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A comparative analysis of a pathway model and manuals to assess efficiency of pedagogical training in doctoral supervision in Uganda

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ABSTRACT

Doctoral supervision is increasingly becoming a complex enterprise, calling for highly skilled and competent supervisors. This paper considers a comparative analysis of a three – pathway model and graduate manuals of selected Ugandan universities to forecast the role of pedagogical training in doctoral supervision. The handbooks were in some instances in consistence with the model tracks. However, they, to a larger extent, envisioned informal training of PhD supervisors. The paper discerns, from the model and documents that a doctoral supervisor with pedagogical training may enlist conceptualised and differentiated supervisory skills. A supervisor on- the- job training has the opportunity to develop crystallized skills. A neophyte supervisor is a candidate of ‘supervisory accidents’. In contemporary times, the process of doctoral supervision takes the supervisor’s aptitude, which to a bigger extent is an upshot of formal pedagogical learning. An empirical analysis of the concepts considered in this paper is suggested.



KEYWORDS

PhD supervision;
pedagogical training;
competence; three pathway
model

Background

Research and innovations are increasingly and globally viewed as key to institutional progress. Indeed, postgraduate qualifications (in this context PhDs) are becoming more and more valued in the workplace as knowledge is viewed as a means through which organisations harness a competitive advantage (Bitzer & Albertyn, 2011). There is increased enrolment of PhD students globally as a result of such perception of intellectual capital currency (Vilkinas, 2002).

Consequently, graduate supervisors encounter greater than before pressure as they face the conundrum of supervising increasing numbers of PhD students. The burden of supervision is met within challenging and changing higher education contexts (Bitzer & Albertyn, 2011). Therefore, there is no doubt that doctoral supervision is now a more complex business (Bøgelund, 2015). These challenges and developments call for the need for well-trained postgraduate researchers both in and outside of academia (Bøgelund, 2015; Turner, 2015). Thus, in some regional contexts, institutions have

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developed professional development programmes to support doctoral supervisors in this professional role (Basturkmen, East, & Bitchener, 2012). Many other institutions, however, rely on training doctoral supervisors through on-the-job experiences. In addition to on-the-job training, other institutions struggle to inculcate skills among their PhD supervisors through non-formal training (Lee, 2008, 2012). In the most miserable circumstances, universities put responsibility of doctoral supervision on their new graduates (Turner, 2015). In fact, the latter is the most common practice among new and developing universities (or probably among established universities as well!).

Practically, a PhD supervisor is widely believed to play a key role in the progress of a student (Bégin & Gérard, 2013). As a result, a doctoral supervisor can either make or break the supervisee. A supervisor is hence a teacher whose product depends on the competency of the strategy s/he employs (Bruce & Stoodley, 2013), and the support given to the student (Curtin, Stewart, A, & Ostrove, 2012). Therefore, doctoral supervisors must possess appropriate skills and subject knowledge (Cusick, 2015; Turner, 2015), for them to churn out acceptable doctoral graduates (Keefer, 2015; Trafford & Leshem, 2009). Certainly, doctoral supervision and mentoring are widely whispered to be skills that can be formally, pedagogically and gradually developed. Thus, many institutions with PhD programmes relentlessly devise a myriad of formal and informal mechanisms through which acquisition of supervisory and mentorship skills among doctoral supervisors could be accentuated (Trafford & Leshem, 2009; Turner, 2015; Wellington, 2012).

In a Ugandan context, however, a part from being in possession of a PhD, there is no agreed position regarding minimum credentials doctoral supervisors should possess. However, the Uganda National Council for Higher Education has tried to lay down some benchmarks, but lacks capacity to supervise what takes place on ground. This problem is compounded by the high number of sprouting universities, which in most cases lack qualified (senior) supervisors. Consequently, some universities expect their faculty to begin on the journey of doctoral supervision as soon as they become PhD graduates. Other universities are fair enough to allow a period of on-the-job practice, through which their PhD graduates acquire 'on-the-job skills' for full time supervision. All the same, a big chunk of skills remains 'on-the-job' experience for most scholars, and indeed for most of the doctoral supervisors.

However, recent partnerships with abroad universities inspired the birth of formal pedagogical training in doctoral supervision. As of today, selected doctoral supervisors, or prospective supervisors from across Uganda periodically receive training in doctoral supervision. Nonetheless, before conception of this paper, the role of formal pedagogical training in buttressing supervisory skills was not clearly understood. The potency of formal pedagogical training in doctoral supervision henceforth needed to be analysed. Therefore, this paper explores the role of formal pedagogical training in doctoral supervision and competence in PhD supervision.

Methods

This paper reports partial findings of a study initially planned to be accomplished in three phases. The first phase enables development of a three-pathway model to represent possible pathways through which a PhD supervisor is bred in a Ugandan context. The second phase considers and integrates reviews of graduate handbooks of select

institutions into the pathway model. In the third phase, it is expected that PhD supervisors shall be interviewed, in view of the first and second phases. However, only the findings of the first two phases are reported herein. Therefore, this paper considers partial results and work in progress.

In the first phase, the paper considers and conceptualises three pathways of cases in which a doctoral supervisor in a Ugandan setting is likely to be bred. The conceptualised pathways are illustrated in Figure 1.

The first/upper pathway represents a case of a supervisor who after PhD graduation is allowed to first observe 'how it is done' e.g. through attachment to senior supervisors. This pathway represents on-the-job training in doctoral supervision. In the second/middle pathway is a case of a PhD graduate who is first given formal training in graduate supervision, and then left free to supervise PhD students. The third/lower pathway is about a case of a new PhD graduate who takes on doctoral supervision immediately after graduation (without experience or training). These three pathways represent real academic life situations in some of the tertiary institutions.

In the second phase, postgraduate research manuals (online versions) of five top universities in Uganda were purposively selected for analysis. However, graduate handbooks from only four out of the five universities were available online. The guidelines/handbooks were from Uganda Martyrs University (2018), Mbarara University of Science and Technology (2017), Uganda Christian University (2018), and Makerere University (2016). University graduate manuals were considered according to uniRank 2018 ranking of universities in Uganda. Therefore, the universities whose manuals were analysed were chartered, licensed and/or accredited by the Ugandan National Council for Higher Education. Names of the universities were given codes U1 to U5 (see Table 1) for easy reference.

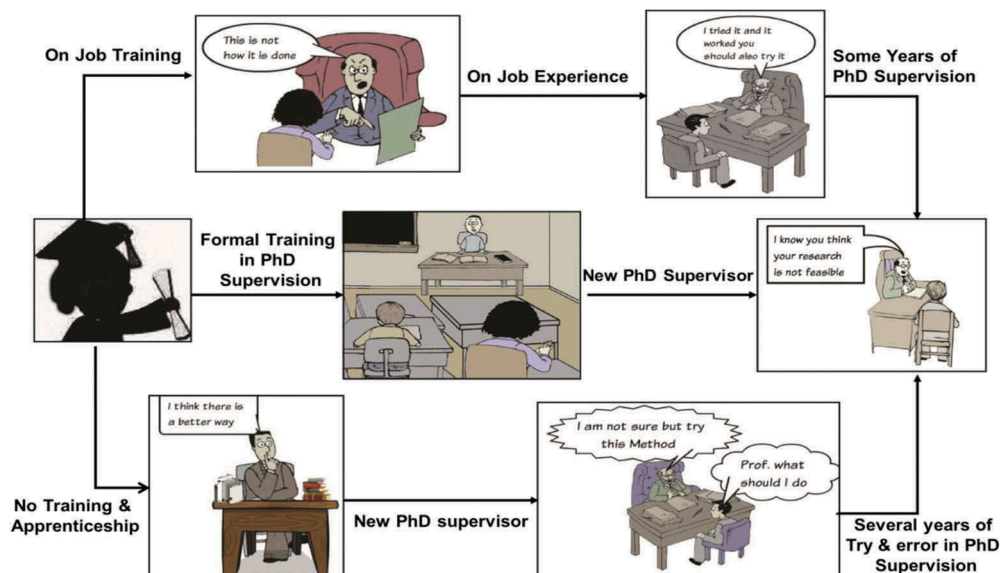


Figure 1. Annotated scheme showing hypothetical pathways in doctoral training and competence in doctoral supervision.

Notes: The graphical illustration is the authors' own idea. **Animation was drawn by Raphael Wangalwa, a PhD student, using an online software at <http://toondoo.com/>

Table 1. To show connection between the three pathways model and university graduate manual description of a doctoral supervisor.

University/ Label	Document	Year of Publication	Content on PhD Supervisor Qualification	Correspondence to the Three Pathway Model
U1	Doctoral supervision guidelines	2016	Academic staff members who qualify to supervise doctoral students must have a doctoral degree of at least two years duration/standing	Upper track
U2	Graduate Hand Book	2017	Full time members of staff engaged within the area of student's interest, being at a rank of senior lecturer, and with experience in postgraduate student supervision	Corresponds with both upper and lower tracks
U3	Academic Research Manual	2018	No specification is made of the qualification of prospective PhD supervisor	None
U4	Not found	none	None	None
U5	School of Postgraduate Studies and Research Handbook	2018	No specification is made of the qualification of prospective PhD supervisor	None

The codes do not correspond with the serial numbers of the universities on the ranking grid. Analysis was based on the description of the mandatory qualifications of doctoral supervisors in the respective institutional manuals, and how the qualifications fitted in the three pathway model previously developed by the author.

Results

This paper considers a hypothetical three – pathway model and analyses graduate e-manuals of selected universities. Details are found in [Figure 1](#) and [Table 1](#) respectively. The two techniques are integrated to form argumentation regarding formal pedagogical training and competence in doctoral supervision. In the analysis, two of the e-manuals were from private and two were from public universities. The manual for one of the public universities was not found. However, two out of the four university manuals specified credentials for doctoral supervisors. Nevertheless, only the manual for U1 was found to have put time limit (see [Table 1](#)) a new graduate is expected to take before they begin to supervise on their own. The manual in this case allows the potential doctoral supervisor to acquire experience during the 'quarantine' period. This arrangement is in consistence with the first track in the pathway model (see [Figure 1](#)).

The manual for U2, however, specifies academic rank and experience with graduate supervision as credentials for prospective doctoral supervisors. This requirement (without time limit) implies that irrespective of the time spent after PhD graduation, supervisors with experience of supervision at master's level qualify to supervise doctoral students. This requirement fits in the first/upper and the last/lower tracks of the pathway model. As observed in [Table 1](#), none of the graduate manuals has formal qualification in doctoral supervision as a requirement for aspiring supervisors.

Discursive argument

The synthesis in this paper is built on an integration of three pathways of cases in which a doctoral supervisor is likely to be formed (see [Figure 1](#)), and on analysis of postgraduate manuals of selected universities in Uganda (see [Table 1](#)). The upper and lower routes in the pathway model, respectively, reflect a supervisor who first gets on the job training and one who supervises soon after PhD graduation. These model tracks are recognisable in the respective graduate manuals for U1 and U2. In the pathway model, the middle route depicts a doctoral supervisor who receives formal pedagogical training before starting to supervise. The middle track, however, is conspicuously absent in the inspected graduate handbooks. This gap is fathomable, as pedagogical training in doctoral supervision in our context is a recent innovation. The innovation as a result has not yet fully proliferated within graduate schools in Ugandan universities. Nevertheless, previous views emphasise a conceptual understanding of the holistic approach to doctoral supervision (Bitzer & Albertyn, 2011; Lee, 2008). The holistic approach to doctoral supervision is in this case pedagogical training inclusive.

Further, the documents and scheme present different pathways or 'journeys' of doctoral supervisor formation. In the upper pathway/route, someone who does not receive formal training takes time to observe and learn 'how it is done'. In some context, a supervisor is allowed some time of 'formation' before they begin to supervise (e.g. in the case of U1). In addition, the upper track in the pathway model and the graduate manual from U1 symbolises a prospective supervisor who depends on subjective experiences from the environment. The environment in this case manifests the supervisor's subjective experiences as a former PhD student. So, it predicts that one supervises the way they were supervised. For instance, the case of U2 demands a prospective doctoral supervisor to have substantial supervision experience before they supervise.

Subjective experience further denotes the 'seniors' informal instructions during on-the-job formation. All the same, the present views compare with Lee (2012) that apprenticeship denotes an academic's opportunity to learn to supervise through practical experience – after working with skilled and experienced supervisors. As regards to a doctoral supervisor's experiences as a former student, the experiences certainly contribute to the benchmark for conduct in supervision. This symbolises earlier scholars' thoughts that the most fundamental influence on a research supervisor is their own experience as a PhD research student (Zeegers & Barron, 2012). Visibly, the supervisor in the upper track is groomed in the traditional model of supervisor formation – supervising the way one was supervised.

As earlier sounded, a new PhD graduate in the middle pathway of the scheme undertakes formal pedagogical training in doctoral supervision. Unfortunately, none of the graduate handbooks inspected had formal training in PhD supervision as a requisite for participation in supervision. Nonetheless, training in doctoral supervision is envisaged as a means of enhancing supervisory abilities. Thus, a formally and pedagogically trained supervisor has the opportunity to achieve conceptualised and differentiated skills in doctoral supervision (Lee, 2012). Conceptualised skills at this point are in regard to modified and refined perception of the supervision processes – transformed academic mindset. Differentiation on the other hand is to put to scrutiny the 'good' and 'bad' supervisory practices. Training builds a mindset that enables middle track supervisors to

develop creative thought processes in their journey of supervision. That way, reflexivity sidesteps naïve copying of experiences from the environment. A supervisor described in U1 and U2 manuals as evidenced in the upper track of the model to the contrary may have higher chances of obtaining crystallized skills from the environment.

Hence, in contrast with the middle track, the supervisory practices described in the U1 and U2 guidelines and exemplified in the upper track seem to follow Lee's (2012) points one to seven (pp. 173–174) regarding practices of development of research supervision. In the points captioned above, a number of non-accredited practices aim to enhance graduate supervisors' supervision skills. They particularly allude to regular supervisor meetings, workshops, seminars, case studies, and mentoring programmes as means of adding value onto supervisors. On the other hand, a doctoral supervisor in the middle track follows Lee's (2012) point eight (p. 174). The latter point considers a supervisor who undertakes accredited and evaluated training programs before taking on supervision. Indeed, the point in reference underscores the approaches used in pedagogical training of doctoral supervisors. Nonetheless, the point in question describes development of pedagogical skills among PhD supervisors in the west, such as in the UK, Sweden, and Ireland.

The upper pathway supervisor, further compared to the middle track, depends on a plethora of research-related and apprenticed expertise overtime. However, the wealth of experience is based on the 'do it the way you were advised' idiosyncrasy. A supervisor in the middle track on the other hand has a blend of research – related expertise and doctoral education pedagogical skills. As Vehviläinen and Lofström (2016) guide, the latter pathway may breed a supervisor who is more process than product oriented. Unlike the supervisor in the upper track, the middle track supervisor is envisioned and hypothesised to develop a maximum self-concept in doctoral supervision. S/he therefore may require less resources, e.g. time to again competence in doctoral supervision. The supervisor in the upper track on the other hand could take longer to deliver excellence in doctoral supervision.

The lower track supervisor is in part depicted in the U2 guidelines, as s/he is a new PhD graduate undertaking supervision soon after graduation. As a result, and in the context of this paper, the supervisor in this track is designated a premature neophyte. The premature neophyte supervisor neither has the experience from on – the – job training nor formal doctoral training. Therefore, the supervisor in the lower track turns out to be a new greenhorn guide who manages an ignorant student. The premature neophyte may become stunted in the way they do supervise. Consequently, the neophyte is likely to take the longest time before gaining supremacy in doctoral supervision, or develops a less optimal style over time. Compared to the upper and middle track supervisors, premature neophyte is liable to 'supervisory accidents'. Supervisory accidents here refer to a situation when the new supervisor often does not 'get it right', or a supervisor that engages in a series of trial and error practices. Therefore, it is imperative that academics new to research supervision undergo preparation or formation before they begin to supervise (Siddiqui & Jonas-Dwyer, 2012).

We observe that learning on the job among doctoral supervisors elevates the risk of inefficiency in supervision (Kiley, 2015; Lee, 2008). The track above shows that lack of prior preparation of the supervisor on the other hand may result in supervisory 'accidents'. Further, learning on the job is highly liable to committing new supervisors to low

self-esteem (Turner, 2015), and self-help encyclopedias as a renowned scholar, Toledo (2014) put it. In the point of departure therefore, and for these and many other reasons, it is safer to concede that aspiring doctoral supervisors in Uganda require formal skills to enlighten them on a new job of supervising and mentoring students.

Conclusions

This paper reports preliminary concepts on pedagogy and quality of PhD supervision in a Ugandan context. The paper is just but inconclusive piece of evidence based on literature and document analysis to highlight the lacunae in doctoral endeavours among developing countries. It is noticeable that not so much has been done to customise PhD supervision in Ugandan universities. Nonetheless, consideration of the three pathway model portrays the process of doctoral supervision as depending on the supervisor's aptitude. Supervision aptitude in contemporary times comes, to a bigger extent, as a result of formal pedagogical learning. This is despite the fact that supervision of doctorates in Africa and indeed in Uganda majorly survives without engaging concepts of pedagogy. Aptitude comes in the form of appropriate competence and alongside the differentiated and conceptualised academic character of the supervisor. I hypothesise that Ugandan graduate supervisors require formal pedagogical training in order to harness confidence and character for efficient doctoral supervision.

Recommendations

Whereas some Ugandan universities have been astute enough to pioneer formal training courses in doctoral supervision, this practice remains unpopular among the institutions that offer PhD programmes. This is the basis upon which further pursuance of the question of quality in doctoral supervision is advanced. There is a need for more empirical undertakings regarding aspects of formal supervisor training as a prerequisite to quality and maximisation in PhD supervision. Further studies would probably better inform policy on rolling out programmes that champion the need for practical and hands-on experiences in doctoral supervision. The ultimate argument remains that the supervisor needs to adapt in order to facilitate the learning process and support the students' progress through their own learning journey. After all, as the common saying goes, a supervisor can make or break a student.

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Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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