EDITORIAL

Academic supervision in Africa: enhancing supervisor preparedness for excellence

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INTRODUCTION

Dissertations and theses are key components of bachelor's, master's and doctoral degree programmes. Students require a lot of support to get through this stage due to the magnitude of work required to undertake the tasks. Supervisors play crucial roles in guiding and supporting students and the nature of supervision has various implications, ranging from students' success to difficulty in completing the research work and dropping out from the degree programme[1,2,3,4]. Several studies suggest that some students are dissatisfied with the supervision they received[5,6,7] and some would not recommend their supervisors to other students[5]. This has led to the suggestions that supervisors would benefit from training[8,9]. Such training will be important in all settings but most especially in Africa where the population is large, with rapid increase in student enrolment, sometimes exceeding the capacities of the universities[10]. It is known that challenges of supervision is one of the factors causing delayed and non-completion of studies in Africa[10]. Growth in student numbers will amount to having more dissertations and theses to supervise and university staff would need to prepare for the task ahead. This editorial discusses and presents the case for training and development of supervisors in Africa. Furthermore, the editorial highlights the role of personal supervision philosophy, arguing that crafting a personal supervision philosophy statement should be a mandatory consideration in supervisors' capacity building efforts.

Learning to supervise through supervising students
It is common for academic staff to embark on supervision without receiving any formal training and pick up necessary skills as they supervise students. This on-the-job learning approach to supervision may be due to several factors, ranging from lack of supervisor training within the institution, lack of staff or insufficient number of experienced supervisors to mentor academic staff new to supervision, among others. Drawing upon experiential learning theory[11], it can be argued that

learning by doing has a rightful place in academic supervision, because learning is a (continuous) process and supervisory ideas are not fixed, especially in view of the diversity of students and diversity of their research topics, methodologies, and so on. It is understandable that on-the-job learning approach to supervision would be the default approach in many low- and middle-income settings, including Africa, due to resource constraints, a myriad of challenges confronting higher education institutions and rising student numbers[10]. Research has shown that some supervisors have done well using this approach through a combination of learning from their students, learning from more experienced colleagues, self-directed learning, and programme design[12].

However, given the complexity of academic supervision, learning by doing will introduce further complexities as new academic staff may lack foundational knowledge of supervision, may not be aware of what to expect, may fall back on how they themselves were supervised (which could be positive or negative, depending on their experiences), and they are likely to resort to whatever works for them. Participants in Motshoane's study[13] expressed this as "being thrown into the deep end" and "figuring out how to supervise by trial and error". The supervisory role would then become daunting and new academic staff may experience more stress than necessary while coping with a heavy teaching workload[13]. It leads to the important question of, "what happens to the student while the supervisor learns on the job?". The student would be oblivious of the fact that the supervisor is trying to figure out how to supervise and would experience dissatisfaction with the supervision - in fact, a study has shown that some students, due to dissatisfaction, would not even recommend their supervisors to others[5]. Therefore, learning by doing has serious implications for academic supervision in Africa in view of concerns about student dropout and delayed completion of studies.

Formal academic supervision training

Formal training helps academic staff to understand the basics of supervision and offers an opportunity for further development of supervisory expertise. For academic staff new to supervision, structured formal training will help them to understand what is required in their new role as supervisors and will offer them an opportunity to ask questions and gain clarity, which will reduce anxiety and build confidence. Experienced supervisors will also benefit from formal training to enable them to gain new knowledge and improve their expertise. Formal academic supervision training could take the form of structured beginner courses, and workshops on different aspects of supervision. In a study conducted among supervisors from universities in various African countries attending a workshop, the focus group discussion uncovered a range of issues around supervisory capacity and called for training for new supervisors[14]. Findings from Ronoh et al.'s study[7] highlighted a need to prioritise training for supervisors since lack of and/or insufficient expertise can interfere with students' progress. The importance of providing formal training for supervisors has been echoed by researchers elsewhere who identified it as a necessary step for improving quality of supervision[15].

However, formal training has attracted criticisms from some supervisors. Several participants in Jackson et al.'s study[16] found formal training to be generic, boring, unhelpful, not always worthwhile, inadequate and of variable quality. These criticisms are from supervisors in non-African settings, and it is not clear how much of these criticisms are shared by supervisors based in Africa. But it is important to pay attention to the content of formal training to ensure that they are meaningful and comprehensive, covering the pedagogy of supervision (theory and practice), administration, research and other areas of supervision. In view of resource constraints in many African countries, it is likely that establishing formal training programmes for supervisors may be challenging. Where that is the case, external collaboration could be considered. An accredited supervision course for new supervisors was developed through a collaboration between several South African universities and the Netherlands Universities Foundation for International Cooperation[17] and the course is open to supervisors from other universities[18,19]. African Science Frontiers Initiatives (ASFI)[20] also offers a comprehensive academic supervision course and other training to equip academics with useful skills to advance scientific research in Africa. This editorial emerges from the inaugural offering of ASFI's Art of Academic Supervision course, delivered to a group of African supervisors and

aspiring supervisors between May and July 2025. The strong and overwhelmingly positive response from participants underscores the pressing need for continuous capacity building in the practice of academic supervision. For this, ASFI deserves commendation for joining other initiatives that now provided training support to African supervisors in pursuing more effective and impactful supervision journeys.

Which approach is better?

Learning through experience, on its own, is not optimal and formal academic supervision training has its own fair share of criticisms. This suggests that it does not have to be "an either-or" situation – both approaches are important and should be adopted but one should come before the other. While new supervisors can learn on-the-job, prior supervisor training and development would make the supervision process less arduous. Formal training provides ideas of "what to do" via theoretical understanding of supervision but "doing" helps to build and deepen competence. Academic supervision is complex so formal training should not be a one-time event offered only at the beginning of supervision. Rather, it should be viewed as a continuous process to further enhance supervisory expertise of both new and experienced supervisors.

The role of personal supervision philosophy

Equally important is identification of one's personal supervision philosophy, which, unlike organisation of formal supervision training, is solely dependent on individual supervisors. Academic staff should be encouraged to draft their supervision philosophy statement, which will help them to better understand the philosophy that guides their practice. Akin to teaching philosophy statements, which are crafted for personal reflection and professional purposes and revised/updated over time[21], supervision philosophy statements capture academics' beliefs, values and practices of supervision. Writing a supervision philosophy statement is developmental as it offers supervisors the opportunity to personally reflect on why they supervise the way they do, and it is likely to change as supervisors become more experienced. Crafting a supervision philosophy statement will help to articulate the type of supervisor one aspires to be and will help students to better understand their supervisor's style[22].

This concept of supervision philosophy is less discussed in the African context. A significant outcome from the just-concluded ASFI course was to ask participants to craft their own personal supervision philosophy. These individual philosophy statements of 37 African academics, documented in the paper by Abdullahi et al.[23], undoubtedly offered participants the opportunity to reflect and articulate their beliefs, values, and supervision styles. This is therefore a welcome development drawing attention to this important topic. In addition to expressing their supervision beliefs, values, and practices, the authors' supervision philosophy statements also showcased their educational purpose and learning goals for students, methods of supervision, methods of assessing students' learning, and assessment of supervision. The common themes recurring in the statements were collaborative approach to supervision; provision of positive, empathetic and supportive environment where students are treated with respect; promoting critical thinking and academic/research integrity; nurturing students to become independent; and to conduct ethical research that makes contributions to society beyond just having a degree and publications. It was impressive to note that many of the authors were favourably disposed to a holistic approach to supervision that caters to students' intellectual, emotional, social, and physical well-being, encouraging interaction with peers, engaging in professional development activities and engagement with local communities. This holistic approach to supervision is important because it considers other areas necessary for students' development rather than focusing on just the research work, thereby addressing non-academic issues that can hinder the completion of students' work[7].

The personal philosophy statements revealed that many academics recognised the importance of flexibility in supervision since students have diversity of needs and students at various stages in their research work would need different types of support, which agrees with the perspectives of Daramola[24]. Some academics made use of modern technology/online platforms for supervision, which is convenient and eliminates geographical barriers to supervision. This is a welcome development since low utilisation of technology is among the factors hindering completion

of students' work[7]. However, there are a range of issues arising from these personal supervision philosophy statements that deserve further attention. Some parts of the statements were vague without providing specific details and some parts were more of explanations of the supervision process. Very few of the statements captured the theoretical framework underpinning supervision practice (e.g. constructivist learning theory), which is important because supervision is a specialist type of teaching, even though it differs from standard classroom teaching[25]. Some of the personal supervision philosophy statements were either less clear or did not have any information about assessment of the quality of their supervision in relation to feedback from students, which, in addition to self-reflection, will help supervisors to improve their practice. Nevertheless, this paper by Abdullahi and colleagues[23] makes an important contribution to the literature on academic supervision due to providing unique insights from academics based in Africa.

Future directions for academic supervision in Africa and conclusion

Supervisor training and development are top priorities for achieving high-quality academic supervision in Africa. Universities can organise structured formal training by themselves or in collaboration with external institutions. Face-to-face training would offer opportunities for physical interactions, but it is also possible to consider online or blended learning options if transport and other costs are a concern. As participants in Ronoh et al.'s study[7] pointed out, training should be offered regularly – continuous training will help academics to build expertise and acquire up-to-date knowledge. In some European countries, it is a requirement for academics to attend mandatory supervision training and co-supervise with more experienced supervisors before being assigned to supervise a student. This, however, may not be a practical solution in Africa given the rising number of students enrolling in universities and few numbers of academic staff. Provision of supervision handbooks containing institutional guidelines and other relevant information will help to offer clarity to supervisors.

Both new and experienced supervisors should be encouraged to craft and regularly update their personal supervision philosophy statements. This would require training (e.g. a self-paced online course or any other type of training) to provide guidance to academic staff on the contents and format of supervision philosophy statement, emphasising its benefit to staff's personal development and the need for updates as they become more experienced. It is important for supervisors to regularly reflect on and evaluate their practices (e.g. after supervising each batch of students) to identify areas of good practice and identify areas for improvement/gaps which can be filled by attending a course. Staff and students in Bazraftkhan et al.'s study[26] attested to the benefits of this reflective practice. Daramola[24] adopted a long-term approach, reflecting on his supervision over the past 12 years in two African universities, and the outcome was a publication of good practices that would be useful to other Africa-based supervisors. Finally, care should be taken to avoid increasing workload. Supervisors in Africa have complained about heavy workloads[13,14] and some supervision-related activities are completed at personal times. Therefore, supervision-related training and continuing professional development activities should not be an extra burden on staff.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST
The author declares no conflict of interest.

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