

## Exploring the prospects for professional development of postgraduate supervisors at the National University of Lesotho

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### ABSTRACT

Higher education developments are gradually enabling the re-conceptualisation of postgraduate research supervision as a teaching and learning practice. This re-conceptualisation has also led to the recognition that postgraduate research supervisors need to be appropriately capacitated so that they can master the supervisory craft. This study sought to explore the prospects for professional development of postgraduate supervisors at the National University of Lesotho, by examining supervisors' trajectories of learning how to become supervisors and to identify areas for further professional development. Fifteen supervisors took part in the study. Nine (three associate professors and six senior lecturers) were interviewed through semi-structured interviews while six junior lecturers were interviewed through a focus group interview. The findings revealed that while most supervisors relied mainly on the way they were supervised, they also value the experiential learning accrued in their trajectories as supervisors. The study highlights issues for consideration in advancing professional development of postgraduate supervisors at the National University of Lesotho.

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## Introduction

Postgraduate research supervision is often separated from the broader teaching and learning project (Kimani, 2014). Thus, postgraduate supervision is commonly construed as more research than teaching. However, it needs to be highlighted that postgraduate research supervision is a challenging and problematic kind of teaching (Boughey, van den Heuvel & Wels, 2017; Motshoane & McKenna, 2021). It has to be guided by key principles which include general teaching skills, a deep knowledge of a specific discipline, and deep reflectivity (Masuku, 2021). Hence, the professional development of postgraduate supervisors is an area that needs attention.

The literature reveals that many academics rely on their own experiences of postgraduate studies, both in their teaching and supervisory practice (Stephens, 2014; Wilkinson, 2011). In addition, higher education massification in the Global South comes with the increased demand for postgraduate studies (Frick, Bitzer & Albertyn, 2014). Universities are confronted with the hugely changing teaching and learning landscape, characterised by an increased demand for more throughput and faster completion rate of postgraduate students. As indicated by Maistry (2017), the novice supervisors require threshold competencies and continuing professional development in order to master the postgraduate research supervisory craft. Such threshold competencies include: (1) the requisite deep knowledge of students or adult learning; and (2) pedagogical strategies that are relevant for postgraduate research supervision (Maistry, 2017). Professional development is seen as the mechanism to further develop the above-mentioned threshold competencies, and advance research supervisors' professional knowledge, recognising that initial pre-service and graduate degrees may have limited longevity (Fairman, Smith, Pullen & Lebel, 2020; Liu & Phelps, 2020).

Despite this changing higher education landscape, not much has been done at the National University of Lesotho (NUL) to capacitate postgraduate research supervisors. This position is underscored by previous research conducted at the NUL which focused on the challenges confronting postgraduate supervision (Tlali, Chere-Masopha, Khalanyane & Sebatane, 2022); and another research project that sought to reframe postgraduate supervision as a teaching and learning practice (Tlali & Chere, 2022). Both studies found that some of the postgraduate supervision challenges emanate from, among others, the lack of relevant professional training for the supervisors. Both studies highlighted the need for continuing professional development of postgraduate supervisors. Therefore, the current study sought to explore the prospects for professional development of postgraduate supervisors with a view to enhancing their practice.

The NUL, through the Centre for Teaching and Learning (CTL), runs a professional development programme for the teaching staff. The content of the professional development programme encompasses approaches in teaching at higher education, advancing effective assessment methods, course design, facilitating the scholarship of teaching, and introducing staff to institutional policies (NUL, 2018). Postgraduate research supervision does not feature in the foregoing list. Thus, the professional development of postgraduate research supervisors happens sporadically through individual supervisor's personal initiatives. Without institutionalized provision of the relevant professional development of supervisors, the quality of postgraduate supervision may be hugely compromised.

It is also worth noting that the positive effects of professional development programmes are context based and intertwined with other forms of support provided by individual institutions (Kalman, Tynjala & Skaniakos, 2020; Noben, Deinum, Douwes-van Ark & Hofman, 2021). In the context of the NUL, the research culture and the supervisors' scholarly identities are stifled by the scarcity of resources such as limited research and conference funding (Tlali et al, 2022). Due to this scarcity of resources, supervisors cannot afford page fees for their research, and they are unable to attend conferences which could empower them.

### **Research aim and objectives**

This study sought to explore the prospects for professional development of postgraduate supervisors at the NUL. Against this background, the study was guided by the following objectives:

- to examine the supervisors' experiences in learning how to supervise postgraduate research
- to identify the supervisors' professional development needs
- to suggest strategies for enhancing the supervisors' professional development.

### **Theoretical framework**

Constructivism has been adopted as an over-arching theoretical perspective for this study. The central principle of this theoretical perspective is that individuals play an active role in constructing their own knowledge (Croy, 2018; Loughlin, Lygo-Baker & Lindberg-Sand, 2020). This theoretical perspective debunks the assumption that knowledge is an autonomous phenomenon that exists without the knower. It recognises that knowledge construction is a product of the knower's reflection and synthesis about the prevalent circumstance and practices (Jaiwal, 2019).

Although the discourses around constructivism are typically associated with coursework and classroom teaching, the contention held in this study is that this theoretical perspective is also relevant in the context of postgraduate research supervision. From a constructivist stance, supervisees are seen as responsible participants in their own knowledge construction while the supervisor's role is to scaffold, facilitate, and become the co-explorer of new knowledge (Croy, 2018; Loughlin et al., 2020). In this case, the supervisor has to create an environment that nurtures the attainment of meaningful learning for the supervisees, by deliberately exposing them to the collaborative and hands-on activities that support the learning process.

From a constructivist perspective, the supervisory practice is construed as a form of humanising pedagogy that is mindful of "what the student does" (Khene, 2014). A humanising pedagogy is essential in advocating for the supervisors who are sensitive to the students that they are supervising and guiding them into mastering the art of research in their disciplines (Khene, 2014). While 'humanising pedagogies' may be criticized for foregrounding the individual self. In this particular case, the notion of humanising pedagogies is regarded as relevant insofar as it restores human dignity and transcends individualist affirmations. This paradigmatic stance advocates honouring and respecting everyone's humanity and developing consciousness and agency in relation to social justice, as well as ensuring inclusive teaching and learning that empowers the students (Khene, 2014).

Based on the foregoing characteristics, constructivism is considered to be a comprehensive theoretical framework as it captures the core tenets of humanising pedagogical contexts and the decoloniality project that seeks to advance epistemic justice to the previously underprivileged localities in the Global South (Vorster & Quinn, 2017). Thus, constructivism resonates with 'Southern' theories in terms of respecting everyone's dignity, recognising contextual differences, and advancing learner centeredness in the postcolonial milieu (Manathunga, 2018; 2020).

### Literature review

The literature was reviewed in four areas, namely: conceptualising professional development; the need for relevant professional development for postgraduate research supervisors; contextualising postgraduate research supervision in the Global South; and striving for excellence in postgraduate supervision.

## Conceptualising professional development

Professional development is conceptualised as equivalent of in-service teacher education (Bautista & Ortega-Ruiz, 2015). In addition, Darling-Hammond, Hyler and Gardner (2017: 2) conceptualise professional development as “a product of both externally provided and job-embedded activities that increase teachers’ knowledge and help them change their instructional practice in ways that support student learning.” As professionals, educators must continually learn and grow in their pedagogical skills, to stay current and ensure that students are learning and growing (Artman, Danner & Crow, 2020). Hence, professional development is seen as the mechanism to develop teachers’ professional knowledge, recognising that initial pre-service and graduate degrees have limited longevity (Fairman et al., 2020; Liu & Phelps, 2020).

There are various professional development models which range from the traditional, conventional, or formal to educator’s self-directed, reform or informal models (Artman et al., 2020; Bergmark, 2020). Conventional models are formal in nature, and consist of workshops, seminars, short or full-term courses at a college or university, and conferences (Abu-Tineh & Sadiq, 2018; Artman et al., 2020). With regard to the educator’s self-directed or ‘reform’ models of professional development, examples include study groups, teacher networks, professional learning communities, mentoring, cognitive coaching, action research, or Massive Open Online Course (MOOC) participation (Abu-Tineh & Sadiq, 2018; Artman et al., 2020).

Conventional or formal professional development practices are criticised for being fragmented, superficial, their one-size-fits-all nature, top-down structure, and lack of continuous follow-up and support, failure to gain buy-in and to promote educator agency (Bautista & Ortega-Ruiz, 2015; Artman et al., 2020). On the other hand, unconventional (informal) professional development initiatives are seen as flexible, self-directed, participatory, bottom-up, and cyclical in nature (Artman et al., 2020). Irrespective of whether professional development activities are conventional or non-conventional, there is a need for institutional initiative to ensure that professional development takes place. As indicated by Abonyi, Yeboah and Luguterah (2020), educational institutions ought to have clear policies and invest significant amounts of time and money in training employees with the goal of increasing their performance.

### Relevant professional development for postgraduate research supervisors

Lately, university teachers have been required to pursue educational professional development activities. They are also urged to attend courses that would give them credentials to teach in higher education (Lee, 2018). However, not much emphasis has been put on professionally developing the university teachers for postgraduate research supervision. Lategan (2014) adds that supervisors need professional development, whether formally or informally. This is valuable in ensuring competency in research skills and the specific subject knowledge relevant for their fields of study. This view is underscored by Maistry (2017), who illustrates that some formal courses in postgraduate supervision have the following distinct competencies that participants have to attain: managing power relations in supervision, creating inclusive learning environments, emphasising the importance of supervisory scholarship, and using supervisory practices that enhance student development. Essentially, the professional development of supervisors must be recognised as a critical factor in creating vibrant and productive research cultures within universities (Lategan, 2014; Maistry, 2017).

According to Manatunga (2018; 2020), it is possible to use a wide range of pedagogical strategies in supervisor professional development. In designing supervisor professional development programmes, it is important to provide a range of collaborative experiences and settings that go beyond the information sharing, awareness raising, and tips which have been linked with the 'training' approach to supervisor development. Another approach is the use of supervision reflective practice groups or networks that operate more informally and continuously. These open up spaces for thinking and sharing about supervisory practice in a more reflexive manner (Henderson, 2018; Minott, 2019). The professional development-oriented model of postgraduate supervision focuses on building the next generation of supervisors and making sure that they are properly enculturated for their role (Petručka, 2019). Professional development may also take the form of peer support groups, workshops, research-in-progress seminars and conferences, adopting a mentor, and engaging in panel or co-supervision (Lee, 2018).

### Contextualising postgraduate research supervision in the Global South

Context is a critical factor in the success or lack thereof of postgraduate research supervision. Leibowitz, Bozalek, van Schalkwyk and Winberg (2015) call for 'contextual intelligence' in dealing with professional development of academics, since the needs and issues for consideration will differ

from context to context. As such, the academia fraternity is urged to listen to and to consider contextual factors that can hinder or enhance the quality of the postgraduate supervisory practice (Leibowitz et al., 2015; Boughey et al., 2017; Tsampiras, 2017). This view is further supported by Ntombela (2017), who highlights that postgraduate supervision is a complex pedagogy which is dependent on the interplay between the supervisor, the student, and a range of institutional factors that include the institutional research cultures.

According to Krauss (2017), history shows that there are enormous disparities among the social classes and geographical localities. Such inequalities can also be observed between universities in the Global North and those in the Global South in terms of research intellectual capacity, resources, and facilities, which include lack of funding, under-resourced libraries, and inadequate technological support (Leibowitz et al., 2015; Boughey et al., 2017; Maruma, 2017). These factors also negatively impact on the 'research cultures' of universities in the Global South which also, in turn, replicate the quality of postgraduate research. As noted by Petrucka (2019), the persistent contextual disparities are replete with academic inequities and are dominated by Western academic models which influence the supervisory experiences, the supervisors' scholarly competencies, and the intellectual autonomy. Some of the academics in inadequately funded, rural universities in the Global South may not have had as much intellectual exposure as their counterparts in the Global North in terms of the rich research culture where seminars, discussions, and other fora are regularly promoted (Boughey et al., 2017). Such a culture is certainly not the case in some parts of the Global South (especially in Africa) which are characterised by resource-scarce contexts (Manathunga, 2020).

The afore-mentioned factors shape the competencies of supervisors and the quality of supervisory practice in a particular context. Many African universities, such as the NUL, are still trailing behind in terms of postgraduate research supervision capacity. In this regard, Manathunga (2018: 96) argues that the postgraduate research supervision is the "key pedagogical site heavily implicated in struggles over contested histories, geographies and epistemologies". Thus, the bulk of the knowledge and pedagogical approaches originate from the Global North whilst practices that have emerged in the Global South have generally been excluded even in spaces where they would have been relevant (Vorster & Quinn, 2017).

### **Striving for excellence in postgraduate research supervision**

According to Fataar (2013), the pedagogy of postgraduate supervision involves developing a scholarly identity, based on an awareness of, and sensitivity to, the ontological dimension of doing research, and the requisite teaching and learning styles. Supervisory pedagogy acknowledges the postgraduate research student as an active learner. A major feature of postgraduate supervision as a pedagogic practice is the creation of an interactive learning space where the experienced and novice supervisors, as well as the postgraduate students, are engaged in an ongoing mutual and dynamic learning process (Nkoane, 2014). Based on the constructivist perspective, learning is recognised as a fundamental aspect of supervisory practice and that, therefore, connects the processes of teaching and researching. In this regard, learning to teach and learning to research are seen in a similar pedagogical light (Stephens, 2014; Tlali and Cere-Masopha, 2022).

Wilkinson (2011) alludes that postgraduate supervision is an extremely complex and challenging teaching and learning process which is often misunderstood and under-rated. Wilkinson (2011) further highlights that postgraduate supervision involves complex academic and interpersonal skills. As a site for teaching and learning, post-graduate supervision has to be guided by certain principles which include: a deep knowledge of the discipline being taught; a general pedagogical knowledge, pedagogical knowledge specific to the discipline; methodological knowledge; deep reflectivity, sharing, and peer review (Wilkinson, 2011). In essence, good supervisors need to have many of the qualities of good teachers because pedagogical excellence in postgraduate supervision is also critical.

### **Methodology and research design**

This study is anchored within the constructivist paradigm and a qualitative approach was adopted. A descriptive research design was followed to examine the supervisors' experiences in their trajectories of learning how to become postgraduate research supervisors and identifying areas and strategies for their professional development. This choice is underscored by Merriam (2014) and Nieuwenhuis (2015), who concede that descriptive designs seek to understand the meaning or definitions that the participants have constructed. By virtue of being invited to take part in this research project, the participants were compelled to reflect on their practice.



## Data collection and analysis

Data were generated through semi-structured interviews, which were followed up by focus-group interviews with the intention to enhance the credibility of the findings. The semi-structured interviews provided some rich detailed data (Merriam, 2014) about participants' experiences pertaining to their journeys in postgraduate research supervision. The follow-up focus groups were conducted with the conviction that a meeting-like setup would produce a wide range of responses while at the same time activating a self-reflection that is triggered by other participants' responses (Nieuwenhuis, 2015). Both forms of interviews are congruent with the constructivist culture that allows probing and gaining depth from the lecturers' lived experience. Data were transcribed verbatim and analysed thematically using codes derived from the data itself.

## Participants' selection

The participants were purposively selected with a view to engaging those with a minimum experience of three years in supervising postgraduate research. 15 supervisors (three associate professors, seven senior lecturers, and six junior lecturers) took part in the study.

**Table 1: Demographic details of the participants**

Participants' code	Rank	Experience (years)
SS-1	Associate Professor	15
SS-2	Associate Professor	13
SS-3	Associate Professor	11
SS-4	Senior Lecturer	9
SS-5	Senior Lecturer	9
SS-6	Senior Lecturer	7
SS-7	Senior Lecturer	7
SS-8	Senior lecturer	6
SS-9	Senior Lecturer	6
FG-10	Junior Lecturer	5
FG-11	Junior Lecturer	4
FG-12	Junior Lecturer	4
FG-13	Junior Lecturer	3
FG-14	Junior Lecturer	3
FG-15	Junior Lecturer	3

## Ethical considerations

As indicated in Table 1, pseudo-codes were allocated to participants to ensure their confidentiality. The codes also reflect the applicable data source and the participant's number. For example, SS-1 designates semi-structured interview – participant 1, while FG-10 refers to focus group interview – participant 10. Further to that, the participants were referred to as 'she' in the reporting of the findings to protect their identity. Attention was also paid to trustworthiness issues in that data transcripts were shared with the participants to ensure respondent validation as described by Birt, Scott, Cavers, Campbell and Walter (2016). Moreover, direct quotes from the data were used with a view to enhance authenticity of the findings.

## Findings

The findings are presented in four major themes, namely: (1) learning how to supervise; (2) modelling quality throughput; (3) preferred forms of continuing professional development; and (4) areas for professional development. A further analysis of these themes yielded a number of sub-themes, which are presented under each of the major themes.

### *Theme 1: Learning how to supervise*

When the participants were asked to share their experiences in learning how to supervise, it became clear that none had received any prior formal training. Rather, their narratives highlighted the challenges and experiential learning that they accrued in their supervisory trajectories. An analysis of this theme generated two sub-themes discussed below:

#### *Sub-theme 1: trial and error*

The participants' experiences revealed that their initial supervisory journeys were characterised by the struggles of learning through trial and error. Here is what SS-1 had to say:

I learned through trial and error, I had to source lots of manuals on how to do research and how to do supervision.

SS-2 also shared the following struggles:

I learned the hard way. I was asked to supervise a student outside my area. I was indeed thrown into at a deep end. I struggled methodologically, theory wise and that

was a horrible experience. My supervisory skills became better after I published a number of peer-reviewed articles. I could confidently supervise somebody else. Writing and publishing articles is the backbone to supervision.

The above findings indicate that due to the scarcity of resources (including human resources) at the NUL, some supervisors are sometimes required to supervise outside their own disciplines. For a beginning supervisor, this may be a frustrating experience. This forces supervisors to learn through trial and error, while they struggle methodologically and with the discipline. However, it seems that the experiences improve as a supervisor grows professionally and academically in terms of publishing peer-reviewed work. Thus, some supervisors gradually constructed their own supervisory knowledge through their lived experiences. This resonates with the constructivism paradigm in that the participants learned by doing and they took responsibility for their own learning.

#### *Sub-theme 2: emulating how one was supervised*

Some participants also alluded to the fact that they learned the supervisory craft from the way they were supervised. SS-3 stated:

I learned postgraduate research supervision mainly through my own experience as a doctoral supervisee. My Promoter involved me by tasking me to read, to comment on submissions and by inviting me to participate in the consultation sessions with other supervisees.

SS-7 added:

My supervisor adopted a peer review approach to PhD research supervision. Those of us who were her supervisees critiqued each other's submissions during our consultation sessions to which she often invited her colleagues. This gave me an opportunity to learn extensively on research supervision in the context of my own PhD experience.

From the above extracts, it seems that some of these participants underwent rich experiences during their postgraduate studies, whereby their supervisors exposed them to opportunities to learn from other colleagues. These findings are aligned with constructivism since they foreground what the supervisor has to create, namely, an environment that nurtures the attainment of meaningful learning for the supervisee by deliberately exposing them to the activities that support hands-on learning and peer collaboration (Loughlin et al., 2020). However, not all doctoral students are exposed to similar experiences, especially at the NUL.

*Theme 2: Modelling quality throughput*

When asked what values they wish to model in their own supervisees, the participants mentioned a number of qualities that they seek to nurture. The sub-themes below capture some of the qualities mentioned by the participants.

*Sub-theme 1: nurturing meaningful knowledge production*

Despite the challenges in the Global South, creating meaningful postgraduate research supervision and making it a worthwhile experience that helps develop the supervisees' academic identities has to be considered as a priority (Lee, 2018). A dissertation or thesis should not be the end of the journey. The supervisees should be in a position to disseminate the findings in a comprehensive manner that demonstrates how much they have grown academically. In this regard, SS-1 had this to say:

Supervisors should support their research students and create opportunities for them to engage in meaningful knowledge production activities and guide them in how to share the findings clearly afterwards.

In the extract below, SS-3 explicitly referred to postgraduate supervision as a form of constructivist teaching:

For me supervision is teaching! It is particularly the type of teaching that is informed by constructivism that requires engaging students in authentic learning activities that are geared towards meaningful knowledge production.

The above responses reflect the tenets of constructivism in the sense that they advocate meaningful knowledge production that espouses active engagement of the supervisees in authentic learning activities (Jaiwal, 2020). SS-2 reiterated that postgraduate research supervision should be a meaningful knowledge production activity in the sense that:

...students should be urged to summarise their work from the bulky dissertation or thesis and write talking points about their findings; ...pick out applicable deliverables out of the study and produce brochures or flyers. It is only then that they can realise what it is that they have learned.

SS-3 concurred:

I also wish each student could publish a paper from their completed dissertation. That for me would be knowledge production.

The foregoing findings illustrate that dissertations and theses should not be written merely for the sake of attaining a qualification as is sometimes the case in contexts where research cultures are not rich (Manathunga, 2018; 2020). In a constructivist context, a dissertation or a thesis must be accompanied by evidence of meaningful knowledge production such as producing a credible publication out of it.

*Sub-theme 2: paying attention to detail*

The findings further indicate that quality postgraduate research supervision also means getting the supervisees to be more meticulous at paying attention to detail. SS-2 highlighted:

For me it's about paying attention to details; reading extensively and paying attention to what is being read. Looking at things from different angles and understanding the nuances.

SS-8 also expressed that:

A supervisee should be able to juxtapose what others say and make a clear distinction of their line of thought, with one's own, and see things from a different angle...

The above findings advance that the supervisees should exhibit growth and vigilance in the way they pay attention to detail and distinguish between various viewpoints.

*Sub-theme 3: advancing a scholarly culture*

According to the participants, excellent postgraduate research supervision is that which models the scholarly culture in the supervisees. This is even more crucial for supervisors to consciously bear in mind, especially in the Global South contexts where research culture has been lagging behind due to resource constraints (Manathunga, 2020; Vorster & Quinn, 2017). SS-5 emphasised:

...I wish to model a scholarly culture in my supervisees by also inspiring them to be critical of themselves and by writing in a way that does not confuse the reader.

In support of this position, SS-7 added that:

It is crucial for a postgraduate research student to construct a coherent argument that has a common thread running through it. That coherent line of thought indicates growth in their scholarliness.

FG-10 also indicated:

I wish to instil critical thinking, academic responsibility, commitment and the ability to work independently as well as students' ability to critique their own work.

Any constructivist teaching and learning site has to foreground student achievement as its priority. From the above findings the participants shared their aspirations about modelling excellence in postgraduate research supervision. Among the indicators of such excellence, they mentioned engaging supervisees in authentic learning, nurturing meaningful knowledge production, scholarly writing, critical thinking, academic responsibility, and the ability to pay attention to detail. Furthermore, some participants aspired to produce supervisees who can present quality research work and disseminate the findings in an effective and concise fashion. These findings are aligned with constructivism in the sense that they foreground supervisee engagement in a manner that enriches their academic identity and scholarly growth (Lee, 2018; Jaiwal, 2020).

### *Theme 3: Preferred forms of continuing professional development*

While almost all the participants agreed that there is a need for appropriate professional development of postgraduate supervisors, not all of them agreed with the formal training or the “training” model as explained by Maistry (2017); some of them preferred informal hands-on engagement. A further analysis of this theme produced the following sub-themes:

#### *Sub-theme 1: formal training*

Regarding the issue of whether formal training would be welcome or not, this is what one of the experienced supervisors (SS-1) said:

The younger supervisors may need the training, as for me I am already looking at the exit.

One of the beginning supervisors (FG-11) expressed appreciation of formal training and had this to say:

Training would be most welcome! I think it would be a very good idea.... there is a lot to gain from that.

SS-2 had mixed feelings. Here is what she said about whether she would enroll for formal supervision training:

Yes and no! Yes training may provide exposure to technical aspects of research supervision. Otherwise I prefer hands-on practice rather than theoretical training. Supervisors have to publish and present their work in seminars and conferences. The feedback one gets from the audience is useful.

From the above responses, on the one hand, some participants highlighted the benefits of formal training, whereas, on the other hand, some emphasised the advantages of informal or hands-on activities such as presentations and publishing one's own research work as one way of advancing the supervisors' professional development.

*Sub-theme 2: serving as external examiner*

In addition to the foregoing views, SS-2 emphatically expressed dislike of formal training. This is what they had to say:

I hate formal training and I get bored with the passiveness. There is not even a guarantee whether I will use that information or not. I would rather have a hands-on practice. I have also learned a lot from serving as the external examiner. If all post-graduate supervisors could be external examiners, that exposure could help them to reflect on their own practice.

The above response reiterates the importance of hands-on activities such as serving as an external examiner, where one can gain an opportunity to reflect on how their own practice compares.

*Sub-theme 3: co-supervision and mentoring*

SS-4 highlighted how the supervisor's professional development can be supported through co-supervision and mentoring. Here is what they said:

...sitting in a formal training session wouldn't really work for me. Maybe co-supervision and mentoring could. Postgraduate supervision is an ongoing journey that is why mentoring is important. There are no hard and fast rules. You cannot say you know it all; there will always be something new to learn.

From the foregoing extracts, the idea of gaining specialised training is welcomed more by the beginning supervisors than by their experienced counterparts. The experienced supervisors seem to prefer hands-on engagement or experiential learning in the form of co-supervision, mentoring, involvement in seminars and conferences, publishing peer-reviewed work, and serving as external examiners. These resonate with what has been envisaged in the literature, that a major element of constructivist postgraduate research supervision should be the creation of an interactive learning space where the experienced and novice supervisors, along with the postgraduate students, can engage in an ongoing mutual and dynamic learning process (Nkoane, 2014).

*Theme 4: Areas for professional development*

The findings reveal that, despite the majority's preference of hands-on professional development over formal training, the participants still identified a number of areas in which they feel a need for further training. This theme further generated the following sub-themes:

*Sub-theme 1: methodological training*

SS-2 indicated the present inclination towards qualitative research, however, they felt a need to obtain training on quantitative research although that was not urgent. In the participant's own words, here is what was said:

I have a distant need for grasping the quantitative aspect of research. However, I wouldn't opt for formal training. I would rather co-supervise with a colleague who is knowledgeable in this area.

FG-15 also voiced a need to gain further methodological training that includes the conceptual and theoretical frameworks, and said:

My main need is a sharpened knowledge on methodologies, conceptual and theoretical frameworks. I would also like to be grounded in everything else that is requisite for postgraduate research supervision.

The above findings confirm that postgraduate research supervisors need ongoing research training, whether that is formal or not (Wilkinson, 2011).

*Sub-theme 2: academic writing*

The findings also revealed that some supervisors need professional development in academic writing. FG-9 said:

I need to gain the ability to help students produce well thought-out and coherent research work.

FG-10 added:

I definitely need more training in helping students how to write. More often their sentences do not tie together. My students are often get frustrated when I comment 'please rephrase' or 'not clear'.

From the above responses it can be noted that supervisors need to sharpen their academic writing skills so that they can be able to nurture this skill in their own supervisees.



*Sub-theme 3: supporting the supervisees*

According to the findings, the supervisors also need professional development on how to support and help their supervisees manage their personal and social matters. FG-11 indicated:

I need to be trained on how to be able to help students to manage their social and academic pressures. I also need to know how to handle repulsive students who feel entitled to the degree before they toil for it.

In support of the above position, SS-7 stated:

I need to gain the ability to motivate and support students throughout their research journey.

The above findings indicate that the supervisors may not have effective strategies on how to manage, support, and motivate their supervisees. As noted by Maistry (2017), these are some of the areas where supervisors need professional development. These findings are in line with constructivism, as one of its key tenets is scaffolding or supporting students to achieve the intended learning outcomes (Loughlin et al., 2020).

## Discussion

The findings suggest that, for the beginning supervisors, the supervisory journey may be a daunting one. Some supervisors learn through trial and error, while they struggle methodologically and otherwise. Most participants also alluded that they learnt the supervisory craft from the way they were supervised. However, most of them had not had sufficient exposure that adequately nurtured their academic identity and scholarly culture. Consequently, they may not be able to adjust to the demands of postgraduate supervision. This lack of exposure may be due to the scarcity of resources and facilities in some universities such as the NUL and others in the Global South (Manathunga, 2020).

The idea of pursuing formal training for postgraduate supervision is welcomed more by inexperienced supervisors than their experienced counterparts. The professional development needs which the participants identified include further methodological training, academic writing, and mechanisms for student support. As has been highlighted in the literature, supervisors, especially the novice ones, require threshold competencies (Maistry, 2017), that include the requisite deep knowledge of students of adult learning; as well as pedagogical strategies that are relevant for postgraduate research supervision. These also need to be complemented with

continuing professional development for supervisors to master the postgraduate research supervisory craft. Thus, due to the recognition that initial pre-service and graduate degrees have limited longevity (Fairman et al., 2020; Liu & Phelps, 2020), the threshold skills should be followed up by institutionalised professional development initiatives in order to enhance the professional learning of the postgraduate research supervisors. However, due to the scarcity of resources and funding at the NUL, this may not be feasible. This shortage should be supplemented with informal supervisors' professional development activities.

The experiences from the NUL show that postgraduate research supervision tends to improve as the supervisors grow professionally and academically in terms of publishing peer-reviewed work, presenting their work in seminars and at conferences, serving as external examiners, and engaging in co-supervision and mentoring of the beginning supervisors by the experienced ones. These multiple hands-on activities are aligned to constructivism since this theoretical framework advocates active supervisees' engagement in pluralistic activities geared towards empowering the supervisors (Manathunga, 2018; 2020; Jaiwal, 2020).

Any meaningful teaching and learning site has to foreground student achievement as its core value. From the findings of this study, the participants shared their aspirations about the type of supervisory product that they wish to produce. Amongst others, they outlined critical thinking, coherent writing, academic responsibility, and the ability of the supervisees to state their position while simultaneously distinguishing theirs from other divergent or opposing views. Furthermore, some participants aspired to produce supervisees who can produce sound research work and disseminate the findings in an effective and concise fashion which illustrates that they have grown through the research journey. The foregoing qualities are indicative of student-centered activities which are meant to promote constructivism and humanising pedagogies (Vorster & Quinn, 2017; Manathunga, 2018; 2020).

## Conclusion

This study sought to explore the prospects for professional development of postgraduate supervisors at the NUL, by examining the supervisors' experiences in learning how to supervise as well as to identify the needs and strategies for their professional development. While some of the findings support the need for conventional or formal professional development on postgraduate research supervision (Motshoane & McKenna, 2021), this may not be a feasible option due to the

resource constraints in the NUL. Besides, the majority of the participants emphasised their preference for non-conventional, hands-on experiential learning. The position held in this paper is that despite the identified constraints and preferences, both formal (institutionalised) and informal forms of supervisors' professional development are likely to complement each other in enhancing the quality of postgraduate research supervision (Abonyi et al., 2020). This pluralistic and inclusive approach (Maistry, 2017) is concomitant with constructivism and the humanising pedagogies that seek to advance vibrant postgraduate research supervision and scholarly cultures in the Global South. Furthermore, these strategies are aligned with the Southern theories that seek to ensure epistemic justice. In the final analysis, the findings suggests that supervisor professional development in the Global South require constructivist teaching and learning, collaboration, coaching and expert support, feedback, and reflection, which transcend individualist affirmations.

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