# Research supervision: Perceptions of postgraduate students at a Higher Education Institution in KwaZulu-Natal

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# Background

❑ Today, there is emergence and growth of knowledge-based economy, in the world dominated by technology and scientific discovery which pose a challenge to universities to generate knowledge, mostly through postgraduate students (Zhao, 2003).

❑ HEIs are expected to transform the PGS into knowledge producers and managers through research supervision process with supervisors playing supportive role

# Background cont'

❑ Before 2000, postgraduate students were full-time resident students thus making it easy for supervisor(s) to have close, personal and individual contact with them (Zhao, 2003).

❑ Today both are challenged by the dynamic and complex environment; failing to have closer personal and individual contact during process due to globalisation with advanced technology. Most PGS have full-time jobs and many responsibilities.

# Background cont'

❑ Further, research supervisors are not trained for this role while Trudgett (2011) acknowledges that high quality supervision is strongly associated with the capacity of academic staff

❑ However, the curriculum of health professionals appears static and outdated (Frenk et al. 2012) like in South Africa. Until 2012, the South Africa Nursing Council (SANC) did not include research supervision in the training of nurse educators.

# Background cont'

- So far, nurse educators supervise research through trial and error, and/or by informal training such as workshops; justifying low input and output leading to reduced throughput of postgraduate nursing students

- Furthermore, studies reported the rapid increasing number of postgraduate students who are mostly underprepared in research (Lessing and Schulze, 2003, Millberg, Berg, Lindström, Petzäll and Öhlén, 2011, Singh, 2011).

# Background cont'

❑ Challenges: unethical relationship with disputes, little or lack of supervisors' expertise, long waiting period for feedback, change of supervisors, irregular contact with busy supervisors due to administrative or teaching responsibilities, and insufficient knowledge of students of research methods (Ismail et al., 2011,p. 81; Millberg, et al., 2011,p. 1020; Singh, 2011,  p.1020-1).  Consequences: conflicts, late completion, high dropout rates (Marie de Beer & Mason, 2009, p. 214), and sometimes transformation of degree of study into certificates.

# Background cont'

❑ At UKZN/CHS: dropout at masters level for project-based was 56%, while the completion rate for masters and doctorate students averaged at 11% and 10% respectively during period of 2000/2006 (Tettey, 2010).

## Research questions:

❑ 1. What are the perceptions of postgraduate nursing students on research supervisor(s)?

❑ 2. What factors influence how postgraduate nursing students perceive support of their research supervisor(s)?

# Research Methodology

- Positivist paradigm, quantitative, descriptive non-convenience sampling and cross sectional were used.

- Postgraduate Research Experiences Survey (PRES) was borrowed and adopted. reliability: Cronbach's alpha test: ($\alpha$=0.91). Ethical approval: UKZN

- Data collection: July, August, and September, 2012. The total population was 80 and 56 students participated; a respondent rate: 70%.

- SPSS 19; descriptive and inferential statistics

# Findings

**Socio-demographic characteristics**

- Mean age: 43.02 years old.

- Period under RS: 5 months- 36 months (3 years), with Mean: 14 months

- Gender: Female: 83.9%; n=47

  Males:  16.1% ;n=9

- Status at University: Part-time:80.4%; n=45

  Full time:  19.6% ;n=11

  Local      :82%;n=46

  International:10 ;18%

# Findings

- ❑ Skills and subject knowledge of the supervisor: 60.7% n=34: SA

    effort to understand them: 41.1%; n=23: SA

- ❑ Guidance in selecting and refining the research topic: 51.8% (n=29):SA

- ❑ Formulation and refinement of the purpose and objectives 37.5% (n=21): SA

- ❑ Guidance on research methodology: 46.6%; n=25) SA

- ❑ Data collection :22.8% (n=8) SA

# Findings

- Data analysis: 16.7% (5) SA

- Report writing: 25% (n=7) SA

- Good relationship: 62.5% (n=35): SA

- Feedback in reasonable time:33.9% (n=19):SA

**Overall support:**

- 66.1% n=37: Perceive moderate support

- 32.1% (n=18): higher level

- 1.8% (n=1): a low level

# Findings

The factors influencing perceptions of PGS: P-Value of 0.5 and below was considered significant

❑ There was no relationship indicated by **gender, age, marital status, previous qualifications and specialization in nursing**.

# Findings cont'

Correlations of perceptions with socio-demographic characteristics

|  | Inferential statistics | P-Value |
|---|---|---|
| Period of RS | Spearman's rho | .016 |
| Full-time/part-time | Mann-Whitney U test | .031 |
| National and international | Mann-Whitney U test | .051 |

# Discussion

❑ Majority (55.3%) of the study respondents spent more than 10 months. the university loses funding from the government (Department of Education, 2004) , extra burden on research supervisor(s), the major contributing factor to dissertation dropout (McCormack, 2004).

❑ The majority was part-time:80.4%; Local :82%. They are full time workers with many responsibilities. This might indicate how the traditional model of RS is not appropriate.

# Discussion cont'

- ❑ 60% of respondents strongly agreed that their supervisor(s) have subject knowledge and skills. UNISA 47% (Lessing and Schulze (2003)

- ❑ 51.8% :highly satisfied with guidance on topic selection and refinement.

- ❑ 46.6%: SA good guidance on research methodology. Most RS were not strong in providing good guidance on research methodology. Lack or little guidance in proposal development leads to discouragement and de-motivation (Ssegawa and Rwelamila, 2009)

# Discussion Cont'

❑ However, strongly satisfied students tend to decrease at data analysis :16.7% and report writing 25%. This suggest low level of skills of RS at this stage? Need for deep exploration study. According to Samuel (2012), the limited capacity of supervisory skills is one of the contextual factors in SA which hinder PGS in continuation of a research career.

❑ 67.9% SA good professional relationship and 71.4% did not feel any threat in receiving feedback. This indicate how is the facilitation process by acting as role models; leading to motivation to scholarship development.

# Discussion Cont'

❑ Overall 66.1% perceive moderate support. a need for improving capacity of research supervisor(s) at postgraduate level.

❑ The period of research supervision: the longer the time students spend with their RS, the less capable they consider their supervisor(s).

❑ Full-time were more satisfied than part time PGs. the traditional model of face to face supervision gives advantages to full-time students, but disadvantages part-time students (CHE, 2007, Zhao, 2003).

# Conclusion and recommendations

- The majority of PGs perceive moderate level of support from research supervisors. Perceived support tend to decrease at guidance on research methodology, data analysis and report writing. This study highlights the need of formal training of research supervisors like in UK, Australia and Canada

- This study strongly recommend the adoption of online model of research supervisors to accommodate Part- time PG students.

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# Thank you