

Students Perceptions of the Quality of Supervision in Proposal and Dissertation Development Process: A Case of Postgraduate Studies in the Humanities and Social Sciences in Kenyan Universities, Kenya

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Abstract

Effective supervision is a critical component in postgraduate studies, particularly in the development of research proposals and dissertations. The supervision process involves the provision of guidance, direction, and support to students as they undertake their research projects. Studies have shown that the effectiveness of supervision techniques can have a significant impact on the quality of postgraduate research projects. However, there is limited research on students' perceptions of the effectiveness of supervision techniques, particularly in the context of Kenyan universities. This study explored students' perceptions of the effectiveness of supervision techniques in proposal and dissertation development, specifically in the humanities and social sciences disciplines in Kenyan universities. The findings of the study provide insights into the types of supervision techniques that postgraduate students perceive to be effective and how these techniques influence their research progress and outcomes. Additionally, the study identified opportunities for improving the effectiveness of supervision in the context of Kenyan universities.

Keywords: Students, proposal, dissertations, research, projects, supervision

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Introduction

Background

In Kenyan universities, postgraduate students in humanities and social sciences are required to complete a proposal and dissertation to earn their degrees. This process involves intensive research and academic writing, and students rely heavily on the guidance and support of their supervisors to navigate the complexities of the process. The role of the supervisor is to provide constructive feedback, facilitate critical thinking, and promote academic growth, among other duties. Effective supervision is vital for postgraduate students, as it can significantly

impact their academic success and future career prospects. Previous studies conducted in the United States, the United Kingdom, Nigeria, and South Africa have examined the role of effective supervision in postgraduate students' academic success (Golde, 2005; Gardner, 2009; Lovitts, 2001; Lee, 2008; Denicolo & Becker, 2017; Afolabi & Tijani, 2016; Onuka & Eshiett, 2018; Mabunda, 2018; Hlalele & Ndebele, 2018). These studies have identified various factors that contribute to effective supervision, including communication, feedback, trust, and support. However, research on supervision

techniques and their effectiveness during the proposal and dissertation development process among Kenyan postgraduate students is limited. Golde (2005) found that departmental and disciplinary culture plays a significant role in doctoral student attrition, while Gardner (2009) identified factors such as financial support, mentoring, and research experiences as important for doctoral student persistence. Lovitts (2001) explored the reasons why some students leave their doctoral programs and identified poor supervision as a major contributing factor.

Lee (2008) explored the different concepts of doctoral research supervision and found that there is a wide variety of supervisory styles and approaches. Denicolo and Becker (2017) provided a practical guide for doctoral supervisors on how to effectively supervise and support their students throughout the research process. Afolabi and Tijani (2016) investigated the effect of supervisor characteristics on postgraduate students' academic performance in Nigerian universities and found that factors such as expertise, accessibility, and approachability of supervisors significantly influenced students' performance. Onuka and Eshiett (2018) provided a guide for supervisors on how to effectively support postgraduate students throughout their research journey. Mabunda (2018) investigated the influence of the relationship between doctoral supervisors and students on research progress and success in South Africa. Hlalele and Ndebele (2018) explored supervisor perspectives on supervising masters and doctoral theses and dissertations in South Africa. Ayodo (2013) investigated the impact of supervision on postgraduate students' learning in Kenya and found that effective supervision significantly influenced students' academic performance.

Therefore, this study aims to explore Kenyan postgraduate students' perceptions of the effectiveness of supervision techniques used during the proposal and dissertation development process in humanities and social sciences. By identifying the techniques that students perceive to be effective, this study aims to provide insight into how supervisors can improve their approach to supervising postgraduate students and enhance students' academic experience.

The results of this study will have practical implications for universities in Kenya and other countries, as they will inform the development of effective supervisory practices for postgraduate students in humanities and social sciences. By providing guidance and support to supervisors,

universities can promote the academic success and personal growth of their postgraduate students, who are the future leaders of their respective fields.

Problem Statement

Effective supervision is crucial for postgraduate students to successfully complete their proposals and dissertations in humanities and social sciences. Although previous research has identified various factors contributing to effective supervision, there is limited research on the effectiveness of specific supervision techniques used during the proposal and dissertation development process in Kenyan universities. Thus, there is a need to explore Kenyan postgraduate students' perceptions of the effectiveness of supervision techniques used during the proposal and dissertation development process in humanities and social sciences. Understanding which techniques are perceived as effective by students can provide insight into how supervisors can improve their approach to supervising postgraduate students and enhance students' academic experience. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to explore Kenyan postgraduate students' perceptions of the effectiveness of supervision techniques in proposal and dissertation development.

Research Objectives

1. To find out the post graduate students' perceptions of the supervision techniques used in the proposal and dissertation development process in humanities and social sciences in Kenyan universities.
2. To compare perceptions of masters and doctoral students on the supervision techniques used in the proposal and dissertation development process in humanities and social sciences in Kenyan universities.

Hypothesis (H0)

There is no statistically significant difference in Masters and doctoral students' perception of the effectiveness of supervision techniques in humanities and social sciences in proposal and dissertation development process in Kenyan universities.

Methodology

This study employed a mixed-methods research design. The target population consisted of target postgraduate students in humanities and social sciences in Kenyan universities. According to Mensah

(2014) where the population is unknown, the sample size can be derived by computing the minimum sample size required for accuracy in estimating proportions by considering the standard normal deviation set at 95% confidence level (1.96), percentage picking a choice or response (50% = 0.5) and the confidence interval (0.05 = ± 5). The formula is:

$$n = \frac{z^2 (p)(1-p)}{c^2}$$

Where:

z = standard normal deviation set at 95% confidence level

p = percentage picking a choice or response

c = confidence interval

Using this formula, the researcher collected a sample of 90 respondents of which 58 duly filled and returned the questionnaires. Thus, the response rate was 64.4% which was considered a good representation. The sample collection procedure consisted of purposive sampling techniques. Data was collected from the sampled respondents using questionnaires and semi-structured interviews to collect data from the respondents. The questionnaire was distributed to all the respondents, while the semi-structured interviews were conducted with a selected group of students who were chosen using criterion sampling techniques.

Results and Discussion

This section provides the findings and discussion of the study in accordance with the stated objectives of the study.

a) Students' perceptions of the Quality of Supervision of the proposal and dissertation development process

The first research objective sought to find out the post graduate students' perceptions of the quality of supervision the proposal and dissertation development process in humanities and social sciences. To rate the students' perceptions, the respondents were provided with a questionnaire consisting of 14 items in a five-point Likert scale ranging from; Never (1), Rarely (2), Some-times (3), Very Often (4) and Always (5) which rated their experiences pertaining the target variable. From the responses obtained from the Likert scales the

researcher computed a mean score and standard deviation for each statement which was used to rate the prevalence of physical abuse on a scale of 1-5. The minimum score was 1 which indicated "Never" or complete absence of the construct being measured. Scores ranging from 1-2 indicated rarely or to a very small extent, scores of 2-3 indicated sometimes or to a moderate extent, scores of 3-4 indicated very often or to a high extent and scores of 4-5 indicated always or to an extremely high extent (Welch-Brewer et al., 2011). The results were showed on Table 1.

Analyzed data presented on Table 1. shows that the computed mean score and standard deviation of supervisors involved other relevant internal and external professional supervisors where necessary were (\bar{x} =2.71, s =1.35). This indicates that the involvement of other professionals occurred only to a rarely or to a very small extent. The study established that the supervisors conducted the following undertakings indicated very often or to a high extent as indicated by mean scores ranging from 3-4 on the scale used. The supervisors' provision of counsel on personal and academic issues that may significantly impact the progress of my research (\bar{x} = 3.53, s = 1.15); monitoring and provision of timely feedback on progress and quality of the student's research (\bar{x} = 3.68, s = 1.11); regularly communicated with the students whenever they lagged behind in meeting agreed timelines. (\bar{x} = 3.36, s = 1.27). similarly, the following activities were rated as occurring to a high extent; the supervisors being knowledgeable about careers and industry related to the students' research area (\bar{x} = 3.96, s = 1.15); supervisors' encouragement of students to participate in conferences, seminars and academic activities and other scholarly networks (\bar{x} = 3.13, s = 1.46) and lastly the supervisors display of research interest and expertise students' area of research (\bar{x} = 3.81, s = 1.16). The respondents rated the following undertakings as occurring always or to an extremely high extent; supervisors communication on my progress in formal, flexible and professional manner (\bar{x} = 4.00, s = 1.09) and that the supervisors were courteous and friendly (\bar{x} = 4.19, s = 0.98). The overall computed mean score and standard deviation (\bar{x} = 3.53, s = 1.3) for the 14 items rating quality of supervision indicated that the respondents were of the opinion that their supervisors highly.

Table 1: Students' perceptions of the quality of supervision in proposal and dissertation development process

S No.	My supervisors	Never	Rarely	Some-times	Very Often	Always	n	\bar{x}	s
1.	Provides counsel on personal and academic issues that may significantly impact the progress of my research.	5.66%	13.21%	26.42%	32.08%	22.64%	53	3.53	1.15
2.	Monitors and provides timely feedback on progress and quality of my research.	1.89%	11.32%	35.85%	18.87%	32.08%	53	3.68	1.11
3.	Regularly communicates with me whenever I lag behind in meeting agreed timelines.	9.43%	15.09%	30.19%	20.75%	24.53%	53	3.36	1.27
4.	Is knowledgeable about careers and industry related to my research area.	5.77%	5.77%	15.38%	32.69%	40.38%	52	3.96	1.15
5.	Communicates on my progress in formal, flexible and professional manner.	1.89%	9.43%	18.87%	26.42%	43.40%	53	4.00	1.09
6.	Encourages me to participate in conferences, seminars and academic activities and other scholarly networks.	23.08%	7.69%	23.08%	25.00%	21.15%	52	3.13	1.46
7.	Shows research interest and expertise in my research area.	3.77%	9.43%	26.42%	22.64%	37.74%	53	3.81	1.16
8.	Involves other relevant internal and external professional supervisors where necessary.	25.00%	23.08%	17.31%	25.00%	9.62%	52	2.71	1.35
9.	Keeps me well informed about policy and Code of Research Ethics	9.43%	13.21%	30.19%	30.19%	16.98%	53	3.32	1.19
10.	My supervisors are courteous and friendly.	1.89%	1.89%	22.64%	22.64%	50.94%	53	4.19	.98
11.	Adheres to my research work plan and timelines	3.77%	15.09%	35.85%	16.98%	28.30%	53	3.51	1.17
12.	Directs me on statistical tools to use in data analysis	16.00%	14.00%	14.00%	28.00%	28.00%	50	3.38	1.44
13.	Connects me to other networks and resources that add value to my studies	17.31%	15.38%	25.00%	17.31%	25.00%	52	3.17	1.42
14.	Gives feedback in a timely manner	3.77%	18.87%	22.64%	20.75%	33.96%	53	3.62	1.24
Aggregate Mean Score and Standard Deviation (\bar{x} = 3.53, s = 1.3).									

According to a study by Alves and Raposo (2021), postgraduate students' perception of the quality of supervision is crucial in the successful completion of their proposal and dissertation. The study found that students who rated their supervisors' support as excellent were more likely to complete their research on time and achieve higher grades. Additionally, students who felt that their supervisors provided constructive feedback and were approachable were more satisfied with the supervision process. Similarly, in a study by Sabir, Akbar, and Mahmood (2020), postgraduate students reported that the quality of supervision significantly impacted the success of their dissertation. The study

found that students who had supportive and engaged supervisors were more likely to complete their research within the expected timeframe and achieve higher grades. Furthermore, a study by Tran, Khuong, and Hoang (2021) found that postgraduate students valued supervisors who had expertise in their research area, provided timely feedback, and had good communication skills. Students who felt that their supervisors lacked these qualities reported lower levels of satisfaction with their supervision and were more likely to experience delays in completing their dissertation.

In conclusion, postgraduate students' perception of the quality of supervision is crucial in

the successful completion of their proposal and dissertation. Supervisors who provide constructive feedback, are approachable and engaged, have expertise in the research area, and possess good communication skills, are more likely to support students in achieving higher grades and completing their research on time.

b) Comparison of Perceptions of Masters and Doctoral Students on the Quality of Supervision in Proposal and Dissertation Development Process

The second research objective sought to compare perceptions of masters and doctoral students on the supervision techniques used in the proposal and dissertation development process in humanities and social sciences in Kenyan universities. The researcher computed a variable "Quality of Supervision" which was used to cross tabulate the masters and doctoral students' perceptions. Table 2 presents a summary of the findings.

Table 2: Opinions on quality of supervision

Graduate Program	Mean Score (\bar{x})	Std. Deviation (s)
1. Masters	3.5000	1.07070
2. PhD	3.5607	1.00943
Total	3.5258	1.03429

Table 2 shows that the mean scores of the Masters students was 3.5000 and for the doctoral students was 3.5607. This indicates that was a very small difference in the perceptions of the two categories of post graduate students on the quality of supervision the same. In order to ensure that the observed differences were significant, the researcher tested the null hypothesis (H_0), which stated thus; *H_0 : There is no statistically significant difference in perceptions of Masters and doctoral students' on the quality of supervision in humanities and social sciences in proposal and dissertation development process in Kenyan universities.*

To establish this the research computed this t-test for the two categories, that is, masters and PhD students. The findings are presented on Table 3.

Table 3 shows that the level of significance .845 was more than the p-value (.05). Therefore, we fail to reject H_0 (at $\alpha = .05$) and conclude that the perceptions of masters and doctoral students on the quality of supervision in humanities and social sciences in proposal and dissertation development process in Kenyan universities were largely the same. Generally, the study revealed that in both masters and doctoral students, perceived the quality of supervision in the same.

Table 3: Independent Samples t-test for masters and PhD students on their perceptions on the quality of supervision

		Levene's Test		t-test for Equality of Means					
								95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	
Quality of Supervision	Equal variances assumed	.163	.689	-.197	45	.845	-.06071	.30837	-.68181 .56038
	Equal variances not assumed			-.199	42.364	.843	-.06071	.30562	-.67733 .55590

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study investigated the perceptions of students regarding the quality of supervision in the proposal and dissertation development process within the context of postgraduate studies in the humanities and social sciences in Kenyan universities. Through an analysis of survey responses, several key findings have emerged, shedding light on the experiences and perspectives of students in this specific academic domain. Overall, the study revealed mixed perceptions among postgraduate students regarding the quality of supervision they received during their research journey. While some students

expressed satisfaction with the support and guidance provided by their supervisors, others highlighted areas of concern and suggested areas for improvement. The findings indicated that effective communication and regular engagement between students and supervisors, are critical factors contributing to positive perceptions of supervision quality. Students who reported that supervisors were reasonably approachable, responsive, and provided timely feedback. Additionally, students indicated that supervisors' demonstrated moderate levels of expertise in their respective fields, insights and guidance throughout the research process. On the

other hand, students expressed dissatisfaction with supervisors' lack of involvement of other relevant internal and external professional supervisors where necessary.

Recommendations

Based on these findings, several recommendations can be made to enhance the quality of supervision in postgraduate studies within the humanities and social sciences in Kenyan universities:

1. Develop comprehensive training programs: Institutions should provide training and professional development opportunities for supervisors to enhance their mentoring skills and subject expertise. These programs should focus on effective communication, guidance in research methodologies, and understanding the unique needs of students in the humanities and social sciences disciplines.
2. Establish clear guidelines and expectations: Universities should develop and communicate clear guidelines and expectations for both supervisors and students in the proposal and dissertation development process. This includes providing explicit instructions on the research methodology, ethical considerations, and milestones to ensure mutual understanding and accountability.
3. Promote collaboration and peer support: Institutions should facilitate opportunities for students to engage in collaborative research activities, workshops, and seminars. Peer support networks and mentoring programs can also be established to foster a sense of community among postgraduate students and provide additional guidance and feedback.
4. Enhance supervision allocation and support systems: Universities should allocate supervisors based on their expertise capacity, ensuring that each student receives adequate attention and support. Implementing mechanisms for regular supervision check-ins and progress tracking can help identify and address any issues or challenges faced by students.
5. Establish mechanisms for student feedback: Institutions should establish formal mechanisms for students to provide feedback on their supervision experiences. Anonymous surveys and feedback loops can help identify areas for improvement and inform policy changes to enhance the overall quality of supervision.

By implementing these recommendations, Kenyan universities can improve the quality of supervision in postgraduate studies within the humanities and social sciences, ensuring that students receive the necessary support and guidance to successfully complete their research projects.

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