An exploration of the experiences and practices of nurse academics regarding postgraduate research supervision at a South African university

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Background. The global landscape of higher education has repositioned itself, moving away from insular institutions towards open responsive systems of teaching and learning with an emphasis on cultivating a new mode of knowledge production. The South African higher education system has responded to these global changes by recognising the contribution of research productivity as a commodity within the overall worldwide knowledge economy. These changes have contributed towards an increased intake of candidates in many university faculties, including nursing, to meet the demand of producing highly skilled graduates.

Objectives. To explore and describe the current practices and experiences of nurse academics regarding postgraduate research supervision.

Methods. A descriptive exploratory design with in-depth interviews was used, and a self-reported questionnaire eliciting information on research supervision practices.

Results. Three emergent themes were identified from the results of this study: a lack of standardised guidelines for nurse academics to effectively supervise postgraduate research; the pressure that nurse academics experience regarding postgraduate research supervision; other demanding roles of an academic, such as a high teaching and clinical workload.

Conclusion. The study demonstrated gaps in research supervision, shared frustrations such as feelings of isolation, and a lack of support systems.

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The discourse on the nature of research supervision in higher education institutions has received much attention.[1] Changes in the economic, political and workplace arenas of many developing countries have highlighted the contribution of research in higher education programmes towards a skilled workforce and in the overall global knowledge economy.[2] The higher education landscape in the South African (SA) context has not been exempt from these changes; many faculties, such as nursing, have increased the number of students accepted into their postgraduate programmes to respond to the demand of producing highly skilled graduates.[3-5] In the selected university, the Department of Nursing has seen an increase in the number of postgraduate students – from approximately 120 students in 2009 - 2010 to 207 in 2011 - 2012 (College of Health Sciences Postgraduate and Research Annual Report, University of KwaZulu-Natal, 2013).

The selected Department of Nursing has 17 academic staff, 12 of whom are involved in postgraduate supervision. Given the increased intake of postgraduate students, the central issue confronting research supervisors concerns how academics can achieve quality postgraduate research supervision and accelerate graduate throughput rates.[6,7]

Research supervisors at higher education institutions are increasingly challenged to facilitate the learning of postgraduate students from diverse backgrounds by innovative and progressive research supervision methods.[2] Furthermore, postgraduate research supervision is increasingly seen as a teaching and learning construct that fosters deep learning and critical inquiry.[1] It therefore demands that academics be continuously trained with innovative methods to harness and develop this skill in postgraduate research supervision.[2,7] The latter is considered to be multifaceted, challenging academics to master the skill of facilitating learning and creating the supervision experience as a social learning construct for the student, coupled with supervising an increased number of postgraduate students.[4,7-9] The aim of this study was to explore the experiences and practices of nurse academics with regard to postgraduate research supervision.

Methods
Design
A descriptive exploratory design underpinned the study. This design was considered appropriate to elicit the experiences and overall practice of the nurse academics regarding postgraduate research supervision. In-depth individual interviews were conducted with key informants – the nurse academics involved in postgraduate research supervision.

Setting and sample
The selected Department of Nursing offers a postgraduate programme: a Master's in Nursing (either coursework or fulltime research) and a PhD in Nursing (research only). There were 12 academics involved in postgraduate research supervision at the time of the study. Given the small target population, non-probability purposive sampling was used. All academics had a minimum of at least 12 months and a maximum of 13 years postgraduate research supervision experience. The heterogeneity in the years of experience enhanced the shared experiences.

Data gathering and analysis

Each individual in-depth interview lasted 45 - 60 minutes and was guided by probing questions, which focused on eliciting the overall experiences and practices of postgraduate research supervision. The interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed and saved in MS Word on a password-protected laptop. Thematic analysis was used to identify emergent themes. A self-reported questionnaire eliciting information on postgraduate research supervision practices was also administered to each participant before the interview and was reported using percentages and frequency counts. The questionnaire focused on the mode of supervision, years of experience involved in research supervision, use of supervision contracts and models, and number of postgraduate students being supervised. The probing questions of the individual in-depth interview and the items of the self-reported questionnaire were informed by literature related to postgraduate research supervision.

Ethical considerations

After institutional ethical approval (HSS/0777/013), departmental permission was granted by the Dean and Head of the School. A letter stating the purpose of the study and detailing its nature was distributed to all participants, who were advised that they could withdraw from the study at any time without reason and that their participation was voluntary and had no bearing on their current positions in the Department of Nursing. There were no direct benefits to the study participants; however, the study results will have an aggregate benefit to the wider nursing department in terms of providing insight into the experiences and practices of research supervision. Anonymity was maintained throughout data collection. No identifying information was requested from the participants. While the researcher was also an academic involved in postgraduate research supervision, the researcher bracketed and did not include her feelings, views and experiences of postgraduate research supervision from the collected data. The second researcher, with whom the main researcher reflected after the individual interviews, facilitated bracketing.

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness of the findings was achieved through: (*i*) credibility; (*ii*) dependability; and (*iii*) triangulation. Credibility was achieved by member checking of the themes that emerged from the interviews. This allowed for congruency in the researcher's meaning of the data to that of the intended meaning from the participants. Dependability of the data collected was ensured through an audit trail. Given that this study had two researchers, both served as peer reviewers of the individual in-depth interviews, the level of probing, and the sequence in terms of how the data were collected. Triangulation of data was achieved through the use of individual in-depth interviews, field notes during the interviews and a self-reported questionnaire. The use of multiple sources of data increased the certainness of the data gathered with regard to postgraduate research supervision.

Limitations of the study

While efforts to avoid researcher bias was controlled by reflection and bracketing, the researchers being academics involved in postgraduate research supervision was a limitation.

Results

Sample description

Data saturation occurred after individual in-depth interviews with 7 participants. Table 1 presents a descriptive summary of the participants' demographic characteristics with regard to their years of experience as academics and postgraduate research supervisors.

Table 1. Sample characteristics

Variable	Mean	Range
Length of time as an academic (years)	6.2	3 - 12
Length of time supervising (years)	4.7	2 - 10
Master's students being supervised at time of interview, *n*	7	2 - 12
Students graduated, *n*	1	0 - 6
Length of time per week supervising (hours)	8.5	3 - 10
Sessions per month with each student, *n*	2	2 - 4
Length of time per supervision session (hours)	1.5	1 - 2.5

Experiences of postgraduate supervision (Table 2)

Three prominent themes emerged during data analysis: (*i*) overwhelmed and frustrated; (*ii*) pressure to perform; and (*iii*) getting the balance right.

Table 2. Postgraduate research supervision practices

Variable	Yes, *n* (%)	No, *n* (%)
Mode of supervision		
Contact (face to face)	7 (100)	-
Email correspondence	7 (100)	-
Skype/video-conferencing or related mode	2 (29)	5 (71)
Other: cohort/group	1 (14)	6 (86)
Use of a supervision contract	5 (71)	2 (29)
Use of models of supervision	1 (14)	6 (86)

Overwhelmed and frustrated

Most participants experienced research supervision as an overwhelming task, expressing feelings of fear and loss of confidence as an academic when they initially started supervising. Moreover, participants noted that they experienced a loss of control in managing their role as an academic, which they largely perceived as being focused on teaching and learning activities. Participants who were less experienced with postgraduate research supervision reported feeling fearful with the expectation of accelerated graduate throughput. They further noted that they experienced the challenge of trying to meet the expectation of successful and quality postgraduate research supervision without clear guidelines to facilitate successful supervision:

'When I started I was given students to start supervision … I didn't know where to begin … there was nothing to guide me … no guidebooks ... .'
' … I felt scared … not knowing what was research supervision and how to start doing this, and at the same time we are expected to have high completion rates … .'
'We are told about making sure our research students complete and graduate in the time given … one becomes afraid especially because some of us have not supervised masters students before.'

It also emerged that the role of supervision was perceived as overpowering compared with other tasks of an academic. This further increased anxiety and being overwhelmed by research supervision, as well as a feeling of being blinded by the lack of knowledge on how to effectively fulfil this role:

'It is frustrating, research supervision takes most of my time … and I also teach clinical modules so need to do clinical rounds with the students as well … .'

' … it becomes frustrating to manage all the roles and task of an academic … research supervision takes most of my time, especially if you are doing it for the first time … and at the same time we are expected to do research publications for ourselves … .'

Contributing to the feelings of being overwhelmed and frustrated, there were no guidelines or models of research supervision that they could use to assist them. Therefore, participants relied on their previous experience of being supervised in their own studies to guide them in research supervision. Furthermore, their own experiences left them feeling doubtful and frustrated with the supervision:

' … there are no information or courses I attended … I have mainly focused on how I was supervised when I was a student … .'

'I supervise based on how I was supervised during my studies … you learn at the same pace as the student you are supervising, I feel uncertain if I'm doing the right thing … .'

'I am always feeling unsure if I am doing the right thing … there is nothing to guide us. You become frustrated not knowing the right way to do things.'

Pressure to perform

Participants felt that they experienced pressure to perform with the research students allocated to them. There was awareness of an expectation from the institution to accelerate postgraduate graduation rates. Furthermore, the participants who were new to research supervision noted the pressure they experienced with having to be skilled and providing quality supervision:

' … you always have a long list of postgrad students that need supervision … you have to finish them at a fast pace because next year your load just gets more … .'

'We are told they [students] need to be completed in the minimum time … our performance as an academic is based on how many students you can graduate.'

'Some of us have just completed our own qualifications and we are expected to supervise … it puts a lot of pressure because students are expecting quality supervision … .'

Some participants noted that the overwhelming pace of being expected to provide research supervision did not facilitate a learning pace where they could find their own niche area in the Department of Nursing and style of research supervision:

'I try to read as much as I can on the student's topic … but because I have so many students to supervise … it is difficult to get your own style to supervise.'

'There are many students … they all come to see you at the same time … one cannot think about what is my way of supervising … or to even think about what area is my area of research.'

Getting the balance right

Participants had many mechanisms of coping with supervision, despite the absence of a formal postgraduate research supervision programme to support the academics. Participants described strategies such as group or cohort supervision and using opportunities such as coffee mornings with postgraduate students to foster an equal relationship between student and supervisor. The participants felt that these efforts contributed towards a positive research supervision experience:

'I find it easier to work on the same aspect with all my students … I get them all together and go over the theory of it … then we go back to individual contact supervision … it avoids repeating the same aspects to all the students … .'

'I make it very social for the first meeting, I try to break the barriers as much as possible … it helps students … gives them a space where they can feel free … to talk about their fears of research.'

Participants also noted that postgraduate students' expectations of what they wanted from their supervision experience added to the stress of supervising. A lack of clear role definition and task allocation of a supervisor has sometimes resulted in hostility and conflict with students, who expected more from the supervision relationship:

'It is frustrating when students expect you to do things like editing and formatting the document … some even expect you to help with literature reviewing … they don't want to learn these skills on their own.'

'I end up even doing grammar and editing and re-writing paragraphs … so I'm not sure if doing so much as part of supervision is also contributing to me feeling fatigued all the time with supervision … .'

Participants thought that creating peer support learning among the students helped supervisors achieve a balance. They felt that this helps in alleviating the unexpected expectations that students tend to have in terms of their own self-directed learning and independence:

'I like to have at least one session each semester where I get all my students together just for a update … this helps students to stay on track because they see where their colleagues are so they don't want to fall behind … .'

'I encourage students to learn from one another … it becomes easier for them to network among each other … it helps me as well, because I'm not burdened with teaching each one the same thing.'

Self-reflection and experiential learning facilitated postgraduate research supervision. Participants used their own experience as a means of trying to improve their role as supervisor:

'I try to improve how I supervise … I use previous supervision experiences with my current students … I try to do things differently to avoid the same mistakes … .'

Discussion

Modes of supervision

This study showed that a face-to-face supervision style was the predominant practice used. The literature supports this finding, arguing that more inexperienced academics use such traditional methods of supervision.[7]

Overwhelmed and frustrated

Inaccessibility of core information with regard to supervision models, styles and norms in effective supervision practices has been documented to contribute towards dissatisfaction among academics.[8,10] Moreover, ineffective supervision and poor graduation rates were predominately reported in environments with few supervision support documents or little training.[1,2,5] This study confirmed the importance of these documented research supervision support factors, as feelings of being overwhelmed

and frustrated were expressed in the context of not having supervision support. We also found that in the absence of supervision guidelines or models participants relied on their own experience to supervise, which often left participants feeling doubtful and frustrated. The literature reports that poor guidelines and support structures for academics, especially novice supervisors, contribute towards negative experiences with regard to the student supervisor relationship, especially as supervisors experience difficulty in balancing the time constraints of other academic roles with the demands of producing graduates at an accelerated rate and at the same time ensuring quality research graduates.[2,4,11]

Pressure to perform

The institutional expectation of accelerating postgraduate degree completion in the minimum time was a source of pressure for the supervision participants. Many authors have noted that higher education institutions are accelerating postgraduate research as a response to the global trend of research productivity being regarded as a commodity in the knowledge production economy.[2,4,10] Authors have supported our experiences that the drive for completion of postgraduate research supervision may contribute to frustration among academics, especially in terms of honing their own supervisory style.[2] Moreover, the literature indicates that while university systems have changed in terms of the political and economic environment and the research funding contestability, academics have not been supported to cope within this changing context.[1,2,4]

Getting the balance right

Establishing an interactive supervisory style allows supervisors to cope with the changing context and multifaced roles of being a clinician, academic, research mentor and supervisor.[1,10,11] The use of peer mentoring and cohort supervision, such as that expressed in this study as coping strategies towards research supervision, has been documented as having many beneficial effects.[12] The findings indicated that academics try to cope with and adjust to the demanding context of providing postgraduate research supervision coupled with other academic roles. The study also showed the use of peer learning and cohort supervision as methods that participants used to try to establish a balance between their academic roles and research supervision. Using forum sessions, cohort supervision and making the supervision interaction a social event is a method of allowing norms and expectations to be communicated early in the supervision relationship to avoid possible conflict and disharmony between student and supervisor.[10,11] It is also supported in the literature as a coping technique to assist supervisors in dealing with large supervision loads.[12]

Conclusion

This study explored the current burden of supervision experienced by nurse academics. Experiences of frustration, loss of control and difficulty in managing the multifaceted role of being an academic with a high number of postgraduate research students requiring supervision were expressed by the participants. Furthermore, the study reported on the coping strategies such as peer-supported learning sessions, cohort supervision and making supervision a social interaction between student and supervisor. We highlighted the importance of standardised training sessions and guidelines to support novice academics in supervision.

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