

Postgraduate Supervision Practices in low regulated University System in Côte d'Ivoire

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Abstract

Postgraduate supervision is paramount to empower the next generation of researchers. However, time spent to graduation and knowledge gain are of great concern regarding the completion of postgraduate studies. In most African universities, the main cause is the lack of guidelines to frame student-supervisors' relationship and their responsibilities. Study aims to analyse how supervision practices in health research in Côte d'Ivoire hinder or promote timely degree completion.

Drawing on a qualitative methodology, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 32 postgraduate students and 17 supervisors. We purposively selected informants in health research based at public universities in Côte d'Ivoire. Results revealed two models with different supervisors' styles, poorly standardised guidelines, and student's coping strategies in the context of low regulation. We conclude that the absence of formal documents and clear regulations for student's/supervisor's roles, as well as the lack of monitoring system by the administration are factors that delay postgraduate study completion.

Keywords: *Postgraduate supervision; Practices; Models; Regulation; Guideline; Côte d'Ivoire.*

1. Introduction

The University as an institution has within its system different elements which are interrelated, organised, and governed by regulations. A university is defined by Andoh, (2017) as an institution of higher learning, a place where people's minds are trained for rational and independent thinking, and for problem solving at higher levels. In Africa, teaching and advancing knowledge through research are key functions of universities through postgraduate training programmes. Thus, postgraduate supervision is paramount to empower researchers and lecturers skills, and beyond. Most of the literature on postgraduate studies describes supervision as a process of learning and teaching which enables both students and supervisors to produce new knowledge (Anderson et al., 2018; Chugh, Macht, & Harreveld, 2021; Noel, Wambua, & Ssentamu, 2021; Rugut, 2017). Supervisors thus play a critical role in the learning process of research at masters' and doctoral level as students depend greatly on their supervisors for research support, and consequently for graduation (Owusu, 2018). Moreover, Azure, (2016) demonstrated that the quality of postgraduate programme depends not only on the supervision methodology but also other elements such as the research environment, which can include policies, infrastructures, funding, library facilities, computing, office space, conferences, travels, and fieldwork just to name few.

The supervision practices reflect the models, approaches, and styles in the relationship between the supervisor and student. There is currently an ongoing debate regarding supervision models, approaches, and styles. Ngulube, (2021) outlined that Phillips and Pugh (1994) make no distinction between supervision styles and approaches, but Lee (2012) considers supervision models as approaches. Whilst for Mouton (2001), styles or approaches are interchangeable and can determine the roles that the supervisor assumes in relation to the supervisee. He identified styles as those of adviser, pastor, quality controller, expert guide, coach, and broker. Within the debate on models there is no generic accepted definition of styles, approaches, and models. However, for the purpose of the current study, the supervisory style is defined as the principles, behaviours, attitudes and reactions that govern the supervisor and student relationship in research (Boehe, 2014; Bøgelund, 2015). Also, in this article, sole, co-supervision and group supervision are indicators of supervision models as revealed by Amehoe & Botha, 2013 and Bitzer & Albertyn, 2011. Based on the aforementioned debate, the supervisory relationship is considered as the heart of postgraduate research training (Hemer, 2012). A certain number of elements are highlighted for a successful postgraduate supervision such as: effective and good supervision, pedagogy of supervision, supervisory feedback, selecting or allocating and matching students with supervisors, supervisors'-students' roles within the context of the relationship, the level of postgraduate students' satisfaction, different models of supervision and styles of supervisors in supervisory practices (Abiddin, 2007; P. Ali, Watson, & Dhingra, 2016; Azure, 2016; Chugh et al., 2021; Hemer, 2012; Noel et al., 2021). Despite the above mentioned knowledge

produced on postgraduate supervision, the completion of master and doctoral studies is of great concern regarding time spent to graduation and the limited project resources and relation to the project timeline. There is need to assess supervisory practices which are undertheorised and poorly understood (Ngulube, 2021) and to provide further research on how completion rate from four to seven years (4-6 years more in Ghana (Akpaprep, Jengre, & Amoah, 2017), 6.19 years in Ethiopia (Fetene & Tamrat, 2021) can be improved. In the case of poor or unclear recorded procedures to guide postgraduate supervision, supervisors tend to develop their own rules and styles. Although there exists a wealth of literature on postgraduate studies, the supervision practices in relation to their impact on postgraduate completion have not yet been investigated in african francophone universities such as those of Côte d'Ivoire.

1.1. Theoretical framework

The conceptual framework underpinning this research resulted from Crozier and Friedberg's theory of "Actors and Systems". The concepts drawn on herein are the concrete system of action, regulation, actor, power, and strategy mobilised in the frameworks of the postgraduate supervision relationship. We considered university as concrete system where all actors are interrelated and their actions are governed by regulations and various management policies. However, it was observed that a weak system of regulations existed in relation to the practices of supervision and to the relations between the students, lecturers, and administration staff in the public university system in Côte d'Ivoire. Moreover, this field of supervision, is a field of power and negotiation where the strategy mobilised by stakeholders relied on their interests, expectations, motivations and behaviours towards them.

2. Methods

The study was conducted from July 2019 to June 2021, in three public universities in Côte d'Ivoire: Université Félix Houphouët-Boigny, Université Nangui Abrogoua and Université Peleforo Gon Coulibaly. We purposively selected faculties in which the postgraduate programme is related to human, animal, and environmental/vegetal health. We then identified and mapped the relevant stakeholders within the context of these three Ivorian universities. They include: full time masters and PhDs students and their supervisors. Prior to the survey, the authorisation was obtained from the vice chancellor of each university faculty, and consent was sought from all participants. The ethical clearance was obtained from the Comité National d'Ethique des Sciences de la Vie et de la Santé of Côte d'Ivoire who approved the study with reference number N/Ref : 132-21/MSHPCMU/CNESVS-km.

As research on supervision practices in higher education in Côte d'Ivoire are still scarce, we used an explorative methodology for which qualitative methods were most suitable. An interview guide was developed considering informants and their supervision experience.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted to collect data from 32 postgraduate students enrolled between 2015 to 2019. Selection criteria for students were as follows: (i) second year of master or PhD student irrespective of stage in the programme; (ii) registered in a running programme or already graduated; (iii) being in sole supervision or co-supervision. Of the supervisors (n=17) recruited within this study, five were deans. All supervisors were directly involved in student affairs by handling general thesis of their respective students. Data collected comprised the research objectives: (i) models and styles of supervision; (ii) the governance system of supervision and (iii) the strategies used by students in their process completing their respective degree programme to graduation. Based on the interview guide, postgraduate students were asked to describe the supervision they received, their knowledge about supervision text and rules and their resilience to overcome supervision relationship challenges. Supervisors were asked to express themselves regarding supervision relationship practice. Information was collected in notebooks and with a tape recorder to ensure accuracy. Data were analyzed using content analysis through NVivo 12 software (from QSR International) and presented thematically to reflect the objectives of the study.

3. Results

3.1 Models of supervision and Supervisors' styles: A mix of formal and informal models

This study revealed two supervision models: 1) the delegation of supervision work to a colleague or assistant and 2) co-supervision. We observed that the styles of supervision were shaped by the attitudes, behaviours, and roles of supervisors in supervisory practices. The styles were the way supervisors intervened and the different roles they played in the relationship. Moreover, within the two models, we distinguished styles of supervision linked to the supervisor's personality. The delegated supervision was close to sole or one-one model of supervision and is an informal supervision relationship where the main supervisor delegated the main activities to his/her teaching assistant (in general a PhD holder and former supervisee who benefited from the same assistance). The co-supervision model was a form of collaborative support to the student through interaction between two supervisors with similar or different background and/or grade in supervising students.

Out of 32 students, 18 pointed out that their supervisors had a "style of delegation". In this model, before any work was sent/given to the main supervisor, the student works first with his/her peers or with a laboratory technician and then with the assistant's supervisor. The assistant validates the work in first instance and transfers it to the main supervisor. The students also reported two keys qualities of the assistant : availability and swift feedback. One of the students said: "*Every time I sent the work to my main supervisor, I would first see a Postdoc who was his own PhD student and then he arranged the work before it went to my supervisor*". (**Female PhD student, animal health**). Another student, expressed his

experience with: *“When the Postdoc/Assistant who is also laboratory technician sees that the document is ready, he sends it to the main supervisor. Once it arrives at his level, the main supervisor will examine what was done and give his approval with the signature on the document before the defense”*. (**Male Msc student, human health**). This was also echoed in comments by one supervisor: *“I assign them to my assistant who monitors them in the laboratory. Students first show the results to him. In each meeting session, both the assistant and student present the results to me and explain them”*. (**Female supervisor, Associate Professor, human health**).

Another supervision style found was the “expert guide” in which the supervisor did not deal with any private or social/family-related issues of his/her students. Herein the professional relationship is seen as privileged over the personal. Students also mentioned supervisors’ styles as involving quality control, document editing and mentorship. These were illustrated respectively by the following statements: *“Sometimes my supervisor rephrases the content in order to help us understand better. He even makes suggestions for us to reformulate objectives or hypotheses. For the interview guides, he guided me when things were not going smoothly”*. (**Female Msc student, human health**). *“She (my supervisor) helps to organize the work. For thesis when the final document is supposed to come out, she passes the documents among her students to edit them. She makes us read our documents page after page. She takes the time to check our work, corrects it, guides us so that we don’t make mistakes”*. (**Male PhD student, human health**). *She is truly human. She encourages us, prays for us and finances our experiments. We don’t pay anything for our scientific publications, she pays. Each of her students has at least two or three publications. She finds that students don’t have money so she helps. She also puts her office at our disposal, an environment to work in*. (**Male PhD student, human health**). To emphasize this comment a supervisor also pointed out: *“The supervisor is rigorous with students in a way so as to build scientific rationale in their works, but at the same time he has to be paternalist. Every year I used to buy computers for students just to boost their work*. (**Male Supervisor, Associate Lecturer, human health**) From our findings, within all the supervisor’ styles were the different attitudes and roles played towards their students’ behaviour in the relationship.

3.2 Lack of practical or standardised supervision guidelines

The selected universities had policies for their governance overall. They also had a handbook comprising a charter and a procedure manual for faculties/departments. However, in practice it was reported by the majority of students that these handbooks which should describe the framework for thesis and research work, and requirements for the programme were hardly known by them at the point of their admission registration. Findings showed that there was no explicit or comprehensive guidelines for postgraduates when compared to undergraduate programmes. The postgraduate programmes are less regulated and less institutionalized. Supervisors were asked about the existing documents on supervision, which

they used to guide their supervision role. All the supervisors relied on the rule of limiting supervision ratio 4PhD & 5Msc students/supervisor, the regulations text regarding tasks allocated to supervisors which dealt mainly with the grade/rank of lecturers (A =full Professor or Associate Professor, B= Associate Lecturer) who are able to supervise students research work and documents from the new academic reform known as Licence-Master-Doctorat (LMD). The following two excerpts from supervisors illustrated their general perception : *“There are no texts or guidelines to say how to supervise doesn't mean you can't teach. We are lecturers, so we know how to teach. We have our plan, our methods but there is nothing defined that we have to build on. There is nothing that says the lecturer has to do this or that and the student has to do this or that”*. **(Female supervisor, Associate Professor, Human health)**. *“I know that we have rules and procedures for teaching and doing research, but we don't have rules and procedures for supervising students. However there is a ministerial decree that says how the Master or PhD (thesis defence) juries are composed, but how the relationship between the supervisor and the student must be, is miningful”*. **(Male Supervisor, Associate Lecturer, Human health)**

Furthermore, our results revealed that the different roles played by supervisors were not documented in any guideline document. However, supervisors developed their own methods and shaped their supervisory relationship according to students' capacity and behaviours. Moreover, we observed that this lack of guidelines was linked to the lack of administration's monitoring of student progress (quality, timing). This aspect was illustrated by two supervisors: *“In our institution, at the same time as the professor is asked to follow the student to completion (Master 2 years and PhD in 3 years), there is no clause to force the professor to follow the student. There is no rule that says what to do and what not to do”*. **(Male Supervisor, Professor, environmental health)**. *“A text that serves as a guide, perhaps existed before but there's no written document that tells us how we should supervise. Former deans and presidents of the university have never mentioned them. Even if it exists, it needs to be updated and if it is implemented, it can help students with completion”*. **(Female supervisor, Associate Professor, human health)**.

Since both supervisor and student were not made aware of the existence of texts regarding expectations and guidelines related their roles and there is no monitoring of the process. This can lead certain people taking advantage to extend student's programme beyond the expected timeframe. This influence the completion: *“On paper it's 3 years for the PhD completion. But in our faculty there are some students who take up to 6 years for completion. The average completion of my PhD students is 4 years”*. **(Female Dean, Professor, human health)**.

Students also were asked about the existing document on supervision and reported that they did not receive any document regarding the different roles of actors within postgraduate studies at the registration or at enrolment. *“If this charter exists, it should be at the level of the scientific council. We are not aware of it. In all the documents that I know of, there is no*

mention of supervision but rather the laws governing university life. What we know is that students are assigned to a supervisor. I don't think I've seen a text that talks about the rights and obligations in supervision. We know that there are texts on the remuneration of lecturers but not about their obligations. In any case I am not aware of any". (**Male PhD student, human health**). However, students highlighted the existence of thesis writing charter in some faculties instead of handbook for postgraduate supervision. "Each department has a written charter. So according to this charter guidelines, we write our thesis". (**Female Msc, Animal health**).

3.3 Students' coping strategies in the context of poor regulation and poor awareness

The observed supervision style within the context of this study is a 'top-down'-power relation between supervisor and supervisee since the supervisor is the main individual responsible for the student and their research project within the academia arena. In this power relationship, the students expectations were not always met. Each actor developed his/her own strategy regarding their interests and resources to overcome challenges since the roles' were not clearly stated or defined. The unknown responsibilities of both student-supervisor impacted negatively the supervision process, as it was found to delays in feedback, related to the supervisor's attitude and busy schedule due to their teaching, administrative and other engagements. This is illustrated by a student and a supervisor respectively; "We don't have any meeting scheduled and when I have some issues, I emailed him but he replied always late maybe because of his position as director. He is too busy and this delayed my defense". (**Male Msc, Animal health**). "With my administrative obligations, I refer the work to my assistant who is both in the field with the students and in the lab. My assistant gives me an update on the progress". (**Male Dean, Environmental health**)

It was indicated that 29 out of 32 students became more autonomous, proactive, worked with peers to fill gaps from irregular meetings, delays in feedback, and insufficient laboratory equipment. They were not passive knowledge recipients, but rather developed their own capacities to become reflexive researcher. The following extracted illustrate the situation: "I think that the student should not expect too much from the professor. There are some supervisors who don't like that, they like proactive, innovative students who provide new ideas". (**Female PhD student, animal health**). Another student described a system of solidarity among peers as strategy: "We helped each other. There were three of us and if one of us couldn't do a specific work, the other students came to help. We didn't have the same topic but we worked in the department on the same animal species, with the same equipment, which made us go into the field together". (**Female Msc student, animal health**)

4. Discussion

Results were based on interviews and aimed at providing information on models and supervisory styles, impact of the absence of supervision guidelines and strategies used by students in this context of low regulation. As the empirical data show, the practices of supervision relationship in the Ivorian university system have become more idiosyncratic. In the absence of clear recorded procedures to guide postgraduate supervision, supervisors tend to develop their own rules and styles.

One of the key functions of any university is to educate and equip postgraduate students with research skills (J. Ali, Ullah, & Sanauddin, 2019). These skills can be built in interpersonal relationship between supervisor and supervisee in the academic and research environment. Our findings showed two supervision models: delegation and co-supervision. It appears that in delagation model the main supervisor was not always available but trusted their assistant because he had already trained them. In each model there were different supervisor's styles such as delegated, quality control editing, and mentorship styles in relation to the student's profile. This finding is supported by previous studies by (Mouton, 2007; Ngulube, 2021).

Results also showed that, there was a lack of defined text regarding the practice of supervision on the roles of each actors in the relationship. The findings of this study are similar to the literature of some anglophone african universities, as supervision guidelines lack clear information. Cekiso, Tshotsho, Masha, & Saziwa, (2019) suggested that the clarification of roles and responsibilities for both the postgraduate student and the supervisor were important so that both parties were held accountable. For this reason Ali et al., (2016) quoted that a clear understanding roles of the supervisor-student was paramount to building a healthy and productive supervisory relationship for successful completion of the degree. Nevertheless, in the anglophone african universities that have supervision guidelines there still exists a lack information on how the relationship should be. Moreover, Masek, (2017) confirmed that there was no prescriptive guideline that establishes mutual expectations of supervisor and student in order to develop a "working" relationship. As a result, both parties do not experience the expected level of supervision. In the context where actors roles were not clearly identified, the postgraduate students developed also their own ways of coping and strategies for the completion of their studies . Their coping strategies were the reaction and effort made to minimize or tolerate some challenges to get their degree certificate. This is in concert with findings of Asogwa, Wombo, & Ugwuoke, (2014) in agricultural education. Evidence from the study showed that the absence of guidelines and clear regulations on supervisory roles, and of administration' monitoring were factors that delay postgraduate completion.

5. Conclusion

The postgraduate student-supervisor relationship is critical for the scientific quality, the individual capacity building, mutual learning and timely degree completion rate of students. The aim of this study was to explore the postgraduate supervision practices in relation to the timely completion of the thesis and associated defence. There are two types of supervision relationship models: delegated supervision and the co-supervision. In each model, the quality control and editing style was appreciated by the students. It was observed that many students do not often complete their thesis on time (up to 6 years for PhD and 3 years for Master) due to the workload of supervisors, lateness of feedback and lack of clear responsibilities of system stakeholders.

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