



Student's Journal of Health Research Africa

e-ISSN: 2709-9997, p-ISSN: 3006-1059

Vol.6 No. 6 (2025): June 2025 Issue

<https://doi.org/10.51168/sjhrafrica.v6i6.1732>

Original Article

SILENT SUFFERING: POSTGRADUATE STUDENTS' COPING MECHANISMS IN THE FACE OF SUPERVISORY CHALLENGES – A QUALITATIVE CROSS-SECTIONAL STUDY DESIGN.

Sibonelo Thanda Mbanjwa*

Mangosuthu University of Technology P.O. Box 12363 Jacobs 4026 Durban, South Africa

Page | 1

ABSTRACT

Background

This study investigates the coping mechanisms employed by master 's-level postgraduate students in response to supervision challenges within a South African university.

Methods

A qualitative cross-sectional single case study was conducted at a South African public university within the Faculty of Natural Sciences. Fifteen master's students (9 females, 6 males) aged 24–36, from disciplines such as Environmental Science, Chemistry, and Microbiology, were purposively selected. All participants had engaged in research-based supervision for at least six months. Data were collected via in-depth semi-structured interviews and analysed thematically using Braun and Clarke's approach.

Results

Twelve out of 15 participants reported psychological stress due to supervision-related issues. Common challenges included supervisor unavailability (13 students), delayed or infrequent feedback (11), and lack of academic guidance (9). Adaptive coping strategies included peer support (10), informal academic support networks (8), and proactive clarification with supervisors (5). Conversely, maladaptive responses included emotional withdrawal (6), avoidance of meetings (4), and procrastination on research tasks (5). Notably, 13 students were unaware of institutional grievance procedures or academic support services.

Conclusion

Master's students frequently endure supervision challenges in silence, lacking knowledge of institutional support mechanisms. While some adopt positive coping strategies, others disengage emotionally or academically, compromising research progress and well-being. These findings highlight the need for structural interventions to support postgraduate mental health and academic resilience.

Recommendations

Universities should implement mandatory orientation for students and supervisors, establish safe reporting channels, train supervisors in communication and mentorship, and promote peer mentoring and mental health awareness initiatives.

Keywords: Postgraduate supervision, Coping mechanisms, Psychological stress, Academic support, Qualitative research

Submitted: 2025-04-23 **Accepted:** 2025-05-25 **Published:** 2025-06-04

Corresponding Author: Sibonelo Thanda Mbanjwa*

Email: mbanjwa.sibonelo@mut.ac.za ORCHID 0000000319417669

Mangosuthu University of Technology P.O. Box 12363 Jacobs 4026 Durban, South Africa

INTRODUCTION

Postgraduate supervision is intended to be a collaborative and developmental process that facilitates the academic and professional growth of emerging researchers. Ideally,

it involves regular engagement, intellectual guidance, and emotional support from experienced supervisors. However, in reality, many postgraduate students experience supervision as a source of anxiety, confusion, and isolation. The supervision journey is often



complicated by inconsistent feedback, lack of availability, poor communication, and ambiguous expectations. These challenges do not merely delay research progress; they significantly affect students' mental well-being and academic confidence. In the context of South African higher education, where universities are under pressure to improve postgraduate throughput rates and research output, the emotional experiences of students navigating supervision are often neglected. While institutional policies may exist to regulate supervision practices, many students find these systems inaccessible, under communicated, or non-functional. This study focuses on understanding how master's-level postgraduate students cope with ongoing supervisory challenges, with a particular emphasis on their emotional resilience, adaptive strategies, and the institutional factors that influence their ability to navigate supervision difficulties.

Research Objectives

- To identify the most common emotional and academic stressors resulting from poor supervision.
- To examine the coping mechanisms students adopt in response to supervisory difficulties.

METHODOLOGY

Study Design

This study adopted a qualitative cross-sectional study design to explore the coping mechanisms of postgraduate students facing supervision-related challenges at Mangosuthu University of Technology (MUT). The case study approach facilitated an in-depth investigation within a specific institutional context, allowing for rich, contextualized insights into students' psychological and academic responses. The cross-sectional nature of the study enabled data to be collected at a single point in time, offering a snapshot of the coping strategies employed by students under existing supervision conditions.

Study Setting

The study was conducted at Mangosuthu University of Technology (MUT), a public higher education institution located in Umlazi, KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. MUT has a growing postgraduate enrolment, particularly within its Faculty of Natural Sciences, where the research was focused. This setting was chosen due to known challenges in supervision engagement and the need to better understand student well-being and academic support structures. Data collection was carried out over three

months, from January 2022 to April 2024, using in-person and virtual interviews depending on participant availability.

Participants

The participants were masters level postgraduate students enrolled in research-based programs at Mangosuthu University of Technology (MUT).

Inclusion criteria

- Active enrolment in a full-time research-based master's program.
- A minimum of six months under formal academic supervision.
- Willingness to participate voluntarily and provide informed consent.

Exclusion criteria

- Students enrolled in research-based master's programs only.
- Students with less than six months of supervisory engagement.
- Individuals who had formally withdrawn or taken a leave of absence from their research program at the time of data collection.

Study Size

The study included a total of 15 master's students, which was determined through data saturation, the point at which no new themes emerged during interviews. This sample size is appropriate for qualitative research aimed at understanding depth, nuance, and variation in lived experiences within a single institutional case.

Participants were recruited through purposive sampling, targeting students known to be engaged in postgraduate research. Recruitment was facilitated by faculty members and postgraduate coordinators, who disseminated the study invitation via email and WhatsApp communication platforms.

Bias

To minimize bias, the researcher implemented several control strategies. First, anonymity and confidentiality were emphasized to encourage open, honest disclosure without fear of academic repercussion. Second, a



standardized semi-structured interview guide was used to ensure consistency in the questions asked. Third, the researcher maintained a reflexive journal to document and reflect on any personal assumptions or interpretations that could influence the study. This reflexive process helped maintain objectivity during data collection and thematic analysis.

Data Measurement / Sources

Data were collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews conducted with each participant. The interviews explored student experiences of supervision, the emotional effects of supervision challenges, and the strategies used to cope with those experiences. Interviews were audio-recorded (with consent), transcribed verbatim, and supplemented by field notes. The interview schedule was informed by themes from the literature and reviewed for clarity and relevance before use.

Statistical Analysis

A thematic analysis approach was employed using Braun and Clarke's six-phase framework: data familiarization, initial coding, theme generation, theme review, theme definition, and reporting. Transcripts were coded manually and validated using NVivo 12 software to enhance reliability and ensure consistency across themes. Simple descriptive statistics (e.g., frequencies, percentages) were used to present demographic data and recurring responses. Missing data were minimal due to the interview format; when clarification was needed, participants were contacted for brief follow-up responses.

Ethical Consideration

The study received ethical clearance from the Mangosuthu University of Technology Research Ethics Committee. All participants were informed about the purpose, procedures, risks, and voluntary nature of the study. Written informed consent was obtained before participation. Confidentiality was strictly maintained, and all collected data were stored securely on password-protected devices accessible only to the researcher.

RESULTS AND FINDINGS

Descriptive Data

The study included 15 master's-level postgraduate students enrolled in research-based programs at

Mangosuthu University of Technology (MUT). The socio-demographic profile of the participants is summarized as follows:

Gender

Female: 9 participants

Male: 6 participants

Age Range

24–27 years: 5 participants

28–31 years: 6 participants

32–36 years: 4 participants

Disciplinary Fields

Environmental Science: 6 participants

Microbiology: 4 participants

Chemistry: 3 participants

Nature Conservation: 2 participants

Duration under Supervision

6–12 months: 7 participants

13–18 months: 5 participants

Over 18 months: 3 participants

Funding Status

Funded (e.g., bursaries/scholarships): 8 participants

Self-funded: 7 participants

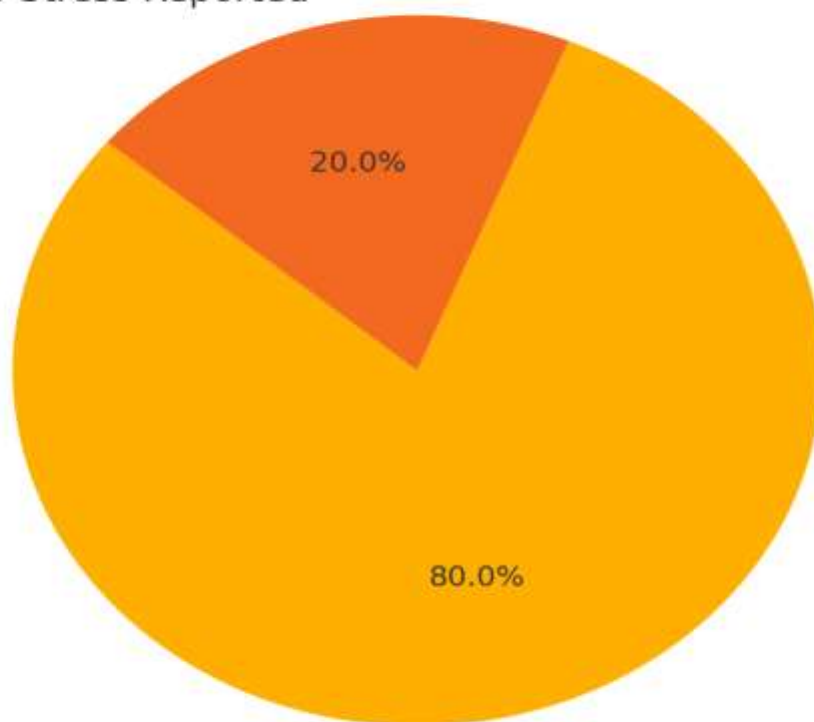
Psychological Stress Among Master's Students

Figure 1 reveals that 80% (12 out of 15) of the participating master's students reported experiencing psychological stress due to supervisory challenges, while only 20% (3 students) indicated that they did not experience significant stress. This highlights a concerning trend where supervision, which should be a source of academic support and growth, is instead contributing to emotional strain and mental fatigue. The high proportion of students reporting stress suggests that supervision is often inconsistent, poorly managed, or unresponsive to students' academic and personal needs, which can hinder motivation and delay progress.

Psychological Stress Among Master's Students

Page | 4

No Stress Reported



Reported Stress

Figure 1: The graph illustrates the psychological stress among master's students

Figure 2 identifies the most frequently cited challenges contributing to student stress. Supervisor unavailability was the most prevalent issue, reported by 13 out of 15 students, followed closely by delayed or irregular feedback (11 students) and lack of academic guidance (9 students). These findings illustrate the breakdown of essential supervision practices such as regular

engagement, constructive feedback, and mentorship. Supervisor inaccessibility, in particular, isolates students, forcing them to navigate research independently and often with uncertainty. These gaps directly compromise both academic outcomes and student mental health, indicating a systemic failure in how supervision is structured and monitored.

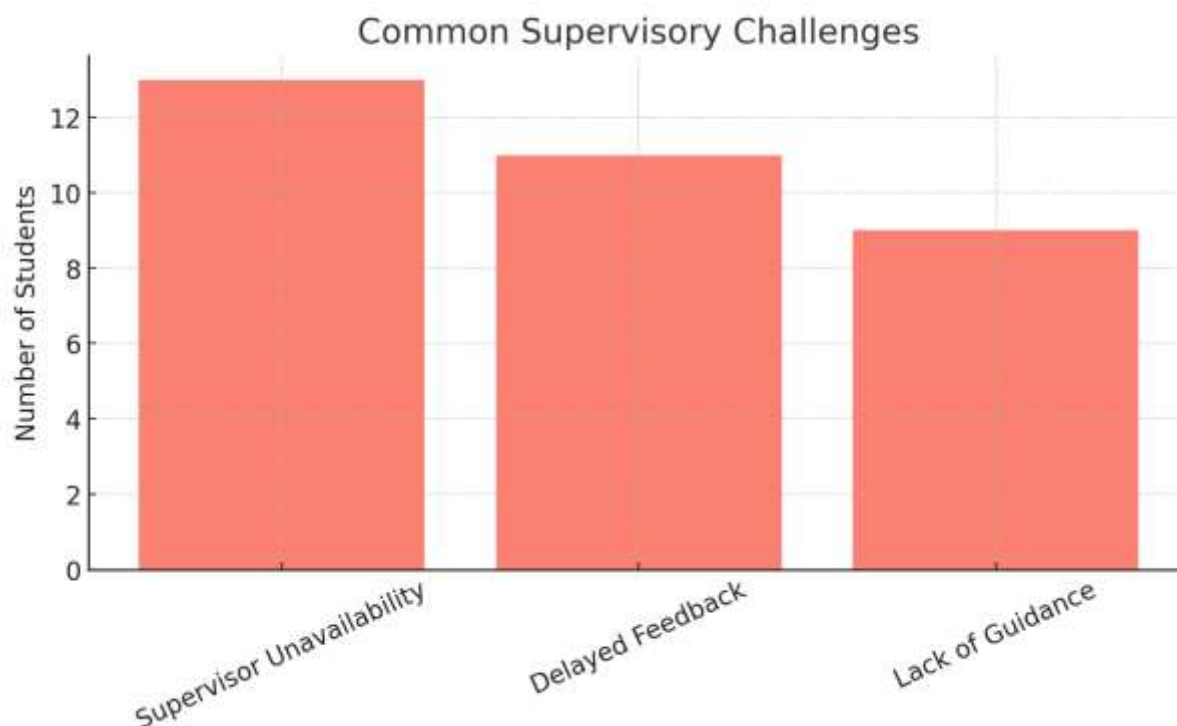


Figure 2: The graph represents the common challenges that supervisors face when supervising postgraduate students

Figure 3 presents how students respond constructively to these challenges. Peer support (10 students) emerged as the most utilized adaptive strategy, followed by informal study groups (8 students) and direct dialogue with supervisors (5 students). The reliance on peer networks indicates a shift in support systems away from formal institutional structures to informal, student-led initiatives.

This is both a strength and a red flag; it shows resilience among students, but also reflects a lack of structured institutional support. The fact that fewer students reported addressing issues directly with their supervisors suggests that many either fear confrontation, lack confidence, or believe that it will not lead to resolution.

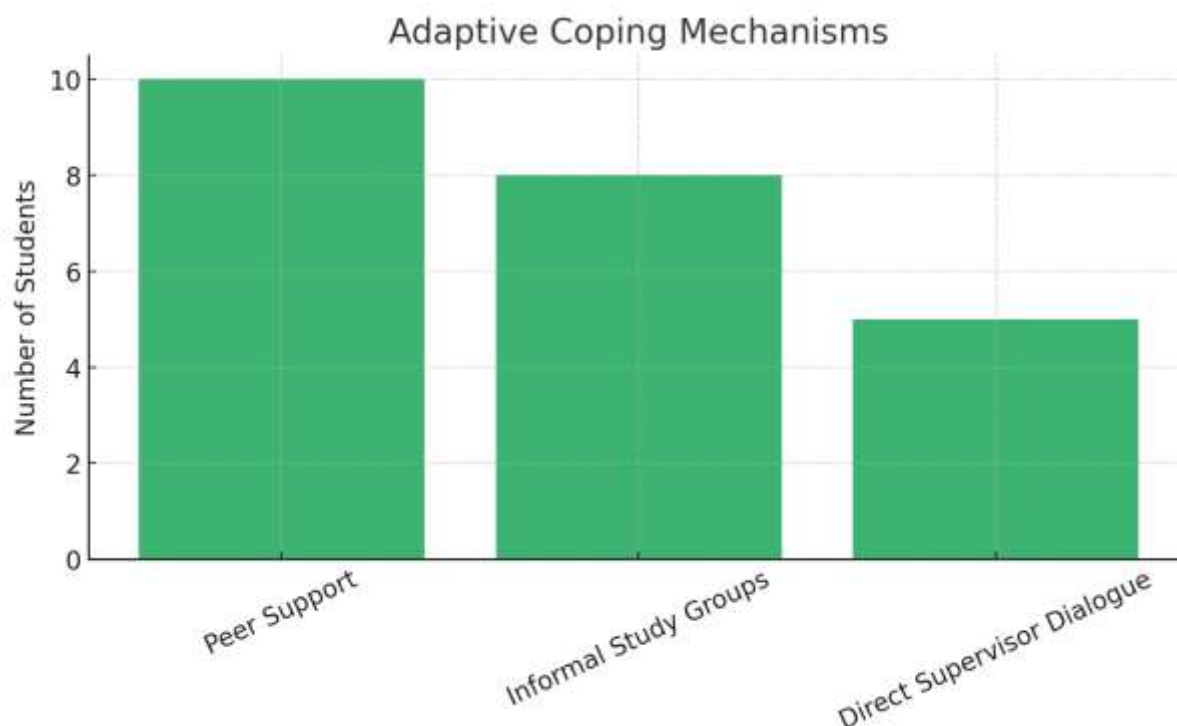


Figure 3: The graph showing the adaptive coping mechanisms used by master s-level postgraduate students

The graph illustrates the qualitative findings of the study, highlighting the most common supervision challenges and coping mechanisms reported by 15 postgraduate students. The most frequently cited issue was supervisor unavailability, mentioned by 13 participants, followed closely by delayed or infrequent feedback (11 participants) and lack of academic guidance (9 participants), underscoring widespread dissatisfaction with the supervisory process. In terms of coping strategies, peer support (10 participants) and informal academic support networks (8 participants) emerged as the most common adaptive responses, while some

students also attempted to clarify expectations with supervisors (5 participants). On the other hand, maladaptive coping was evident in emotional withdrawal (6 participants), avoidance of meetings (4 participants), and delaying research tasks (5 participants). Notably, 13 participants indicated they were unaware of institutional support services, suggesting a critical communication gap that may exacerbate the emotional and academic toll of poor supervision. The overall pattern reflects a mix of resilience and vulnerability, with students often navigating their struggles in isolation.

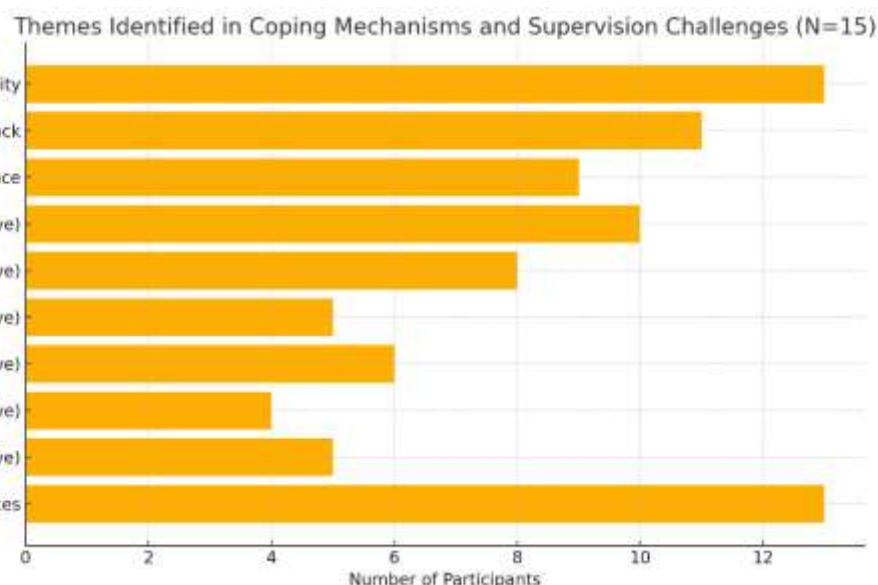


Figure 4: The graph illustrating the frequency of key themes identified in the participants' experiences of supervision challenges and coping mechanisms

DISCUSSION

Figure 1, illustrating psychological stress levels among master's students, revealed that 80% of participants (12 out of 15) experienced emotional strain due to poor supervision. This confirms that ineffective supervision is not an isolated concern but a widespread issue within the postgraduate experience. High levels of stress among students suggest that supervision has become a major contributor to mental health concerns in academic spaces. These findings echo the work of Manathunga (2007), who identified the emotional labour of navigating inconsistent supervision as a source of burnout, academic paralysis, and alienation from the research process.

Figure 2, highlighting common supervisory challenges, pointed to supervisor unavailability (13 students), delayed feedback (11 students), and lack of guidance (9 students) as the leading sources of student frustration and disengagement. These issues strike at the core responsibilities of academic supervision: timely feedback, mentorship, and availability. When these expectations are not met, students are left to navigate their research alone, which often leads to feelings of abandonment, confusion, and disillusionment. These results align with Lessing and Schulze (2002), who noted that inadequate academic support contributes directly to extended time to completion and student dropout.

Figure 2 focused on adaptive coping mechanisms, showing that most students turned to peer support (10 students) and informal study groups (8 students) to manage supervision challenges. While these strategies reveal commendable resilience, they also highlight the lack of institutional structures supporting emotional and academic well-being. The fact that only 5 students felt empowered to engage directly with their supervisors suggests a breakdown in the supervisory relationship, possibly influenced by power dynamics, fear of conflict, or perceived ineffectiveness. These findings are consistent with Backhouse (2009), who argues that when formal systems are inaccessible or dysfunctional, students revert to informal networks for survival. These insights, the graph on awareness of institutional support services (noted in a previous result), showed that only 2 out of 15 students were aware of available support mechanisms, such as grievance channels or mental health services. This lack of awareness is alarming, considering the prevalence of stress and supervision-related issues. It indicates that institutions are either not providing adequate support or are failing to communicate it effectively. As Govender and Naidoo (2020) emphasize, the existence of a policy without practical visibility or enforcement renders it ineffective and leaves students unsupported.

Taken together, these visual findings reinforce the view that the postgraduate supervision environment needs systemic reform. Students are navigating a complex



academic journey with minimal structured support, resulting in a combination of stress, disengagement, and informal coping strategies. Without targeted institutional interventions, students will continue to suffer in silence, and the quality and integrity of postgraduate education will remain compromised.

GENERALIZABILITY

While this was a context-specific, single-institution case study, the themes identified, such as poor supervision, lack of student support, and emotional stress, are broadly relevant across many higher education institutions, particularly in resource-constrained environments. Thus, the findings are analytically generalizable and may serve as a reflective tool for other universities facing similar challenges in postgraduate supervision.

CONCLUSION

This study confirms that master 's-level postgraduate students often face considerable emotional and academic hardship due to poor supervision. The challenges of supervisor unavailability, insufficient feedback, and lack of academic mentorship lead to elevated levels of psychological stress. While some students demonstrate agency through adaptive coping strategies, such as peer support, others are left to cope in silence, resorting to disengagement and emotional withdrawal. The lack of institutional awareness and access to support systems further exacerbates their suffering. These findings emphasize the need for higher education institutions to treat supervision as a structured, accountable, and student-centred process.

LIMITATIONS

This study was limited to a single South African university and focused only on master's students from the Faculty of Natural Sciences. As such, the findings may not represent the full spectrum of supervision experiences across other faculties, programs, or institutions. The study also relied on self-reported data, which may be influenced by memory bias or participant perception. Additionally, the study did not include the perspectives of supervisors or institutional leaders, which could have offered a more balanced understanding of systemic supervision challenges.

RECOMMENDATIONS

A multifaceted institutional approach is necessary to address the challenges identified in this study. First, universities should implement compulsory supervisor training programs that equip supervisors with essential skills in effective communication, academic mentorship, mental health awareness, and student engagement. This will ensure that supervision is not left to personal style or experience alone, but is guided by a consistent, student-centred framework. Secondly, structured supervision induction programs must be developed for postgraduate students to ensure they clearly understand their rights, responsibilities, and the support systems available to them from the beginning of their academic journey. Additionally, institutions should facilitate peer mentorship networks, allowing experienced postgraduate students to support their peers in navigating research and supervisory challenges, thus promoting community and academic resilience. Furthermore, universities must enhance institutional communication by making supervision policies and student support services more visible and accessible through workshops, orientation sessions, and online platforms to ensure that students are well-informed and empowered. It is essential to establish confidential grievance and mediation mechanisms that allow students to raise supervision-related concerns safely and receive support from an impartial third party. Together, these interventions can significantly improve the postgraduate supervision experience and safeguard students' emotional and academic well-being.

BIOGRAPHY

Dr. Sibonelo Thanda Mbanjwa is a dedicated lecturer in the Department of Nature Conservation at Mangosuthu University of Technology (MUT), South Africa. He holds a Ph.D. in Environmental Science and specializes in biodiversity conservation, sustainable development, and environmental education. Dr. Mbanjwa is deeply committed to community engagement, student mentorship, and the integration of indigenous knowledge systems into conservation practices. His work bridges academia and practical application, empowering students and communities through innovative teaching, research, and outreach initiatives.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I acknowledge the moral support and encouragement from the Deans and HOD of the Department of Nature



Student's Journal of Health Research Africa

e-ISSN: 2709-9997, p-ISSN: 3006-1059

Vol.6 No. 6 (2025): June 2025 Issue

<https://doi.org/10.51168/sjhrafrica.v6i6.1732>

Original Article

Conservation, Faculty of Natural Science, Mangosuthu University of Technology.

FUNDING

This work was not supported by any grant. The author did not receive research support from any company. The authors declare that no funds, grants, or other support were received during the preparation of this manuscript.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors have no relevant financial or non-financial interests to disclose.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

I, the author, contributed to the study conception and design. Material preparation, data collection, and research were performed by Mbanjwa S.T. The first draft was written by Mbanjwa S.T.

DATA AVAILABILITY

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the author, but restrictions apply to the availability of these data, which were used under license from various research publications for the current study and are therefore not publicly available.

The data supporting the findings of this study are available upon reasonable request from the corresponding author. Due to ethical considerations and confidentiality agreements, individual participant data cannot be publicly shared. However, anonymized and aggregated data may be provided for academic or research purposes upon institutional approval.

REFERENCES

1. Backhouse, J. (2009). Doctoral education in South Africa: Models, pedagogies and student experiences. Pretoria: Council on Higher Education.
2. Govender, K., & Naidoo, D. (2020). Postgraduate supervision experiences of South African students: Challenges and prospects. South African Journal of Higher Education, 34(6), 144-162
3. Lessing, A. C., & Schulze, S. (2002). Postgraduate supervision: Students' perceptions. South African Journal of Higher Education, 16(2), 139-149. <https://doi.org/10.4314/sajhe.v16i2.25253>
4. Manathunga, C. (2007). Supervision as mentoring: The role of power and boundary crossing. Studies in Continuing Education, 29(2), 207-221. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01580370701424650>

PUBLISHER DETAILS

Student's Journal of Health Research (SJHR)

(ISSN 2709-9997) Online

(ISSN 3006-1059) Print

Category: Non-Governmental & Non-profit Organization

Email: studentsjournal2020@gmail.com

WhatsApp: +256 775 434 261

Location: Scholar's Summit Nakigalala, P. O. Box 701432, Entebbe Uganda, East Africa

