

# THE ASSAF REPORT AND BEYOND: ENHANCING SUPERVISION

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POSTGRADUATE DEVELOPMENT IMBIZO

# OUTLINE OF PRESENTATION

- The Supervisory Context in South Africa
- So Who Supervises the Supervisor?
- Common Supervisor-related Problems Experienced by Students
- The Supervisor as a Mentor

# The Supervisory Context in South Africa

# THE SA CONTEXT

ASSAf report (2010):

- In 2007 SA produced 1274 PhD graduates or 26 per million of population
  - (Decreased to 1182 in 2008)
- Compared to:
  - Australia: 264 per million
  - Portugal: 569 per million
  - (Brazil: 42 per million)
- Thus a critical need to increase the number of postgraduate students

# THE SA CONTEXT

- Ramani and Malema (Mail & Guardian, 12-19 April 2012, p. 41) cite a CHE (2007) report:
  - More female than male postgraduate students, but only 42% of PhD graduates are women;
  - Women publish between 14-37% of papers;
  - Only a third of NRF-rated researchers are women;
  - 43% of permanent academic staff at universities are women, but only 24% are at the Professor/ Associate Professor level;
  - Only 40% of Senior Lecturers are women

# THE SA CONTEXT

- National Development Plan (2011):
- “Increase the numbers of African and woman postgraduates, especially PhDs, to improve research and innovation capacity. This will help to accelerate the transformation of South Africa’s scientific and academic communities to better reflect the population”
- “Produce more than 100 doctoral graduates per million per year by 2030”
- “Increase the percentage of PhD qualified staff within the higher education sector from the current 34 percent level to over 75 percent over 20 years”

# THE SA CONTEXT

- National Research Foundation's mission statement (Vision 2015 document):
  - “To contribute to the knowledge economy in South Africa by attaining at least 1% of global research and development (R&D) output by 2015”
- Then changed to 0.5%

# THE SA CONTEXT

- Long-term target is to increase the number of PhD graduates from 1200 in 2005 to 6000 by 2025 (SA PhD Project)
  - **BUT:** “ ‘The number of students enrolling for research Master’s degrees has declined steadily since 2004, as did the number of graduates since 2005’. As the pool of potential doctoral candidates decreases, it will take a special effort to produce 6000 graduates per year.” (CHE, 2009 cited in SA PhD Project Partnership Guide)



# THE SA CONTEXT

- So there's a strategic imperative to increase the number of postgraduate students (feeder to doctoral graduates) to increase SA's research output and competitiveness
- What are some of the stumbling blocks that result in postgraduate students dropping out/ taking longer than planned to complete their degrees?

# THE SA CONTEXT

- ASSAf report (2010):
  - 4 main blockages to increased PhD output:
    - Pipeline constraints (quality of schooling system, undergrad and postgrad pipeline)
    - Institutional constraints – limited supervisory capacity at universities
    - Financial constraints
    - Administrative constraints

# THE SA CONTEXT

- Criticisms levelled against universities (HEQC Audit Panel Reports cited in ASSAf report, 2010):
  - Inadequate support for postgrad students
  - Lack of clarity on guidelines to students
  - Lack of formal training for supervisors
  - Inconsistent application of rules regarding supervision and examination across faculties within the same university
  - Inadequate monitoring and information systems to track postgraduate students

# THE SA CONTEXT

- ASSAf report (2010) also identifies 4 main supervision-related reasons for “pile-up” effect:
  - Availability of supervisors to students (time, access/ communication), e.g. supervisor is overburdened with lecturing load/ other students, supervisor takes long to provide student with feedback
  - Lack of attention/ interest by supervisors in the development of postgrad students (can lead to demotivation; may be due to insensitivity to cultural differences)
  - Possible lack of competence of supervisors in students’ specific research areas, computer literacy
  - Students only having access to one supervisor

# THE SA CONTEXT

- Finally, ASSAf report (2010) identifies poor student-supervisor relationships as a risk factor for doctoral attrition
- Mentorship is critical in addressing the abovementioned problems

# So Who Supervises the Supervisor?

# WHO SUPERVISES THE SUPERVISOR?

- Many institutions lack proper mechanisms of accountability to hold supervisors accountable for the quality of supervision they provide
- At some institutions, academics do not even have job descriptions – so what can we assess their performance against and hold them accountable for?
- Quality of teaching and supervision should be key performance areas for academics – often not the case as “research output” is narrowly defined and emphasised

# WHO SUPERVISES THE SUPERVISOR?

- At some institutions, there are “rules” (formal/informal), e.g. relating to how long supervisors can take to give feedback
  - But these are not always adhered to
- Issue of performance management in academia seems to be quite sensitive – argument by some against more effective controls seems to be “academic freedom” and “this is not a business”
  - Could this argument be a smokescreen for the powers-that-be?
  - Could insufficient awareness/ training contribute to the resistance to change?



# WHO SUPERVISES THE SUPERVISOR?

- Need to have an integrated performance management system to enhance postgraduate supervision:
  - A strategic priority
  - Job descriptions outlining roles and responsibilities
  - Performance appraisal
  - Rewards
  - Training and development
  - Assessing the appropriateness of the performance management system

# **Examples of Supervisor- related Problems Experienced by Students**

# PROBLEMS WITH SUPERVISORS

- Supervisors not giving feedback, or not giving feedback timeously
- Feedback being personal, unconstructive, demeaning or insulting
- Feedback not being substantive
- Supervisor being away for long periods of time or being too busy
- Supervisor changing his/ her mind about the direction of the research, or wanting new things done later on

# PROBLEMS WITH SUPERVISORS

- In-fighting between supervisor and co-supervisor, or between (co-)supervisor and other academics, so the student is caught in the middle/ disadvantaged
- Lack of mentorship from the supervisor
- Supervisor perhaps not being a subject matter expert in the student's research area
- Ethical dilemmas resulting from supervisor not following university rules
- Harassment, sexual assault, rape

# PROBLEMS WITH SUPERVISORS

- The reality is that the balance of power in the student-supervisor relationship is tilted away from the student
  - The student is the more vulnerable party
- Many points of diversity and inequalities can further emphasise these power imbalances, leaving the student even more vulnerable
  - E.g. differences in race, culture, gender, gender identity, sexual orientation, religion, urban/ rural, nationality, language, educational background

# The Supervisor as a Mentor

# WHAT IS MENTORSHIP?

- Ideally your supervisor should be your mentor, but this is not always the case
- A mentor guides the growth and development of the mentee, provides feedback (+ve and -ve)
- Mentorship is mentee-driven
- Personal and Professional Development Contract (PDC) is at the heart of the mentoring relationship
- Difference between a mentor and a coach
  - Coach is a subject matter expert
  - Your mentor could be your coach, but not necessarily

# WHAT IS MENTORSHIP?

- Compare the definitions below:
  - "A Mentor is a person who oversees the career and development of another person, usually a junior, through teaching, counselling, providing psychological support, protecting and at times promoting or sponsoring." (D. Clutterbuck)
  - "Mentoring is a **RELATIONSHIP** and a set of processes where one person offers help, guidance, advice and support to facilitate the learning or development of another person." (G. Lewis)



# WHAT MENTORSHIP IS NOT

- Driven by the mentor
- The responsibility of the mentor only
- A relationship of dependency
- One-sided
- A relationship characterised by feelings of either entitlement or helplessness
- A guaranteed springboard for a promotion, more pay or special benefits
- A platform to air gripes and grievances

# A JOURNEY - PHASES OF THE MENTORING RELATIONSHIP (courtesy of Kudsiya Cassim and Associates)

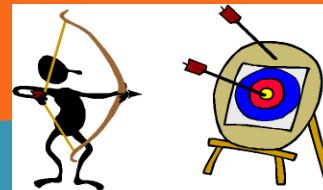
A SPECIAL FRIENDSHIP

MANAGING THE SWEET SORROW OF LETTING GO



ENRICHING THE CONNECTION

GROWING A PARTNERSHIP FOR LEARNING



INTRODUCTION & COURTING

# ENHANCING THE MENTORING RELATIONSHIP

- Stephen Covey's concept of the "Emotional Bank Account"
  - Positive behaviours that build the EBA
  - Negative behaviours that deplete the EBA
- Being aware of different:
  - Needs
  - Frames of reference
  - Personal values

# KEY ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES OF THE POSTGRADUATE STUDENT

- Treat your supervisor, colleagues, staff, students with professionalism and respect at all times
- Take ownership of your degree and work hard
- Honour contractual agreements (e.g. tutoring)
- Submit regular progress reports
- Inform your supervisor of any problems that may impact adversely on your research project
- Have regular progress meetings with your supervisor
- Give and receive feedback in a constructive manner

# YOUR SUPERVISOR'S KEY ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES

- Treat you with professionalism and respect at all times
- Respect your right to privacy and confidentiality
- Give and receive feedback in a constructive manner
- To fulfil university/ administrative requirements related to your degree
- Have regular progress meetings with you
- Encourage you to complete the PDC
- Try to find opportunities for you to grow and develop

# MANAGING POTENTIAL CONFLICT

- Face-to-face meeting between you and your supervisor/mentor
- Getting someone to mediate a meeting?
- Grievance procedure in your Department/ Faculty?
- Ombud?
- Possibility of changing supervisors?
- At some universities you may be allowed to submit your thesis without your supervisor's approval, but this is not a good idea – examiners will wonder why and assume that it's because the supervisor had a problem with the quality of your work.

# PREPARING FOR THE FIRST MENTORING MEETING

- Your roles and responsibilities
- Your expectations of each other
- When and where you will meet for future meetings
- Who will take responsibility for calling meetings
- Options open to you if the relationship does not satisfy both your needs (handling conflict)
- How to handle and manage conflict
- The possibility of changing mentors
- Exiting the relationship

# USEFUL TEMPLATES....

- The Mentoring Pledge (see **page 25 of Chapter 9** of the Postgrad Toolkit)
- Progress Report (see **page 27** of Chapter 9 of the Postgrad Toolkit)



# THE PERSONAL & PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT CONTRACT

- The PDC is a self-empowerment tool that encourages you to take ownership over achieving your goals.
  - A catalyst in the career-management process
- It is a “contract” – with *yourself*.
- Encourages you to think long-term
- Holistic and integrated – considers ALL your goals (postgraduate study, career-related, family, health, retirement, financial, recreational etc.)

# THE PERSONAL & PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT CONTRACT

- Provides a structure to your plans:
  - For each goal, detail your key activities (personal action plan).
  - For each key activity:
    - Timeframes?
    - Possible risk factors?
    - Contingency plans?
- Flexible, organic and personalised
- Share your PDC (or aspects of this) with your research supervisor and mentor – is at the heart of your mentoring relationship

# THE PERSONAL & PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT CONTRACT

- Let's see what the PDC looks like now.... Please turn to **page 4 of Chapter 10** of the Postgraduate Toolkit on CD.
- How can you adapt this for yourself?

**THANK YOU VERY MUCH FOR YOUR  
PARTICIPATION!**

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