



## Exploring How to Promote Access to and Success in Postgraduate Studies Through Supervision: A Conceptual Perspective

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**Abstract:** The current ethos and decorum in postgraduate studies thrive on the assumption that postgraduate students do not require similar academic support as undergraduate students. As a reflective practitioner, I have observed that support given to students diminishes significantly based on their seniority within the university. Traditionally, supervisors emphasize student autonomy and self-regulated learning in postgraduate studies. This compromises the access to and success in postgraduate studies of many students. Against this backdrop and informed by constructivism and interpretivism, this conceptual paper explores how to promote access to and success in postgraduate studies through supervision. Being a conceptual study in nature, document analysis was used to obtain literature perspectives on postgraduate supervision, its conceptualization and how it can be designed to promote access to and success in postgraduate studies. A thematic and content analysis of relevant literature suggests that access to and success in postgraduate studies can be achieved through a humanistic approach to supervision, which is informed by the needs and context of the supervisee. I therefore call for a continuous dialogue between the supervisor and the supervisee for shared and mutually negotiated collective expectations. I recommend raising awareness among supervisors and supervisees on the literature confirmed qualifiers of quality supervision and qualities of a good supervisor. As a scholarly contribution towards ongoing research on postgraduate supervision, the study offers a new conceptual framework, firmly grounded in literature to guide and inform supervision and mediate the interactions between the supervisor and supervisee.

**Keywords:** postgraduate studies, quality supervision, South Africa, supervisor, supervisee

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## **Exploring How to Promote Access to and Success in Postgraduate Studies Through Supervision: A Conceptual Perspective**

Postgraduate supervision is an aspect of academic culture and practice in higher education which has attracted and received a great deal of research attention in recent years both nationally and globally (e.g., Ali et al., 2019; Council on Higher Education, 2022; Department of Higher Education and Training, 2023; Hadi & Muhammad, 2019; Heyns et al., 2019; Jeyaraj, 2020; Madikizela-Madiya & Mushomi, 2021; McCulloch et al., 2016; Rambe & Mkono, 2019; South African Human Rights Commission, 2016; Van Rensburg et al., 2016 ). However, less attention has been given to exploring how supervision can be used to promote access to and success in postgraduate studies, especially in the context of the South African higher education system, which is the focus of this study. This is despite the reality that the nature and quality of supervision given to postgraduate students is a significant determinant of their access to and success in postgraduate studies (Jeyaraj, 2020 & Madikizela-Madiya & Mushomi, 2021). In a higher education landscape, which emphasizes student autonomy and self-regulated learning, supervision becomes a critical force to reckon with.

Against this backdrop, in this conceptual paper, I provide a synopsis of how the concept of quality supervision is conceptualized in literature and explore how supervision can be used to promote access to and success in postgraduate studies. First, I present literature perspectives on how researchers conceptualize quality supervision in postgraduate studies. Based on the findings of this literature review, I then offer a new conceptual framework for postgraduate supervision, including the four key elements and the roles they play in promoting access to and success in postgraduate studies. I conclude with recommendations and suggestions for further research.

### **Study Background**

The discourse of postgraduate studies is more of a global phenomenon and interest than an issue peculiar to a specific context (Ali et al., 2019; Hadi & Muhammad, 2019; Jeyaraj, 2020; Lee, 2017; Rambe & Mkono, 2019). Previous research regarding postgraduate studies and supervision have consistently raised the absence of purposeful well-coordinated tailor-made support mechanisms for students as an issue of major concern. For example, in South Africa, discussions about promoting access to and success in higher education can be found as far back as 1997 (Department of Higher Education, 1997, 2013, 2015 & 2019; the Education White Paper 3 [WP3], 1997; Mzangwa, 2019;). Collectively, these policies and legislation seek to increase and widen access to and success in higher education. However, contrary to these policy aspirations, a recent study by Mapuya (2025) found that access to higher education remains a serious challenge among many young South Africans.

While these South African-related policies and legislative acts refer to both undergraduate and postgraduate studies, they have only been interpreted within the context of undergraduate studies and not in higher education. This has prompted critics to refer to this silence on postgraduate studies as one of the technical flaws of such policies and legislation which need to be addressed (Mzangwa, 2019). This has also raised concerns on the issue of access to and success in postgraduate studies because of lack of similar legislative and policy attention.

From a South African higher education perspective, while the above-mentioned policies and legislation have been enacted to fast track and improve the access of all students to higher education (Council on Higher Education, 2022; Mzangwa, 2019), the same cannot be affirmed regarding access to and success in postgraduate studies. In the South African context, for instance, there has been a deliberate and carefully planned adoption of policies and legislation seeking to overcome and redress unfair discrimination, increasing and promoting access to higher education and training opportunities over the past two decades. Improving the quality of education, training, and research has also been one of the underpinning goals of these policies and legislation. Nevertheless, the issue of access to and success in postgraduate studies has not been adequately addressed.

Corroborating the above assertions, the Council on Higher Education (2022) admits that these policies and legislation have paid too much attention to undergraduate studies while ignoring the plight of postgraduate students in their quest for access to and success in postgraduate programs. The Council on Higher Education (2022) further maintains that transformation across all South African universities must find expression in all aspects of the institutions of higher learning, such as access, academic success, governance, leadership and management, research, and knowledge systems (South African Human Rights Commission, 2016).

The issue of supervision in postgraduate studies as acknowledged above has been the compounding effect of this phenomenon, leading to postgraduate students experiencing serious challenges across the globe (Hadi & Muhammad, 2019; Jeyaraj, 2020; Madikizela-Madiya & Mushomi, 2021; McCulloch et al., 2016). These challenges in obtaining access to and achieving success in postgraduate studies justify the calls made by the Council on Higher Education (2022), Mapuya (2025), Mendy & Madiope (2018), Nzimande (2015) and the South African Human Rights Commission (2016) for radical policy change and curriculum transformation in higher education. Changing the current supervision approaches and how postgraduate studies are viewed is part of these reforms.

With supervision being one of the integral components of teaching and learning in higher education, the Council on Higher Education (2022) concurs with Mendy & Madiope (2018) that curriculum transformation is essential for the continuous re-evaluation and re-thinking of pedagogical methodologies and the ways in which teaching and learning are currently being conducted in postgraduate studies. To the effect of the above, the Department of Higher Education and Training (2023), emphasizes that research in a transformed higher education environment is significant in exploring ways to address the legacy of inequality and increasing equality. However, I argue that with the limited supervision being given to postgraduates, such high-quality research is not realistically attainable.

### **Aim and Significance**

The aim of this conceptual paper is to explore how supervision can be used to promote access to and success in postgraduate studies and how the concept of quality supervision is conceptualized in literature. The findings and recommendations offered here can benefit institutions of higher education across the globe by underscoring the critical role played by supervisors in promoting the students' access to and success in postgraduate studies. Additionally, by (re)conceptualizing the idea of quality supervision, this study contributes meaningfully to emerging literature on improving the support and supervision of postgraduate

students, and to the ideals of an all-inclusive and more supportive climate in higher education institutions, improving the satisfaction and study completion rates of postgraduate students.

The following research questions were explored: (a) How do researchers conceptualize quality supervision? (b) How can supervision be used to promote access to and success in postgraduate studies?

### **Theoretical Framework**

This study was underpinned and guided by the theoretical assumptions of social constructivism and interpretivism. In the shared views of Mapuya (2022) and Bryman (2016), who endorse the earlier sentiments of Vygotsky (1978), reality is a socially constructed phenomenon, which is created by society itself and has therefore no observable single reality. Geels (2020), Saleem et al. (2021) and Lombardo & Kantola (2021) concur that interpretations are not made and developed in a vacuum; instead, they originate in the societies in which those who make and develop these interpretations are actively involved. Thus, society informs how researchers understand and perceive reality (Knapp, 2019). Constructivists and interpretivists also assert that society plays a significant role in interpreting and making sense of one's experiences. Thus, my interpretation of how the concept of quality supervision is conceptualized in literature and the meaning ascribed to these perspectives is socially constructed (e.g., Al-Qaysi, Mohamad-Nordin & Al-Emran, 2021; Geels, 2020; Jung, 2019; Knapp, 2019; Lombardo & Kantola, 2021; Saleem et al., 2021).

One of the central tenets of interpretivism and social constructivism is that reality is socially, actively, and mutually constructed (Hwang & Jeong, 2021; Jung, 2019). In this study, these perspectives guided the analysis of documents by acknowledging that the authors conceptualized postgraduate studies and quality supervision in different ways. Because the findings and narratives drawn from the literature reflected diverse and context-specific understandings, their meaning and interpretation could not be taken as fixed. Instead, they required processes of mutual negotiation, consistent with the constructivist and interpretivist view that knowledge emerges through interaction and dialogue.

### **Literature Review**

In this section of the paper, I explore the dominant discourses around and conceptualizations of quality supervision in postgraduate programs presented in relevant literature, including existing legislation on higher education and supervision in South Africa. To provide an inclusive review of the literature, I include the lived experiences, challenges, and lessons learned from both a South African and global perspective. This section not only reviews existing literature on quality supervision but also offers a distinct interpretation of that literature, serving as the foundation for my (re)conceptualization of quality supervision.

### **Conceptualizations of Quality Supervision**

While scholars acknowledge that the idea of quality supervision is fundamentally objective, polarized, and relative, there is a shared view on what constitutes quality supervision (see Ali et al., 2019; Grant et al., 2014; Heyns et al., 2019; Jeyaraj, 2020, ). The most consistent qualifiers of quality supervision that stood out in my review of the literature are: regular

meetings between the supervisee and the supervisor; provision of quality time to the supervisee; keen interest in the supervisee's research project; appreciating the ideas of the supervisee; acknowledging and correcting the supervisee's mistakes; supporting and encouraging the supervisee; and directing the supervisee towards the successful completion of the research project (Hadi & Muhammad, 2019; Heyns et al., 2019; Sharmini & Lazarovitch, 2014).

Since quality supervision is the product of a good supervisor, it is necessary to outline the qualities that distinguish a quality supervisor. Based on my literature review, the more desirable qualities of a good supervisor include, communication skills, a friendly research approach, providing the supervisee with regular feedback, accessibility to the supervisee, and patience (Hadi & Muhammad, 2017 & 2019; Jeyaraj, 2020; Li, 2018;). These qualities support quality supervision because they necessitate a paradigm shift from viewing supervision as a one-size-fits-all approach towards the adoption of supervision practices that are informed by the students' needs and individual profiles. Supporting the above line of thought, Jeyaraj (2020) maintains that effective supervision can positively affect student satisfaction, completion rates and research output. This points to improved access to and success in postgraduate studies for students in various local and international higher education systems.

Drawing from the above submissions on the shared qualifiers of quality supervision and qualities of good supervisors, I (re)conceptualize quality supervision as a kind of supervision which does not only prioritize the student's learning and supervision needs, but one which also acknowledges the autonomy and uniqueness of the student. Lastly, viewed from Foucault's conceptualization of power (Foucault, 1980), I argue that postgraduate supervision, like all forms of social interactions, involves complex multi-power relations which need to be managed and approached with caution. Foucault (1980) was found to be a useful lens to explore the dynamic power relations in postgraduate supervision because, it acknowledges the power relations at play between the supervisor and the supervisee in any supervision set-up.

### **Current Policies on Postgraduate Supervision in South Africa**

One of the most significant legislations regarding higher education in South Africa, the Education White Paper 3 (WP3), (1997) presents a vision of a transformed, non-racial, democratic and non-sexist higher education system whose underlying objectives among others, are to promote equal opportunities of access and success, and to advance all forms of scholarship and knowledge while addressing the complex challenges and demands of the South African higher education system (South African Human Rights Commission, 2016). While not explicitly stated in the legislation, postgraduate studies are included in this vision as they are part of the higher education landscape this policy seeks to guide and inform.

In acknowledging the challenges in postgraduate studies, the South African Department of Higher Education and Training (2023) cautions that while significant strides have been made to transform the university system in South Africa, postgraduate enrolment still remains low. In addition to the above concern, the Department of Higher Education and Training (2023) further endorses the observations of the South African Human Rights Commission (2016) and Mendy and Madiope (2018) regarding the poor postgraduate enrolment and graduation rates of black South Africans. Central to the issues highlighted by the Department of Higher Education and Training (2023) is the underrepresentation of black South African instructional and research staff relative to South Africa's overall population demographics.

As part of a response to these challenges in higher education, the Department of Higher Education and Training introduced the University Capacity Development Programme, whose underlying aim is to transform research and teaching and learning, as well as promote equity and student success in all universities (Department of Higher Education and Training, 2023). Developing the supervisory quality and capacity of universities and promoting capacity development collaboration between South African universities and those outside its borders, is one of the secondary objectives sought to be achieved by the University Capacity Development Programme.

### **A South African and Global View of Postgraduate Supervision: Lived Experiences, Challenges, and Lessons Learned**

While the contexts of postgraduate supervision reviewed here differ across countries, they share a common objective: to enhance understanding of postgraduate supervision and identify best practices that improve the quality of supervision at this level. Regardless of the country in which these studies were conducted, the cumulative findings provide significant insights into how supervision can be used to promote access to and success in postgraduate studies. Moreover, a synthesis of these studies provides broader lens through which to explore postgraduate supervision.

While the challenges associated with postgraduate supervision and research are experienced by both developing and developed countries, literature suggests that developed countries have made greater progress in addressing these issues than their developing counterparts (Hadi & Muhammad, 2019). For instance, in a developed country like Australia, postgraduate students rarely experience quality or excellent supervision (McCulloch et al., 2016). Similar observations have been made in South Africa (Mendy & Madiope 2018 & Nzimande, 2015) which is a developing country. In the South African context, this further finds expression in Heyns et al. (2019), the Council on Higher Education (2022), the South African Human Rights Commission (2016) and the Department of Higher Education and Training (2023) who raise serious concerns about the standard and quality of postgraduate supervision. Jeyaraj (2020) has also made the same observation in the Malaysian higher education sector, where most postgraduate students are exposed to poor supervision.

In New Zealand, Lee (2017) suggests that postgraduate supervision remains a serious challenge in many universities and continues to undermine access to and success in postgraduate studies. Similar experiences of postgraduate students have also been reported in Pakistan (Ali et al., 2019). For example, to provide postgraduate students with quality supervision and mitigate supervision-related challenges, the Higher Education Commission in Pakistan capped the number of postgraduate students a supervisor can supervise to twelve students: five at the Ph.D. level and seven at the master's level. Across these studies, the central role of supervision in shaping access to and success in postgraduate studies is clear and undisputed (Heyns et al., 2019; Jeyaraj, 2020).

In line with the findings of Jeyaraj (2020) and Hadi and Muhammad (2019), Ali et al. (2019) reaffirm that the quality of supervision is a significant predictor of both access to and success in postgraduate studies. Additionally, Heyns et al. (2019) and Jeyaraj (2020) submit that supervisory support is an important variable in the success of postgraduate students in their research projects. Likewise, Heyns et al. (2019), McCulloch et al. (2016), and Van Rensburg et al. (2016) posit that efficient and quality supervision are the prerequisites for the quality and

success of postgraduate research. Heyns et al. (2019) argue that the experiences of postgraduate students, their satisfaction levels, retention, and course completion rates are fundamentally dependent on the quality of supervision they receive from their supervisors.

In addition, Hadi and Muhammad (2019) found a positive relationship between the success of postgraduate students in their research projects and the quality of supervision they receive. The study found that the research skills of postgraduate students and their success in conducting successful research were directly connected to supervision. This finding underscores the significant effect that supervising and mentoring have on the success of postgraduate students in their research projects (Rambe & Mkono, 2019). Thus, in supervising postgraduate research projects, supervisors act as a more knowledgeable other, whose insights and guidance are indispensable to the success of the project.

Studies by Sharmini and Lazarovitch (2014) and Hadi and Muhammad (2019) explored the challenges postgraduate students experienced during their research projects and found that poor supervision was one major challenge among a host of others. Likewise, Jeyaraj (2020), echoing the earlier observations of McCulloch et al. (2016), found that most supervisors have not yet received adequate training in supervision or in providing quality guidance to their postgraduate students in their research projects.

A similar concern was raised by Starke-Meyerring (2011), who found that most of the supervisors relied on the supervision practices to which they had previously been exposed and on their own conceptions of what constitutes good supervision. This was later endorsed by Heyns et al. (2019) who reiterated that postgraduate supervisors tend to imitate the supervision skills of their supervisors and apply them to postgraduate students, thereby perpetuating similar supervision practices. Jeyaraj (2020) cautions that these untested practices can compromise the quality of supervision to which students are exposed. In South Africa, the Council on Higher Education (2022) and the Department of Higher Education and Training (2023) also questioned the supervision competencies and capacities of supervisors in South African universities. Similarly, Heyns et al. (2019) noted the issue of poor supervision skills and supervisor incompetence.

In Malaysia, Jeyaraj (2020) explored the needs of postgraduate students with an aim to implement support mechanisms to improve student satisfaction levels and completion rates. Jeyaraj (2020) found that postgraduate students need quality supervision for the successful completion of their studies. Ali et al. (2019) posit that research in postgraduate supervision in higher education seems to advocate for a radical paradigm shift towards being student centered. Concurring with this finding by Ali et al (2019), Heyns et al. (2019) added that there is a serious need to review and change the present culture and practices pertaining to postgraduate supervision and migrate towards person-centered supervision approaches.

In a similar study, Ali et al. (2019) investigated Pakistani students' perceptions of supervision based on their lived experiences. The authors explored the narratives of bad and good supervision practices and found that the current postgraduate supervision practices fall short of mentoring ethics to meet the supervision needs and expectations of postgraduate students. Studies by Jeyaraj (2020), Naidu et al. (2015), Jomaa and Bidin (2017), Lee (2017), and Mohd Isa and Ahmad (2018) have produced similar findings, underscoring the poor quality of supervision postgraduate students receive in their research. Another shared finding in these studies is that poor supervision is the main factor underlying the drop-out and course completion rates of postgraduate students (Jeyaraj, 2020; Lee, 2017; Ali et al., 2019; Hadi & Muhammad,

2019). Thus, quality supervision is imperative for postgraduate students to make a contribution that is authentic and meaningful in their respective areas of specialization (Ali et al., 2019).

### **Supervision Approaches Found in Literature**

Noting the influence of supervision on access to and success in postgraduate studies, there have been debates among scholars on quality supervision approaches (Hadi & Muhammad, 2019; Heyns et al., 2019; Lee, 2017; Rambe & Mkono, 2019), especially when looking at the composition of postgraduate students. Jeyaraj, (2020) agreeing with Heyns et al. (2019), suggested that owing to variables such as student diversity and mismatched expectations between students and their supervisors, postgraduate supervision has increasingly developed into a complex and sophisticated phenomenon.

Therefore, rather than prescribing a specific supervision approach, supervisors need to select a supervision approach which is compatible with their strengths, their context, and the needs of their students. Below, I present several supervision approaches found in my review of the literature that can be considered. As Jeyaraj (2020) observed, successful supervisors acknowledge that they cannot apply a one-size-fits-all approach to supervision but should rather adopt different approaches that are informed by the needs of their supervisees.

Armitage (2007) and Rau (2008) suggested that supervision models can either be facilitation-centered or power-centered. McCallin and Nayar (2012) argue that facilitation centered supervision empowers the student to take full control of the research project while the supervisor plays a mediating and facilitating role. Marnewick, (2023) further explains that this supervision model allows the postgraduate student to make the most important decisions about the research project, in consultation with the supervisor, who will advise on the best practice under the given circumstances. For Maseko (2020) the facilitation centered supervision model seeks to empower students to achieve their full potential while the supervisor assumes a mentorship role. On the other hand, Marnewick, (2023) supports the earlier views of Maseko (2020) that the power-centered supervision model places all the power to make executive decisions regarding the research project, the steps and process in the supervisor. The student's voice is either marginalized or silenced in this approach.

Ali et al. (2019) submitted that the traditional approach to supervision views supervision as a teaching and learning relationship between a supervisor who is more experienced and knowledgeable and a postgraduate student who is less experienced and knowledgeable. In this relationship, the supervisor's responsibility is to teach the postgraduate student some research skills and oversee the research project. Ganzer (2007) points out that this supervision approach positions the supervisor and the postgraduate student in a hierarchical relationship in which the supervisor is regarded as an expert whose role is to teach the postgraduate student some research skills and provide direction on the most appropriate way to complete the study or research project successfully.

Ali et al. (2019) cautioned that, unlike the collaborative supervision approach, this hierarchical supervision approach denies and minimizes other possible supervision options and relationships between the supervisor and the supervisee. Endorsing this caution, Copeland et al. (2011) added that this approach bears some significant ethical connotations regarding the role of the inherent power relations between the supervisor and the supervisee in the supervision process. Thus, the traditional approach to supervision can be seen as creating a superior supervisor and an inferior supervisee, thereby potentially undermining the intelligence, ability,

and ideas of the supervisee and disregarding the academic and scholarly freedom of that supervisee. Ali et al. (2019) subscribed to this line of thought by adding that in with this approach, the supervisee passively receives knowledge and ideas from the supervisor while the concept of independent thinking and agency is undermined.

Jeyaraj (2020) asserted that in acknowledging and recognizing the importance of supervision for the successful completion of research projects, several institutions of higher learning have developed and adopted various supervision approaches. To this effect, Jeyaraj (2020) observed that the most common supervision approach is the apprenticeship model in which an academic with experience in a specific field of study is appointed as the supervisee's supervisor. However, alternative supervision models have emerged over the years, including the collaborative cohort model and the supervisor mentoring approach (De Lange et al., 2011; Ali et al., 2019). Another supervision model grounded in community and collaborative research involves bringing academics from various disciplines to supervise a cohort of postgraduate students in the completion of their research projects (De Lange et al., 2011; Paglis et al., 2006).

Research underscores the important effect of the supervisor's experience in supervising postgraduate students as a determiner of the supervision experiences of postgraduate students in their research projects (Maseko 2020). Hadi and Muhammad (2019) operationalized the concept of *supervisor experience* as having the critical skills and discipline-related knowledge to offer meaningful and successful supervision. Ali et al. (2019) and Muhammad (2019) added to this conceptualization by suggesting that an experienced supervisor possesses the ability to publish their own research, guide the supervisee in the selection and modification of the topic for the research project and a literature review, critique the work of the supervisee, providing meaningful feedback, and guide the supervisee to the successful completion of the research project.

Placing supervisees into small groups during the initial stages of the supervision journey benefits both the supervisor and the supervisees when these working groups are grounded in the assumptions of cooperative learning and problem solving (Mapuya, 2022 & Vygotsky, 1978). Such an approach empowers the postgraduate students to be independent and autonomous life-long scholars, which is one of the fundamental goals and imperatives of any education system. Moreover, this approach is also consistent with the basic principles of self-regulation and self-regulated learning.

It is also important to emphasize that supervisors themselves have many professional duties and obligations that compete for their time and attention. It is therefore anticipated that group supervision during the initial phase of the research journey frees up time for the supervisor to attend to other priorities. Postgraduate students then take ownership and responsibility of the entire research project and can therefore set realistic goals towards its completion, becoming more resilient and motivated. In my view, group supervision is most appealing and suitable when the supervisor wants to take the postgraduate students through generic aspects of research. These include formulating a research topic, academic writing, writing a statement of the research problem, formulating research questions and objectives and selecting research design and methodology.

Importantly, the above literature review was not only a survey of existing scholarship but also an integral component of this study's analytical process. Rather than being treated solely as background, the reviewed documents were examined as data in their own right, with their perspectives, assumptions, and narratives thematically analyzed. This dual role of the literature—as both review and analysis—highlights the unique methodological contribution of this study and

reflects my (re)conceptualization of quality supervision through the integration of document analysis and thematic interpretation.

### **Research Design and Methodology**

For methodological alignment and relevance, a qualitative research approach was deemed appropriate for this study, considering the research questions which the study sought to answer. In the shared views of Gall and Borg (2014), Leedy and Ormrod (2015) and Pietersen and Maree (2016), qualitative research approach is not only consistent with the theoretical assumptions of social constructivism and interpretivism but is also compatible with document analysis.

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

In this conceptual study, document analysis was used to gather data from credible sources containing relevant information to address the research questions and achieve the aim of the study. The sources included journal articles, book chapters, and existing policies and regulatory frameworks on supervision and postgraduate studies. To identify relevant literature, the key terms—postgraduate studies, supervision, quality supervision, supervisor and supervisee—were entered into google scholar to locate and download recent peer-reviewed journal articles and book chapters. Similarly, the regulatory frameworks on supervision and postgraduate studies were purposefully selected and downloaded from the websites of the respective regulatory bodies. The theoretical submissions from the journal articles, book chapters, and policies and regulatory frameworks made a significant contribution in how I (re)conceptualized quality supervision to promote access to and success in postgraduate studies and the ultimate conceptual model developed to inform postgraduate supervision.

Letsekha (2022) and Prior (2009) concur that document analysis is a longstanding and valuable practice in empirical studies. One of the major benefits of document analysis is that documents lack reactivity (Altheide et al., 2008). Additionally, proponents of document analysis argue that documents hold recorded text which is free from the intervention of the researcher (Bowen, 2009). Furthermore, documents are viewed as social truths which are replicated, shared, and applied in socially coordinated ways (Atkinson & Coffey, 2004). For Cheek (2004), apart from presenting and reflecting certain narratives and interpretations of reality, documents also play a pivotal role in the establishment of that reality. These views informed my choice to conduct a document analysis as a source of data for this study.

To align with the theoretical assumptions of social constructivism and interpretivism, I engaged thematic data analysis as submitted by Naeem et al., 2023. In the methodological views of Naeem and colleagues (2023), qualitative researchers use thematic analysis to identify and assess patterns or themes in a given data set, which can provide new insights and knowledge. This technique enabled a systematic analysis of literature on the conceptualization of quality supervision and its role in promoting access to and success in postgraduate studies, thereby revealing notable patterns and key insights that are relevant to the study.

Observing the methodological guidelines of thematic data analysis suggested by Naeem et al. (2023), the perspectives presented in the literature were analyzed and classified according to the main ideas they conveyed. Meaning, findings and conceptualizations that were at harmony with one other were treated as a similar voice advancing a common idea, which was regarded as a theme or pattern. Corroborating ideas that were not significantly different from those of the

main themes were noted and recorded as sub-themes. These findings will now be presented and discussed below.

### Findings

The presentation and discussion of findings is guided and informed by the themes that emerged from literature perspectives on each of the research questions that were raised in the study, followed by the necessary discussion and implications on postgraduate supervision.

#### Findings Related to Research Question #1: How Do Researchers Conceptualize Quality Supervision?

Responding to how researchers conceptualize quality supervision, the following main and sub-themes were constructed: the main themes included that quality supervision is, (a) student centered and (b) follows a humanistic approach (Ali et al., 2019; Madikizela-Madiya and Mushomi, 2021; Muhammad, 2019; Jeyaraj, 2020; Li, 2018). The sub-themes indicated that quality supervision acknowledges the individual needs and context of the supervisee, involves regular communication and is based on agreement on expectations.

Miseliunaite and colleagues (2022) and Lambert and colleagues (2016) argued that a humanistic approach to supervision regards individuals as predominantly prosocial, with the conviction that personal development is a product of processing one’s emotions and the meanings of experiences. Lambert et al. (2016) further maintained that the humanistic approach to supervision views individuals as self-conscious with the freedom to make choices and be accountable for such choices. This approach is based on the conviction that students have the right, ability, and desire to determine what is best for them and how they can become the best version of themselves. I assert that the humanistic approach to supervision assumes that when the supervisor creates an enabling environment in which the supervisees can express themselves, progress is likely because of the supervisee’s drive towards self-actualization.

**Table 1**  
*Conceptualizing Quality Research Themes*

Main Themes	Sub-Themes
Supervision which is student-centered	Acknowledges the individual needs and context of the supervisee
	Involves regular communication
	Is based on agreement on expectations
Supervision which is based on a humanistic approach	The supervisor is empathetic
	The supervisor is caring
	Regular follow-ups on progress
	Setting realistic submission timelines

Contrary to the above conceptualization of quality supervision, a study by Ali et al. (2019) revealed that postgraduate students feel neglected and abandoned during their postgraduate studies. Supervisors emerged as uncooperative and authoritative, which is consistent with the traditional supervision approach. Another adverse finding which is inconsistent with the humanistic approach to supervision was presented by Madikizela-Madiya and Mushomi

(2021), whose participants reported not being able to meet with their postgraduate supervisors as often as they wanted. This aligns with a trend in the current dispensation of postgraduate studies in which students struggle to access their supervisors (Maseko 2020). These themes and characteristics of quality supervision are important in postgraduate studies because they provide minimum conditions necessary to promote access to and success in postgraduate studies. Collectively, they epitomize the ideal supervision to be given to postgraduate students in their research projects.

**Findings Related to Research Question #2: How can Supervision be Used to Promote Access to and Success in Postgraduate Studies?**

Addressing how access to and success in postgraduate studies can be promoted through quality supervision, the following main and sub-themes were constructed: The main themes included, quality supervision and community of practice; the sub-themes included: supervisor’s availability, comprehensive clear feedback, motivating and encouraging, collective shared expectations and creating opportunities for supervisees to work on their research projects in groups. See Table 2 below. Based on literature, supervision can only be used to promote access to and success in postgraduate studies when it is delivered with quality and grounded in the principles of a community of practice.

**Table 2**  
*Supervision for Access and Success Themes*

<b>Main Themes</b>	<b>Sub-Themes</b>
Quality supervision	Supervisor’s availability
	Comprehensive clear feedback
	Motivating and encouraging
	Collective shared expectations
Community of practice	Creating opportunities for supervisees to work on their research projects in groups
	Create platform for supervisees to share ideas and their progress
	Peer review of each other’s work

Consistent with the conceptualization of quality supervision, to promote access to and success in postgraduate studies, supervisors need to make sure that, from the onset, there are clear shared expectations which will inform the supervision process. As soon as the research project has started, the supervisor should try to motivate, encourage, and provide the student with clear feedback and be available for consultations when necessary.

Furthermore, literature suggests that supervision can be used to promote access to and success in postgraduate studies when it is oriented in a community of practice. This means that the supervisor should create opportunities for students to work in groups, share and exchange ideas with one another, and peer review each other’s work. Additionally, supervisors should ensure that the number of students being supervised is manageable to avoid compromising their access to and success in the research projects.

These findings highlight the importance of continuous group supervision, collaborative research initiatives, and establishing a community of practice. They further reaffirm the verdicts

of Fergie and colleagues (2011) and Jeyaraj (2018) who found the postgraduate journey to be lonely and isolating for students, thus, there is a need for collaboration. With postgraduate studies being a lonely and arduous venture for some, the need to establish a community of practice becomes even more appealing and urgent (Jeyaraj, 2020).

### **Additional Findings**

Through my analysis, I found deficiencies in the current supervision models in terms of student support, which can fundamentally compromise students' access to and success in postgraduate studies. Hadi and Muhammad (2019), McCulloch et al. (2016), Jeyaraj (2020), and Ali et al. (2019) presented comparable findings, affirming the lack of support students receive in their postgraduate studies. For example, in South Africa, the Council on Higher Education (2022), the South African Human Rights Commission (2016), and the Department of Higher Education and Training (2023) have observed and lambasted the quality of supervision students receive. These findings also highlight the unbalanced expectations of postgraduate students and their supervisors. Jeyaraj (2020) reported similar findings, emphasizing the opposing expectations of postgraduate students and their supervisors.

One way these disparate expectations can be addressed is by having a memorandum of understanding between the supervisor and their students. Jeyaraj (2018 & 2020) and Fergie et al., (2011) also found that undergraduate studies do not prepare students adequately for postgraduate studies and the rigour and demands of postgraduate research. For example, Jeyaraj (2020) questioned the extent to which the Malaysian undergraduate degrees prepare students for postgraduate studies, particularly in terms of research. Ultimately, there is a mismatch between the expectations of postgraduate students and those of supervisors regarding supervision. Thus, supervisors should use tailor-made, context-driven supervision approaches specifically designed for each supervisee.

Another important finding emerging from this study is that postgraduate students feel marginalized and detached from the support structures of the university. This feeling is amplified by the fact that some of them never have the opportunity to be on campus physically. These feelings of marginalization and isolation culminate in a surrendering attitude (Hadi & Muhammad, 2019; Jeyaraj, 2020, Madikizela-Madiya & Mushomi, 2021). Without adequate motivation, students who fail to go beyond this phase usually discontinue their studies or take a break from the research project (Maseko 2020).

Considering the consistent rise in student enrolment in postgraduate studies, it may not be possible to provide all postgraduate students with personalized and differentiated supervision during their programs. Thus, there is a need to educate postgraduate students that successful postgraduate studies require self-directed, self-regulated scholars who can work independently with minimal supervision. This reflects the reality of postgraduate studies, where the perception that supervisors fail to provide quality supervision needs to be reconsidered. Many postgraduate students report feelings of marginalization, neglect, abandonment, loneliness, frustration, hopelessness, helplessness, anxiety, and nervousness (Jeyaraj, 2020). These experiences often stem from unrealistic expectations of supervisors, who are sometimes viewed in the same way as schoolteachers providing constant support. When students encounter the self-directed nature of postgraduate studies, the contrast can be jarring.

## **Discussion and Recommendations**

The findings from this study have significant implications on post graduate supervision and its future practice. First, there is the need for a continuous dialogue between postgraduate students and their supervisors on the nature and quality of postgraduate supervision. This may call for the implementation of quarterly online surveys in which postgraduate students score some specific indicators of quality supervision and provide some suggestions on how it can be used to promote access to and success in postgraduate studies. Institutions of higher education can develop Likert Scale questionnaires containing the distinctive qualifiers of quality supervision and suggestions on how postgraduate supervision can be used to promote access to and success in postgraduate studies.

Second, there is the urgent need for institutions of higher education to adopt effective orientation programs in which the expectations of postgraduate students and supervisors are explicitly and comprehensively discussed and underscored. This may involve an intentional focus on the contents and provisions of a Memorandum of Understanding (MU) between the two parties. This MU could present a set of shared expectations from both the postgraduate student and supervisor, thereby eliminating the possibility of mismatched expectations.

Third, postgraduate supervision should be student driven and grounded in a humanistic approach. There is a clear indication from the findings that postgraduate supervision should be informed by the unique and dynamic needs of postgraduate students. This implies that supervisors cannot follow a one-size-fits-all approach to supervision. While acknowledging the extra work that accompanies this approach, there remains a need for tailor-made, personalized postgraduate supervision for promoting access to and success in postgraduate studies. Ultimately, postgraduate students and supervisors must be in constant communication in terms of progress, expectations, challenges encountered, mitigations, and support.

### **Recommended Conceptual Framework for Quality Postgraduate Supervision**

Informed by the findings in this study, I submit a new conceptual framework on quality postgraduate supervision to be used to promote access to and success in postgraduate studies. See Figure 1. First, central to quality supervision and postgraduate studies is the student and the envisaged research project. To provide for accountability, responsibility, connection between the supervisor and the supervisee, and communication regarding the terms and conditions of supervision, an MU between supervisor and supervisee is necessary. Second, once the research project has commenced, regular communication and feedback between the supervisor and the supervisee, including specific timeframes, is necessary. Third, when providing feedback and requesting further work, supervisors are expected to recognize and appreciate the unique contexts and circumstances of their supervisees. At the same time, it is the supervisee's responsibility to communicate any challenges that may threaten their access to and success in the research project. Such communication is essential for supervisors and academic institutions to implement appropriate interventions and necessary support programs.

**Figure 1**

*Conceptual Framework for Quality Postgraduate Supervision*



Throughout this practice of quality supervision, supervisors should remain sensitive to the unique needs of each postgraduate student under their supervision. Supervisors should migrate away from a one-size-fits all supervision model and gravitate towards a more student-focused approach, such as I have described above in this new conceptual framework. Additionally, acknowledging that supervisors do not always have enough time at their disposal to offer all their supervisees tailor-made supervision, I also recommend that postgraduate students be empowered to engage in self-regulation and self-regulated learning.

Orientation programs designed to prepare students psychologically, emotionally and mentally for the rigor and demands of postgraduate studies could address the need to prepare and empower postgraduate students. There is a need to strengthen the research component in undergraduate studies by introducing students to research earlier in their academic journey, for example, in the second year of their undergraduate studies. Early exposure could help prevent students from feeling overwhelmed when they progress to postgraduate studies. In addition, I recommend that the joint supervision and co-supervision opportunities currently available to University Capacity Development Programme (UCDP) scholars should be extended to all universities in South Africa to improve the supervisory capacity of academic staff.

### **Limitations and Future Studies**

The limitations of this study arise from its epistemological, philosophical, and methodological underpinnings. As a theoretical study, one key limitation is its reliance on secondary data, which limits the availability of empirical evidence to either corroborate or contradict the findings drawn from literature. Nevertheless, document analysis remains a central and legitimate foundation of theoretical inquiry (Prior, 2008).

Despite these limitations, the contribution of the present study to supervision and postgraduate studies remain significant. By foregrounding the dominant issues and contestations surrounding the conceptualizations of quality supervision, this study highlights the critical role of supervision in advancing access to and success in higher education. Although theoretical in nature, this study makes a noteworthy contribution to current discourses on postgraduate studies and supervision in higher education.

Furthermore, future studies on the contested phenomenon of quality supervision in higher education could benefit from incorporating phenomenological perspectives of both postgraduate students and supervisors. Such an approach would deepen the exploration of how quality supervision is conceptualized in literature and how it can serve as an instrument to promote access to and success in higher education. This would also create opportunities to employ multiple data collection methods and instruments for triangulation, thereby yielding more authoritative and conclusive findings.

### **Conclusion**

Postgraduate supervision is a complex and dynamic aspect of higher education that requires significant investment in human capital. In this article, I explored how access to and success in postgraduate studies can be enhanced through quality supervision, while also exploring how the concept of quality supervision is conceptualized in literature. From this review, several dominant descriptors of quality supervision were identified. Drawing from both literature and empirical findings from prior studies, I advocate for a humanistic approach to supervision and support the creation of communities of practice to assist postgraduate students in their research journeys. I further argue that supervision should be responsive to the dynamic needs and contexts of postgraduate students. Through a thematic document analysis, this study contributes valuable insights into postgraduate supervision and its role in promoting access to and success in postgraduate studies.

This conceptual paper contributes to current discourses and continuing research on supervision as a significant variable in postgraduate studies by developing a theoretically grounded conceptual framework for improved access to and success in postgraduate studies. Highlighting the processes and four fundamental processes underpinning postgraduate supervision, the conceptual framework provides realistic, practical and easy to follow steps to improve higher education and postgraduate studies in various educational contexts across the globe.

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