Indonesian Journal of Educational Research and Technology

Supervisors do not Supervise: Cases of Some Frustrated Postgraduate Students in Higher Education Institutions

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A B S T R A C T

The level of postgraduate (PG) student incompletion and dropout, especially at the master's and doctoral levels, is a concern. These students are admitted with high scores and have guiding supervisors to assist them. The overarching aim of this study is to investigate the problems faced by PG students due to supervisor misconduct and power imbalances and to develop recommendations for improving the supervision environment and supporting student progress. A qualitative-focused survey was followed to address issues that PG students face in research supervision. Participants were PG students in various departments at institutions of higher learning in Gauteng, recruited purposively and snowballed. Study findings revealed PG's frustrations due to supervisor misconduct, abuse of power, and delayed student feedback. This led to a student dropping out of the program and others staying in the system post their maximum time, needed to complete the qualification. Furthermore, other students experienced prolonged mental distress, while some retaliated against their supervisors due to compounded frustrations and ill-treatment. There is a concerning pattern of supervisor misconduct, power imbalances, and a longer time to give feedback that has significantly impacted the progress and well-being of PG students. Furthermore, this study recommends that institutions of higher learning need to establish clear policies and procedures, provide training and support for supervisors, and implement regular monitoring and evaluation, among others. The results pave the way for effecting progress in student-supervisor relationships and university throughput.

1. INTRODUCTION

Postgraduate (PG) studies have gained increasing interest due to their academic and vocational benefits, as many first-degree graduates view a degree as not being adequate (Tomlinson, 2008). For many students aspiring to enroll in PG studies, PG studies should ideally commence at least 12 months before the intended start date. Except in cases where recognition of prior learning is used or involved, PG qualifications are typically available to individuals who have completed an undergraduate degree. In addition, Yan *et al.* (2024) points out a celebrated fact that entry requirements to PG studies are usually stringent, requiring above-average to excellent performance, and not just a mere or marginal pass to obtain a degree.

The transition from any level of education to a higher level is not linear, as high performance at one level does not necessarily translate in the same form (Wang *et al.*, 2023). Some high performers at one level have shown to drop in performance when they entered higher levels while some commonly low performers who managed successful admission to higher levels may excel when reaching these higher levels (Ogresta *et al.*, 2021). The main motivations for pursuing PG studies include career advancement, academic aspirations, and the opportunity to specialize and develop expertise in a specific field (Chatterjee *et al.*, 2019; Diogo *et al.*, 2022; Papageorgi *et al.*, 2024).

Furthermore, while enrolling for a PG degree has several benefits, it also carries inherent responsibilities (Arnold, 2018). These include deepening understanding of a field due to specialization, broadening knowledge and skills by exposure to the latest trends and developments in the field, equipping for independent research, career advancement and opportunities, improved employability, networking opportunities and enhanced critical thinking and problem-solving capabilities. PG students are known for being pioneers in the creation of new knowledge. Through practical application and the range of courses available, they will gain an understanding of how different fields of study are interconnected. This will give a broad yet deep knowledge base that people can apply flexibly in various real-world situations and theoretical models.

Preparing students for autonomous research is a prime advantage of participating in PG education. PG studies equip individuals with the ability to carry out research autonomously, which is beneficial for academic and career endeavors. PG students engage in hands-on research that contributes to practical solutions in various industries and innovates on existing knowledge. Ogbari (2023) states that PG curricula are often tailored to address real-world demands, with academic departments committed to supporting and developing students capable of producing top-quality research.

Research indicates that the percentage of master's degree dropouts has been decreasing over the years, with a notable increase in the number of graduates (Styger *et al.* 2015). The doctoral trend decrease is not spoken about, apparently because it is not showing. Even for the master's program, such a decrease may be slight, and for some and not all universities. In South African universities there is an inexcusably high level of high master's and doctoral dropout and incompletion rates. This decrease in enrolment for advanced studies, particularly among domestic students, poses a significant challenge that hampers nations' abilities to foster economic development and alleviate poverty (Van Antwerpen & Dirkse Van Schalkwyk, 2024). Masutha and Motala (2023) inform that in South Africa, PG studies make up a relatively small proportion of higher education (HE) enrolments, accounting for just 15.2%. Notably, most PhD graduates in the country are international students, comprising 56.7%, while 43.3% are South African nationals. This contrasts with 96.9% of UG graduates being South African.

The leaking pipeline of students not progressing to PG studies or taking too long to complete them is a major concern (Fuhrmann *et al.,* 2011). Factors contributing to this include funding challenges, student unpreparedness, lack of PG support programs, and inadequate supervision capacity, among others. Limited numbers of PG students studying full-time also impact completion and dropout rates. PG studies are crucial for developing a country's economy, society, and citizenry. The declining participation of local students in PG study programs, especially at the doctoral level, is detrimental to a country's ability to address economic growth and poverty reduction through research and innovation. Addressing this issue requires a serious rethink of PG education policies and funding to support and retain local students.

HEIs should strive to comprehend and address the reasons behind PG students not completing their programs (Akour & Alenezi, 2022). Those who do not finish may face financial burdens and end up in a worse financial situation compared to if they had not pursued, HE. In countries where citizens pay taxes, the public indirectly bears the cost of these failures. Additionally, high non-completion rates can harm the reputation and credibility of a program or institution. Other factors contributing to PG dropout rates are highlighted by Bağrıacık Yılmaz and Karataş (2022) who reported that lack of interaction in education, especially student-supervisor and social interactions, as well as student characteristics like marital status, employment status, gender, age, and skills. In addition, the quality of educational and technical support, supervisor experience and qualifications, examination conditions, and orientation programs play crucial roles in dropout decisions.

To address the shortfalls in PG students' success rate, higher education institutions support PG students at risk of dropping out by implementing tailored strategies that address financial challenges, academic success, and socio-emotional connections with the institution or program (Chandrasekera *et al.,* 2024). Mize *et al.* (2024) explain that these strategies start with investing in PG student recruitment, teaching, learning, and support initiatives to identify PG student at-risk students and establish suitable intervention strategies and support plans (Banaag *et al.,* 2024; Halabieh *et al.,* 2022; Sá, 2023). PG student behavior, attitude, higher education institution resources, leadership, and academic performance play fundamental roles in predicting dropout risks. Valencia Quecano *et al.* (2024) explains that by focusing on providing adequate support, clear expectations, and academic and social involvement opportunities. There is a need for studies to address the challenge of supervisors not supervising as a contributing factor to the PG dropout rate. Thus, this study investigates the problems faced by PG students due to supervisor misconduct and power imbalances.

2. METHODS

A qualitative-focused survey was followed to address issues that PG students face in research supervision. Participants were PG students in various departments at institutions of higher learning in Gauteng. Participants were selected purposively and snowballed. According to Althubaiti (2022), the sample size (n) is the number of subjects to be included in a study from a population. Qualitative studies usually require small sample sizes (Indrayan & Mishra, 2021; Vasileiou *et al.,* 2018).

The qualitative sample size should be large enough to allow addressing of the study phenomenon but sufficient as dictated by saturation, which refers to the point in data collection when no additional insights are identified (Saunders *et al.* 2018). On saturation, data begin to repeat so that further data collection is redundant, signifying that an adequate

sample size is reached. Therefore, in this study, the sample size (n = 9) was determined by saturation at the data collection stage.

We contacted the participants using Microsoft Teams and Zoom to conduct in-depth interviews. Data were collected using a semi-structured interview guide. The interviews were structured around an interview guide with the central question being "What was your experience like during the supervision process?", supplemented by detailed probing where necessary. Though straightforward as it sounds, the guide was given to a few researchers in the field for content validation.

The analysis was performed using the thematic content analysis technique which is a descriptive presentation of qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Firstly, the researchers read through the transcripts several times to identify emerging themes that provided an understanding of the experiences of interns. After reading all transcripts, a list of similar topics was compiled, grouped per the theme.

For trustworthiness, Shufutinsky (2020) principles were applied in this study to ensure trustworthiness in the qualitative study. Moreover, credibility was ensured through prolonged engagement with the PG students' checks to enable them to correct or change what they viewed to be a wrong interpretation of their contributions. To ensure the dependability of the study findings, consistency was upheld in the detailed study methodology, such as data collection, which was checked for conveying a common message. Confirmability was confirmed by using multiple researchers to evaluate the results, interpretations, and recommendations.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The study included four female and five male PG students in various fields of specialization at higher education institutions in Gauteng Province. Almost all the participants exceeded the minimum number of years required for the degree program. Detailed information is shown in **Table 1**. **Table 2** shows verbatim responses from participants.

Table 1. Participant demographic profiles.

Gender	Degree	Specialization	Duration	Time spent
Female	MSc	Social work	2 years	N/A
Male	MSc	Linguistics	2 years	4 years -
Male	MSc	Psychology	3 years	7 years -
Male	PhD	Business economics	3 years	11 years -
Female	PhD	Statistics	3 years	4 years -
Male	MSc	Statistics	2 years	4 years -
Female	MSc	Psychology	3 years	4 years -
Male	PhD	Sociology	3 years	7 years -
Female	PhD	Management	3 years	9 years

Table 2. Verbatim responses from participants.

Participants	Verbatim response
Participant 1	*"My supervisor has power, and when reported, he is the one to evaluate your case. So, I am trapped as I cannot report him. He is a reviewer of the faculty research and ethics committee. If I report him and eventually reach that stage, he will catch me there. He takes three months to give feedback on a less than fifteen-page submission. I am in my third year of a two-year master's degree, but he is not in any hurry to see me through. I am told that my supervisor is a very experienced, professor and that many students have graduated under his guidance. But why can't I benefit from his experience? The way he is going, I think he does not have the experience and track record I hear about. I think they overrate him. He is selfish and very inconsiderate. There are five students at master's, whom he is supposed to supervise. None of us have moved from where we started. He cares less, because, except me who submitted a final proposal draft, no other one has submitted anything. They are awaiting his feedback on the proposal drafts they submitted months ago. We are all black, and we are made to understand that he is fully supporting white ones in a nearby university."*
Participant 2	*"She asked me to wait in October/November, as she was marking undergraduate examinations. She was answering as I was asking her, and she asked for two weeks. I gave her three weeks. When I called her, she said everyone in her household had been sick, so they were recovering, including herself. I waited again for another week. When I called, she was attending to her doctoral thesis response from external examiners, who had feedback. So, my study had to wait, again. This was her third doctoral degree; my master's was the first one for me. How selfish! She wants to get all the top degrees but causing me to fail my first real postgraduate degree. When she was done with her resubmission, she was then having a birthday and a trip overseas with family. When I submit work to her, I have to remind her to give me feedback. She takes five months to give me scanty feedback, concentrating on a small grammatical error and shouting at me as if I killed a person. Yes, I had made a mistake, but she covered herself with an excuse for my mistake. It was my first real mistake, but very tiny. Why do we not have co-supervisors? My supervisor does not care and is only about herself. She is self-centered, insensitive, arrogant, and reckless."*
Participant 3	*"I had one supervisor, and apparently, I was the first-ever candidate she supervised. If she had others before me, then no one completed, and I cannot blame them. I had been admitted based on my concept paper, and the study title I had submitted when I applied. Even my admission letter said so. As she was not accepting the appointments I was proposing, I decided to develop a research proposal according to the styles recommended by the faculty. I submitted it to her requesting feedback. Little did I know I was 'pulling a tiger by its tail'. I had provoked a 'monster'. She wrote back, saying she no longer wanted me to follow my original study title, and I had to wait for her to decide on my new title. I immediately asked to change the supervisor, which then was an insult to the faculty. The dean, who seemed very close to her, asked me by phone to cancel my registration. I refused, saying he should tell me by email, and propose compensation for my losses. Three years passed without a supervisor, but I was never refused permission to reregister. In my fourth year, I was given an expatriate supervisor who seemed only interested in the progress of foreign students. He gave me 15-minute appointments while giving foreign students more than two hours. When we met, he told me what he knew about me and that I must never take chances with him. I decided to record when I entered his office. He never gave me feedback on my submissions, until I went to the ombudsman. I have just been allocated a supervisor from another university, chosen by me. I checked a nearby university and Googled profiles of experts in my area, and I saw an experienced prof there. When I communicated with her, she told me not to worry, as she had been a supervisor with them before. She also assured me that they would not do anything to harm me, as long as she has been formally appointed. I can see progress, and the departmental submission was successful. I am awaiting the faculty ethics to give me clearance. My supervisor showed me how to work on the chapters so long, such as literature review and others. I am now on track."*

Table 2 (continue). Verbatim responses from participants.

Participants	Verbatim response
Participant 4	"*I had withdrawn from my studies after eight years, but later reflected and realized that it was not my fault. I got angry and mad, so I went back to the supervisor to voice my disappointment. He had wasted my time and my money and destroyed me emotionally. I went to his office, and I told him how he destroyed me, and the words I used were not so friendly. I could see he was scared. I also warned that when I return, he should not even try to stand in my way as he did with supervision. From him, I proceeded to the dean of his faculty. The dean knew my case, but not the facts as my former supervisors had blamed it all on me. Luckily, I had email records of our correspondence. As these clearly showed it was his fault, I was readmitted. So, last year in my tenth year I returned. The proposal has now passed several stages. It is on its way to clearance. I have two supervisors, and one of them is committed.*"
Participant 5	"*When I first visited my supervisor, for about three minutes she told me that she chose to supervise me because of the concept paper I had submitted and the focus of my study. She then started commenting on my dress, my hair, and petty things and seemed to have been soliciting friendship. She even said maybe we can have tea together sometime . . .. Then she wasted about 45 minutes telling me about herself, how best she was as a student, how she was always a top candidate. I have all these on record as we speak now. I asked about her research records, such as the number of publications she had and the number of PG students she supervised to completion. She said they were matters for another day. I could sense she was uncomfortable. I made it clear that her supervision and research prowess were the main things that mattered to me. We did not do much on my studies, as she was attending another meeting. In our second meeting, I insisted on working on my proposed study. She hated that I was not interested in her pranks. She then criticized my proposal but with no merits of academia. For two years and 8 months, she wasted my time, as she did not give me feedback on my submissions. I then wrote a letter to the head of the department. I was given a more experienced one with several PG-completed supervisions and publications to his name.*"
Participant 6	"*Every time I submitted work to my supervisor, he said it was wrong, mentioning 'You submit rubbish'. I pleaded with him to give me feedback on what I needed to do, but he never did so. When I realized that he was joking with me, we agreed on the title, verbally. When I came home, I wrote an email to him, confirming what we had discussed, including agreeing on the title. I also wrote that title. He replied confirming our meeting and the title. I wrote the proposal and submitted it to him by email, copying the departmental admin officer. For this, he wanted to kill me. He said I must never email anyone. In brief, he was unsupportive and arrogant. When we got into conflict after 14 months of my time wasting, and I went to the HOD, he lied that I never sent him anything. So stupid he could not even realize that I had an email trace of emails. I produced them, starting from the one of admin staff. The HOD was disappointed and removed him immediately. I asked for two experienced ones, but I got only one. 'From the frying pan into the fire', the current one refuses email correspondence. So I complained and the HOD summoned him. After speaking to the HOD, I might be allowed to find my external supervisor. The arrogance of their internal supervisors is terrible.*"
Participant 7	"*My supervisor is arrogant and selfish. She does not care, and she seems to compete with her students, and me. She was asking to drive my car and I refused. She keeps telling me that I am an egotistic student, but she describes herself. Her conduct to me is supervision violence. She is an enemy to me, and I have reported her. She is so unsupportive. She boasts about her achievement instead of supervising me.*"
Participant 8	"*The first supervisor was my nightmare and made me hate research. He carried the title of 'professor', but it was not visible in any way. He was uncaring and rude, and to me he was useless. Luckily, this man was so careless that he wrote insults and curses in an email, so I was able to demonstrate his conduct. Moreover, there was no email showing how he supervised or supported my research. He did not even reply to my questions. He refused to make a timetable, as I was proposing. He said that I must just follow his instructions. So, how was I going to be an independent researcher? He gave me depression that lasted for over 14 months, and even labeled*"

Table 2 (continue). Verbatim responses from participants.

Participants	Verbatim response
	me weak because I could not resist 'simple frustration'. They wanted to provide a co-supervisor, but I insisted on them removing him completely. I welcomed the idea of a second supervisor, but not when that man was one of the supervisors. The co-supervisor started on a negative note, but now we are on track and my former wants to rejoin me, as a second co-supervisor, coming through the co-supervisor. I turned it down on the basis that he should indicate what value he would add, and he could not say."
Participant 9	*"The supervisors were initially two, but the main supervisor, a woman, dominated the co-supervisor (CS). We only had our first meeting after six months of my admission, and even upon my insistence. On the first day, she scolded me for 'thinking I was the supervisor' by asking for a meeting. I realized then that I was in for a 'high jump', but I did not succumb to her intimidation. The CS, a cool gentleman, tried to talk but the supervisor 'called him to order' that she was the supervisor. After a week I received a letter that the CS was dropped, and the supervisor remained. My attempts to rather have the CS as the main, and the supervisor to be dropped were refused. Since I realized that she was that mean, I communicated by email and WhatsApp, to keep records. She preferred to call instead and avoided replying using the same modes. After six years of no progress, I reported my fate to the director and the dean and submitted my emails and the clips of my WhatsApp, while she showed nothing. I insisted on a new supervisor and the extension of years of my study. These were granted when I threatened to approach a newspaper. I received a capable South African supervisor, who also cared. It all paid off. I have now fulfilled the required manuscript submission to the journal, and my final thesis is on its way to the external examiners. I may graduate by the end of the year."*

Themes emerged are in the following:

(i) Supervisor Misconduct. The study findings reveal that some PG students fear that their supervisors can retaliate against them if students report, especially when they hold some power in the institution. This was supported by one MSc student in social work who said "My supervisor has power, and when reported, he is the one to evaluate your case. So, I am trapped as I cannot report him. He is a reviewer of the faculty research and ethics committee". Another concern among the respondents was that supervisors were favoring one race group over another, this was highlighted by one respondent who said "We are all black, and we are made to understand that he is fully supporting white ones in a nearby university". Another response supported this by saying "In my fourth year I was given an expatriate supervisor who seemed only interested in the progress of foreign students. He gave me 15-minute appointments while giving foreign students more than two hours". In some instances, supervisors were cursing and insulting PG students "Luckily, this man is so careless that he wrote insults and curses in email, so I was able to demonstrate his conduct". Moreover, another supervisor misconduct was highlighted by an MSc student in Linguistic who said that "When she was done with her resubmission, she was then having a birthday, and a trip overseas with family" instead of providing the student with feedback on his research work. Furthermore, the study reported PG misconduct where students spoke to their supervisors in an unruly manner, this was highlighted by one respondent who said that ". I went to his office, and I told him how he destroyed me, and the words I used were not so friendly. I could see he was scared. I also warned that when I return, he should not even try to stand in my way as he did with supervision". Another PG misconduct was highlighted in the sentiments of one respondent who said "I insisted on a new supervisor and the extension of years on my study. These were granted when I threatened to approach a newspaper".

(ii) Abuse of power. The study reported concerning abuse of power, that some supervisors abused the power they had to ill-treat students and avoid doing the intended duties of assisting the learners. Even when learners raised their concerns to relevant authorities, both the supervisors and higher authorities continued to abuse their powers, this was highlighted by various respondents. One of the respondents said "I immediately asked to change the supervisor, which then was an insult to the faculty. The dean, who seemed very close to her, asked me by phone to cancel my registration. I refused, saying he should tell me by email, and propose compensation for my losses". This is an abuse of power by the dean who was close to the lecturer. Another respondent who highlighted abuse of power from the supervisor who was sitting in committees said "My supervisor has power, and when reported, he is the one to evaluate your case. So, I am trapped as I cannot report him. He is a reviewer of the faculty research and ethics committee. If I report him and eventually reach that stage, he will catch me there".

(iii) Longer time to get Feedback. Some supervisors demonstrate multiple delays in responding to the completion of the PG candidate's study due to many personal commitments and health issues within their household, this was highlighted by one respondent who said "She was answering as I was asking her, and she asked for two weeks. I gave her three weeks. When I called her, she said everyone in her household had been sick, so they were recovering, including herself. I waited again for another week. When I called, she was attending to her doctoral thesis response from external examiners, who had feedback. So, my study had to wait, again. This was her third doctoral degree; my master's was the first one for me. How selfish! She wants to g*et al*l the top degrees but causing me to fail my first real postgraduate degree. When she was done with her resubmission, she was then having a birthday, and a trip overseas with family".

Furthermore, the results reveal that some supervisors took three to five months to review a short proposal draft submitted by PG students which led to frustrations and consideration of dropping out, this was highlighted by multiple respondents, one said "When I submit work to her, I have to remind her to give me feedback. She takes five months to give me scanty feedback, concentrating on a small grammatical error and shouting at me as if I killed a person", another respondent said "For two years and 8 months she wasted my time, as she did not give me feedback on my submissions". One student who did not get feedback on their submission said that "When we met, he told me what he knew about me and that I must never take chances with him. I decided to record when I entered his office. He never gave me feedback on my submissions, until I went to the ombudsman". The lack of timeous feedback from supervisors led to some students being depressed "He refused to make a timetable, as I was proposing. He said that I must just follow his instructions. So, how was I going to be an independent researcher? He gave me depression that lasted for over 14 months, and even labeled me weak because I could not resist simple frustration".

The study findings indicated that some PG students feared that their supervisors could retaliate against them should they escalate their frustrations, especially when they hold some power in the institution. The case of respondent 1 is one example, citing that the supervisor was on the ethics committee and could be allowed to evaluate their complaints. This seems to create a clear conflict of interest and power imbalance, as he was not fulfilling his responsibilities as a supervisor to provide timely guidance and support to help the candidate and the other students progress in their research (Lee *et al.,* 2024). Taking three months to review a short proposal draft is unacceptable. The favoritism towards white students at another HEI suggests racial bias and unethical behavior, as supervisors have a duty to treat all

students fairly and with respect (Kimhi, 2020). The lack of progress by PG students under expert supervision raises serious questions about supervisor competence and commitment.

These PG candidates showed to be very frustrated with their supervisor's lack of support, long delays in providing feedback, and self-absorbed behavior that is negatively impacting their ability to complete their PG degree. The candidate would feel that the supervisor is uncaring and irresponsible.

Some supervisors demonstrate multiple delays in responding to the completion of the PG candidate's study due to many personal commitments and health issues within their household, and this is not acceptable. Health issues are acceptable to a point, but when the supervisor is always off sick to offset the student's progress, they should be changed. For example, the supervisor, despite initially asking for two weeks, candidate granted her three weeks, only to encounter further delays as she dealt with illness and her academic responsibilities related to her third doctoral degree. This resulted in additional waiting periods for the candidate as she prioritized her academic pursuits. This can be viewed as selfishness on the part of the supervisor (Roberts & Seaman, 2018). The situation that culminated in the supervisor celebrating her birthday and embarking on a trip overseas with her family after completing her thesis resubmission and disregarding the master's candidate is a case requiring intervention (Almlöv & Grubbström, 2024). A series of events causes frustration and feelings of neglect in the candidate who awaits supervisor assistance with their PG studies.

The respondents' journey through PG programs has been marked by challenges and changes in supervision. In some instances, initially admitted PG students based on a concept paper and study title, some students faced difficulties with inexperienced supervisors who rejected proposed appointments and demanded a change in study titles. Also, requests to change supervisor caused conflicts, and delays for some time without a supervisor. Cases of expatriate supervisors also seemed to show a lack of supervisor interest in South African students. Some students even resorted to record meetings to gather evidence on feedback delays, and some instances led to the involvement of the ombudsman. Usually, a second supervisor seemed to bring stability and progress to the research (Molaba *et al.*, 2024). Under an experienced professor's guidance, many students progress.

As the candidates expressed frustration with some supervisors, they cited limited knowledge and a lack of constructive feedback. According to McCulloch and Leonard (2024), students would feel that their time and interest are disrespected when the supervisor offers no guidance despite claiming authority. When meetings with supervisors result in verbal approvals but lack written feedback, they often cause confusion and inconsistency. Robertson (2017) explains that students prefer and benefit from written feedback, so a supervisor who resists this leads to a breakdown in trust.

Some candidates had even dropped their studies after many wasteful years and returned when they consciously reflected and realized that it was not their fault. Students normally feel angry and disappointed. Cases led to students confronting supervisors and escalating to higher offices. According to Albertyn and Bennett (2021), such situations going out of hand should be prevented. Some candidate escalated their problems to the faculty deans, some of whom were unaware due to misinformation from the supervisors about their students. For the candidates who had email evidence to prove their cases, it led to their readmissions. Others were blamed as they never thought that faculties could be unsupportive like the supervisors.

Some candidates describe their initial meeting with a supervisor who began by praising their concept paper and study focus but later disapproved of it. That is dishonesty (Gray &

Jordan, 2012), which academia does not need. A supervisor who focused on personal topics such as dress and hair, and the supervisor seemed more interested in building a friendship than discussing the candidate's research, was a sign of a lack of professionalism. Also, a supervisor spending close to 50 minutes talking about her academic achievements is unhelpful to the candidate. Another unfortunate case is when the supervisor dodges a question on supervision, saying it is for another day when the student comes for a supervision appointment. Cekiso *et al.* (2019) explain that such treatment could cause student discomfort and frustration. The importance of academic supervision and research is emphasized. Moreover, such supervisors tend to provide feedback of limited use.

Many students experienced challenging situations with their supervisors who provided negative feedback without constructive criticism. Mackey *et al.* (2017) counsel that critique, and strictly not criticism, is required in supervision. Despite attempts to seek guidance, some supervisors did not give feedback. Some supervisors prefer to send details verbally or by phone, avoiding email, leading later to misunderstandings and conflicts. Some such supervisor behaviors were solved by adding a supervisor or replacing the initial one.

Under-supervised PG students often express frustration and anger towards their supervisors, as they find them to be arrogant, selfish, and unsupportive. A supervisor who allegedly asked to use the student's car and the student refused, then became critical of the candidate, labeling her as selfish, is a case requiring dismissal, or at least a disciplinary hearing (Hafid, 2022). The supervisor's behavior may be motivated by a competitive spirit and focus on their achievements rather than on the supervision task.

The supervisors being discussed are uncaring, rude, and generally ineffective to the student's study progress (Mackey *et al.,* 2017). Many of them fail to provide support or supervision, do not reply to questions from students, and refuse to create a timetable for research. According to Wald *et al.* (2023), the timetable is the initial step in the student-supervisor relationship, marking the beginning of their collaborative efforts. Some unsupportive supervisors label their students as weak for experiencing frustration. Some of these students are caused by depression. Thus, supervisors neglecting students should be decriminalized (O'Kane & Brussoni, 2024; Smit, 2022). For PG students, such supervisor conduct is challenging but unnecessary. Some students are intimidated and bullied, and those who succumb may drop out.

4. CONCLUSION

The findings highlight a concerning pattern of supervisor misconduct, power imbalances, and a longer time to give feedback that has significantly impacted the progress and well-being of PG students. Addressing these issues is crucial to ensure a fair and supportive academic environment for postgraduate research. The study findings suggest that the institution of higher education needs to enforce memorandums of understanding between students and supervisors to track the progress of supervisors and apparent misconduct, power imbalances, and timeous feedback. Furthermore, this study recommends the following to address the issues faced by PG students and improve the quality of supervision. By establishing clear policies and procedures, providing training and support for supervisors, implementing regular monitoring and evaluation, promoting diversity and inclusion, providing mental support for PG students, encouraging collaborative supervision to speed up timeous supervisor feedback, and providing open communication and feedback between PG students and supervisors, among others. Although the study findings are not generalizable due to geographical location and small sample size, the results pave a way for effecting progress in student-supervisor relationships and university throughput.

5. AUTHORS' NOTE

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article. Authors confirmed that the paper was free of plagiarism.

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