



# **Supervision of Doctoral Students with Disabilities in South Africa: Issues, Trends and Reflections for Best Practice**

**Duduzile Nkomo <sup>a\*</sup>**

*<sup>a</sup> Department of Special and Inclusive Education, Psychology and Guidance and Counselling, BA ISAGO University, Botswana.*

## **Author's contribution**

*The sole author designed, analysed, interpreted and prepared the manuscript.*

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## **ABSTRACT**

The supervision of doctoral research is enmeshed in confounding experiences across multidisciplinary domains of knowledge and contexts. The situation seems more complicated if it involves doctoral students with disabilities in African educational landscapes. In relation to this, the paper discusses issues and trends that are prevalent in the supervision of doctoral students with disabilities in some South African institutions of higher learning. Further deliberations on evolving issues in the supervision of this group of students in a transforming educational system are made, respectively. The author also interrogates the influence of attitudinal factors in the supervision process, challenges experienced by supervisors and lastly makes suggestions for reflective practice.

\*Corresponding author: Email: [dnkomo25@gmail.com](mailto:dnkomo25@gmail.com);

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The quality and success of doctoral students with or without disabilities in their research projects and thesis writing in higher learning largely depends on effective and efficient supervision [1,2,3]. As early as students complete the registration process and resume the doctoral programme, there are assigned supervisors who have the responsibility of guiding them from development of a feasible research topic right through to understanding research conduct protocols, production and defence of research proposal, collection and analysis of data and finally writing the thesis for presentation [4]. This is a mammoth task that deserves careful planning if responsible stakeholders are to achieve desired success. While supervision of 'general' students is quite challenging, the situation is even worse when it comes to those with disabilities as they may, at times need additional support from the supervisor and the entire institution for them to succeed [5]. In an attempt to define disability, [6] states that it is a condition that impacts on one's ability to efficiently do life activities like individuals without disabilities. Disability may be physical, visual, intellectual or even related to one's capacity, amongst others. In regard to students with disabilities, it implies that their condition may impede the academic output therefore need relevant support and assistance.

## 2. EVOLVING ISSUES IN THE SUPERVISION OF DOCTORAL STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

The doctoral degree began in the nineteenth century as a way of ensuring the availability of highly qualified human resources capable of meeting the demands of dynamic, yet fast growing economies of our nations [7]. Like elsewhere in the world, in South Africa, experienced supervisors are used as main mentors of students doing doctoral or any other postgraduate studies [1,3]. Manderson et al. [8] define supervision in the conduct of academic research as a process of providing professional guidance and monitoring throughout the candidature of a student. In reference to doctoral supervision, it implies supporting while regularly assessing the students' progress throughout their doctoral programme. Existing literature suggests that effective supervision in doctoral studies is

influenced by three major components, which are the management system, students and supervisors [9,10]. From a system perspective, the definition of effective supervision varies according to discipline, area, and programme. When now focusing on students, it focuses on the ability of the supervisor to meet their academic and professional needs [11]. This may include guiding the student to adhere to set deadlines and respond satisfactorily to comments given after assessment of their work, amongst other crucial factors. Furthermore, Ladany et al. [12] perceive effective supervision in relation to compliance to set supervision standards and policies.

Additionally, effective supervision can be enhanced by development of a good supervisory relationship. Mothiba et al. [13] note that at the inception of the supervisory relationship, a doctoral student is given an opportunity to share their experiences on the area that they desire to conduct an in-depth study on, then they work alongside their supervisors in engaging in the relevant processes. This academic relationship is expected to lead to completion of their studies within a particular period of time [14]. Ladany, Mori and Mehr [12] also add that, for these students to be considered worthy of attaining the doctoral qualification, their research output should make a meaningful contribution to the body of knowledge in their field or discipline. This may be in the form of generating fundamental discoveries or even new technologies.

From the students and supervisors' point of view, [18] highlights that effective supervision is highly related to the character and qualities of a supervisor. Students often perceive a good supervisor as one who timeously provides them feedback on their academic progress. Other personality traits that may define a commendable supervisor include approachability and open-mindedness, amongst others [3]. On the other hand, Ladany et al. [12] substantiates that, it is not only the supervisor who should possess particular qualities but the student as well. The same further elaborate that the student's attitudes, experience in learning and good interpersonal skills are crucial in effective supervision.

In South Africa, acceptance of students into the doctoral programme depends on their academic

credentials and ability to meet the set standards, and this resonates with the general global practices [2]. In view of this, it is prudent to note that students with diverse abilities or those that come from different backgrounds are also allowed to enrol in doctoral degree programmes as long as they meet set standards. This aligns with the South African policy guidelines [16]. The UNESCO [17] World Declaration on Education for All policy, of which South Africa is a signatory, also emphasises the inclusion of students with diverse needs in all levels of education. This encompasses the doctoral level. While this is commendable, more often than not, some students with disabilities pursuing the doctoral degree are not meaningfully assisted by their supervisors to reach their goals. The researcher, being a person living with a disability, noted this during her doctoral studies. Some supervisors would even expect the supervisee to meet all set deadlines and other demands, ignoring the impact of the student's disability on expectations and study progress. The blame cannot be entirely apportioned to supervisors only, but largely to circumstances that relate to effective supervision. Some of these include, lack of knowledge of the needs of students by supervisors, limited understanding of strategies that should be employed to help students with specific disabilities and at times student failure to disclose their limitations to the supervisors [18].

### **3. DOCTORAL STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES' EXPERIENCES IN THEIR STUDIES**

The experiences of doctoral students with disabilities vary tremendously in different universities and contexts [19]. Nonetheless, these experiences whether positive or negative can have a vast impact on effective supervision [20]. In relation to this, Mothiba et al [13] stress that some supervisors, because of misinformation, generally relate disability to inability, so if a student with a disability manages to get to doctoral level, they tend to undermine the negative impact of the disability on the student's performance and progress, then give the condition less attention than could be required [13]. In such a situation, students may struggle with the consequences of the disability until they complete their studies but in worst situations, they may drop out of the course. Afterwards, supervisors may not even realise that their reaction contributed to the student's decision to drop out. This may further allow them to continue with their attitude while affecting

more and more students who could be having visible or even invisible disabilities.

On a different note, Mole [21] observes that in developed countries like the United States of America, disability rights movement and disability rights legislation have helped spur increased enrolment and visibility of students with disabilities. In other contexts however, South Africa included, many students with disabilities continue to face greater physical, social and emotional barriers in postgraduate education than their non-disabled counterparts [20]. As long as this continues uncorrected, it means students will continue to suffer from discrimination which, in most cases, leads to low self-esteem and perception. With this being the case, even the supervisors may find it very difficult to work with a student who has poor self - esteem and possibly, low motivation. In addition to being disabled, doctoral students with disabilities have often raised other pertinent supervision issues that are also a challenge even to other students without disabilities, and these relate to research components such as understanding and selecting suitable research designs, data collection and processing, and /or thesis writing [22].

Furthermore, Wilbur, Kuemmel and Lackner [23] state that due to uncertainties of their supervisors' reactions, some doctoral students with disabilities find it very difficult to discuss their conditions, associated academic or social limitations and preferred learning styles with them. In some situations, such students do not only fail to notify their supervisors but their universities as well. Mather (2020) further observes that less than 50 percent of students inform their postsecondary institution of their disability. This means the other 50 percent may just prefer to manage their conditions in one way or the other. In view of this, Lizotte and Simplican [1] state that disclosure is a recurrent and tricky issue which doctoral students contend, particularly if their disability is invisible. Collins [22] further observes that, some doctoral students with invisible disabilities like mild to moderate hearing impairment choose not to disclose their conditions because they believe that their supervisors or faculties are less informed about the effects of disability or rather they may prefer to resist a disability identity label. Furthermore, Peterson & Saia [20] postulate that doctoral students with emotional or psychological disabilities sometimes report that they are unwilling to disclose their disability status to their

supervisors because they fear the stigma that may be attach to it.

Additionally, Collins [22] reveals that some doctoral students with disabilities have often indicated that their supervisors portray negative attitudes about their abilities to navigate challenges posed by the doctoral studies journey, as a result they tend to focus more on students without disabilities. In relation to this, in a study conducted by Kimball, Wells, Ostiguy, Manly & Lautebach [6], it was revealed that some supervisors of students with disabilities had negative attitudes towards their potential to complete the doctoral course, and therefore seemed to be giving more attention to the so called 'able bodied individuals than them. In addition to this, some were not even keen to assist students with disabilities to attend and participate in research conferences and seminars like other doctoral students without disabilities.

Other experiences and challenges of doctoral students are not directly linked to supervision but one way or the other impact on students' overall success. In view of this, Collins [22] notes that sometimes students face environmental obstacles within and outside the university. These affect their ability to participate in conferences (both national and international), university seminars, meet with the university representative for disabled people or even meeting their counterparts with disabilities as well. Participation in research seminars and conferences helps students to have deeper insight into varied ways of conducting their own or related research projects [24]. Additionally, research conferences help students to be more knowledgeable about different methods of conducting research. Participation and presentation in a research conference or seminar also helps students to improve their research and presentation skills. In most cases, students with disabilities have a low self-esteem and this does not exclude those that are at doctoral level [22]. If such students perform well in conferences or seminars they tend to gain confidence in themselves and this trait often helps them to be able to present their views and opinions to their supervisors during the supervisory process. Kutscher & Tuckwiller [25] note that some supervisors prefer such students as there will be able to withstand other pressures that come with this undertaking.

Furthermore, some doctoral students with visual disabilities encounter inaccessible university

websites, have difficulties in obtaining materials for classes and those that are needed to write a doctoral thesis [26]. In this case, if the students have not communicated their disability to the supervisors, they in turn may not understand that maybe, their poor performance in studies has little to do with their intellect but rather, a lot with the institution's level of disability accommodation. Relatively, some doctoral students with motor disabilities have often reported difficulties in getting to their office and that of their supervisors. The basic problem in this case relates to maladjustment of infrastructure at universities or faculties [27]. The responsible institution may lack adequate information that relates to adaptation of infrastructure so as to cater for varied learners with disabilities.

#### **4. ATTITUDES OF SUPERVISORS OF DOCTORAL STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES**

The attitudes of doctoral supervisors towards students with disabilities can either have a positive or negative effect on the success of the research project [1,14]. In South Africa, like in other related countries, the attitudes of supervisors towards doctoral students with disabilities may differ from their attitudes towards undergraduate students for a number of reasons [1]. Some supervisors may be negative about taking measures to accommodate postgraduate students when they know that such practices would significantly alter the course of study. Others also might renege on accommodations because they believe that unsuitable accommodation can give an unfair advantage to students. The other point is that postgraduate students, unlike the undergraduate ones are sometimes engaged as teaching assistants, dissertation advisees or research assistants [28]. It is also the trend that supervisors with negative attitudes towards disability in general, may not have the confidence to assign responsibilities to students with this condition.

#### **5. CHALLENGES FACED BY SUPERVISORS OF DOCTORAL STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES**

There are several challenges that supervisors of students with disabilities encounter in the execution of their duties. One of these is lack of understanding of the condition and needs of students in order to successfully complete their studies [25]. This implies that even if the

supervisors may be willing to meet the needs of students with disabilities they may be hampered by lack of understanding of the impact of the disability in an individual. Thus, doctoral supervision encompasses numerous formal and informal competencies that supervisors are expected to focus on, as well as other individual student dispositions which could be social, political, emotional, cultural, and economical in nature [29,3]. On a different note, failure by the local university management to attend to supervisors' experiences with regard to increased workload and other learning experiences may be attributed to the nature and context of doctoral education. Another challenge faced relates to lecturer-student ratio, whereby some lecturers find themselves with an unmanageable number of doctoral students [30]. If one of these has a certain learning disability, for instance, it becomes difficult for the supervisor to afford that student adequate time for supervision as he will be expected to attend to other students as well. In view of this, Zavale & Schneijderberg [31] state that the massification of higher education has resulted in large numbers of postgraduate students with varied levels of capabilities. While this aligns well with the [17] Education for All policy, in this instance, a student with a disability may be prone to exclusion in supervisory practice yet physically included in the system.

## **6. REFLECTIONS FOR BEST PRACTICE**

A number of strategies may be employed to improve access to effective supervision by students with disabilities [18]. One of the most crucial ones is development of policies that specify how doctoral students with disabilities should be identified and assisted by the university, responsible faculty and supervisors. This means that if supervisors discover that they have been allocated students with disabilities, they should be well positioned to guide them on where and how to get help that can have a positive impact on their ultimate success in their studies. Furthermore, the policies should stipulate how supervisors should be trained so that they possess the requisite skills to meaningfully supervise affected students. Another prudent opinion that supervisors may need to consider is adoption of supervision styles that meet the unique needs of students [32]. This may enhance effective consideration of students with disabilities' needs.

In addition, Lee [15] pinpoints that some doctoral students fail to complete their studies because of emotional trauma that they will be silently going through at the university. Apart from this, Lizotte & Simpican [1] observe that most research focuses on general doctoral students, and hardly on doctoral students with disabilities, who disengage from doctoral studies for various reasons that may be related to their conditions, inaccessible infrastructure or a hostile environment. This being the case, it becomes paramount for institutions of higher learning, not only in South Africa, but also in other parts of the continent to consider engagement of specialists whose mandate is to support the education of doctoral students with disabilities [29]. These may be assistants of the disabled, psychologists, career counsellors and sign language interpreters, amongst others.

Also, students with disabilities should be encouraged to disclose their conditions as soon as there are enrolled into the doctoral course. The benefits of this cannot be overemphasised. According to Francis et al. (2019), for some students with disabilities, disclosing a disability to administrators and supervisors is empowering. The ability to find a "community" of disabled students on can helps individuals to feel less isolated. The power to accept the label 'disabled' validates their difficulties and allows them to feel like they are lazy or not trying hard enough in their studies (Francis et al., 2019; Osborne, 2019). Kutscher and Tuckwiller [25] are also convinced that disability-specific social support is quite critical for the success of students with disabilities.

The creation of an effective supervisory relationship is another intervention measure that is considered important. Lizotte & Simpican [1] affirm that, a healthy relationship between doctoral students with disabilities and their supervisors is essential when it comes to student success in doctoral education. Similarly, Igumbor et al. [33] and Boughey & McKenna [14] note that the quality of supervisory relationship is important in reaching the main agenda of postgraduate degrees. If the supervisors and supervisees have a healthy relationship, the supervisees may easily communicate other personal challenges there are facing that could impede their progress [34,35]. Supervisors that are made aware of personal and other impeding problems of supervisees may be able to offer appropriate advice, mentor and support them accordingly.

## 7. CONCLUSION

From the preceding discussion it can be concluded that more often than not, doctoral students with disabilities are hardly noticed and given due attention by their supervisors and other members of staff. This presentation highlighted how these students can be identified in the system. Above all, deliberations on some measures that can be adopted to meet the needs of such individuals are made respectively.

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## COMPETING INTERESTS

Author has declared that no competing interests exist.

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