Postgraduate Students' Perceptions of Effective Supervision Practice in an Open-Distance e-Learning Environment

Thulani Andrew Chauke
University of South Africa

Abstract: The aim of this study is to explore the perceptions of postgraduate students in open distance e-learning (ODeL) institutions on what constitutes effective supervision practices that contribute to their academic success. This study adopted a qualitative research approach, sampling 10 postgraduate students pursuing their master's degrees in an ODeL environment through purposive sampling. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and analysed using thematic analysis. The findings revealed that clear communication and feedback, supportive relationships, and active engagement are key elements of effective supervision in ODeL, enhancing postgraduate students' academic success. Supervisors play a crucial role by providing both academic and emotional support through mentorship and motivation, which fosters student achievement. The study recommends that supervisors hold regularly scheduled online meetings with their students because this practice can significantly improve the effectiveness of supervision in ODeL. Additionally, the study highlights the importance of providing training for

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supervisors in humanising pedagogy, specifically designed for ODeL contexts. This training aims to equip supervisors with the necessary skills to effectively engage with students from diverse cultural backgrounds and to respect them regardless of their educational background, beliefs, or cultural differences.

Perceptions des étudiants de cycles supérieurs concernant les pratiques de supervision efficaces dans un environnement de formation ouverte et à distance

Résumé : L'objectif de cette étude est d'explorer les perceptions d'étudiants de cycles supérieurs inscrits dans des établissements de formation ouverte et à distance (FOAD) concernant les pratiques de supervision efficaces qui contribuent à leur réussite universitaire. Cette recherche a adopté une approche qualitative en sélectionnant, par échantillonnage raisonné, dix étudiants inscrits à un programme de maîtrise en FOAD. Les données ont été recueillies au moyen d'entretiens semi-dirigés et analysées de manière thématique.

Les résultats révèlent que la communication claire et les rétroactions constructives, des relations de soutien ainsi qu'un engagement actif sont des éléments clés d'une supervision efficace en FOAD, pour favoriser la réussite des étudiants. Le rôle des superviseurs s'avère crucial, puisqu'ils offrent un soutien à la fois académique et émotionnel, grâce au mentorat et à la motivation, ce qui stimule la persévérance et la réussite des étudiants.

L'étude recommande que les superviseurs tiennent des rencontres en ligne régulières avec leurs étudiants, car cette pratique peut améliorer significativement l'efficacité de la supervision en FOAD. Elle souligne également l'importance d'offrir une formation aux superviseurs en pédagogie humanisante, spécifiquement conçue pour les contextes de FOAD. Une telle formation vise à doter les superviseurs des compétences nécessaires pour interagir efficacement et respectueusement avec des étudiants issus de diverses cultures, quelles que soient leurs origines éducatives, leurs croyances ou leurs différences culturelles.

Mots-clés : étudiants de cycles supérieurs, perceptions, supervision efficace, formation ouverte et à distance, réussite universitaire.

Introduction

Effective supervision in postgraduate studies involves providing comprehensive guidance to students, encompassing both personal and career aspects. A crucial goal of this guidance is to ensure the timely completion of studies (Chamberlain, 2016). The academic discourse worldwide has a critical focus on enhancing the performance of postgraduate students, as universities are expected to increase their success rates (Manyike, 2017). Wiegman (2013) suggests that effective supervision is an evolving process. In contrast, open distance e-learning (ODeL) is characterised by a lack of physical interaction between students and lecturers, with modern technologies serving as the

primary medium of communication (Al Rawashdeh et al., 2021). This distance often makes it challenging to establish an open communication channel and a strong relationship between supervisors and postgraduate students, which can contribute to higher attrition rates in ODeL institutions (Mahlangu, 2021). Heeralal (2015) asserts that postgraduate students in ODeL frequently struggle to complete their qualifications within the stipulated time, largely due to a deficiency in direct, in-person interaction.

According to Manyike (2017), supervisors may face difficulties when they are not familiar with their students' strengths and weaknesses, a problem that often stems from insufficient consultation during the student selection process. In addition, Maphalala and Mpofu (2017) highlight that financial constraints are a significant challenge for postgraduate students in ODeL, especially at large institutions like the University of South Africa. The absence of physical contact can also lead to feelings of isolation among students. Therefore, supervisors must provide not only academic but also financial support to their students (McCallin & Nayar, 2012).

At the University of South Africa, the supervisory setting is guided by clear institutional requirements. A supervisor of a master's student must hold at least a master's degree in a relevant field, while doctoral supervision requires both the supervisor and co-supervisor to hold doctoral qualifications. Once supervisors are appointed by the department, both supervisor and student must complete an agreement form that sets out the expectations, responsibilities, and

terms of their working relationship. Supervision at the University of South Africa takes place within an ODeL context, which shapes the institution's signature pedagogy. Students are expected to engage in largely self-directed learning, while supervisors provide structured guidance and timely feedback.

Communication is primarily mediated through the learning management system, the M&D student dashboard, and email, with occasional use of online meetings. Supervisors record student progress on the learning management system, which is later formalised in a supervisor's checklist upon completion of studies. This context brings particular expectations: students must regularly update their research plan and target dates, submit work according to agreed timelines, and demonstrate independence in managing their studies. Supervisors, in turn, are expected to give constructive and timely feedback to enable students to complete their master's degree within the minimum period. However, the reliance on asynchronous online communication and the absence of face-to-face interaction can create challenges such as delayed feedback, miscommunication, or feelings of isolation, which directly impact the supervisory relationship and the student's academic progress (University of South Africa, 2023).

Previous studies, such as those by Manyike (2017) and Mahlangu (2021), have primarily focused on the challenges faced by supervisors and students in ODeL. To date, there has been no study conducted to specifically explore the perceptions of postgraduate students themselves on the key elements of

effective supervision. This study aims to fill that gap by exploring the factors that postgraduate students in ODeL institutions consider essential for effective supervision that contributes to their academic success. The objective of this study is to identify the factors that postgraduate students perceive as crucial for effective supervision in their master's studies within an ODeL environment. The findings will provide valuable insights for supervisors, helping them better understand and implement practices that students consider effective. This study is guided by the following research question:

> *How do postgraduate students in ODeL perceive the key factors influencing effective supervision practice in their master's studies?*

Effective Supervision Practices in Postgraduate Studies in Open Distance E-Learning

In the context of ODeL, the effectiveness of supervision can be significantly enhanced when supervisors provide emotional support to postgraduate students and help them understand the importance of autonomous research (Govender, 2018). Establishing a Community of Practice, as emphasised by Netshitangani and Machaisa (2021), is also crucial for effective supervision in ODeL. This requires supervisors to foster shared values and build rapport within the academic community (Heeralal, 2015). Furthermore, supervisors in ODeL must

integrate contemporary technologies, such as Skype and learning management systems, to facilitate virtual meetings and online discussions (Heeralal, 2015).

Effective supervision is evident when a supervisor provides essential support throughout the entire research process, from the planning phase to the final submission (Yende, 2021). Van Rensburg et al. (2016) contend that effective supervision is manifested through empathetic practices, where supervisors demonstrate genuine care for their students' academic achievements. According to Byars-Winston et al. (2018), a central component of effective supervision is the incorporation of humanising pedagogy, which is a pivotal element in increasing postgraduate student throughput. This approach enables supervisors to show respect for students regardless of their progress in the research journey. Byars-Winston et al. (2018) also assert that supervisors must be attuned to the diverse backgrounds of their students, adapting to their cultural contexts to make them feel valued and appreciated. Ekpoh (2016) adds that supervisors who are willing to go the extra mile to help students complete their studies within the stipulated timeframe contribute to more effective supervision.

Supervisors are responsible for guiding postgraduate students throughout their research journey, which is essential for fostering student confidence and support (Fragouli, 2021). Mantai (2017) argues that providing social support enhances effective supervision in postgraduate studies. This support not only cultivates a sense of belonging but also allows students to concentrate on their academic pursuits. Furthermore, supervisors are encouraged to organise

seminars for postgraduate students to impart essential research skills, including academic writing (Aithal & Kumar, 2016). The challenges of postgraduate studies can impact students' mental well-being, so effective supervision should also include providing mental health tips (Marais et al., 2018; Waight & Giordano, 2018). Sverdlik et al. (2018) assert that supervisors are responsible for maintaining regular engagement with their students, thereby fostering a sense of control crucial for success. In addition, incorporating emotional and psychological support is considered imperative for effective postgraduate supervision (Moyano et al., 2020; Douglas, 2020).

In ODeL, supervisors must actively foster openness by facilitating effective communication and sharing pertinent information (Hug, 2016). Okeke-Uzodike (2021) even likens effective postgraduate supervision to good parenting, stressing the need for supervisors to establish an efficient communication channel to help students develop their academic identity. Gumbo (2019) suggests that supervisors in ODeL should value human interaction, even when mediated by digital tools.

Bireda (2019) notes that postgraduate students often encounter language obstacles, particularly those using English as a medium of instruction. Consequently, supervisors are responsible for helping their students overcome these linguistic challenges. Proficient supervision becomes apparent when supervisors offer mentorship and foster critical thinking skills through constructive feedback (Fynn & Janse van Vuuren, 2017). According to McCallin

and Nayar (2012), students benefit significantly from the individual attention provided by their supervisors because it fosters personal growth. Therefore, effective supervision is enhanced through personalised guidance. Grouping students is another pivotal component of effective supervision (Van Biljon & De Villiers, 2013). This approach not only facilitates peer-to-peer learning but also helps supervisors manage their time efficiently. Swarts (2017) supports group supervision, highlighting its importance in reducing feelings of isolation among students.

While the existing literature delineates what supervisors in ODeL consider effective supervision, scant attention has been paid to the perspectives of postgraduate students. This study addresses that gap by exploring the perceptions of postgraduate students on the elements they believe constitute effective supervision, thereby contributing to a more comprehensive understanding of the topic in the context of ODeL.

Theoretical Frameworks

This study is framed by the Self-Determination Theory (SDT), developed by Deci and Ryan, which gained prominence in the academic community during the 1970s and 1980s. As a theoretical framework, SDT focuses on human motivation and personality development by examining factors that drive behaviour, how motivation operates, and how individuals' personalities evolve through life experiences (Ryan & Deci, 2000). The theory posits that intrinsic motivation and

the satisfaction of basic psychological needs are vital for influencing human and development.

According to Ackerman and Neuhaus (2018), SDT identifies the following three essential components for individual motivation and personality growth:

- **Autonomy:** The desire to take control of one's life, shape one's destiny, and influence one's surroundings.
- **Competence:** The drive to develop skills and achieve goals, allowing for a sense of mastery and control over various life situations.
- **Relatedness:** The need to build strong connections with others to lead a fulfilling life.

In the context of this study, SDT is used to explain how supervisors in an ODeL environment can adopt this framework to enhance effective supervision practices that foster academic success among postgraduate students. Supervisors can promote autonomy by encouraging students to become self-directed learners. This involves providing guidance that goes beyond formal academic support, motivating students to work independently without being solely dependent on the supervisor. For competence, supervisors can enhance student success by providing constructive feedback. This feedback helps postgraduate students develop a sense of mastery, which in turn motivates them to invest greater effort in their studies. Finally, to address the challenges posed by the physical distance in ODeL, supervisors can foster relatedness by offering various forms of support, including emotional and career development

assistance, and by being consistently available. This connection is crucial as it helps students feel supported and connected to their supervisors, which is vital for their academic success.

Methodology

This study employed a qualitative research approach to gain insight into the participants' perspectives, which is essential for drawing conclusions about specific social phenomena. As Bryman (2012) notes, a qualitative approach is often used in the social sciences when there is limited existing evidence on a topic. Guided by an interpretivist paradigm, this approach allowed for a deeper understanding of a social phenomenon based on the participants' lived experiences, specifically those of postgraduate students in ODeL.

Data were collected from postgraduate students at the University of South Africa. This university was chosen because it is a leading distance education institution in South Africa, renowned for offering qualifications without physical contact between students and lecturers (University of South Africa, 2021). The study's sample consisted of 10 master's students currently enrolled in their programs, selected using purposive sampling. This non-probability method was used because the researcher, based on their judgment, believed these participants could provide the most informative insights into the topic (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010). The decision was further justified by the researcher's

employment at the University of South Africa, which ensured a pool of highly relevant participants familiar with the context of ODeL.

Inclusion and exclusion criteria were established to guide participant selection. Inclusion criteria required participants to be master's students at the University of South Africa's College of Education, registered between 2020 and 2024. This timeframe was chosen to ensure the participants had recent experience with supervisor-student relationships in the ODeL environment. Students enrolled in master's programs outside of the College of Education were excluded.

Gatekeepers for this study were academics in the College of Education who actively supervised master's students during the specified period. The researcher secured their cooperation to obtain the contact information of potential participants. After obtaining ethical clearance from the University of South Africa (Reference Number: 2024/07/12/00000080/02/RB), the researcher contacted these students to request their participation.

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, which provided participants the freedom to express themselves openly (Hancock & Algozzine, 2017). This format was selected to encourage postgraduate students to share their perspectives without interruption. Due to the lack of physical proximity, three interviews were conducted via Microsoft Teams. The estimated duration for each interview was 45 minutes to allow in-depth discussion and collection of rich data. An interview guide was prepared and shared with participants in

advance to save time and facilitate a more focused discussion. In addition, written responses were obtained from seven participants. Because of the commonality in responses, both the written responses and the interview transcripts were included in the analysis.

Table 1: Semi-Structured Interview Guide

Research Questions

What specific aspects of supervision do you believe contribute most to a positive and productive postgraduate learning experience in open distance e-learning?

Can you share examples of supervision practices that you have found particularly beneficial in your open distance e-learning experience?

How do you perceive the impact of supervisor availability and responsiveness on your progress and overall satisfaction with your postgraduate studies in open distance e-learning?

In your experience, can you recommend the most effective supervision practices that supervisors can use to support their students in open distance e-learning?

The data collected from postgraduate students was analysed using thematic analysis. This qualitative method is designed to identify, analyse, and report patterns or themes within interview data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). To ensure a rigorous analysis, the researcher followed the six phases outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006):

1. **Familiarisation with the data:** The initial phase involved transcribing the recorded audio interviews. The researcher spent significant time reading and re-reading the transcripts to identify and interpret initial ideas and patterns.

2. **Creating initial codes from the data extracts:** In this phase, the focus was on identifying repeated phrases and concepts that carried essential meaning, which could serve as the foundation for future themes.

3. **Searching for themes**: In this phase, the researcher organised different codes into related clusters. Themes were conceptualised as data extracts that captured crucial aspects related to the study's objectives.

4. **Reviewing themes**: In this phase, the identified themes were refined and reviewed against the research questions to ensure they accurately reflected the nuances of the collected data.

5. **Defining and naming themes**: In this phase, the researcher assigned clear and concise names to the identified themes, which aided in succinctly communicating the essence of each theme.

6. **Writing the report**: The final phase involved creating a narrative report supported by verbatim quotations from the participants. This report presented a comprehensive overview of the thematic analysis and the insights derived from the postgraduate students' perspectives.

This study rigorously adhered to all ethical guidelines. Before any data collection began, the researcher secured ethical clearance from the University of South Africa, College of Education with the ethical clearance number of

Reference Number: 2024/07/12/00000080/02/RB. Subsequently, the researcher requested contact details of postgraduate students from their respective supervisors. The objectives of the study were transparently communicated to all potential participants, and their informed consent was obtained before their involvement in the study.

Findings

The aim of this study is to explore the perceptions of postgraduate students in ODeL institutions on what constitutes effective supervision practices that contribute to their academic success. The main theme that emerged in this study is that a holistic supervision practice is needed for effective supervision in ODeL. A variety of factors contribute to effective supervision practice. The main theme of holistic supervision practice involves a variety of sub-themes such as communication and feedback, and other sub-themes explained below.

Holistic Supervision Practice

The participants were asked about the elements that constitute effective supervision practices contributing to their academic success in postgraduate studies. They emphasised that effective supervision consists of a holistic approach, where the supervisor pays special attention to the postgraduate students' personal development, emotional well-being, and career aspirations, rather than focusing solely on aspects such as dissertation layout, methodology,

and technical details. This approach makes it easier for postgraduate students to navigate their studies effectively.

Communication and Feedback

Participants emphasised the importance of clear and consistent communication between supervisors and students as an effective supervision practice in ODeL that contributes to their academic success. The participants further indicated that ongoing communication between the supervisor and postgraduate student is important in fostering a sense of support and accountability, which is essential for their academic success:

> *"It entails a positive working relationship between the supervisor and the student, characterised by regular and timely constructive feedback."*

> *"My understanding of effective supervision in open distance e-learning is that it involves clear and consistent communication, timely feedback, and a supportive relationship between the student and the supervisor."*

The quotes above from the participants indicate that effective supervision practice in ODeL entails that accessibility plays a crucial role in the supervisory process. The practice of being responsive to postgraduate students helps the students focus on their postgraduate studies and contributes to their academic success, thereby effectively linking the concept of accessibility in supervision to academic success. This connection is a strong point:

"In today's digital age, where everyone uses tools like WhatsApp, I have noticed that my supervisor's use of WhatsApp has significantly contributed to the development of my research proposal. I can communicate with my supervisor whenever I struggle to understand a certain concept, and he provides me with feedback through this mode of communication."

The response above from the participant highlights the importance of incorporating digital technology into effective supervision practices as way of fostering open communication and contrastive feedback in postgraduate studies which contributes to the students' academic success. Furthermore, the use of WhatsApp as the mode of communication between supervisor and student allows for real support and provides quick feedback to the student. This finding further highlights the importance of using digital tools in postgraduate studies research success and enabling supportive learning environment.

Supportive Relationships

Establishing a supportive relationship was a recurring sub-theme in the responses. Participants described effective supervisors as a holistic support structure and emphasised the significance of understanding students' educational levels. One participant articulated:

"An effective supervisor provides holistic support for the students under their supervision. They guide students academically, are patient, and understand that the students' educational level is below theirs, offering guidance aimed at improving the students'

academic capabilities. An effective supervisor is available to answer questions and provide timely responses, offering constructive rather than destructive feedback."

This sentiment stresses the role of supervisors, not just as evaluators, but as mentors who foster a nurturing environment conducive to learning. Responses from participants included:

"Helping students complete their studies on time involves a continued, positive interpersonal exchange between the supervisor and the student."

"My supervisor and I have a good working relationship. He provides guidance on how to search for literature, especially recent sources, using platforms like ResearchGate and Google Scholar. I wasn't aware of these platforms and used to search for academic information through Google, often ending up with outdated sources. My supervisor walked me through the process, which has helped me a lot."

"I had trouble with referencing, but my supervisor supported me without judgment. He organised a meeting and showed me how to properly reference according to the APA style, which has been invaluable."

The above quotations from the participants highlight the importance of supportive relationships between the supervisor and postgraduate students, which play a vital role in postgraduate students' academic success. In addition, the supportive relationships that a supervisor builds with students involve

mentorship and skill-building, which enable postgraduate students to overcome some of the challenges they experience in their academic journey and helps them develop long-term academic competence and confidence:

> *"My supervisor provides me with emotional support. There was a time when I wanted to give up on my studies because I was facing many difficulties at home, which affected my schoolwork. However, my supervisor was able to motivate me and help me face my challenges. Now, I feel like I'm on the right track because of his emotional support."*

> *"My dream is to work in academia, but since I'm currently a teacher, I didn't have enough information about the process of transitioning to university work. My supervisor has also assisted me with the information I need to pursue a career in academia. This motivation and encouragement have helped me work hard to finish my master's on time so that I can continue with my PhD and eventually join academia."*

The statements above from the participants highlight the importance of motivation, guidance, and emotional support from the supervisor, which renews students' interest in their postgraduate studies journey. Emotional support provided by the supervisor is seen as one of the key elements of effective supervision practices and is crucial in helping postgraduate students overcome personal challenges in order to attain academic success.

Active Engagement

The sub-theme of active engagement emerged from participants' insights about their relationship with their supervisors. Participants indicated that their supervisor fostered active engagement during supervisor practice and that played a crucial role in their academic success. This active engagement involved a number of engagement sessions that the supervisor organised with postgraduate's students to help the students improve their academic writing. Participants say:

> "I understand that I need to stay in contact and consult with my supervisor at every step of my study."

> "I regularly have engagement sessions with my supervisor, who helps me improve my academic writing."

> "Whenever I face challenges, I inform my supervisor, and he organises sessions with me, even through WhatsApp, where he provides assistance."

The remarks above from the participants suggest that effective supervision is a two-way approach, requiring postgraduate students to actively seek help and engage with their supervisors throughout their learning journey. This approach enables postgraduate students to get help from their supervisor who organises engagement sessions through social media platforms. These sessions sometimes play a vital role in postgraduate students' academic success.

Motivation and Mentorship

Another sub-theme that emerged during the interview was motivation and support. The participants highlighted motivation and support as one of the effective supervision practices that assist them in staying on track with the research project and performing better in various chapters in the research project. One participant said:

> *"I can say that following up on tasks, receiving words of encouragement, coaching, and advice from my supervisor is helping me understand research."*

> *"My supervisor is more than just a supervisor. He constantly motivates me to work hard and encourages me to put in extra effort, so I can pursue a PhD once I complete my master's degree."*

The statements above drawn from a participant's response show that they have had a positive experience with their supervisor, emphasising the crucial role of mentorship in their academic success. The participant highlights how their supervisor's consistent follow-up on tasks, encouragement, and guidance through coaching and advice have been instrumental in helping them understand the complexities of research. The supervisor went beyond their formal role, offering motivational support. This inspired the student to work harder and aim higher, fostering a sense of dedication and ambition toward pursuing a PhD after completing their master's degree.

Discussion

The aim of this study is to explore the perceptions of postgraduate students in ODeL institutions on what constitutes effective supervision practices that contribute to their academic success. The study findings revealed that effective supervision practice in ODeL is a multifaceted approach that not only facilitates academic success, but also fosters a sense of community and support within the distance learning context. It comprises communication and feedback, supportive relationships, active engagement, motivation and mentoring. This finding aligns with the work of Chamberlain (2016), who argues that effective supervision practices involve a wide range of support extending beyond academic assistance to cater to other developmental areas of postgraduate students. The study further revealed that consistent and clear communication and feedback between postgraduate students and supervisors are vital elements of effective supervision practices in ODeL that contribute to the academic success of postgraduate students. Additionally, regular communication and feedback help postgraduate students avoid feelings of isolation in distance learning and foster strong working relationships with their supervisors, both of which are essential for students' academic success. Moreover, receiving feedback from supervisors, as found in this study, boosts students' confidence, making them feel heard and supported in their academic journey. To enhance effective supervision practices, supervisors, whether in face-to-face or distance

learning, have the responsibility of fostering clear communication with their students on a regular basis (Hug, 2016; Okeke-Uzodike, 2021).

The integration of digital tools to enhance postgraduate students' learning experiences is crucial in the modern age. As this study found, supervisors use digital technologies such as WhatsApp to provide students with timely information. Postgraduate students find this mode of communication effective and conducive to their academic success because it allows them to maintain regular communication with their supervisors. This finding echoes the results of Heeralal (2015), who emphasised the importance of supervisors in ODeL environments using digital technologies such as Skype and online discussions within learning management systems to enhance students' learning experiences.

Furthermore, this study revealed that a supportive relationship is one of the crucial components of effective supervision practices in ODeL, playing an important role in the academic success of postgraduate students. The findings show that supervisors not only fulfil an academic role, but also offer emotional support, thereby providing proper guidance and motivation to build postgraduate students' academic skills, which in turn plays a critical role in the students' success. Supervisors should strive to offer students both academic and emotional support (Govender, 2018; Moyano et al., 2020; Douglas, 2020). Van Rensburg et al. (2016) stressed that effective supervision can be seen through empathetic practices, where supervisors demonstrate concern for the overall development of their students.

The study also revealed that active engagement is a key component of effective supervision practices in ODeL, contributing to postgraduate students' academic success. This engagement helped foster positive working relationships between students and supervisors, with communication extending to social media platforms. This finding supports a previous study by Sverdlik et al. (2018), which argued that supervisors must ensure regular engagement with students to foster a positive learning environment in higher education. Additionally, the study found that motivation and mentorship are important components of effective supervision practices in ODeL environments. The mentorship and motivational support provided by supervisors go beyond formal academic support, boosting students' confidence and enhancing their ability to work hard. Proficient supervision in postgraduate studies becomes evident when supervisors offer mentorship and foster critical thinking skills through constructive feedback (Fynn & Janse van Vuuren, 2017).

The findings of this study contribute to the SDT in the context of effective supervision practices in ODeL. Communication and feedback, as components of effective supervision, align with the SDT's emphasis on relatedness. The study revealed that the supportive environment provided by supervisors fosters a sense of belonging among postgraduate students, enhancing their intrinsic motivation—a key tenet of the theory. The findings of this study, viewed through the lens of SDT, are strongly corroborated by established online learning best practices (Netshitangani & Machaisa, 2021).

The emphasis on supervisors providing constructive feedback to foster a sense of competence aligns directly with recommendations for effective online teaching, which stress the importance of timely, specific, and actionable feedback (Hug, 2016; Okeke-Uzodike, 2021). In a physical classroom, a student might receive informal feedback through body language or a quick chat. In the ODeL environment, this study demonstrates that formal, deliberate feedback is essential to fill this gap and maintain a student's motivation. This practice is not merely about correcting errors but about building the student's self-efficacy, which is a core component of both competence in SDT and successful online learning.

The findings of this study contribute to effective supervision practices in the context of ODeL by emphasising the importance of timely feedback and effective communication in shaping postgraduate student success at institutions such as the University of South Africa. Furthermore, the findings show that the use of online platforms for supervision is not only an administrative necessity but also a critical pedagogical practice that directly influences postgraduate student success in an ODeL environment. Like any other study, this one has limitations. The small sample size means the findings cannot be generalised to all postgraduate students enrolled in an ODeL environment in other countries. However, the issues raised by the participants may apply to a minority of postgraduate students in ODeL environments in South Africa and other universities globally. Despite the small sample size, this study has policy

implications. It recommends policy formulation in ODeL environments that encourages supervisors to conduct regularly scheduled online meetings with their students, as this practice can significantly improve the effectiveness of supervision in these settings.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The findings of this study highlight the importance of effective supervision practices that encompass a range of support beyond formal academic assistance in enhancing the academic success of postgraduate students in ODeL. The study shows that postgraduate students believe supervisors in this environment are addressing their personal, emotional, and academic needs, which are essential components of effective supervision practices contributing to academic success. The study stresses the importance of providing training for supervisors in humanising pedagogy, specifically designed for ODeL contexts. This training aims to equip supervisors with the necessary adaptability skills to effectively engage with students from diverse cultural backgrounds and values. Furthermore, it emphasises the importance of teaching supervisors to respect students regardless of their educational background, beliefs, and cultural differences.

In ODeL institutions, specifically within the context of South Africa as the focal point of this study, it is imperative for supervisors to adopt the cohort model. This model advocates for supervisors to organise their students into

cohesive groups, thereby facilitating the cultivation of collaborative relationships among students. This collaborative environment not only promotes mutual support but also encourages students to seek assistance from their peers.

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Author

Thulani Andrew Chauke is a Y2 NRF-rated researcher and the 2025 recipient of the Research Excellence Award for Early Career/Emerging Researchers currently working as Senior Lecturer at the University of South Africa, College of Education. He holds a PhD in Education and has extensive experience in youth development, electoral administration, and higher education, with a particular focus on democracy, youth health, and broader aspects of youth development. Dr. Chauke's research interests lie at the intersection of youth studies, youth work, and youth behaviour, with a strong focus on education, youth political participation, youth health and well-being, and the sociology of youth.