An Introduction to Postgraduate Supervision

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Purpose of the Guide

This guide provides a basic introduction to the supervision of postgraduate studies. At the centre of each discussion are examples of best practices and guidelines on how to deal with all aspects associated with postgraduate supervision. Both the postgraduate student and the novice supervisor are targeted in this book, although seasoned supervisors could also benefit from the reflections. In the development of a supervision culture a comprehensive research guide is needed for the following reasons namely:

- To understand new trends in postgraduate supervision and how to react to these trends
- To understand the context of postgraduate supervision at a university
- To understand the demands of postgraduate supervision
- To create a community of scholars
- To create dialogue amongst supervisors and postgraduate students

This guide is the result of intensive discussions between the contributors to this manual, and a variety of workshops related to supervision (such as protocol writing, research methodology, supervision models, writing for publication, etc.). The contributors bring to the table a variety of experiences and backgrounds in postgraduate supervision, ranging from research management, supervision and research, as well as studies on postgraduate studies related to postgraduate supervision.

This book is presented as a workbook which provides both supervisors and postgraduate students with the opportunity to discuss and debate various issues related to supervision. The book is designed in such a way that it can be updated as frequently as necessary to accommodate new needs and perspectives in postgraduate supervision. Activities have been designed for the different themes, and helpful tips (as best practices) are provided.

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Theme 1

WHY THE FUSS ABOUT RESEARCH AND POSTGRADUATE SUPERVISION?

Laetus O.K. Lategan

After reading this theme you should be able to:
- understand the context of postgraduate supervision;
- apply the working definition of postgraduate supervision to the supervisory process.

Although many challenges face research and postgraduate studies in South Africa, four challenges in particular are relevant to the discussion on research and postgraduate education:

- **Policy implementation** to address a binary and racially divided higher education system.
- **National needs** such as cultural diversity, representation (equity), quality of education, shortage of science, engineering and technology (SET) graduates, cooperation with business/industry, skills development, social role of universities, etc.
- **Africanisation** and **internationalisation** (mobility and transfer).
- **Economic challenges** such as the role of a new subsidy formula, research by and for business/industry, commercialisation of research, patents and intellectual property (IP).

Several national policies and initiatives are supportive of postgraduate education. Important steering mechanisms in these policies are:

- **The National Plan for Higher Education** (NPHE) (2001) supports the development of research and postgraduate studies. Two objectives are specifically dedicated to research and postgraduate studies. These objectives are:

**Outcome 13**: Research concentration and funding linked to outputs.
Outcome 14: Increased graduate enrolments and outputs at the master’s and doctoral level.

- The National Qualifications Framework (NQF) prescribes the core values of a qualification. Core values include a comprehensive grasp on a discipline, critical understanding of advanced research methodologies, independent research, ability to conceptualise, advanced information retrieval, communication of research results, intellectual independence, capacity to critically evaluate own and others’ work, etc. These values are found in the discussion on the new qualification descriptors as well as the Higher Education Quality Committee’s (HEQC) assessment criteria for postgraduate research and supervision. The debate is also emerging as to whether a doctoral qualification should be purely academic of nature or whether it should have a professional focus.
- The Skills Development Strategy and the Human Resources Development Strategy address the shortage of skills in the labour market and how postgraduate education, amongst other things, can address this shortage.
- Postgraduate qualifications are regarded as research outputs and funded accordingly (Funding Formula).

As a result, postgraduate education is never removed from a broader policy context. Notable contexts are:

- Postgraduate studies are based on a programme offering in the Programme Qualification Mix (PQM). The PQM is approved by the Department of Education.
- The Higher Education Quality Committee audits institutions for their institutional effectiveness and accredits programmes based on their quality.

All kinds of initiatives have followed on these policies. The National Research Foundation (for example) has taken on the so-called “PhD as a driver” initiative. The idea embodied in this phrase is that a new generation of researchers should be developed through student grants.

Another noteworthy initiative is the capacity-building activities implemented by many universities to sustain a research culture. These activities can be grouped into structural (such as committees and funding opportunities) and intellectual (such as workshops and publication opportunities) capacity-building initiatives. These activities have made inroads into postgraduate studies as well.

A concern, however, is still the high drop-out rate of students resulting in the non-completion of studies. In addition, many students are taking too long to complete their studies (residency time of enrolment). The reasons include
challenges such as under-prepared students, non-qualified supervisors, lack of funding, decline in postgraduate enrolments, and so forth.

These and many other developments have placed research and postgraduate studies in the spotlight. This central position is further enhanced by factors such as the following:

- **Research is a knowledge creator** – without research there will be no new knowledge to develop societies, to expand the economy and to improve people’s daily lives.
- **Research is big business** – in the knowledge society research can earn revenue.
- **Research is a problem solver** – in a complex society with daring challenges research can solve problems and provide solutions to challenges.
- **Research is a skills developer** – through research people can get hands-on (acquired) skills that can enable them to address challenges associated with the quality of life.
- **Research is a bridge-builder** – sophisticated knowledge can be employed by business and industry to the benefit of the people, the economy and social communities.
- **Research is a benchmark** – in a competitive environment research can assist professors and their students to take the lead in specific areas and walk away with the laurels.

The expectations of what research can do are echoed by the National Plan for Higher Education (2001). This plan identifies the following tasks for research:

- Research should contribute to a new (South) African intellect.
- Research should employ previously disadvantaged students (blacks and women) and provide opportunities for equity and equality.
- Universities should be developed through research and development.
- Postgraduate students are regarded as “research outputs”. This has financial implications for institutions.

Research is further complicated through the expectations people have of science itself. Research has shown a definite paradigm shift from *research should unlock the world of ideas to research is done for the sake of research itself* to the current *research should have social relevance*.

In addition to this, society is moving away from a *service* society towards a *knowledge* society. Knowledge has now become a commodity (supply and demand), and research is done for market reasons. This leads to a customer management relationship (CMR) approach to research.