Sustaining a Healthy Supervisor-Student Relationship: Students Speak

Mbusiseni Celimpilo Dube[a]

a. Educational Foundations, College of Education, University of South Africa, Pretoria, South Africa.
Email: dubemc@unisa.ac.za

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ABSTRACT

Student supervision process is a cumbersome exercise which requires both supervisor and student or supervisee to work in tandem. This implies that there should be a good relationship which culminates to trust between the supervisor and student. However, if the supervisor and student mistrust each other, the whole supervision process may be a fiasco. The problem is that some supervisors are reckless when it comes to handling students and their supervision matters, and this affects supervision relationship. Without a healthy relationship between a supervisor and a student, the undertaking and completion of the research study may not be feasible. This paper sought to examine students' voices on strategies to sustain a healthy relationship between the supervisor and the student. Data were generated qualitatively using semi-structured interviews and the study was sampled purposively. Using a thematic analysis, this study revealed that a healthy relationship can be sustained through open lines of communication, giving hope and motivation, teamwork, honesty about capabilities, mutual respect, providing timeous feedback, keeping confidentiality and providing guidance and support. This study concludes that supervisors should guard against the manner they treat their students because if they treat them badly and or disrespectfully, the supervision process may be negatively impacted. Therefore, this study recommends that supervisors should explore different ways of accommodating students with their needs and be flexible enough to support them so as to secure and sustain the supervision relationship that can determine the completion of the research study.

KEYWORDS

Sustain; healthy; supervisor; student; relationship; speak.

INTRODUCTION

When supervisors undertake their mammoth task of supervising master's and PhD students, they need, amongst other things, to establish a good relationship so that the supervision process can be smooth sailing. This is not the task of supervisors only, but students as well need to pull together with supervisors for the same course. In other words, there should be an equal effort to sustain a supervision relationship between supervisors and students. So, an unhealthy relationship between a supervisor and a student can impede the completion of the study. Several studies have looked at the supervisor-student relationships (Lundgren & Osika, 2021; Wang et al., 2022). In particular, the study conducted by Hodza in 2007 at Africa University explored the social factors that can influence the supervisor-student relationship using experienced and senior supervisors of the institution as the source of information. However, an insight into issues for sustaining a healthy supervisor-student relationship using the lens of postgraduate students, in order to assist supervisors to be careful of their actions and behavior towards their students, has never been fully explored.

Any postgraduate study requires a healthy relationship between these two parties because they should work in tandem for the study to succeed. It means the supervisor and the student are expected to pull together to the same direction in order to keep and sustain the relationship because a relationship between a supervisor and a student can either make or break the study. If the relationship between these two parties is unhealthy, both student and supervisor can be affected thus impacting the study. For this reason, Liang et al. (2021) suggest that the supervisor-student relationship is amongst factors that contribute to the well-being of the student. On the same note, "where students need to work with their supervisors frequently, the impact of the supervisor-student relationship on student's subjective well-being should be particularly important" (Nielsen et al., 2017, p. 274). The well-being of a student is critical during the undertaking of the study. Both supervisor and student should pull together to sustain this relationship.

Subsequently, this study sought to look at the perspectives of students on the sustainability of a healthy supervisor-student relationship. This was informed by the problem that some supervisors turn to be reckless when dealing with their students and their studies. They do not send good feedback and if they do, they take a long time to send their feedback and they are unavailable when students need them; all these issues can affect their relationship with students. When students receive feedback that is not properly addressed, their relationship with supervisors may change. Lundgren and Osika (2021) argue that supervisor-student interpersonal relationships have implications for the progress of the work and satisfaction of the student. Supervisors should make their students comfortable and satisfied with their supervisors. If feedback or comments are not well-crafted and presented, students may have self-doubt and that may affect their research journey. Also, Collins et al. (2021) regard productive relationships between supervisors and students as among the primary factors that contribute to the completion the study. There is a great possibility that bad relationships between supervisors and students can hinder the completion of the study.

Therefore, this paper is guided by the research objective: How to sustain a healthy supervisor-student relationship? To answer this question, this paper sought to examine students' voices on strategies to sustain a healthy relationship between the supervisor and student. Unveiling and unpacking these strategies will help supervisors, especially novice ones to be aware of issues they should take into cognizance when supervising postgraduate students. These findings will also enlighten students with issues that can negatively affect supervision process. If students are conversant with these issues they may not fall for the same trap of denting supervision relationship.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The researcher should start by describing previous research to map and assess the research area to motivate the aim of the study and justify the research question (Snyder, 2019). This provides what has been done in relation to the focus of the study. Moher et al. (2009) also add that the value of an academic review is the presentation of what was done, what was found, and the clarity of reporting.

Nine stages that describe the developmental socialization of a postgraduate student

More than 30 years ago, Dhremer and Grossman (1984) presented nine stages that describe the developmental socialization of a postgraduate student. The first stage is attention where the supervisor should provide time and attention to help a student know how to perform his/her task. It should be borne in mind that as students register, they do not know much about research matters; hence, they should be given more attention in order to familiarise themselves with research issues. The second stage is support where the supervisor provides support to a student for solving study related problems. In line with this, Dube (2021) argues that postgraduate students rely on supervisors for guidance and support. Therefore, students hope to get proper support from supervisors so that they can complete their studies. The third stage is feedback where the supervisor should give appropriate feedback about why something should be done and give recognition and information about matters affecting the study. Dube (2021) proposes that supervisors provide feedback which encapsulates what students should undertake in their studies. The fourth stage is nurturing which involves the sharing of ideas and personal feelings. This suggests that supervisors should be frank and share all they can with their students so that students can broaden their scope of understanding.

The fifth stage is emerging autonomy. Emerging autonomy expects the student to experience high enthusiasm and motivation and begins to think and act independently. In other words, this stage requires supervisors to help students to act and work independently. However, students cannot act and work independently without motivation and good guidance from their supervisors. The sixth stage is setting limits and it requires supervisors to set limits on appropriate roles for the student. Supervisors should be well versed about their roles as supervisors and those of students so that expectations can be well understood (Adedokun et

al., 2024) The seventh stage is personal competence which means that students should be regarded as high achievers with good skills willing to take responsibilities for good results. Supervisors should do their best to complement the knowledge and skills that students have since they are not tabula rasa. The eighth and ninth stages are loyalty and commitment respectively. These two components regard students as part of the wider organization where they want to contribute and impact in a personal way. This suggests that supervisors should help and allow students a platform where they can show off what they are capable of as emerging researchers (Kuzembayeva et al., 2022; 2024).

Some factors that can influence a supervisor-student relationship

Psychological capital

Psychological capital refers to a positive appraisal of circumstances and probability for success informed by motivated efforts and patience (Dudasova et al., 2021). Students should be motivated so that they can be inspired to put efforts that can see them completing their studies. Yezer et al. (2024) define psychological capital as the positive psychological state of development that is characterized by efficacy, optimism, hope, and resilience. Efficacy encapsulates the extent to which a specific intervention can produce a beneficial result under ideal conditions (Jeffer et al., 2024; Mokone & Setlalentoa, 2023). This argument augurs well with supervisor student supervision because the supervisor is expected to make some interventions that can help students succeed in their studies. On the other hand, optimism is about making positive attributions about succeeding now and in the future, and optimists believe that their future will yield positive results regardless of their efforts (Domino et al., 2020; Khathi et al., 2022). This suggests that optimists expect good things to happen due to the effort they put. Therefore, students are expected to be optimists so that they can be motivated to accomplish their studies. Hope encompasses a goal-directed energy and a plan to meet goals (Gallagher et al., 2019) hope includes agency and pathways. While agency is about the willpower to pursue goals, pathways is about the ability to generate alternative paths to achieve goals when obstacles come into play. This suggests that for a postgraduate student to succeed they should be directed by hope which involves the willpower and way-power and these can assist the student to achieve the major goal which is the completion of the study. Lastly is resilience which entails the ability to bounce back from adversity, conflict, failure or even positive events, progress and increased responsibility. Resilience is about soldiering on after a heavy storm or difficulty that a student may have encountered along the way to complete the study. Students should not be discouraged by difficulties they come across but fight to achieve their goal.

Trust

"Trust is one of the ways that can serve as a yardstick to measure quality supervision. If students trust their supervisor, they can adhere to all instructions and guidance" (Dube, 2021, p. 01). This shows the role that trust can play in the supervisor-student relationship. Makhamreh and Kutsyuruba (2021) emphasise that trust plays an important role in supervisory relationship. On the same note, Boitet et al. (2024) argue that trust facilitates a sense of belonging and respect,

suggesting a co-dependent relationship where students should trust their supervisors to experience belonging, while respect derives from forming trusting relationships. Trust can shape a sense of belonging and respect and these two issues are crucial in enhancing the completion of the study. As students and supervisors trust each other, that can develop respect among them (Manase & Ngubane, 2024; Pietersen & Dube, 2024). This suggests that for any team working towards the accomplishment of a research project, trust should be bolstered for the team to function successfully. However, it was argued long time ago by McCune (1998, p.117) that "it is difficult to trust someone who has a distinct advantage over you". This may imply that supervisors have power advantage over students; hence, sometimes students may be required to do as supervisors say without questioning. Supervisors therefore need to guard against power issues because if they do not, students may feel uncomfortable during the supervision and this may impact on the relationship (Chauke, 2025).

Supervisors should inculcate trust between these two parties. They can do this by understanding personal circumstances and being. Nasir and Masek (2015) propose basic elements of supervision and they are: negotiating or guiding the transition from dependence to independence, adapting the supervisory approach to individual student's needs and personalities, disciplinary differences and recognizing that a key to the entire process is the deft formulation of the problem/topic/question since it is that which ensures focus and engagement. While the student should trust the skills of the supervisor, supervisor should also trust the intelligence and achievement of the student in producing an intellectual piece of work of high-level quality (Denis et al., 2019). Samuel (2025) argues that the frequent interaction between the supervisor and student can be possible if the principles of trust and reciprocity are well developed.

Effective communication

Denis et al. (2019) argue that the challenges between the supervisor and student can be traced back from lack of communication between the two parties. Effective communication can help reduce challenges and strengthen the relationship between the two. In response to this, Denis et al. (2019) clarify that transparent communication grows over time and enables each party to voice his/her needs, frustrations and uncertainties clearly; however, communication should be clear, constructive and frequent. On the same note, Tegegne et al. (2024) claim that effective communication entails a clear, accurate and timely exchange of information and meaning between individuals. As supervisors communicate with their students, they should ascertain that they communicate vividly. They should also ensure that their communication, especially with feedback, is communicated to students in time not too late after students' submission of study related work.

Toutou (2020) outlines five key principles for effective communication, namely, completeness, conciseness, clarity, concreteness, courtesy, consideration and correctness. The message from supervisors to students should always meet these principles so that students cannot found themselves wanting after receiving feedback or communication from their

supervisors. Dube (2021) argues that communication between the supervisor and student should be characterised by mutual openness, honesty, bravery and humour. Also, Walter (2024) notes that transparent communication can help generate substantial personal benefits across multiple dimensions of performance and relationships, and trust building appears as the most fundamental outcome. Transparent communication can help to build trust. Supervisors should communicate with their students transparently so that they help build the trust between them and their students. Therefore, communication is the cornerstone for a healthy supervisor-student relationship; without communication, the relationship between the supervisor and student may be affected thus impacting on the completion of the study.

Emotional intelligence

Drigas et al. (2021) argue that emotional intelligence is one of the factors that can help develop and maintain a good and effective relationship between the supervisor and student and it constitutes student's self-awareness, empathy, social expertise and mastery of purpose and vision. Students need to develop these skills so that they can have and maintain a healthy relationship with their supervisors. Emotional intelligence can be defined as the multifaceted abilities that enable individuals to understand, recognize and manage their own emotions, as well as understand and influence the emotions of others (Kumar et al., 2023). It is the responsibility of both supervisors and students to be emotionally intelligent. The lack of emotional intelligence can make one to be inconsiderate of others emotions and thus treat them badly thus denting the supervisor-student trust. A research study is an emotional journey which needs one to have understanding of own feelings and feelings of the supervisor. This can help reduce an impasse that may develop between the two parties.

Drigas et al. (2023) outline four skills that underlie emotional intelligence. The first one is self-awareness which requires the student to know him/herself in terms of strengths and weaknesses and this can help him/her to identify the kind of assistance or guidance he/she needs from the supervisor. The second one is empathy which entails the ability to understand the perspectives of others, particularly towards the demands on the supervisor's time from other duties and activities. The third one is social expertise. This is about the ability to build genuine relationship and express care, concern and conflict in healthy manners. The last skill is mastery of vision which refers to the ability to bring authenticity to one's life by living a life based on deeply felt intentions and values. Students need to be able to deal with these issues if they are to have a healthy relationship with their supervisors.

Theoretical underpinning- Social exchange theory

This intellectual piece was framed using the social exchange theory (SET) of Blau (1964). This theory involves a series of sequential transactions between two or more parties (Mitchell et al., 2012). SET provides a lens through which human interactions and relationships can be examined (Hatamleh et al., 2023). Student supervision is about interactions between the supervisor and student. Therefore, they should build a relationship. This theory suggests that human behaviour can be understood as an exchange process (Liu et al, 2025). This is because in the supervision

process, students submit their work and come back with feedback from supervisors. The quality of these exchanges is sometimes influenced by the relationship between the actor and the target (Blau, 1964). One of the principles of SET is maximizing rewards by minimizing losses, and where social behaviour is motivated by the rewards that individuals anticipate through interactions (Garnefeld et al., 2020). Students expect to be rewarded at the end of their hard work of writing a study. So, these principles address the desire of the student in a supervision process. This theory influenced this study because as it is based on the exchange of arguments and ideas that can shape the relationship between the supervisor and student. If the relationship is not conducive, the exchange can be affected. It is therefore incumbent upon the supervisor and student to take into cognisance all the issues they need to enhance and maintain a good relationship which can ensure that the completion of the research project is feasible. Also, this relationship is characterised by the rewarding process during the research journey and upon the completion of the study. The accomplishment of the research study depends on the manner the supervisor treats the student whether positively or negatively. However, both parties have the responsibility to positively contribute towards a healthy relationship which may influence the completion of the study.

METHODOLOGY

This paper followed a qualitative approach because it seeks to understand how individuals interpret the social reality and meanings they bring to their experiences (Elabbar, 2021; Phillips, 2023). Using purposive sampling, this study engaged 10 postgraduate students who had completed their masters and PhD studies. Since the researcher had to look for those who had completed their Masters or PhDs, it was difficult to balance gender, hence the researcher managed to find three males and seven females with the age range of 35 and 50. These students were relevant because they had experienced supervision process and they knew the good and bad behaviour of supervisors. In order to generate data, semi-structured interviews were adopted because they allow the interviewer not to strictly follow the formalized list of questions but instead ask open-ended questions that allow for discussion rather than a straightforward question-and-answer format (Rgc et al., 2020). Participants were asked to respond to a question: How can supervisors sustain the relationship they have with students they are supervising? This question was asked to students in order to secure their perspectives as students having been supervised to completion. For convenience, these participants were interviewed in their own comfort spaces and interviews took less than an hour. Subsequent to data generation, thematic analysis was used because it is centred on pattern identification, where a researcher systematically identifies, analyses, and reports recurring patterns that are constructed to themes (Lochmiller, 2021). So, thematic analysis assisted me to detect, analyse and report the themes in data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). As outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006) interviews were transcribed, checked against the recording, codes were generated, themes constructed and presented for analysis against literature. Ethical issues were considered before the researcher undertook this study, and approval was granted by the institution to undertake

it. All participants participated on their own volition as their rights to participate were spelled out in advance. Confidentiality and anonymity were addressed through. Participants also voluntarily signed consent forms where they agreed to partake in the study. Lastly, participants were informed that data would be safely stored in the office of the researcher for a five-year period after which it would be destroyed.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

This study revealed numerous issues that can shape supervisor-student relationship. These issues were open lines of communication, teamwork, honesty about capabilities, mutual respect, providing guidance and support, keeping confidentiality and, giving hope and motivation. These are issue that were raised by students and affecting supervisor-student relationship.

Open lines of communication

According to students, one of the strategies to sustain a healthy relationship is through open lines of communication. Findings revealed that some supervisors are always available when needed by students whereas some are difficult to find thus interrupting the progress of the study. A supervisor who is not available during the times of need may frustrate students and thus weaken the relationship. Supervisors should keep lines of communication open because that assists students to be always in touch with supervisors when the need arises. Students feel comfortable if they are free to communicate with their supervisors freely. If students can openly communicate with their supervisors either verbally or non-verbally, that can bolster the relationship with supervisors.

Participant A argued: *"My supervisor was available anytime I needed him and that made my work very simple, it was easy to communicate with him".*

Participant D explained: *"I like it when you phone your supervisor asking something, he answers your call, you email he responds; that's the kind of supervisor I had".*

Participant C complained: *"My supervisor was a very difficult person to work with. You will call him several times, he won't answer and you will find yourself stuck until you find him after calling him many a times, yho angimcabangi"*

These assertions from participants show that sometimes students get stuck and need advice or clarity from supervisors for them to proceed with their studies. If supervisors are unavailable to assist students, that becomes a challenge for students. In relation to these assertions, Denis et al. (2019) proclaim that some challenges between the supervisor and students can be traced back from the lack of communication. Also, Dube (2021) argues that communication between the supervisor and student should be characterised by mutual openness. If supervisors are to sustain a healthy relationship with their students, they need to keep their doors open for students and be available each time they are needed. They must also ensure that they communicate completely, concisely, clearly, concretely, courteously, considerably and correctly (Toutou, 2020).

Giving hope and motivation

The challenges students face during the research journey can demotivate them and they may lose hope. Without hope and motivation, students may struggle with the challenges and pressures of the study. Supervisors should revive lost hope and motivate students so that they can soldier on in whatever difficulty they may encounter to complete the study. Umam et al. (2023) elaborate on ten commandments for motivation which are setting a personal example, presenting task properly, developing a good relationship, increasing confidence, making interactions interesting, promoting autonomy, personalising the learning process, increasing goal-orientation and familiarising with the target culture. These are techniques for motivating students. In other words, supervisors have a role to play pertaining students' motivation.

Participant A alluded to: *'the only thing I like about my supervisor is that he keeps motivating me. Even if I wrote something wrong but he will make me see the positive from that wrong and this makes me feel positive at all times'.*

Participant I added to: '*My supervisors always motivate me by saying, 'making mistakes when undertaking a research study is acceptable since you are learning something new and complex, so don't feel ashamed; we will keep rectifying them, don't worry'.*

It is true that students will along their research journey make all sorts of mistakes. Even though they will still need support from supervisors. So, supervisors should keep motivating them since motivation can keep them going. Supervisors should make students see the positives from what they have submitted because it comes after a big effort. Motivation can be associated with efficacy which entails the use of specific intervention to yield beneficial result under ideal conditions (Jeffer et al., 2024). Motivated efforts that are encapsulated in psychological capital are critical if students are to complete their research studies. With good motivation and hope, student's actions may be characterised by optimism and resilience which can underpin the study completion (Yezer et al., 2024).

Teamwork

Students argued that working like a team with supervisors can help them complete their studies easily. Their view was that if they work as a team, it becomes easy to engage with the study since both parties pull together to the same direction; in other words, they both understand how to work in tandem since they need and should help each other to complete the study. In line with this,

Participant B affirmed: *"I wish supervisors can get it clear that we should work as a team for the completion of the study because if the study doesn't go through, we are both to blame".*

Participant F explained: *"my supervisor told me that we are a team because in the end we both either lose or benefit from the study".*

In relation to this argument, Borrallo-Riego et al. (2021) argue that there should be a collective responsibility between supervisors and students, with both parties being actively involved, with supervisors guiding students in knowledge construction. On the same note, Nunev (2019) articulates that teamwork emphasizes collaborative assessment where students can evaluate

their own activity, creating an assessment as a collaborative product of both student and supervisor efforts. These arguments emphasise the significance of working together of both supervisors and students for the accomplishment of the study project. Both supervisors and students have a role to play in the accomplishment of the study. For supervisors to be good team members, they should guard against using their advantage they have over students (McCune, 1998). It is through support that a supervisor can be a team member and play his role.

Honesty about capabilities

Findings revealed that honesty about capabilities can also assist to keep a healthy relationship. The argument of students was that supervisors should come out clean if there is something they do not know so that students can seek help elsewhere. Supervisors cannot be 'Mr know it all'; they may not be familiar with some issues, so they should tell students if that is the case.

Participant H argued: *'I hate it when my supervisor claims to know everything and mislead me sometimes; and even order that I change something correct thing whereas he never knew anything about it'.*

Participant J complained: *'My supervisor could not distinguish between Harvard and APA style of referencing. He ordered me to change the correct referencing for the wrong one and could not listen to me when I tried to explain and clarify'.*

Participant D explained: *'My supervisor commented that he didn't see my voice in the study. When I asked him to explain how I should do that he couldn't tell me but yet he was demanding to see my voice in the study. Now tell me how do you demand something you can't even explain how it's done'.*

Supervisors should not claim to know everything, as Dube (2021) argues; they should be honest with their students. They need to be sure about their comments to students' work and if they are unsure, they should research and comment about something they are sure is correct. Failure to be honest about capabilities may interfere with the relationship between the supervisor and student. The sequential transactions between the supervisor and student should be done with confidence and should be guided by extensive knowledge. If the knowledge is not sufficient enough then transactions may be in shambles. Transparency is another critical element of a successful and ethical supervision practices (Lofstrom et al., 2022). Supervisors should be transparent with their students and indicate if they do not know so that they are honest with students. Therefore, being dishonest and unclear about some issues may mislead the student in performing the task. Psychological capital elaborates on confidence about abilities to mobilise motivation and causes of action needed to successfully execute a given task (Ozyilmaz et al., 2018). If students find that a supervisor is not honest about capabilities, they may not be motivated to execute their tasks accordingly. Supervisors should be transparent with their candidates because transparency can boost confidence. Dube (2021) argues that supervisors should be honest with their students. In line with this, Karp et al. (2019) argue that the dialogue between supervisor and student should be honest and open.

Mutual respect

Participants explained that mutual respect is the key to a healthy relationship in the supervision process. Mutual respect suggests that when two people do not agree on everything, they do not get upset with each other. In other words, they do not get upset over little things but are willing to work things out because they care for each other. Caring for each other is expected during the supervision process. Students expect supervisors to show respect to them since there will be some disagreements, misinterpretations and misunderstanding during the research journey. This was revealed in the following way:

Participant F asserted: *'I had appointment with my supervisor and travelled all the way from Swaziland to meet him, only to find that he couldn't sit down with me and discuss as per our scheduled appointment. I wasted both money and time and that was a big disrespect'.*

Participant G indicated: *'My supervisor was disrespectful. After submitting my work, it came back with words 'rubbish' and 'if you don't want to complete your study, stop wasting my time'. Mind you, I didn't know what to do since he had never explained anything to me, I was clueless'.*

Participant A argued: *'I submitted my work and after two weeks I made a follow-up and there was no response. I phoned, there was no response, I emailed there was no response, I waited for a month until I received my work. I found the delay so disrespectful'.*

Failure to honour an appointment without an apology is a form of disrespect and so is writing unwelcoming comments. Supervisors should not send unwelcoming comments because that can jeopardise the camaraderie. Supervisors should demonstrate the development of emotional intelligence skills, which allow them to understand the emotions of their students (Kumar et al., 2023) and thus refrain from doing things that can interrupt the morale of their students. This skill suggests that supervisors should also empathise and consider how students will feel after receiving bad comments and delaying their return of the submitted work. All the above actions of the supervisor can be associated with treating students in a negative fashion because these actions are not conducive at all. Makhamreh and Kutsyuruba (2021) argue that supervisors should create an environment where students are free to express themselves. However, if they feel disrespected, they may not express themselves freely.

Providing timeous feedback

According to students, providing timeous feedback can also assist to sustain a healthy relationship. Feedback is part of the transactions between the supervisor and student as proposed by social exchange theory. The kind of feedback students receive from supervisors can either sustain or erode the relationship. Unfortunately, feedback that comes after a long time may arrive when the student no longer remembers everything he/she wrote and this is not good. If feedback delays, it means even the completion of the study may delay. This is because the student needs to attend to comments from the supervisor and if they came late, the student will also start working on them late. Participants had the following to say:

Participant B alluded to: *'I was hoping to complete my proposal in one year but my supervisor takes time to send back marked work and it frustrates me'.*

Participant C explained: *'a feedback that comes after a long time after submission, is demotivating because when it comes you have already forgotten what you wrote and when attending to comments you have already forgotten what you wrote'.*

Participant E argued: *'I took into account that my supervisor will send feedback after two weeks as per MOU. I therefore did and submitted my work three weeks before school closure hoping he will return it so that when schools are closed, I work on his comments. Unfortunately, I waited for his feedback until schools were re-opened and I had no enough time to do the work I planned for as per our MOU'.*

Supervisors need to understand that the more they delay returning feedback, they delay the progress of students and they also make it difficult for students to do corrections easily since they may have forgotten; it's better if they return feedback soon after submission when students still remember what they wrote. Lastly, supervisors should understand that some students are studying part-time while working full-time, so they do not have all the time. Smeets et al. (2021) caution that feedback should be provided promptly to enable immediate error correction and learning because delayed feedback can serve as a significant barrier to learning. The feedback that comes late may not be appropriate as it could have been if it was submitted in good time. Read and comment on written work within an acceptable period of time (Karp et al., 2019).

Keeping confidentiality

The findings revealed that confidentiality between the supervisor and student can help sustain a healthy relationship. If supervisors treat students' matters confidentially, they invest in a healthy relationship. Confidentiality is one of the fundamental pillars of effective supervision practice (Belsak & Simonič, 2019). This suggests that a supervision process may be interrupted and trust be broken if there is no confidentiality between supervisors and students. Confidentiality in supervision means that all materials presented in supervision remains confidential to the supervision session (McEwen et al., 2025). If students know that the supervisor treats their issues confidentially, it is easy for students to share anything with their supervisors and by so doing, the relationship is sustained. Also, confidentiality can be associated with integrity. Treating student matters confidentially is a way to show respect to students.

Participant F **asserted that**: *'I hate it when my supervisor discloses recklessly, when he makes examples about what we discussed during our meeting in his office; I feel like he doesn't respect my privacy as his student'.*

Participant C explained: *'I was so embarrassed when my supervisor commented openly about my methodology section errors I made in front of undergraduate students in his office, ngeswela umgodi wokucasha; he should have waited for them to leave then talk to me'.*

Participant E complained: *'I was so embarrassed seeing my supervisor displaying my proposal forms during workshop talking about mistakes that students make when filling them; they had my full details and she did not know I was one of the attendees'.*

Students are sensitive to their matters being discussed openly without their consent especially in front of other people who have nothing to do with their study. In line with this, Hammond and O'Donovan (2015) assert that during supervision process, the possibility for harm is great; hence, supervisors should safeguard the welfare of their students by simply respecting privacy of their students and treating their matters with confidentiality.

Providing guidance and support

One of the pillars for sustaining a healthy relationship is providing guidance and support. One of the reasons students are supervised is to get guidance and support, and they can get that from supervisors. To support this argument, Karp et al. (2019) and Dube (2021) argue that students expect support, encouragement, guidance and advice from their supervisors for them to complete their studies. Pohl and Galletta (2017) list support for the students as one of the contributions of the supervisor to the student.

Participant B argued: *'supervisors should note that we register for master's because we want to be guided and supported on how to undertake research and complete our studies and nothing more than that'.*

Participant E also alluded to: *'my friend, to tell you something, supervision is about guidance and support, without those two there is no study'.*

Participant A added: *'without a guiding and supportive supervisor, trust me, no study will be completed and if it does it will take longer than expected'.*

When students register, they do not have enough research knowledge and skills, and for them to obtain this knowledge and skills, they rely on supervisors. Students can complete their studies if they are properly guided and supported and supervisors should always bear that in mind.

CONCLUSION

The paper was undertaken to explore issues that can help sustain a healthy supervisor-student relationship. After the examination of data and presentation of findings, this paper concludes that sustaining the supervisor-student relationship is a responsibility for both parties but the supervisor has an upper hand towards sustaining the relationship. Sequel to that, this study concludes that supervisors should ensure that their lines of communication are always open so that it is easy for students to liaise with them if need be. Both supervisors and student must understand clearly that they work and should work as a team to accomplish the research journey; hence they should always pull together in the same direction. Supervisors should be honest about their capabilities with students. This means if they do not know, they must spell that out for their students. For any relationship to be successful, there must be a mutual respect, hence supervisor and student should respect each other. This paper also concludes that supervisors should always provide guidance and support for their students. If the study is to succeed, the supervisors should keep confidentiality with the work of the student. Lastly, the supervision process can succeed if the supervisor gives hope and motivation. Therefore, it can be concluded that the supervisor-student relationship can influence the completion of the study.

Recommendation

This study was limited to post-graduate students who had completed their masters and or PhD degrees and their supervisors. So, following the findings of this study, this paper recommends that supervisors should ensure that open lines of communication are always open for their students, should respect their students at all times and provide prompt feedback. They should always be honest with their students if there is something they are not conversant with and they should always provide guidance and support to their students since it is a cornerstone of supervision. They should always motivate students. This study recommends that a future study should be undertaken to cater for the side of the story for supervisors. The supervisors need to present their side of the story relative to issues that can affect supervisor-student relationship.

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