

# Publish or Perish: Challenges and Opportunities of Supervision of PhD Theses

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## ABSTRACT

The belief that if one does not publish, then one perishes is widely held in academia. The PhD supervisor should publish papers and assist their candidate to publish as well. So, the PhD supervision and publication journey is often not a rosy one although the results, when the journey is successfully completed, are sweet. This study investigates the challenges and opportunities of PhD research supervision of 20 purposively selected supervisors in the researcher's sampling frame which included international conference emailing lists. The supervisors were contacted by email. Data were collected by means of semi-structured and unstructured questionnaires which had been tested for validity and reliability through 'peer and expert checking.' The Delphi technique with two rounds was used to collect the data which was then analysed thematically. Findings showed that most supervisors had challenges of clash of supervision roles, little collaboration with others, supervising students with little research knowledge but keen on plagiarism, among others. Learning through observation and experience, promotion, collaboration, networking and publishing together were cited as benefits and opportunities of supervising PhD candidates. The results of this study may help to inform policy and practice in post graduate supervision, especially of research and in the African context, and maybe even beyond.

**Keywords:** Publish or perish, PhD research journey, PhD candidate, PhD supervisor, PhD thesis, post graduate supervision, challenges, opportunities

## INTRODUCTION & BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

The research supervision journey, whether at masters, PhD levels or otherwise, is often not a rosy one although the results, when the journey is successfully completed, are sweet. This belief may be attributed to candidates as well as their supervisors. Despite the challenges, it is believed that production of graduates at tertiary level, which partially depends on effective supervision of their research projects, has implications of the economies of developing countries in Africa (Bacwayo, Nampala & Oteyo, 2017). Effective supervision of research projects can lead to quality education and institutional success at college or university level (Bacwayo, Nampala & Oteyo, 2017; Kaguhangire-Barifaijo & Nkata, 2021) and this may lead to job creation and employment which also have ripple effect on the country's growth domestic product.

The successful supervision of research and publication of academic papers by lecturers or research supervisors may lead to their promotion (Bazrafkan, Yousefy, Amini, & Yamani, 2019). If supervisors do not publish, they may 'perish' as it were. However, there are challenges as well as opportunities encountered during, and also after, the research journey (Swargiary, 2023; Kaguhangire-Barifaijo & Nkata, 2021; Ngulube, 2021; Tian & Singhasiri, 2016). From the researcher's experiences and observations, most PhD supervisors had challenges, and their candidates took more than the minimum time to complete their dissertations and theses. This triggered the researcher to study deeply this phenomenon.

## PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

This study traces the research supervision journey of PhD supervisors by investigating their challenges and opportunities.

## SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

The results of this study may help to inform policy and practice in post graduate supervision, especially of research and in the African context, and maybe even beyond.

## STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

It would appear, from the researcher's own observations and from literature, that most PhD supervisors encounter research supervision and publication challenges which negatively affect the preparation of the student's proposal and the production of the final write-up. The problem may be exacerbated by the absence of clear policies and regulations to guide research, supervision and paper publication, especially in the Zimbabwean context.

## RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The following research questions guided this study:

1. What are the general challenges of supervising PhD candidates?
2. What are the perceived benefits and opportunities of supervising the PhD candidates?
3. What are the major roles of PhD supervisors?
4. How do PhD supervisors rate their candidates?

## REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

This review of related literature is divided into the following sections: Theoretical framework, General Challenges of PhD supervisors, Benefits and Opportunities of Supervising the PhD Candidates, Roles of PhD Supervisors.

### Theoretical framework

Several theories guide supervision, be it school teaching practice or research project supervision. Two prominent ones are the participatory action learning and action research approach (Wood & Louw 2018) whereby co-supervision is encouraged, power relations are minimized, knowledge creation and ownership are enhanced, and the traditional model where the supervisor is the expert and the student is the 'vessel' to be spoon fed. Similar to this are the - authoritative (dictatorship/directive, autocratic, expert teacher) versus the persuasive discourse (communicative, team work, collaborative, creative, mentoring) (Augustsson & Jaldemark, 2013). Using the participatory and team-work model, the supervisor will be motivated to learn, guide and assist the student to complete the thesis within the minimum possible duration while the other (opposite) theories imply that supervisor-supervisee relationship will be sour, and the supervisee or student will experience a lot of challenges which could hinder his/her progress. These challenges might emanate into psychological, moral and mental ones.

Also, the traditional face to face interactive model has been used for quite some time but now it can be blended with ICT or online model (Agu & Odimegu, 2014). The blended approach ensures that the student can use the internet and e-libraries resulting in improved supervision process, reduced administrative workload of the supervisor, and creation of both manual and e-records of the supervision process (Agu & Odimegu, 2014).

The blended approach, coupled with the participatory action learning and action research and the persuasive discourse approaches, as alluded to above, might be better for the Zimbabwe scenario taking into cognizant the

fact that most Zimbabwean students face challenges of accessibility to ICT materials and internet connectivity. Guided by the above-mentioned theories, this study hopes to investigate PhD supervision with respect to the challenges and perceived benefits.

### **General Challenges of PhD supervisors**

Some PhD supervisors face their own challenges which may be different to those faced by their students. Some of these are the high lecturer and student ratios and insufficient resources. The managers of the institutions themselves have often lamented that there are very few lecturers with PhD's compromising on supervision quality (Bacwayo, Nampala & Oteyo, 2017). Kaguhangire-Barifaijo and Nkata (2021) have noted that institutions face the challenge of choosing the best supervision models and implementing them, that there are often fights between supervisors and this has negative ripple effect on the student, and that there are misunderstandings or disagreements between the supervisee and the supervisor on knowledge, skills, etc. These challenges could be alleviated by choosing better supervision models such as the blended approach coupled with participatory approaches and group supervision, also known as co-supervision, team supervision, collaborative supervision or joint supervision (Kaguhangire-Barifaijo, & Nkata, 2021; Agu, & Odimegwu, 2014).

Participants in Swargiary's (2023) study proffered some ways of solving these challenges such as having regular communication, having clear guidelines and expectations, training and mentorship, putting in place formal mechanisms or policies on research supervision, and encouraging collaborative research and publications.

Also, role ambiguity, no clear legislature/policies, no supervision check or checking of supervisor him/herself were proffered as other challenges (Bazrafkan, Yousefy, Amini, & Yamani 2019). Do PhD students in Zimbabwe and elsewhere face similar challenges? This study will examine this and other issues.

### **Benefits and Opportunities of Supervising the PhD Candidates**

Despite the challenges, some benefits and opportunities of supervising PhD candidates have been investigated. Among them are the opportunities for exposure and creating lifelong friendships (Bacwayo, Nampala & Oteyo, 2017), networking, and learning opportunities through workshops and face to face gatherings (Lim, Covrig, Freed, De Oliveira, Ongo, & Newman, 2019; Grohnert, Gromotka, Gast, Delnoij, & Beusaert, 2024). According to Kaguhangire-Barifaijo and Nkata (2021) effective thesis supervision may lead to research output, and this will be a benefit to the researchers and the institution as well because "institutional success and reputation depends on research output" (p. 1). There are also moral reputational and financial benefits to the institution (Bazrafkan, Yousefy, Amini & Yamani, 2019). Netshitangani and Machaisa (2021) corroborate these ideas by opining that thesis supervisors have opportunities to attend workshops, seminars and conferences, while students have opportunities to collaborate with peers during face-to-face meetings, also sometimes virtually.

### **Roles of PhD supervisors**

The roles and responsibilities of supervisors have been documented. Among the roles of the supervisors is the quality mentoring role (Bacwayo, Nampala & Oteyo, 2017; Lim, Covrig, Freed, De Oliveira, Ongo, & Newman, 2019), providing decisions on content and methods, having and using expertise on thesis supervision (Lim, Covrig, Freed, De Oliveira, Ongo, & Newman, 2019; Bazrafkan, Yousefy, Amini & Yamani 2019) and guiding the student to have suitable research topics (Bazrafkan, Yousefy, Amini & Yamani 2019). According to Kaguhangire-Barifaijo and Nkata (2021) supervisors and students have the joint role of publishing together and having open communication. Also, supervisors should help students develop academic potential, plan the thesis process, help in choosing topic and methodology strategies, provide feedback, and regularly communicate with the student on all the requirements (Gronhert 2024). This research hopes to investigate if similar observations are noted in the Zimbabwean scenario and also elsewhere, with the view of coming up with generalizable recommendations.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study investigates the challenges and opportunities of PhD research supervision of 20 purposively selected supervisors in the researcher's sampling frame which included international conference emailing lists. The supervisors were contacted by email. Data were collected by means of semi-structured and unstructured questionnaires which had been tested for validity and reliability through 'peer and expert' checking. According to Naisola-Ruiter (2022), when using the Delphi method, data is gathered by asking a selected panel of 'experts' or participants to anonymously make judgements on a specific research issue. The researcher shares with the participants the responses which are later discussed in several rounds so that a consensus is reached. Twin (2023) says this method allows the participants to interact with the responses of one another without coercion, change or adjust their opinions until consensus is reached and still remain anonymous. In this study the Delphie technique with two rounds was used to collect data. Supervisors' questionnaire data were presented in question-by-question format and also by narrating the 'voices' of the respondents. Content analysis was used, and emerging themes were categorized and listed.

## RESULTS, FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

### Supervisors' Questinnnaire

Below is a question- by- question presentation and analysis of the findings.

Question1 asked about the demographic data of the participants and the results are shown in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Demographic data of the participants, n=20

	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Age range (yrs)</b>	<b>Years of experience at the institution</b>	<b>From which Department?</b>
Supervisors, n = 20	Male = 5	50-64	10-17	Curriculum Instruction (3), Educational Management (12), Commerce (3)
	Female =15	50-64	10-17	Science & Math Education (2)

Table 1 shows that 75% of the supervisors were female and 25% male, all the supervisors were mature (50-64 years old) and relatively highly experienced in supervision (10-17 years). Most of the supervisors (85%) belonged mainly to education related departments (Curriculum instruction, Educational Management and Science & Math Education). Perhaps this research could have revealed varied and different results if some of the respondents could have belonged to other departments like hard sciences, engineering or technology.

Question 2 asked the supervisors to describe the PhD research supervision journey they had travelled so far, citing the dates when they started, the challenges they had faced, the triumphs they had had, and the feelings they had experienced:

Below is a snapshot of the descriptions of only three supervisors.

### Supervisor A:

I started very late as second PhD supervisor in June 2020. My challenge was that I did not get any information on what my roles were as second supervisor. The main supervisor sort of wanted me to do the bulk of the work. I, however, appreciated the supervisor for sharing some observations we made as we supervised the assigned student. At some point the main supervisor wanted me to take on the role of an internal assessor by requesting me to mark the student's document and give comments per each line/sentence but I told him that I had done my part as supervisor. The roles of a supervisor and an assessor are not the same. The student was compliant, and he worked on the document as he was guided. Nonetheless, I felt that the student did not, at any time,

defend his actions or sections of his document, he quickly complied with supervisors' suggestions yet debate or discussion is key in PhD work....In 2022, I was again appointed as second supervisor. The main supervisor treats me with respect and together we worked out our plan of action with the student. So far, we have had two online meetings with the student. My observation is that the student is taking rather too long to present his proposal. It took a very long time for me to be appointed co-supervisor. There was unfair allocation of PhD supervisory work to members in the University. Work was generally the monopoly of old- timers. This is a source of frustration.

### **Supervisor B:**

I was given a student to supervise in the year 2019 and immediately the student wrote the study title she disappeared only to appear in the year 2023 with the desire to continue with her study. She has developed her concept paper, and I hope she will keep track till the end. The challenge I experienced is abandonment of the work by the student without notifying me. The second student is very diligent and progressing well. She started 2022 and by the end of last year she had defended in the department and was ready to defend in the school. She is self-driven and determined to finish within the stipulated time. The challenge with this student is being negative to the corrections I give and unwillingness to continue within the required time in making corrections.

### **Supervisor C:**

I started supervising research students from 2011 to present. The challenges I encountered were related to students failing to consistently consult the supervisor, copying finished work on research (i.e., plagiarism), lack of adequate research knowledge or the research process and using old sources in reviewing literature. My major triumphs were working according to provided timeframe and following the major steps in the research study.

The descriptions of all the three supervisors above show that supervision was exciting but not without challenges. The main challenges were related to modalities of co-supervision and students' weak collaboration and time management quality. These views corroborate those of Kaguhangire-Barifaijo and Nkata (2021) and Bacwayo, Nampala and Oteyo, (2017), among others.

Question 3 asked supervisors to state some of their major roles. The responses that reached consensus were as follows:

- a) Sharing useful research sources of information [15%]
- b) Providing samples of well written sections of PhD documents [10%]
- c) Guiding research work step by step [80%]
- d) Publishing with the student [35%]
- e) Guiding the students [95%]
- f) Motivating the students [55%]
- g) Monitoring progress and reporting to the department [75%]
- h) Making the write up [25%]
- i) Supporting the student during defenses and through the journey [80%].
- j) Providing guidelines in writing of different phases of the research report [85%]
- k) Encouraging students to read more material on research [30%]
- l) Marking and providing feedback on each level or chapter [25%]
- m) Encouraging publication of articles from the project/dissertation/thesis [15%]



The percentages in brackets [%] show the extent to which the answer was mentioned. However, some of the responses were similar or repeated, hence the figures do not necessarily add up to 100%. It can be noted that most supervisors considered: Guiding research work step by step, Supporting the student during defenses and through the journey, Providing guidelines in writing of different phases of the research writing, and Guiding the students, as the major roles. The emerging major theme could be considered as Guidance or Mentoring. Netshitangani and Machaisa (2021) and Bacwayo, Nampala and Oteyo (2017) also agreed with these views. Publishing with the students was another important role followed by marking the thesis and providing feedback. Motivating the student also goes hand in hand with mentoring and providing feedback and these should encompass all stages of the research process.

The major themes emanating from these responses, (related and not exhaustive) were considered as student guidance, student support, motivation, co-publishing, monitoring and feedback.

Question 4 asked whether publication of a research paper by a student is mandatory before the student completes his/her PhD and if so, how many papers are required. The results are shown in the table below.

Table 2: Is publication of a research paper by a candidate mandatory and what is the number of papers?

Response from	Mandatory	Number of papers
Supervisor, n=20	<b>Yes:</b> n = 10 (50%)	3 or more, n=0
		2, n= 10
	<b>Not sure,</b> n = 0 (0%)	1, n= 0
	<b>No:</b> n= 10 (50%)	Not applicable, n= 10
Total n=20 (100%)	Total n=20 (100%)	Total n=20 (100%)

Results in Table 2 show that there were mixed views (i.e., 50-50) as to whether research paper publication before PhD completion was mandatory. This could depend on the PhD guidelines or policies of the institution. The number of articles to be published before one graduated was agreed to be two by 50% of the participants. However, it is the personal view of the researcher that good supervision and co-publication between supervisor and student enhances the student's writing skills and motivates and aids them for future promotion in academia. Gill and Bunard (2008) hold similar sentiments. .

Question 5 asked the supervisors what factors, if any, had hindered their student(s) from publishing. Their responses can be summarized as follows:

- Monetary challenges, high publication fees or lack of funds
- Absence of student zeal, not confident enough or fear to just get started
- Student not having the culture to write papers
- Time limitations
- Lack of skills to extract a paper from the thesis
- Aim is just to complete the program and not worry about publishing

The above responses from the supervisors can be categorized into the following themes together with the consensus reached (in terms of %): High publication fees (75%), Lack of confidence, (no zeal, fear) (20%), Poor academic writing skills (10%), Not clear on benefits of publishing (10%), Time limitations (10%).

The above findings indicate that since high publication fees followed by lack of confidence to publish were mentioned by most participants it would be beneficial to the institutions to carry out workshops on academic

writing skills and appropriately fund joint publications especially between students and their supervisors. Academic writing training was also supported by Netshitangani and Machaisa (2021) and this could lead to joint publications.

Questions 6 and 7 asked supervisors to rate their students with respect to being cooperative (Q6) and knowledgeable (Q7) in research.

Table 3: Rating of students by supervisors, n =20

Supervisors	Q6: 1-6 scale from <b>Not cooperative at all</b> to <b>Very cooperative</b>	Q7: 1-6 scale from <b>Not knowledgeable at all</b> to <b>Very knowledgeable in research</b>
n = 12	5	4
n = 5	4	3
n = 3	1	2

From the results in Table 3 it would suffice to say that those students who were said to be not cooperative were also not knowledgeable in research and the opposite being true. Some 60% (n=12) of the supervisors rated their students as very cooperative and somewhat knowledgeable in research.

Q 8 requested the supervisors to state the general challenges faced by a PhD student while Q9 asked for possible solutions to those challenges. The corresponding results are presented in Table 4 below.

Table 4: Supervisors' responses to challenges faced by students and possible solutions, n=20

Supervisors' ID number	Challenges faced by students	Possible solutions
1, 8	Delayed feedback from supervisors	Supervisors need to work with deadlines together with the student.
2	Time constraints	Proper training in time management
3, 20, 15	Conflicting opinions and suggestions from main and co-supervisor	Main and co-supervisors should share observations first before relaying conflicting suggestions to the students
4, 14	Some supervisors and members in research boards still demanding students to submit hard copies of student's research document	Everyone involved in research should not lag behind technology-soft copies of student work should be shared to cut on travelling expenses
5, 17	Low motivation	Give incentives to motivate the students
6, 18, 20	Lack of funds (e.g., for travelling)	Government and university to offer research grants
7, 2, 16	Time constraints since most are employed and working while studying	Proper training in time management
8, 13, 14	Lack of support from university	Departments and lecturers to call the student regularly or the student is given a schedule on how to come to the institution for consultation
9, 19	Inadequate time to fully focus on studies	Proper training in time management
10,	Big internet costs for the research	Encourage them to be resourceful
11	Lack of resources (e.g., for typing and printing research documents)	Government and university to offer research grants
12	Electricity challenges	Encourage them to be resourceful

Table 4 shows that four sets of three supervisors agreed on conflicting opinions from supervisors, lack of resources and funds, time constraints and lack of university support as the most common challenges faced by students. Four groups involving two supervisors also agreed on some of the aspects while four sets of single supervisors had their own views. The findings in Table 4 can be categorized into five important themes for the challenges, the themes being not necessarily exhaustive and disjoint: time factors, low motivation, shortage of funds and resources, conflicting supervisory roles and demands, and institutional support. The supervisors offered some tentative solutions to these challenges, and these agree with suggestions offered by Swargiary (2023, Kaguhangire-Barifaijo, and Nkata (2021), and Agu and Odimegwu (2014).

Question 10 was slightly different from Q9 in the sense that challenges in Q9 were faced by students while those in Q10 were faced by supervisors although both were proffered by the supervisors themselves. The responses to challenges faced by supervisors (Q10) and the possible solutions (Q11) are given in Table 5 below.

Table 5: Challenges of supervising PhD students and possible solutions, n=20

<b>Supervisors' ID number</b>	<b>Challenges faced by supervisors</b>	<b>Possible solutions</b>
1, 12, 14, 20	Going through pieces of work which are hardly readable	Students should be helped to use technology to spruce their work from the start to finish...-checking grammar, spellings
2, 3, 15, 19	Having other duties to fulfill as a lecturer	Supervisor needs good time management
3, 9, 10	Students not effecting suggestions by supervisors, not going through marked documents step by step...	Firmness on part of supervisor- no moving further if initial suggestions would not have been taken on board
4, 11, 16	Time constraints hence not being able to mark and give feedback in good time.	Incentives in terms of good remuneration on supervision and on-time graduation.
5, 17, 18	Time constraints hence not being able to follow up the student or even give reasonable support	Department to follow up the students directly and not wait for the lecturers to do so
6, 9, 13	Low motivation	Give incentives in terms of good tokens on timeous graduation of the student.
7, 18	Heavy workload in teaching	Reduced teaching workload
8, 20	Students not well read in understanding research and failing to be knowledgeable in this area	Encourage them to seriously read materials on research

Table 5 shows the views that more than two supervisors agreed on, with four pointing out 'going through pieces of work which are hardly readable' and 'having other duties to fulfill as a lecturer' being the common challenges. The themes emerging from them were considered as a) Time constraints – many duties to do, b) Heavy workloads, c) Lack of scholarship by students- not well read and, d) Low motivation-lack of incentives. Suggestions to overcome the challenges were offered, among them being good time management, sufficient incentives, reduced workloads, all pointing to the need for institutions to have clear policies and guidelines on doing PhD research and supervision. These ideas corroborate those of Ndayambaje, Bjuremark, Ntaganda, Nkurunziza, Gahugi, Rutikanga and Habinshuti (2018) and of Bacwayo, Nampala and Oteyo (2017).

Most supervisors believed that there are benefits and opportunities of supervising theses of PhD candidates. Question 12 asked about these, and the responses given were summarized as follows:

- Collaboration can be fostered
- One learns some things from the student's work...,while supervising a student
- Increased publications



- Promotion is pegged on this
- Increase knowledge in supervision and in the area under research
- Job satisfaction
- Your knowledge base of research increases also
- You will have the opportunity to supervise more of such students as well as examine their theses.

These viewpoints suggest areas of agreement between supervisors emanating into the following important themes: Learning is enhanced, knowledge is increased, collaboration enhanced, promotion guaranteed, increased publications, and job satisfaction. These ideas are in tandem with views of other researchers (Grohnert, Gromotka, Gast, Delnoij, & Beausaert, 2024; Kaguhangire-Barifaijo & Nkata, 2021; Oliveira, Ongo, & Newman, 2019; Bacwayo, Nampala, & Oteyo, 2017).

Also, a balanced approach that values both quality and quantity of research output should be promoted. There should be open communication between supervisors and students so as to reduce stress, clarify expectations and foster a research culture that adheres to ethical standards and agreed policies. Both supervisors and students should be well resourced and financially supported.

## CONCLUSION

This study concludes that PhD supervisors, be they novice or experienced, still face challenges, which however can be overcome. Most participants proffered that students, supervisors and PhD offering institutions should work hand in hand to overcome these challenges. One of the solutions suggested was putting in place clear-cut policies and guidelines on supervision strategies. There also exist good opportunities of supervision inclusive of co-publication, co-supervision, networking, collaboration and knowledge sharing and moral growth and satisfaction. It is also concluded that the results of this study may help to inform policy and practice in post graduate supervision, especially of research and in the African context, and maybe even beyond. Four research questions were proffered and answered in this study.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

The study recommends that:

- Institutions offering PhD's should put in place clear policies and regulations on PhD supervision. [For example, one institution in Zimbabwe has already drafted such a policy document: Zimbabwe Open University, (2023). Post Graduate Research Regulations. However, research on its effectiveness or implementation has probably not been undertaken yet.]
- PhD supervisors should constantly be reminded of their roles through induction activities, training and workshops.
- PhD supervisors should be motivated, incentivized and supported to effectively supervise PhD research.
- There is a need for further research, which may include more and varied technics of data collection and analysis.

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