Tenth Pan-Commonwealth Forum on Open Learning (PCF10),

THEME: Innovations for Educational Resilience

Sub-theme: Inspiring innovations.

TITLE: Developing an indigenous graduate research supervision culture in an Open and Distance e-learning environment. Lessons from an ODeL programme.

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ABSTRACT

Most students in the Master's in Education- Educational Leadership (MEdEL) at a medium sized Open and distance e-learning institution have successfully completed their programme within the stipulated five years with the average being two to three years. It is postulated that this could be because the supervision of their research is anchored on the philosophy of *ubuntu* which is an indigenous African education philosophy that is gaining traction among scholars. The aim of this paper is to report on and investigate whether the philosophy of *ubuntu* guides MEdEL students and supervisors in developing the research dissertation. The research objectives were an analysis the extent to which MEdEL students and supervisors are aware of *Ubuntu* as an educational philosophy, the extent to which MEdEL research supervisors adhere to the guiding principles of *ubuntu* when they supervise student dissertations and, make recommendations on how *ubuntu* principles can be incorporated in the research supervision of graduate students in an Open and Distance electronic Learning (ODeL) environment. A mixed methods approach was used in the design, collection and analysis of data using an online questionnaire for graduates, students and supervisees, face to face and written interviews of supervisors, and the analysis of literature and key documents associated with the supervision of dissertations. Key data sources included graduate and current students of the MEdEL; research supervisors and literature on ubuntu as an educational philosophy.

Key words: ubuntu, online research supervision, ODeL environment, collaborative learning

Introduction

This paper focuses on the roles and responsibilities of a research supervisor and the student as viewed through the lens of *ubuntu* as an educational philosophy. It is in part, a response to Sefhoto's (2018:551) recommendation that PhD *(read research*) supervision be geared towards developing home-grown models and theories for resolving teaching and learning problems. It starts with an explanation the key concepts undergirding the paper, namely, research supervision, open and distance learning (ODL), open and distance e-learning (ODeL), an ODeL environment, collaborative learning and *ubuntu*. Each of these concepts are then further interrogated to see how best they fit in with the possible development of an indigenous research supervision culture even when employing digital tools. The second part reports on a study of limited scope that investigated the perceptions of students on whether their supervisors adhere to *ubuntu* educational philosophy. In the same way, a sample of supervisors were requested respond to a set of questions in an interview schedule sent to them online. This was to compare whether the responses of the two groups of participants. Finally, the responses from the supervisors and supervisees were triangulated to extant literature so as make credible recommendations on the influence of *ubuntu* on student success in writing their dissertation.

The issue

Over the past five years the Master of Education, Educational Leadership (MEDEL) students have been passing their dissertations very well. Although this phenomenon has not been formally documented, the writers have a hunch that it could be a result of how research supervisors interact with their students in the process of accompanying them to complete their dissertations. This paper reports an investigation on whether the philosophy of *ubuntu* guides MEdEL students and supervisors in developing the research dissertation. The paper first describes the roles and responsibilities of a research supervisor and the student in an ODeL

environment as reported in the literature. It goes on to discuss *ubuntu* as an educational philosophy and how this this related to research supervision. What then follows is a description of a study of limited scope that aimed at ascertaining whether supervisors and supervises are conscience and adhere to the guiding principles of *ubuntu* in the preparation of the dissertation. The paper concludes with recommendations arising from the study.

The roles and responsibilities of a research supervisor and the student

Graduate research supervision entails multiple roles which include among others; being a manager, director, friend, supporter, advisor, examiner, teacher and most importantly a facilitator (Masek and Ilias, 2020: 2493). It also requires possession of certain skills in discipline knowledge, research skills, transferable skills, management skills, digital fluency skills as well as skills relating to the overall management of the research process (Fulgence, 2019:732). For the students, their responsibilities are dependent on the philosophies and guidelines set by institutions as well as the philosophical orientations of their supervisors and to a large extent, the academic discipline in which the research is being conducted. (See, Robertson, 2017)

The following key concepts are outlined in this paper:

- **Research Supervision**

Process by which the supervisor gives some guidance, counselling, and support to a student during the development of a **research**. In this process, the supervisor helps the student with time management, makes them aware of intermediate and final deadlines, and ensures students get the most of their projects done, and have the necessary resources

- **Open and Distance Learning (ODL):**

Any learning activities within formal, informal, and non-formal domains that are facilitated by information and communication technologies to lessen distance, both physically and psychologically, and to increase interactivity and communication among learners, learning sources and facilitators. (Bozkurt, 2019)

- **Open Distance E-Learning (ODeL):**

It is the type of teaching and learning that gives students, who must fulfil multiple roles and are affected by the barriers of distance, cost and time, an opportunity to pursue their studies online (Maboe 2019).

- **An ODeL environment**

An environment where technology reduces (or eliminates) geographical barriers between students and their supervisors, between each other and between them and their institutions, facilitated mainly by ICT tools and online systems (consider: - Alip et al., 2020)

- **Collaborative learning**

"a variety of educational approaches involving joint intellectual effort by students, or students and teachers together." Smith and McGregor (nd)
https://www.evergreen.edu/sites/default/files/facultydevelopment/docs/WhatisCollaborativeLearning.pdf

- ***ubuntu*.**

"*Ubuntu* is a philosophy that is driven by a commitment to the moral values and principles of humaneness, empathy, and a deep caring for others. He goes on posit that practicing *Ubuntu* is to engage in a process of deconstruction of the prevailing modernist epistemologies that tend to separate the heart and mind" (Letseka, 2019, 2016). It forms part of the fabric of values that guide education alongside democracy, social justice and equity, equality, non-racism and non-sexism, an open society, accountability, the rule of law, respect, and reconciliation (Assié-Lumumba, 2016, Letseka, 2012).

***Ubuntu* as an educational philosophy**

The philosophy of *Ubuntu* presupposes that all humanity is connected and that is why in many Sub-Saharan countries it forms part of the fabric of values that guide education alongside democracy, social justice and equity, equality, non-racism and non-sexism, an open society, accountability, the rule of law, respect, and

reconciliation (Assié-Lumumba, 2016, Letseka, 2012). The philosophy has its roots in the pre-colonial education systems as practiced by Africans in their traditional ways of knowledge transfer from one generation to another with the overall aim of making the young (and old) part of the communities' social fabric (Assié-Lumumba, 2016).

In his inaugural lecture Prof. Moeketsi Letseka, the United Nations, Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) Chair on Open Distance Learning (ODL) at Unisa, defined *ubuntu* as a philosophy that is driven by a commitment to the moral values and principles of humaneness, empathy, and a deep caring for others. He goes on posit that practicing *Ubuntu* is to engage in a process of deconstruction of the prevailing modernist epistemologies that tend to separate the heart and mind (Letseka, 2019, 2016).

***Ubuthu* as a philosophical framework for graduate supervision**

Mogadime, Mentz, Armstrong, and Holtam (2019) note that *ubuthu* is anchored on three principles: spirituality, interdependence, and unity. Spirituality denotes that supervising and leading is a call from the Almighty to service, which means that the supervisor should give back to those who do not have (that is the student). It also calls on the supervisor to sacrifice time and effort to assist the student meet set goals. It also denotes that the supervisor offers support as a member of a family of community of learners. In the same way the student is expected to respect the supervisor (*not fear*) by adhering to set agreements, communicating in polite language, and deliberating reasonably with the supervisor.

In terms of interdependence, the supervisor *who has* helps those *who have not* to keep the powerful and the powerless together resulting in the privileged (supervisor) giving hope to those who are not privileged (student) through guidance and advice and that the success of the student is also viewed as the success of others, that is, supervisor, academia, and community (Letseka, 2013).

In terms of unity, within the *ubuntu* approach to supervision, success of one is shared with others and that self-worth is measured through what one can do for others – that is "I am because we are" (Mogadime, 2020:114)

When looking at the impact of doctoral supervision on supervisor learning, Halse (2011) posits that this learning is through how supervisors engage with and in the social and political contexts of their universities. The supervisor is also able understand him/herself and the student in addition to the understanding of the pedagogical relationship with the student. Mosana, (2001) however is of the opinion that the educational value of *ubuntu* is to teach people collective solidarity values through the promotion of respect for norms and values of the community

Ubuntu resonates with the emancipation approach as a supervisory process. This is because the approach allows and supports personal transformation (Lee, 2010:19). In the traditional neo-liberal approach to doctoral (*read graduate*) supervision, the students are in a situation where they are viewed as neophytes while the supervisors are viewed as experts. Under such an approach, the supervisors are usually not empathetic (Tsotetsi and Omodan, 2020:2) They contend that when supervision is framed through *ubuntu*, it can narrow the gap between student and supervisor. They particularly examined doctoral supervision relationship between the supervisor and student as one of a mentor and mentee. Tsotetsi and Omodan (2020) then went on to look at the models of mentoring, as the traditional and the contemporary.

In the traditional model, the mentor (supervisor) is all knowing, all powerful, he/she is an expert, director, critic and tells the student what to do. On the other hand, the mentee (student) is an apprentice, is obedient, takes instruction, is devoted and totally dependent on the supervisor (Tsotetsi and Omodan, 2020:110-111). As a result, the student must conform and fit into the supervisor's way of doing things. He/she must abandon his/her way of thinking (Manathung, 2007; Letseka and Mathabe, 2018). On the other hand, the contemporary model looks at the mentor and mentee having a co-responsibility, are interactive, rational, and work as a team with common goals set together. The mentor and mentee learn from each other with the mentor being a facilitator and friend. In this way, the supervisor (the mentor) is perceived as preparing the student (mentee) to become a future supervisor (Tsotetsi and Omodan, 2020:115). This preparation occurs in three phases, with phase one being *mentoring in* where the supervisor guides the student to prepare a research proposal; *mentoring through* where the supervisor "walks along side" the student as he/she seeks ethical clearance, navigates the protocols of data collection as well as analysing and discussing the findings until a final report is prepared; and finally *mentoring onward* where the supervisor becomes a colleague offering advise on how to continue beyond the doctorate. From the *ubuntu* perspective the first phase is linked to connecting and bonding, while the second one results in collaboration and the third and final phase should result in mutual commitment and trust.

Thus, if supervision is underpinned by *ubuntu*, supervisors should strive to reduce the power gap between them and their students by communicating with respect, adopt a give and take stance noting that there is no single

reality in any given situation. Mentors should aim towards empowering those that they supervise. Both mentor and mentee should "commit to not disappoint" (Tshelane, 2014:728). Rather than talking about the student claiming to create new knowledge, in *ubuntu* both supervisor and student co-create new knowledge. In this way, *ubuntu* aligns to the transformative paradigm which recognises multiple realities, bridges the gap between supervisor and student, initially for the progress of both and onward to beyond academia and to the community.

Technology, *Ubuntu,* and research supervision

From the surface it maybe surmised that *ubuntu* has no place in the use of ICT tools for research supervision. In the writers' own experiences as supervisors of master's students for the last seven years, we and our students have benefitted from using technology to support each other. In the initial stages of the master's supervision journey, we held face to face meetings at least 3 to 4 times in a semester to assist students prepare their research proposals. This was in addition to meeting them face to face during residential tutorial sessions and research boot camps. Over the past one and a half years however and mainly because of COVID 19 restrictions, face to face interactions have been greatly reduced. They have been replaced by online meeting through ZOOM, MICROSOFT TEAMS and GOOGLE MEET, chat sessions and forum discussions. This has resulted in faster communication even between us and the students who live and work in far off places. In addition, tools like email, SMS and WhatsApp have eased communication and to a large extent improved one on one communication, which was sometimes difficult when a group converged in one place for a tutorial or a group session.

Gumbo (2019) has indicated that although online supervision has its advantages as outlined from the writers' experience, the human element should take precedence over technology. The researcher opines that even when technology is in use a lot of students still believe that in the saying "seeing is believing" adage and often demand to see one's face to understand because seeing one's face illuminates' attachment and engagement. Gumbo (2019) argues that an online supervisor can exhibit *ubuntu* without compromising standards. This is because online results in faster provision of feedback to students in addition to targeted sharing of resources that are easily accessible on the internet. Search engines like GOOGLE or GOOGLE Scholar allow students to access the latest books, journals, and other e-information sources at the click of a button.

Like other developments, online supervision has its challenges. These include situations where students are not able to use the technology tools properly, the cost of the gadget and internet, the attitude of students especially those who are forced to adapt or be left behind. Gumbo (2019) advises that where possible blended supervision online and face to face interaction be practiced by institutions of higher learning to prevent the widening of knowledge and digital divide that *ubuntu* strives to overcome.

The study

To investigate whether the philosophy of *ubuntu* guides MEdEL students and supervisors in developing the research dissertation, a study was conducted among students and their supervisors of the research proposal and dissertation of the MEdEL programme at the BOU. A population of 60 students in their first and second year together with their supervisors was targeted. For the students an online questionnaire was sent by email. The questionnaire required students to respond to a range of statements as to whether they: Strongly Disagree, Disagree, Not Sure, Agree to Strongly Agree on a 5 -point Likert Scale (See Appendix 1). In addition, supervisors asked to answer a set of seven questions relating to *ubuntu* and students' dissertation preparation (See Appendix 2). All research ethics protocols including applying and receiving ethical clearance from the University as well as obtaining consent from the participants were observed (See Appendix 3). In addition, supervisors were interviewed online using a set of seven questions relating to *ubuntu* and students' dissertation preparation (See Appendix 2). All research ethics protocols including applying and receiving ethical clearance from the University as well as obtaining consent from the participants (See Appendix 3).

The Results from the quantitative survey.

A total of 27 MEdEl students responded to the questionnaire. Ten (10) males and 17 females; thirteen (13) were in their first year, 11 were in Year 2 and three did not indicate their year of study. Missing data was treated pairwise in SPSS. That is, rather than drop all cases with missing data, available data for those cases were used in the analysis. SPSS; version 25 was used for the analysis.

Due to the categorical nature of the data, which was obtained from a Likert scale, a nonparametric test was used for the analysis. Non-parametric tests basically analyse frequencies and make no assumptions about the distribution of values. They become useful in cases where the assumption of normality, in particular, might be violated. The tests, examine the differences between observed data and expected or the hypothesized model. It

is all about comparison of frequencies (George, D. & Mallery, P). Specifically, *One-sample Chi-Square test* was used. It examines whether the elements of a single categorized group differ significantly from the hypothesized underlying distribution.

Descriptive Statistics

A five-point Likert scale was decoded such that 1 represented the least desired situation of the given statement and 5 the most desired. Table 1 depicts the results.

Table 1: **Percentage Distribution of MEdEL- Students' responses to the questionnaire on research supervision and the mean scores of the responses.**

Strongly Disagree (SD); Disagree (D); Not Sure (NS); Agree (A); Strongly Agree (SA)

Statement	*SD (%)*	*D (%)*	*NS (%)*	*A (%)*	*SA (%)*	*Mean Responses* $\bar{x}$
1.- I consider my supervisor to be caring	*11.*	*7.4*	*7.4*	*29.6*	*44.4*	*3.89*
2.- I consider my supervisor to be humble	*0*	*0*	*11.1*	*40.7*	*38.5*	*4.15*
3.- I consider my supervisor to be considerate	*7.4*	*3.7*	*7.4*	*40.7*	*40.7*	*4.04*
4.- I consider my supervisor to be thoughtful when providing feedback	*7.4*	*3.7*	*11.1*	*33.3*	*44.4*	*4.04*
5.- I consider my supervisor to be generous in awarding grades	*25.9*	*14.8*	*25.9*	*14.8*	*18.5*	*2.85*
6.- I consider my supervisor to be wise	*11.1*	*7.4*	*3.7*	*22.2*	*51.9*	*4.00*
7.- I consider my supervisor to be hospitable	*11.1*	*0*	*7.4*	*48.1*	*48.1*	*3.93*
8.- I consider my supervisor to be socially mature	*11.5*	*0*	*11.5*	*38.5*	*33.3*	*3.92*
9.- I consider my supervisor to be socially sensitive	*11.1*	*0*	*14.8*	*40.7*	*33.3*	*3.85*
10.- I consider my supervisor to be virtuous	*11.1*	*0*	*11.1*	*33.3*	*44.4*	*4.00*
11.- I consider my supervisor to be a blessing to me	*11.1*	*0*	*11.1*	*42.3*	*34.6*	*3.88*
12.- My supervisor values my opinions	*7.4*	*7.4*	*11.1*	*40.7*	*33.3*	*3.85*
13.- My supervisor considers me as a co-learner	*11.1*	*0*	*18.5*	*33.3*	*37.1*	*3.85*
14.- My supervisor respects my opinions	*7.4*	*7.4*	*11.1*	*29.6*	*44.4*	*3.96*

Over 70% (sum of last two columns) of the MEdEL-students were of the opinion that their supervisors satisfied all the given statements regarding adherence to the guiding principles of Ubuntu in their supervision of students' dissertations except for one statement (item 5) *I consider my supervisor to be generous in awarding grades*. A relatively small percentage of students (33.3%) agreed that their supervisors were generous in awarding grades. This item also attracted the highest neutral response of "not sure". It was the only item with more students disagreeing (40.7%) than agreeing (33.3%). The item that received the highest number of students rating it high was item 14 (*My supervisor respects my opinions*). About 90% of the students were of the opinion that their supervisors respected their opinions.

The last column in Table 1 gives the mean ratings per item. It presents the same picture as the above discussion. That on a scale of 1(SD) to 5 (SA), taking 3 as the neutral point, all statements were positively rated except item 5 with a mean rating of 2.85.

Significance testing

A non-parametric test, *One-Sample Chi-Square test*, was used to compare observed data (frequencies) to the hypothesized assumption of equal probabilities in the categories. The significance level was set at *0.05*. The *p-value* associated with the comparison were noted and their significance status indicated with asterisks. Table 2 depicts the results.

The null and alternative hypotheses guiding this test were:

H_0: *Observed frequencies are equally distributed among the categories per particular item*

Table 2: Dichotomized MEdEL- students' responses (in percentages) and their significance level

Strongly Disagree (SD); Disagree (D); Not Sure (NS); Agree (A); Strongly Agree (SA)

Statement	*p-value*
1. I consider my supervisor to be caring	*.005**
2. I consider my supervisor to be humble	*.045**
3. I consider my supervisor to be considerate	*.001***
4. I consider my supervisor to be thoughtful when providing feedback	*.002**
5. I consider my supervisor to be generous in awarding grades	*.790*
6. I consider my supervisor to be wise	*.008**
7. I consider my supervisor to be hospitable	*.008**
8. I consider my supervisor to be socially mature	*.057*
9. I consider my supervisor to be socially sensitive	*.085*
10. I consider my supervisor to be virtuous	*.029**
11. I consider my supervisor to be a blessing to me	*.049**
12. My supervisor values my opinions	*.009**
13. My supervisor considers me as a co-learner	*.183*
14. My supervisor respects my opinions	*.005**

H_1: *Observed frequencies are not equally distributed among the categories per particular item*

***Note*: **significant at .001**
*** significant at .05**

Out of the 14 items, four items were rendered not significant. The numbers of the students who strongly agreed; agreed, not sure, agree or strongly disagree were not significantly different with the hypothesized probabilities across categories. The students differ significantly in their opinions regarding their supervisors regarding other item excluding being generous with grades; being socially mature; socially sensitive nor considering them as co-learners.

The analysis of results of the quantitative data indicates a strong correlation of the belief by the students who responded to the questionnaire that their supervisors were caring, humble, thoughtful when giving feedback, virtuous, and to some extent spiritual. The results also indicate that students considered that their supervisors respected their opinion, which again is a quality that resonates with *ubuntu.* Most significantly, the respondents considered their supervisors to be considerate in their interactions with their supervisees which is a key tenet of *ubuntu.*

Results from the qualitative written interview.

Out of the 8 supervisors who were approached to respond to a set of 7 questions, only 2 provided answers. Both respondents indicated knowledge of ubuntu as an "*African culture to shows compassion, dignity, and solidarity* " Respondent A and that it " *Implies that the teacher is involved in empowering and sensitizing in improving themselves in the teaching learning process".* Respondent B. They both agreed that it is possible to practice ubuntu in an ODeL environment and that *"actually most promoters of education at a distance are Ubuntu oriented*".

When asked about the advantages of ubuntu in research supervision at a distance, Respondent A opined that "*If there is a display of forthrightness and fairness as well as determination to enhance empowerment in improving the lives and attitudes of those involved in distance education (teaching and learning processes)*." Respondent be provided an example by saying: "*I personally believe that there could be advantages of adopting Ubuntu during supervision because during the outbreak of COVID 19, humanity was exposed at*

various levels where learning and teaching even supervision had to be adjusted to accommodate the trauma that came with the outbreak. So, adopting ubuntu has advantages to those on the receiving end." The main drawbacks ubuntu and research supervision were summarized by the respondents as "*Overdependence and countertransference of attitudes and perceptions in research and the outcomes of the same*" and " *Delayed completion of work especially when a student is given time off to practice theirown cultural practices.*"

In conclusion Respondent B offered the following opinion: "*To me I can conclude by saying the more we can embrace African humanity, we could strengthen the concept of ubuntu. This could even extend to where ubuntu becomes an African philosophy where its pieces of work would be published. By publishing these pieces of ubuntu or African philosophy, we could be known to the world becauseas it stands, ubuntu is not well known because it is hardly documented"*.

Conclusion

From the literature and the study as reported in this paper, it can be concluded that MEdEL students and supervisors are aware of *Ubuntu* as an educational philosophy; and that they adhere to the guiding principles of *ubuntu* when they supervise student dissertations.

Recommendation

It is recommended that since this study was small and of limited scope further research be conducted with a larger sample of students and supervisors from different schools offering Masters degree programmes at BOU.

We close this discussion with two observations. One from Carter, Laurs, Chant, & Wolfgramm-Foliaki (2018) who are advocates of incorporating indigenous knowledge in higher education that "supervisors and their candidates should draw on their heritages, looking for culturally appropriate pedagogies and protocols, because these are apt to inspire the heart of human relationship-building". The other is that "through *ubuntu*, one learns, lives, and grows in, through and with others in ways that cannot always be neatly pre-figured" by Samuel and Vithal (2018).

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