The Research Degree and the Role of the Supervisor: Best Practice

*Recommendations
from a USHEPiA Benchmarking Workshop
held in Entebbe
21 and 22 November 2005*

Report compiled by USHEPiA Office

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Best Practice

Preamble

The research degree supervisor plays a critical role in encouraging, guiding, inspiring and educating postgraduate students. Resulting from their colonial heritage the format of postgraduate studies in East and Southern African universities has been based on a model derived from universities in the United Kingdom. The changing nature of higher education and the socio-economic environment in these African countries requires us to re-examine not only the role of the research degree supervisor, but the context within which she or he is now working. These days many students are more mature coming back to university with work experience, they are often studying part time, and many are carrying out research in complex multidisciplinary fields. Their universities lack the resources of most developed world institutions and the supervising academics are heavily loaded with undergraduate teaching responsibilities and often involved in contract work, leaving them little time for research.

Against this background, 26 academics and administrators involved in post graduate research education from the eight USHEPiA partner universities met to identify best practice. Presentations from each university provided background from which four key component elements of the postgraduate research degree were distinguished:
- Students
- Supervisors
- Assessment
- Management

Based on the deliberations of the workshop, best practice in these areas is outlined below. (As all four elements are inter-related there is some duplication in the identification of the best practice; this has deliberately been included in the summary below.)

THE STUDENT

Pre-application information
a) All potential post graduate students should be able to access generic information about post graduate studies on the web or in printed format. Provision of this information would be the responsibility of a central university office, ideally a Postgraduate Centre.
b) In addition, printed and web information about specific fields of study and potential supervisors should be made available to students by the Faculty or Department.

Admission and induction
a) The Department / Faculty (Academic Unit) should have final authority over who is admitted to post graduate study.
b) While the student has a responsibility to try to identify a potential supervisor and research area, the Academic Unit will make the final decision based on expertise available, work loads and potential funding.
c) The Postgraduate Centre should provide a general orientation to the campus and various university services and policies affecting postgraduate students.
d) More specific orientations should be done by the Academic Unit and, if appropriate, the International Office.
e) A postgraduate student association is recommended. Information about this association should be given to all new postgraduate students.
f) All induction and orientation information material should be focused at postgraduate students, and take cognizance of the difference between postgraduate and undergraduate students.

Generic training requirements
a) Early on after registration, the Postgraduate Centre should provide compulsory training on preparing a research proposal, thesis writing, and writing for publication.
b) The Postgraduate Centre should provide compulsory training on generic research methodology, including how to conduct a literature search.
c) The Postgraduate Centre should have compulsory seminars on the ethics of research and publication. This should include information about Intellectual Property rights and responsibilities.
d) The various Faculties should provide relevant IT and numeracy skills courses for their postgraduate students.
e) Recognising that education goes beyond academic content, the Postgraduate Centre should provide courses on "soft skills" such as effective communication, relationship management, time management, life skills and conflict resolution. Staff should also be encouraged to attend these courses and develop their "soft skills".

Agreement between student and supervisor
a) It should be university policy that there is a signed agreement between the postgraduate student and supervisor. Even if not yet university policy, this is recommended practice. This agreement should clearly state the expectations of the supervisor and the student, outline their agreed responsibilities, and clarify potential authorship and intellectual property issues. (It is recommended practice that in papers emanating from the student's research, the supervisor is second, rather than first, author.)

Monitoring
   a) The student should be required to submit regular progress reports (in a format and at a frequency agreed upon in the Agreement).
   b) The supervisor should be required to submit regular progress reports to the Head of Department and, should there be any problems, to the Dean.

Feedback
   a) The supervisor must provide timely feedback to the student on work submitted to him/her.
   b) The student should be required to give seminars on his/her research and expect constructive feedback from these.
   c) Feedback from external examiners and referees should be discussed with the student.
   d) Each postgraduate student should complete an exit survey on completion of his/her degree. This should be submitted to the Dean/Faculty Postgraduate Studies Committee who will provide feedback to the Head of Department and supervisor.
   e) A periodic confidential survey relating to postgraduate students' experiences will provide valuable feedback to the Postgraduate Centre.

The graduate environment
   a) There should be a suitable physical location on campus with spaces for postgraduate students to meet, study, use computers and to socialise.
   b) There should be a Postgraduate Students Association on campus.
   c) The Postgraduate Centre should have policies, handbooks and other relevant information available for reference.
   d) An individual in the central administration should be identified as a 'postgraduate ombudsman' to whom postgraduates could appeal as a last resort concerning problems they might be experiencing.

THE SUPERVISOR

Choice
   a) Usually the supervisor is identified by the Academic Department. However the student has a responsibility to try to identify a potential supervisor and research area. The Academic Unit will make the final decision based on expertise available, workloads and potential funding.
   b) To supervise Masters level research the supervisor should have as a minimum a Masters degree and relevant experience. To supervise a PhD student, a supervisor is required to have a PhD.
   c) The student should have a say in the choice of his/her supervisor.

Training
   a) Training should be provided in supervisory skills including the "soft skills" mentioned above, research philosophy, approaches and management, and university policies and practices with respect to postgraduate supervision.
   b) It would be valuable to devise and offer a "Training of Trainers" programme for supervisors in the USHEPiA universities.

Incentives
   a) Criteria for promotion and salary increases should include key performance areas related to postgraduate supervision.

b) Graduate supervision and training should carry more academic weight than undergraduate teaching.
c) Supervisors should not be paid to supervise students because this is part of their job. The implication of this is that academics have an adequate salary. If non-university staff members assist in supervision, payment can be considered.

Workload
a) The number of students a supervisor can be responsible for depends on his/her other duties in the department and faculty, especially the undergraduate teaching load.
b) A supervisor should allocate an agreed-upon number of hours per week to each student.
c) It is suggested that one person can supervise a maximum of 3 PhD and 5 Masters students at any one time.
d) Every qualified member of the academic staff should have the opportunity to supervise postgraduate students.
e) The Academic Unit (Department or Faculty) should establish its postgraduate supervision capacity annually and aim both to meet this target and not exceed it.
f) The Dean or postgraduate studies committee in any faculty should monitor the number of students each supervisor has in terms of agreed targets.

Joint supervision
a) Masters students should have a minimum of 1 supervisor and PhD students a minimum of 2 supervisors.
b) Supervisors should be designated as principal, first or main, and co-supervisor or second.
c) The role of each supervisor must be spelt out in the Agreement.
d) Co-supervision provides a training opportunity for new supervisors to work alongside more experienced supervisors.
e) All (new) supervisors should be required to attend a training course (see above).
f) In order to identify potential co-supervisors in other universities, each university should put a database of supervisors and their areas of expertise on their web page. CV's of experienced senior staff could be put on each university's web page. USHEPiA could assist by having a database of supervisors.

Ethics
a) Each university should have a code of ethics for supervision. Supervisors and students should be made aware of this during their induction/training.
b) Each supervisor should have a copy of a university document outlining the role and duties of the postgraduate supervisor.
c) It is recommended that supervisors keep a diary of their interactions with each student.

ASSESSMENT

Process
a) Each university should have in place a clearly defined assessment process which should be made known to the student at an early stage. This would include notification of an intention to submit, selection of a Board of Examiners and the timeframes required, linked to graduation dates.

b) Guidelines indicating timeframes for external and internal examining must be made known and adhered to.
c) Guidelines for the processes should clearly indicate who has responsibility for each step of the process.
d) Feedback (to the student, supervisor and administrators) and quality assurance should form part of the assessment process.

Examiners
a) Postgraduate research degrees should be examined by both internal and external examiners.
b) The supervisor should not be an internal examiner but may be present at assessment discussions of the Board of Assessors to provide information as required.
c) Examiners must be provided with clear guidelines as to how they should report back, with clear timeframes.
d) The Board of Assessors, which considers the examiners reports, should exclude all the examiners, but should include the supervisor.
e) Examiners are selected by the Faculty's postgraduate studies committee based on CV's submitted by the Department and the supervisor.
f) A database of potential examiners in the region would be useful. This could be linked to the database of experienced supervisors mentioned above.

The *Viva Voce*
a) This should be optional and used primarily to ensure that the student knows and understands the work.
b) If used, clear guidelines should be in place as to how it is conducted and what outputs are expected.
c) A public defence of a thesis was not felt to be beneficial. Rather a mandatory public lecture by each graduate could both give the student confidence and assist in publicising the research.

MANAGEMENT
Funding
a) The majority of funding for postgraduate students should come from government. (1) Universities should identify postgraduate training needs, prioritise them and motivate for them as part of their institutional budgets which are submitted to government; and (2) government should have a national research strategy which identifies and provides funds for research development in priority areas. Funding postgraduate students should be a key part of this strategy.
b) Universities should also explore the opportunities presented by developing partnerships with industry and the private sector. These partnerships should be recognised as being beneficial to both parties.
c) Universities should put aside a percentage of the income they generate from contracts and consultancies for research and training. This would be distributed by the Research Committee in response to proposals received through the Academic Units.
d) Donor funding should not be relied upon for postgraduate students and should be seen as complementary to other sources.

Faculty vs central responsibilities
a) All levels of the institution have a role to play in postgraduate studies. The university

as an institution should have a central policy on postgraduate studies. The Faculty, through the postgraduate studies committee, has responsibility for monitoring and assessing postgraduate research degrees, and the individual departments are the primary home for the students. The department "owns" the postgraduate student.
   b) Separate from these there should be an independent Postgraduate Studies Centre which would offer compulsory induction courses, communicate policies and ensure implementation of the policies.

Agreements
   a) A formal agreement, signed by both the supervisor(s) and the students, detailing expectations and responsibilities of all parties is seen to be essential for managing the postgraduate studies process.
   b) Agreements should be administered by the Postgraduate Studies Centre.
   c) Disputes and problems should first be taken to the department, then if necessary to the Director of the Postgraduate Studies Centre who will follow up with the relevant Faculty and department.

Implementation
   a) Implementation of policies and procedures should be monitored through regular student and supervisor reports, with copies to the Head of Department.
   b) The Postgraduate Studies Centre should give clear guidelines to both students and supervisors on how to raise complaints as part of the induction.
   c) The Postgraduate Studies Centre should monitor overall implementation of policy. A component of this would be an exit interview with each student.

Ethics
   a) Students and supervisors need to be aware of and comply with the institution's research ethics requirements as determined by the university's Ethics Committee.
   b) Students and supervisors must be aware of ethical issues related to supervision. There should be a code of conduct for students and supervisors.

Presentation and storage (availability) of theses
   a) Clear guidelines on the requirements for layout and presentation of theses should be given to students at an early stage (size, format, etc).
   b) All thesis titles, abstracts and the names of the supervisors should be available on the institution's web site.

Quality control
   a) The Postgraduate Studies Centre should monitor generic quality control of the postgraduate research degree process.
   b) External examiners and the Board of Assessors monitor academic quality.

OTHER ISSUES

Coursework
   a) It is recognised that there is almost always a requirement for additional coursework to be undertaken by the student.
   b) The requirements for this should be discussed and agreed upon early on, by the student and supervisor, and should form part of the Agreement.
   c) Coursework should not just be audited, but formally attended and examined.

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Presentations

The Research Degree and the Role of the Supervisor: Examples of Best Practice and Problem Areas, University of Botswana
Prof Runner Majinda, Prof Izaac Mazonde and Prof Coryce Haavic

The Research Degree and Role of Supervisor: University of Nairobi Examples of Best Practice and Critical Problem Areas
Prof P.M.F Mbithi, Prof T.E. Maitho, and Prof K.M. Mavuti

The Research Degree and the Role of the Supervisor: Best Practice and Critical Problem Areas – Experience from the University of Dar es Salaam, Tanzania
Prof L. Rutashobya, Prof S. Massawe, and Dr G. Nkwengulila

The Research Degree and the Role of the Supervisor : University of Zimbabwe Best Practice and Critical Problem Areas
Prof S. Mukaratirwa, Dr C Mutisi, and Dr D P Chimanikire

The Research Degree and the Role of the Supervisor : Best Practice. University of Zambia
Prof S B Kanyanga, Prof B J Phiri, and Prof Steve Simukanga

The Role of the PhD Supervisor, University of Cape Town
Nan Warner

The Research Degree and the Role of the Supervisor: Best Practice. Makerere University
Prof Eli Katunguka-Rwakishaya

The Research Degree and the Role of the Supervisor : Best Practice. Jomo Kenyatta University of Agriculture and Technology
Prof Florence K. Lenga, and Prof Mabel Imbuga