reflecting on Supervision Experiences." *South African Journal of Higher Education* 34 (2): 164–176. <https://doi.org/10.20853/34-2-3565>.
- Motala, S., and K. Menon. 2020. "In Search of the New Normal." *Southern African Review of Education* 26 (1): 80–99.
- Mullen, C. A., and C. C. Klimaitis. 2021. "Defining Mentoring." *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences* 1483 (1): 19–35. <https://doi.org/10.1111/nyas.14176>.
- Narayan, R., C. Rodriguez, J. Araujo, A. Shaqlaih, and G. Moss. 2013. "Constructivist Learning Theory."
- Ngubane, N., and M. Makua. 2021. "Ubuntu Pedagogy." *Inkanyiso* 13 (1): 1–12. <https://doi.org/10.4102/ink.v13i1.9>.
- Ngulube, P. 2021. "Postgraduate Supervision Practices." *Problems of Education in the 21st Century* 79 (2): 255–272. <https://doi.org/10.33225/pec/21.79.255>.
- Okeke-Uzodike, O. E. 2021. "Postgraduate Supervision in a Transforming Environment." *Issues in Educational Research* 31 (4): 1175–1194.
- Omodan, B. I., and C. T. Tsotetsi. 2020. "Deconstructing Power Differentials." *Ubuntu Journal of Conflict and Social Transformation* 9 (1): 105–126. <https://doi.org/10.31920/2050-4950/2020/9n1a6>.
- Phaswana-Mafuya, R. N. 2023. *Research Mentorship*. <https://doi.org/10.36615/9781776444632>.
- Radebe, L. J. 2023. "Novice Supervisors' Experiences." Doctoral dissertation, University of Pretoria.
- Rathmell, W. K., N. J. Brown, and R. R. Kilburg. 2019. "Transformation to Academic Leadership." *Consulting Psychology Journal* 71 (3): 141.
- Roberts, R. E. 2020. "Qualitative Interview Questions." *Qualitative Report* 25 (9). <https://doi.org/10.46743/2160-3715/2020.4640>.
- Samodien, M., M. Du Plessis, and C. J. Van Vuuren. 2024. "Enhancing Higher Education Performance." *SA Journal of Human Resource Management* 22: 1–13.
- Sarabipour, S., Hainer, S.J., Arslan, F.N., De Winde, C.M., Furlong, E., Bielczyk, N., Jadavji, N.M., Shah, A.P. and Davla, S., 2022. Building and sustaining mentor interactions as a mentee. *The FEBS Journal*, 289(6), pp. 1374–1384. <https://doi.org/10.1111/febs.15823>.
- Shikulo, L., and M. Lekhetho. 2020. "Exploring Student Support Services." *Cogent Social Sciences* 6 (1): 1737401. <https://doi.org/10.1080/23311886.2020.1737401>.
- Siew, N. M. 2022. "Mentor-Mentee Outreach Programme." In *Concepts and Practices of STEM Education in Asia*, 175–197. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-19-2596-2-10>.
- Sott, M. K., and M. S. Bender. 2025. "The Role of Adaptive Leadership." *Merits* 5 (2). <https://doi.org/10.3390/merits5010002>.
- Tangco-Siason, A., Magramo-Basbas, J.I.F., Montañó, H.C., Gálvez-Felimon, R., Ortiz-Roces, C. and Pedroso, J.E.P., 2022. Exploring mentees' needs from a mentoring program: towards the

- development of a mentoring toolkit. *International Journal of Arts and Humanities Studies*, 2(1), pp.33–45. <https://doi.org/10.32996/bjahs.2022.2.1.6>
- Thaba-Nkadimene, K. L. 2020. “A Reflective Essay on Supervision.” *Journal of African Education* 1 (3): 5–26.
- Tlali, T., J. Chere-Masopha, E. Sebatane, and T. Khalanyane. 2022. “Challenges Confronting Postgraduate Supervision.” *International Journal of African Higher Education* 9 (2): 22–39. <https://doi.org/10.6017/ijahe.v9i2.15367>.
- Van de Kerkhof, M. 2024. “‘I Am Because We Are’: Introducing Ubuntu Philosophy.” *The Collector*. <https://www.thecollector.com/ubuntu-philosophy-introduction>.
- Yin, R. K. 2018. *Case Study Research and Applications*. 6th ed. SAGE.