

## Chapter 22:

# Ethics in Research Supervision in a Distance Education Context

Mmabaledi Kefilwe Seeletso, Southern African Development  
Community Centre for Distance Education

## Introduction

Quality cuts across all disciplines, including education, and remains an issue for global concern. Quality and quality assurance continue to dominate spaces, and research in education has not been spared. Quality in research is mainly about scientific excellence and compliance. Distance education, just like other forms of education delivery, should be able to produce global scholars and world-class citizens who can fit anywhere in the world. Distance education needs to produce quality researchers who can contribute to policy formulation, as well as inform practice in the system. This all starts with high-quality supervision of researchers, who can in turn produce quality research outputs.

Students' satisfaction remains key in most educational institutions, irrespective of the level. This satisfaction can only happen when there is access to quality education, including both content and learning support. This chapter will therefore, dwell on one of these imperatives, that of quality, which also determines a few others. For instance, high quality research can promote internationalisation. It can also lead to global transformation as it can improve economies. For quality to be realised in the education sector, especially higher education, it is important to harmonise the ratios of research students to the existing qualified supervision staff. These are critical to lead to successful completion of scholars who can further contribute to the growth of research in distance education in future.

High-level skills remain critical for the knowledge-based economy. As such, research remains equally important for knowledge creation. Graduates of institutions of higher learning world over have proved to be drivers of the economy as they possess the necessary knowledge and

information. These institutions, irrespective of the mode of delivery they use, remain hubs of knowledge creation. Lecturers therefore need to perform their work with great diligence, including facilitating institutional research.

This chapter covers several themes that underpin research supervision such as socialisation, student focus, and the research process to establish the need for quality research in research supervision. There are key concepts that will be explained in this chapter, as well as roles and responsibilities of supervisors, institutional rules, regulations and resources guiding the students through the proposal to the final dissertation or thesis, and strategies for effective supervision. Borrowing from the latter, this chapter looks at quality matters and issues of ethics in distance education research and explores the extent to which these issues are of high priority for both institutions and supervisors. This chapter further argues that it is necessary to implement the necessary quality assurance and research ethical controls to ensure that distance education students are not disadvantaged and are exposed to credible or even better research and quality education than they would acquire through the traditional learning environment.

## Definition of key concepts

In this part of the chapter, some keywords as used in the context of the discussion have been explained. The explanations have been provided by the author to suit the context in which they have been used in the chapter. Though some of the concepts have been explained as per the explanations of the authorities, some definitions reflect the author's experience as both a distance education practitioner and distance education research supervisor.

Seeletso (2022: 121) defined *distance education* as 'a philosophy of teaching and learning in which the learner and the facilitator are separated and away from each other'. She further stated that distance education has, over time, proved to be of great importance in helping overcome barriers to accessing education.

*Quality* is about the 'goodness' or 'excellence' of something, be it a product, service, process, or anything else. Quality can also be viewed as the degree of excellence—or simply put, how good the service, product, or process is. Good practices can be learned from institutions who have paved their way as institutions of excellence. Pitsoe and Seeletso (2022: 1) posit that 'quality is a multidimensional concept and has become an imperative term on higher education'.

This chapter will adopt Belawati and Zuhairi's (2007: 2) definition of *quality assurance*, which is

the 'systematic management and assessment procedures adopted by higher education institutions and systems in order to monitor performance against objectives, and to ensure achievement of quality outputs and quality improvements'. This will be used alongside Watty's (2003) definition, who contends that quality can only be defined or explained as fitness for purpose, which will in turn promote sustainability of high standards, perfection, and consistency on how things are done.

*Quality measure* is the ratio of research supervisors to students, and whether the available staff is qualified for the supervision job. When we talk about master's or doctoral degree research, the supervisor should have a PhD as their minimum qualification, especially when supervising a Master's degree student. Under normal circumstances it is desired that for one to supervise a PhD candidate, they should be a professor.

*Quality research* involves all processes needed for research and whether all these are aligned and made explicit to all stakeholders. Research can come in many different forms, but irrespective of the form it must be good quality research. The design and methods for data collection need to be appropriate for the topic to be considered as quality research. The findings should also be clear, precise, straight forward, and not ambiguous to be considered as quality research.

In the context of this chapter, *research ethics* refers to morals or rules that help researchers understand the difference between wrong and right. In short, research ethics can be viewed as rules for conducting research to ensure that participants' rights are not violated. Okeke, Omodan, and Dube (2022: 169) define research ethics as 'moral principles that guide research'. The scholars further argue that research ethics involve a number of variables that 'may include seeking permission to research participants ...' (Okeke, Omodan, and Dube 2022: 170).

*Research supervision* involves a qualified expert or scholar providing guidance and mentoring to a student engaged in a particular research project. This expert scholar or mentor, also called a supervisor, guides the student or mentee through their research program. The research supervisor guides, provides direction, and monitors students' research and progress, and is expected to provide general support, encouragement, and feedback.

To enhance quality, there is a need, therefore, to rethink strategies that need to be reviewed and rethought in research and research supervision. These include improved supervision process, improved evaluation systems, and other avenues that will enhance excellence. Measures should then be in place to ensure that this excellence is maintained at all costs and at all times.

## Institutional rules, regulations, and roles guiding research and research supervision

It is important that quality is ensured in all structures and processes of the institution regarding research and research supervision. Institutional rules and regulations guiding all quality, quality assurance and ethical processes need to be in place. There should also be role players to ensure enforcement of all these rules, procedures, and regulations that have to take place. To start with, there should be admission policies in place. This exercise is very important and a key quality assurance step in the recruitment exercise, as it can help the institutions establish the applicants' academic abilities. Policies need to be able to allow the institution to interact with the applicants as part of the recruitment and admissions policy to establish their dedication and passion for the programme. This alone can give the institution an idea on the applicants' commitment and whether they would really complete their study. The institutional regulations and procedures should also be able to pair supervisors with their protégés. Having admission procedures can facilitate a prior interview with the applicants and can help match the students with their future supervisors, especially regarding expertise, which is key in research supervision. Institutions need to have robust pre-enrolment counselling for students who wish to enrol in their different programmes. The pre-enrolment sessions need to have sound admission processes, good induction workshops, and transparent processes and procedures on supervision, assessment, and examination of dissertations and theses, both internal and external. Distance education learners need to be ethically aware of what research entails and how it has to be conducted.

Distance education institutions need to have research ethics that are shared with students and must be part of the university procedures. These ethics need to help guide distance education learners in their research writing and other processes such as examination of their dissertations and theses. As issues of quality assurance and compliance, all available processes need to be shared with students to ensure that they know what to do as a matter of policy and compliance. They also need to know the implication of non-compliance and failure to abide by the institutional research ethics. In other words, it is important to have these gate-keeping processes and procedures implemented without fail - not just there on paper, yet not used. If what is documented is not implemented by both students and supervisors, then quality will be highly compromised.

Quality remains critical in research and research supervision and helps lead to students being able to publish in professional journals. This has become a high priority given that institutions are under pressure to increase their research output. This applies to all institutions of higher learning.

However, distance education institutions face more challenges especially due to work overload, leaving supervisors with little time to do research and publish their findings.

## Possibilities and challenges of research in distance education

It is important for all distance education research supervisors to support their protégés and help them produce high quality research outputs. Quality research is a product of several key aspects that include systematic review of information sources, as well as a carefully formulated problem. The purpose of the research must be clear and not ambiguous. For the literature review, a quality research study needs to demonstrate how the current study is related to already existing studies. The study should also be relevant to stakeholders, be balanced, and free from bias. Above everything else, the study must be intriguing, innovative, and exciting to the reader. To achieve all these, a supervisor needs to support the student during the research study right from the proposal stage to completion. The section below explains some of the strategies needed for effective research supervision right from inception to the completion of the research study.

169

## Strategies for effective distance education research

Different stages of the writing process help ensure quality in distance education research and research supervision. In this section of the chapter some of the strategies for effective research supervision are discussed, as well as challenges that may hinder effective supervision. Engagement with different authorities, in the form of an extensive literature review, is also discussed in this section. Igumbor et al. (2020: 1) contend that ‘the quality and success of postgraduate education largely rely on effective supervision’.

In a study they conducted on ‘Effective supervision of doctoral students in public and population health in Africa ...’ Igumbor et al. (2020: 1) shared that ‘the respondents remarked that effective supervision is a two-way process, involving both supervisor and supervisees commitment’.

Malfroy (2005: 165) observes that ‘... the relationship of supervision as the primary relationship for managing both student and research progress during the period of candidature’. Since supervision is a two-way process, there is a need for a healthy relationship to sustain this journey to completion. There is a need for commitment and respect from both parties. Furthermore, both parties need to

discuss and agree on the 'supervision ground rules' to make expectations and roles clear and free from ambiguity.

Supervisors have multiple roles to play in their research supervision responsibilities. It all starts when they guide the students in identifying their research topics and crafting of their research questions. It takes a rare skill and expertise to guide students just through this phase of their research journey. From here the research supervisor must help students appreciate how the review of the literature is done. From the author's experience as a distance education practitioner and research supervisor, she has come to observe that this is one of the most difficult stages of research supervision. One can spend months just in this section of research alone, especially in the distance education space. Having face-to-face support sessions for distance education research students would help them a lot with their studies. However, in distance education where students would be scattered all over, a face-to-face support environment is difficult to do. As such, the different research stages are never easy, hence distance education students will always take longer to understand and complete than their counterparts in traditional universities. Once the literature review is done, normally students will move on to the research design and methodology, which can never be complete without students developing the necessary protocols and guides for their research. These are done under the guidance of the supervisor. All these are steppingstones to what Kiley (2011) views as integrating students into the world of academia.

170

Igumbor et al. (2020) caution that what one person views as effective supervision may be elusive to another person. This can even lead to different models of supervision which may run parallel in different countries (Cross and Backhouse 2014). There are various supervision models, but apprenticeship, or the one-on-one model, has remained common for a long time in Southern Africa, and Africa at large. However, this is slowly getting replaced by team supervision which includes more than one supervisor (Frick 2019). Despite providing individual and personalised attention and feedback, Robertson (2017) argues that the apprenticeship model is being fast replaced by group or team supervision. Robertson (2017) corroborates that the breakdown in communication between the supervisor and their protégés may delay students' progress, unlike in team supervision where communication is more defined and better than in the apprenticeship model. Team supervision brings together two or more experts as supervisors. These will, during the supervision process, complement each other in different research areas and experiences. Team supervision further facilitates shared responsibilities and enhances quality due to the working together of multiple experts. Co-supervision improves supervisor-supervisee interaction and improves quality of research supervision (Paul, Olson, and Gull 2014). This sounds good but should be taken with

caution. If the main supervisor, for instance, has poor relations with the student, this can delay progress. The author has personally co-supervised a student who had frequently argued, and had issues with the main supervisor. So, most of the time the author was playing the reconciliatory role, which delayed the student's progress. When such a situation happens in distance education, it often takes a much longer time to resolve than it would happen in a traditional education system where reconciliatory meetings could be called for the involved parties.

Quality research supervision includes being an expert in a given field or area of study (Ladany et al. 2013). Dietz (2006: 2) affirms that '... the nature of supervisor interaction with students may largely be informed by their own background, knowledge, methods and experience'. In some instances, quality of supervision might be compromised. Bacwayo, Nmpala, and Oteyo (2017) observe that high student-staff ratios in most African countries may result in poor research supervision and mentorship. This can be even worse in distance education institutions, most of who depend largely on part-time staff to supervise their research students. In some instances, one is expected to supervise despite having a heavy teaching load. Too much multitasking, such as including staff members in too many committees, can also add to the unnecessary workload of people also expected to supervise research students. Research has shown that this is worse in distance education where there is a lot of multitasking, especially by lecturers who, among other roles, design and develop curricula, develop learning programmes, train, and coordinate part-time staff, as well as involved in teaching.

171

Quality research supervision needs supervisors to be trained to be equipped with the necessary skills for the supervision responsibility. Effective supervision, as viewed by Igumbor et al. (2020: 3) is a 'two-way interactional process that requires both the student and the supervisor to collaboratively engage each other within the spirit of professionalism, respect, open mindedness, to promote a favourable supervision environment'.

Grant (2003: 180) notes that the supervisor '... does not only teach the student skills but, to teach the student how to be someone – a researcher, a scholar, and an academic'. Bastalich (2017: 1153) contends that '... the aim of supervision or research education is partly, to facilitate an identification with, or socialisation into academic culture'.

One important quality assurance measure in research in distance education regards the examination of students' research dissertations and theses. This is usually done at the end of the study, and it involves the evaluation of the dissertations and theses, as well as the candidate presenting themselves for the viva voce, being the oral defence or verbal summary of the main issues emanating from their work.

Over the years, to date, it has remained difficult to establish holistic quality of the research output since only one document is submitted for examination where it (examination) exists. Other distance education institutions do not even have this arrangement where candidates must submit for examination. In most cases where oral defence is done it usually takes a few hours and one wonders if something done over a period of three or four years, or even more, can be discussed in just a few hours. This has led to an emerging debate of the view that some research examination should be more than just a written product, being a research dissertation or thesis. Scholars have proposed that over and above the research document, professional conduct and compliance to ethics need to be included. The argument is that all these proposals would then lead to a holistic graduate who can be a 'value add' or 'asset' to their area of study, as well as research and scholarship. The expectation is for the graduate to demonstrate expert knowledge and show critical skills above everything else. The distance education graduate that went through quality supervision must be able to show ability to evaluate existing knowledge and ideas.

### Timely and constructive feedback

172

Timely and comprehensive feedback remains pertinent for quality research supervision, whether in a distance education space or not. For quality supervision, both the student and the supervisor need to agree on deadlines, and make sure that both parties commit to these deadlines. From experience, this has always been a key motivator to the students the author supervises. This has been further corroborated by a study by Igumbor et al. (2020) on effective supervision of doctoral students in public and population health in Africa. Timely feedback tends to encourage students and motivate them to become autonomous in their learning. Students learning through the distance education mode for the first time always need to be inducted on time management. This in turn helps supervisors provide feedback within the given schedule. This can be done online and as such, reduces unnecessary delays that come with going to campuses for face-to-face meetings with supervisors.

Distance education research supervisors need to know the kind of feedback they have to give to students and know how the feedback should be crafted. Supervisors also have different means of communicating the feedback to their students which can be written or provided through a meeting to facilitate more discussion and interaction. Irrespective of how the feedback is given or communicated, the supervisor must avoid ambiguity for the feedback to be effective. The supervisor



must also be honest but respectful. Distance education students should be supported to be able to gain autonomy over time. Therefore, feedback provided by supervisors is key. Among supervisors' key tasks are to lead, guide, coach, and mentor their students (Bastalich 2017). Feedback provided should aim at guiding learning and development of ideas. Most of the time the feedback is beyond just guiding context and expertise, but also includes correcting grammar, spelling, and punctuation since most students would not have academic writing skills. All these are necessary to enhance quality in distance education research.

## **Quality assurance in distance education research**

Distance education research and research supervision have always been faced with challenges. This gave rise to several frameworks that were geared towards improving the practice around distance education research supervision, especially at the graduate level. There are several such frameworks and principles, one of which is discussed in the next part of this section. Cheng (2016: 9) contends that practitioners 'need to rethink their mind-set of understanding quality and quality assurance and use the notion of quality to support students to fulfil their potential, and to develop the professional practice of academics, in order to make them become confident and motivated in what they are doing'.

173

The Salzburg principles have explicit recommendations put in place to address research supervision challenges. The Salzburg response, among others, was largely to help strengthen research integrity by elimination of plagiarism. It also aimed at interdisciplinary research, networking, and providing transferable skills. The Salzburg principles further discuss possibilities of collaborating and twinning with others to ensure capacity building and sharing practices for continuous improvement.

## **Challenges of supervision/mentorship in distance education**

As much as distance education research supervisors and institutions always strive for success and good practice, there are challenges that need to be addressed. In the next section of the chapter, issues that hinder quality supervision are discussed. There is poor time management by both students and supervisors, especially by supervisors who only supervise distance education students on a

part-time basis. Some students equally have very poor time management skills. Distance education students mostly study part-time. As such they have many other responsibilities competing for their time. This remains a challenge that can negatively impact on their completion. Some of the distance education students also display limited or poor academic writing and research skills, as well as poor language skills. Regarding language and academic writing, some students struggle to differentiate spoken English from written language. When writing their research work, students still use slang, which they can only use when speaking, not when writing. This, therefore, suggests that distance education research students need to be grounded on academic writing. The induction processes should unpack what is expected of students. Following the induction exercise, the distance education research students can then practice by writing short, properly referenced pieces. This practice will ultimately help them master the art of academic writing in distance education.

The 'publish or perish' policy used by most universities to promote academics is a difficult mission to accomplish due to many other responsibilities they are tasked with and even more difficult for distance education institutions with large student numbers in each course. Although part-time staff are often used to support teaching and assessment, they still need to be recruited, trained, monitored, and paid on time - the management of these part-time staff can, therefore, be onerous. Carter, Kensington-Miller, and Courtney (2017: 13) contend that '... all supervisors are under more pressure to produce outputs - faster and in greater numbers - and the squeeze is unlikely to ease off anytime soon'.

Distance learning students are most of the time mature adults. They, therefore, at times, face challenges that they often expect supervisors to solve for them which some supervisors also consider easy for mature, graduate students to handle. As such, some conflict may arise between expectations or roles to be played by either of the parties. This observation has been corroborated by Malfroy (2005: 170) who contends that 'several supervisors complained that some students expect too much support and that they want everything done for them'. Other issues include the fact that students themselves are hardly ever prepared for research.

Research has further shown that there are some supervisors who are not trained for the supervisory work they do though they may have the right qualifications. So, training needs to be prioritised for research supervisors. This has further been observed by Teferra (2015: 13) who states that there is a serious shortage of 'seasoned supervisors, hence, an over reliance on novices for supervision'.

## Conclusion

To maintain quality and ensure that research ethics are upheld in distance education research and research supervision, or any supervision issue for that matter, it is crucial to train supervisors. It is also of great importance to balance the supervision roles and responsibilities. These will contribute to quality in distance education research. The students need to appreciate that at this level they need to be autonomous and only engage their supervisors for guidance and coaching. However, a common understanding must exist so that each can know their roles in this research 'partnership' or 'journey'. Quality supervision is characterised by respect and open communication. This can help both the supervisor and the supervisee to know their roles and responsibilities and to ensure that all necessary quality issues are complied with in research supervision, because quality matters in distance education research. Despite the varying definitions of quality and quality assurance, it is important to note that the two concepts are always defined in terms of value for money, fitness for purpose, and maintenance of perfect products with zero defects, among others.

## References

175

- Bacwayo, E., Nmpala, P., and Oteyo, N.I. 2017. Challenges and opportunities associated with supervising graduate students enrolled in African Universities. *International Journal of Education and Practice*, 5(3): 29–39.
- Bastalich, W. 2017. Content and context in knowledge production: A critical review of doctoral supervision literature. *Studies in Higher Education*, 42(7): 1145–1157. [Course material of Module 1 of the DIES/CREST Training Course for Supervisors of Doctoral Candidates at African Universities. Stellenbosch University].
- Belawati, T. and Zuhairi, A. 2007. The practice of a quality assurance system in open and distance learning: A case study of Universitas Terbuka Indonesia (The Indonesia Open University). *International Review of Research in Open and Distance Learning*, 8(1): 1–5.
- Carter, S., Kensington-Miller, B., and Courtney, M. 2017. Doctoral supervision practice: What's the problem and how can we help academics? *Journal of Perspectives in Applied Academic Practice*, 5(1): 13–22.
- Cheng, M. 2016. *Quality in higher education: Developing a virtue of professional practice*. Rotterdam: Sense Publishers.

- Cross, M. and Backhouse, J. 2014. Evaluating doctoral programmes in Africa: Context and practices. *Higher Education Policy*, 27(2): 155–174.
- Dietz, A. J., Jansen, J. D., and Wadee, A. A. 2006. *Effective PhD supervision and mentorship. A workbook based on experiences from South Africa and the Netherlands: South Africa-Netherlands research programme on alternatives in development (SANPAD)*. Amsterdam: Rozenberg Publishers. Available at: <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/15364>
- Frick, L. 2019. *Supervisory models and styles*. [Course material of Module 4 of the DIES/CREST training course for supervisors of doctoral candidates at African universities. Stellenbosch University.] Available at: <https://www0.sun.ac.za/crest/dies-crest-online-training-course>
- Grant, B. 2003. Mapping the pleasures and risks of supervision. *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education*, 24: 175–190.
- Igumbor, J. O., Bosire, E. N., Karimi, F., Katahoire, A., Allison, J., Muusula, A.S., Peixoto, A., Otwombe, K., Gitau, E., Bondjers, G., Fonn, S., and Ajuwon, A. 2020. Effective supervision of doctoral students in public and population health in Africa: CARTA supervisors' experiences, challenges, and perceived opportunities, *Global Public Health*, 17(4): 496–511. Available at: DOI: 10.1080/17441692.2020.1864752
- 176 Kiley, M. 2011. *Developments in research supervisor training: Causes and responses*. [Course material of Module 2 of the DIES/CREST training course for supervisors of doctoral candidates at African universities. Stellenbosch University.]
- Ladany, N., Mori, Y., & Mehr, K. E. (2013). Effective and ineffective supervision. *The Counselling Psychologist*, 41(1). 28-47.
- Malfroy, J. 2005. Doctoral supervision, workplace research, and changing pedagogic practices. *Higher Education Research & Development*, 24(2): 165–178.
- Okeke, C.C., Omodan, B.I., and Dube, I.B. 2022. Ethical issues in humanities, social sciences, and science education. In: *Fundamentals of research in humanities, social sciences and science education*, edited by E.O. Adu and C.I.O. Okeke. Pretoria: Van Schaik Publishers. pp. 170–179.
- Paul, P., Olson, J.K., and Gull, R.B. 2014. Co-supervision of doctoral students: Enhancing the learning experience. *International Journal of Nursing Education Scholarship*, 11(1): 31–38.
- Pitsoe, V.J. and Seeletso, M.K. 2022. Quality assurance in virtual learning and e-learning spaces. *Zambia Journal of Distance Education*, 11(2): 1–7.
- Seeletso, M. 2022. Using information communication technologies for interactive open and distance learning experiences in the era of COVID-19. In: *Online teaching and learning in higher education during COVID-19*, edited by R.Y. Chan, K. Bista, and R.M. Allen. Routledge. pp. 120–133.

Teferra, D. 2015. Manufacturing and exporting excellence and 'mediocrity': Doctoral education in South Africa. [Course material of Module 4 of the DIES/CREST training course for supervisors of doctoral candidates at African universities. Stellenbosch University].

Watty, K. 2003. When will academics learn about quality? *Quality in Higher Education*, 9(3): 213-221.

---