

Effective Strategies of Doctorate Students' Blended Supervision and Mentorship at School of Education, Moi University, Kenya

David Kipkasi Kessio
Moi University, Eldoret, Kenya

Post COVID-19 era compounded by the proliferation of co-supervision as a result of multidisciplinary research studies and internalization of education has necessitated blended supervision and mentorship. Blended supervision provides panacea to graduate studies where research supervision could be done remotely through blended model which is a hybrid of online and face-to-face. This study sought to evaluate effective strategies of doctorate students' blended supervision and mentorship programme at School of Education, Moi University, Kenya. The following objectives guided the study: to assess the level of preparedness by the doctorate supervisors in adoption of blended supervision and mentorship; to determine the availability of the ICT infrastructure and platforms that support blended supervision and mentorship; and to establish the challenges in adoption of blended supervision and mentorship. The target populations were doctorate supervisors, doctorate candidates, ICT support personnel, and Dean postgraduate studies at Moi University. The study adopted interpretative philosophical paradigm thus qualitative research design. Constructivist learning theory of learning was adopted. Simple random sampling of postgraduate students and faculty; purposive sampling of the ICT staff, Dean postgraduate studies and doctorate supervisors was used. Open-ended questionnaires, document analysis, and interview schedule were employed to collect data from the respondents. Data were analyzed descriptively and through thematic coding. Key findings revealed that there was inadequate preparation of doctorate supervision, lack of feedback expectation tool thus delayed responses and poor connectivity especially during interaction. The study findings would inform policy, adoption, and implementation of blended supervision in Africa higher education institutions and would be of significance to policy makers, researchers, and institutions of higher education in enhancement of doctorate students' blended supervision and mentorship.

Keywords: strategies, blended supervision, constructivist learning

Introduction

Doctorate qualification all over the world is considered to be an apex of academic discourses, which produces critical thinkers and potential graduate supervisors in Europe, US, Australia, and sub-Saharan Africa (Abukari & David, 2019; Hoddell, Street, & Wildblood, 2002). Doctoral supervision environment has drastically changed especially due to post COVID-19 pandemic, co-supervision, and internationalization of education. At the fulcrum of doctoral supervision is the ubiquitous adoption of blended supervision by the supervisor and doctorate student (Benmore, 2016; Abukari & David, 2019).

David Kipkasi Kessio, Ph.D., Senior Lecturer, Department of Educational Management & Policy Studies, Moi University, Eldoret, Kenya.

Empirical studies foreground the overarching adoption of blended supervision for quality and timely completion rates of doctorate degree. Concomitantly, literature review indicates that blended supervision enhances effectiveness thus ultimately influences the quality of the doctorate degree and timely completion (Gill & Burnard, 2008; Akerlind & McAlpine, 2017; Abukari & David, 2019).

There is increased interest in blended supervision of doctorates in the world over Germany, United Kingdom, USA, and Africa is not an exception. Rapidly growing doctoral provisions reveal paradigm shift in doctoral education while conversely blended supervision is a recent innovation (Freeman & Tolmie, 2012; Hawkes, 2016). Blended doctorate supervision studies provide both opportunities and challenges to students thus become apprentice from being novice researchers (Park, 2005). Studies revealed that the relationships with doctorate supervisors significantly affected supervisees for various reasons. Relationships could be bolstered through regular positive interactions through blended supervision.

Recently, effort is concerted by researchers including increased concerns on postgraduate work and mentorship (Hawkes, 2016; Abukari & David, 2019). A growing number of research findings have limited itself on evaluation, quality, and completion of research studies. There is paucity of information on effectiveness of non-conventional supervision models like blended supervision where the supervisor and the supervisee are remotely removed. Empirical studies reviewed contend myriads institutional, structural, and personal inherent challenges (Park, 2005; Abukari & David; 2019). It is imperative to establish "ground rules" that regulate the conduct of doctorate candidates and their academic advisors at the commencement of their academic odyssey, where the process and the outcome are overtly demarcated, expected to be symbiotic in concerned individuals (Gill & Burnard, 2008; Benmore, 2016).

This goes a long way in effectiveness of supervision as both the doctorate supervisor and supervisee work as a team in order to achieve the envisaged outcomes. Halse (2011) alludes that the quality of doctorate graduates is of concern to policy makers and the employers. He attributes to the quality and inadequate preparation of supervisors. Conversely, exists dearth of empirical findings about effective strategies of doctorate students' blended supervision and mentorship and how it can be enhanced during co-supervision. This calls for reflexivity and open mind on the doctorate supervisors in order to inspire confidence on the supervisee.

The scope of the study focuses on the blended supervision and mentorship of postgraduate students at Moi University. Any envisaged generalization should take cognizance of the characteristics of the population (Denzin, 2014; J. W. Creswell & J. D. Creswell, 2018) thus limited to the study context. The study was qualitative and thus the sample cannot be adequately representative of all postgraduate doctorate students. The findings are of significance to the university graduate schools, management, researchers in the field, supervisors, and doctorate students for effective blended supervision and mentorship.

Literature Review

Blended supervision is current discourse on students' supervision and mentorship (Park, 2005). The responsibility for undertaking this provision oscillates inextricably on several sections in organization: educational/academic development centres, Dean postgraduate, directorate of research, student support, and academic affairs in most public universities (Halse, 2011; Hutchings, 2017). The key actor is however the supervisor.

The capacity building of doctorate supervisors through online/offline, seminars, mentorship is current area of doctorate supervisors' preparation and mentorship programme (Benmore, 2016). Preparation of academic

faculty adopts myriad approaches: several emphasize the collegiate mentorship (Hutchings, 2017). Arguably, new supervisors are usually influenced by two factors when conducting supervision: their conceptualization of their epistemology and reflexivity (Lees, 2008; Hutchings, 2017).

Empirical studies reveal that there exists a policy guide for undertaking doctorate supervision. This was developed in 2008 that has been concomitantly reviewed and improved through further refinement and teamwork with supervisors in seminars in Europe, UK, Australia, India, and sub-Sahara Africa (Gill & Burnard, 2008; Hutchings, 2017).

It suggests that effective supervisors go through a blend of the following strategies which is contingent on their preference and context:

The functional approach focuses on performance thus provide an opportunity to measure progress through project execution tools, risk analysis, milestones and record keeping. It is identified by the intent to achieve outcome; Enculturation provide a sense of belonging (to the cohort, the discipline, the culture), it emphasizes being part of a group, having a sense of direction, working to the standards of that group and is identified by the supervisor's intent to include the candidate in a number of ontological and epistemological process; Critical thinking encompasses intellectual rigor, provides an opportunity of thinking in new ways, encourages the ability to analyse and recognise flaws in arguments and is identified by the supervisor's intent to analyse and enable the candidate to analyse what is being planned or presented; Emancipation presents value of enabling the candidate to become autonomous, it provides the candidate support in discovering a personally meaningful framework, supporting personal transformation and is identified by the supervisor's intent to develop others in whatever trajectory they choose to undertake; Relationship development has the core value of love. It is altruistic, benevolent and demonstrates goodwill. It foregrounds friendship, wisdom in managing boundaries, agreeing expectations and preventing conflict (Lee & Murray 2015; Hutchings 2017; Park, 2005); The period allowed for supervisor capacity building differs drastically across institutions and countries (Hutchings, 2017; Lee & Murray, 2015). Few universities use short free time sessions while some online/blended programmes and some run intensive accredited programmes where the university provide workload ratio for new supervisors to train during the semester. This goes a long way in enhancement of blended supervision of doctorate students and mentorship. (Benmore, 2016)

QAA (2017) came up with conventional indicators that were generally acceptable and adequately addressed crucial aspects of any higher level learning and supervision by extent:

Higher education provider arrangements: that enable a university to deliver according to national, regional and international expectations, include regulation for research degrees and monitoring provisions; the research environment: appropriate factors to support relevant subjects, students and research degree—infrastructure; research-active staff; and knowledge exchange; selection, admission and induction of students: clear admission and induction procedure guided by a sound admission policy and induction; Supervision: create a systematic and a clear supervision arrangements that is supportive to the research student and the overall process; Progress and review arrangements: set up an effective process that monitors and reviews progress of research students; development of research and other skills: initiate research training and education activities to establish personal and professional development opportunities for the benefit of research students; Evaluation mechanisms: internal and external evaluation processes that collect and act upon evaluation from all players in the programme process (research students, staff, examiners); assessment: clear assessment process that reflects the distinctive nature of the research degree and are available to students, staff and examiners; and Research student complaints and appeals: put in place a clear process of resolving problems and ensure that all research students and staff are aware and understand the different processes. (Abukari & David, 2019)

Methodology

The study adopted interpretative philosophical paradigm where qualitative methodology is context-conscious that was utilized (Denzin, 2014; J. W. Creswell & J. D. Creswell, 2018). A constructivist researcher propounds that “reality based on people's subjective experiences of the external world”. Interpretivists believe there is no

single correct route or particular method to knowledge and that no objective knowledge is independent of thinking or human reasoning (Aliyu, Bello, Kasim, & Martin, 2014).

Qualitative approach uses naturalistic setting to study phenomena in context specific environment where overt manipulation is not possible (Denzin, 2014; Bordens & Abbott, 2014). Data were collected from the respondents directly. It focuses on the self who is supervisor and doctorate supervisee with the expected outcome of completion of research through blended supervision and mentorship (Denzin, 2014).

Thirty doctorate students and fifteen supervisors were interviewed through focused group discussions, open ended questionnaires, and online reports and recordings. The doctorate supervisors' corrections, online/zoom recordings, Google docs, and handwritten comments during face-to-face interactive supervision were analyzed through thematic coding, strands where emerging themes on doctorate students' blended supervision and mentorship were evaluated and interpreted.

The target populations were doctorate supervisors, doctorate candidates, ICT support personnel, and Dean postgraduate studies at Moi University. Purposive sampling was used to determine the sample. Dean postgraduate and ICT support staff were selected since they were information rich as experts (Benmore, 2016; J. W. Creswell & J. D. Creswell, 2018). The students were able to express their thought, feelings freely. This provided insights on the blended doctorate supervision and mentorship.

The following ethical considerations were adhered during the study: first was respect for persons where the researcher reiterated to the participants to enter into participation in study voluntarily or exit. Secondly, beneficence called for protections of the well-being of participants during the study (Bordens & Abbott, 2014; QAA, 2017). Thirdly, justice proscribes use of participant respondents due to their readily availability (Bordens & Abbott, 2014). Internet research and ethical research practice was upheld through obtaining of consent to use chat rooms and online audio recordings from both the candidates and their supervisors.

Discussion of the Findings

The research identifies myriad issues which were prerequisite for effective strategies of doctorate students' blended supervision and mentorship by their supervisors. Focused group discussions were interactive; in addition, the online analysis and thematic coding of zoom supervision revelations from the reports highlighted the need for supervisors to mentor the supervisees as a peers. since doctorate qualification is considered as training of new if not potential supervisors. This supports the findings by Hutchings (2017) and Park (2005) who contend that doctorate supervision studies provide opportunities and challenges to students thus become apprentice from being novice researchers. This enables them to mentor others thus overarching self-efficacy.

Halse's (2011) findings suggest that doctorate supervisors' supervision experiences and perceptions transform their subjectivities and negotiated identities. In general, "blended supervision is an ongoing ontological process of becoming a supervisor" through mentorship and concomitantly nurturing generation of future supervisors (Lee & Murray, 2015). Forging of stronger partnership with key stakeholders and for capacity building in supervision process emerged strongly in supervisors' narratives through experience (Abukari & David, 2019). This would significantly bolster quality of supervision especially through blended model and mentorship programme. The respondents inextricably bemoaned inadequate infrastructure and poor adoption of blended supervision and mentorship in African context.

The following research questions derived from objectives guided discussions of findings:

Level of Preparedness by the Faculty in Adoption of Blended Supervision and Mentorship

The findings through thematic coding and transcription of interview responses and online content analysis including reports indicated inadequate preparation of doctorate supervisors. It is at variance with Lee and Murray (2015) and Halse (2011) who posit that there was need for adequate preparations of supervisors to enable to expedite their responsibilities. Benmore (2016) recommends regular seminars, workshops, online capacity building of doctorate supervisors as form of professional development programme for effectiveness.

Interview guide with the postgraduate and ICT staff including the supervisors revealed that there was limited time to engage in blended supervision and mentorship due to work load and overlapping academic calendars/semesters. The doctorate supervisors were taking full teaching load, being thesis examiners, and performing other administrative duties due to their seniority in the academic echelon.

The findings seem to suggest that the induction process of the faculty members should be inextricably linked to doctorate supervisors. There was need of co-supervision with the most senior faculty for blended supervision and mentorship.

Most doctorate supervisors indicated that they attended online thesis supervision courses through sponsorship by stakeholders in the education sector. Interview with some respondents intimated:

I attended personal development supervision programmes by my own ingenuity, while some were arranged and sponsored by professional organizations. East and South African-German Centre of Excellence for Educational Research Methodologies and Management (CERM-ESA) and Partnership for African Social and Governance Research (PASGR) mentored me through their training Programmes (respondent X)

This calls for multifaceted and multidisciplinary engagement between the stakeholders involved in research supervision which is supported by the findings by Abukari and David (2019).

Availability of the ICT Infrastructure and Platforms That Support Blended Supervision and Mentorship

Research findings revealed that majority of the doctorate students and their supervisors had access to information communication technology gadgets namely: laptops, tablets, iPads, desktop computers, and cellphones. Focused group discussions suggested that some elderly and most experienced doctorate supervisors preferred face-to-face model of supervision as opposed to online. Taylor (2008) needs adoption of ICT in order to embrace quality in the supervision and ultimately effectiveness.

Document analysis identified the following platforms commonly used by doctorate supervisors: emails, Google docs, Google meet, Google classroom, Massive open online course (MOOC), zoom meetings, whatsapp group, BlackboardLearn among others. Most of the platforms were free except zoom and institutional platforms which the supervisors and supervisees were pre-registered to use at outset. Most of the platforms in use were interactive thus panacea to “loneliness” of doctorate students. This enabled real-time response to their concerns.

Challenges in Adoption of Blended Supervision and Mentorship

Research findings revealed institutional, personal, and social challenges which acted as an impediment to blended supervision and mentorship. Abukari and David (2019) reiterated that, academic practitioners in doctorate are tasked with the leadership opportunity to demonstrate that doctorate is of quality, produces thinkers, high level caliber researchers and supervisors. Findings reveal relationship between doctorate supervisors' knowledge and the quality of the postgraduates. At the centre of effectiveness is adoption of blended supervision. This could be addressed through provision of panacea to challenges inherent in adoption of blended supervision.

Table 1 summarizes the findings on the challenges bedeviling the effective strategies of doctorate students' blended supervision and mentorship. It is instructive to note that institutional, personal, and social challenges can be addressed through allocation of resources, orientation, facilitation, negotiation, and commitment by all parties. This would considerably enhance doctorate supervision and mentorship programme.

Table 1

Challenges in Adoption of Blended Supervision and Mentorship

Challenges	Supervisor	Supervisee
Institutional	Low internet bandwidth	Poor connectivity
	Inadequate capacity building	Limited orientation
	Full workload	Course work load
	Delayed payment for supervisions	Clearance of fees
	Change of supervisors	Poor communication
Personal	Poor organization culture	Lack of clarity
	Resistance to change	Low adapt to technology
	Delayed correction by student	Slow pace of correction
	Poor attitude towards supervision	Discouragement due to challenges
	Conflict	Misunderstandings
Social	High expectations	Lack of funds
	Family obligations	Family commitment
	Transfers	Distance from supervisors
	Sabbaticals	Maternity/paternity leaves

Source: field data, 2022.

Conclusions

The study findings delineate the effective strategies of doctorate students' blended supervision and mentorship. It is multisectoral and requires synergy between supervisees in "academic, social, and political context" of their respective university. It is discourse on contemporary landscape of supervision and panacea on how supervisors engage with their doctoral students especially in African context.

The study foregrounds blended supervision implication for supervision and mentorship of doctorate students and how it can be effectively harnessed for theory and practice. This ultimately improves the quality and completion rates of the doctorate study through synergy between the supervisor and supervisee. Results from this study reaffirm the need for the doctoral supervisors to exercise their academic leadership place in the society in order to mentor the candidates for excellent quality and timely completion of the research through blended supervision. Institutions have responsibility to provide suitable working environment for the doctoral supervisors and supervisees.

There was delayed feedback as a result of poor progress and review arrangements. There was need to establish and maintain strategy which evaluates, assesses, and provides feedback loop doctorate students (Taylor, 2008; Halse, 2011). Feedback Expectation Tool (FET) both hardcopy and through online could be adopted to enable all concerned parties to be responsible and accountable. This would act as contractual form during supervision process; it would drastically reduce delays and conflict that could arise during doctorate supervision process.

Recommendations

The following recommendations were derived from the findings:

- There should be regular capacity building on emerging online technologies through seminars and online platforms such as webinars, Digiface, and face-to-face workshop trainings. This could be realized through

partnership with other stakeholders on research. Doctorate supervisors should be allocated limited teaching load and un-overwhelming administrative duties.

- There is need to engender blended learning in the university mission, vision, and concomitantly policies. There should be partnership between universities and well-wishers such as the Kenya Education Network (KENET), DAAD, internet providers to support doctorate supervisors and students in their research study through subsidized charges as part of corporate social responsibility and encourage multidisciplinary research.
- Institutional, personal, and social challenges should be addressed though multi-sectoral academic mentorship supports programmes and flexibility embraced where supervisees can retrieve corrections at their convenient time.

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