

Expectations of the Student-Supervisor Relationship in Doctoral Studies

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Abstract: - Postgraduate supervision and particularly the student-supervisor relationship in doctoral studies has recently become a topic of great discussion in the academic arena. The relationship between the student and the supervisor is central to the successful completion of doctoral studies. As such, the focus of this study was to explore the nature of the student-supervisor relationship in the completion of educational doctoral studies in two African universities, namely, Nelson Mandela University in South Africa and Moi University in Kenya.

A qualitative approach was used, located within an interpretivist paradigm and positioned as an intrinsic interpretive case study. Convenient and purposive sampling was utilized to select participants who had recently completed their doctoral studies in education within the last five years. An individual semi-structured interview and drawings were used to generate the data with ten participants, five from each of the two Universities. The data was analysed thematically and the model for interpersonal supervisor behaviour of Mainhard, Roeland, Tarkwijk and Wubbels (2009), was used to make meaning of the findings. The conclusions from the findings were used to generate implications which could be helpful to university management in improving postgraduate supervision and in so doing, promote the success rate of doctoral studies in African universities.

Keywords: - Student-supervisor relationship, Supervisor, CUE: Commission for University Education

I. BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

A relationship exists between the research student and his/her supervisor during the entire period of research to the time the student is awarded the degree, often times continuing after the awarding of the degree. The supervisor works with the student by guiding and directing the entire process of knowledge production. In this study, the student-supervisor relationship refers to the relationship between the supervisor and a doctoral candidate.

Supervision refers to a process where the supervisor oversees a research project (Lee, 2008). During this process the supervisor works with the research student through the provision and guidance of academic reading, developing logical and critical thinking, as well as providing guidance pertaining to the various writing requirements associated with the academic writing (Halse, 2011; Hodza, 2007). Despite the importance of postgraduate supervision, it is a pedagogy which appears to be poorly understood (Jones, 2013). The relationship between the doctoral student and the supervisor is key to successful completion of doctoral studies within the expected time (Jones, 2013). This relationship is seen as a two-way interaction process, where the student and the

supervisor are expected engage each other professionally with respect and in an open mind (Hodza, 2007).

Statement of the Problem

In the recent years, the student-supervisor relationship has been highlighted as a critical aspect in postgraduate supervision and the achieving of higher degree certification. The relationship of the student and the supervisor is now seen as central to the successful completion of postgraduate studies (Jones, 2013).

Africa is in need of more researchers who can be involved in knowledge creation to solve African problems. However, statistics shows that the completion rate of doctoral studies in Africa is still very low (Cloete, Sheppard, Bailey & MacGregor, 2015).

While a number of studies have been undertaken on postgraduate student-supervisor relationship elsewhere, there are few documented studies that have established the nature of the relationship in the context of African universities. What forms the best practices for student-supervisor relationship elsewhere may not be the case in the context of African universities because of resource constraints, culture, and other factors. There could be some commonalities but also differences within the student-supervisor relationship as compared to other parts of the world that should be understood.

Exploring the nature of the student-supervisor relationship in an African university context and from an African perspective, could enable the formulation of context specific recommendations that could be used to enhance the student-supervisor dynamics in doctoral studies hence improving the completion of doctoral studies in education in Africa. This study is therefore focused on the nature of the student-supervisor relationship in the completion of educational doctoral studies in two African universities.

II. RESEARCH APPROACH

The research approach taken in this study is qualitative. Qualitative research aims at gathering rich descriptive data related to a particular phenomenon or context in order to develop an understanding of what is being studied

Doctoral students' expectations of the student-supervisor relationship

Doctoral students have a lot of expectations of their relationship with their supervisors. The expectations concern

progressing well throughout the period of the study. This could vary at certain points, as each student has unique needs and personality.

Candidates joining the doctoral programme expect to receive an induction to the institution and the programme (Pole, Sprukkereef, Burges & Lakin, 2006). Supervisors can save students a lot of time and expenses by making sure that they are inducted into the general processes of conducting the research. This involves induction into the departmental policies and availability of resources for fieldwork. It may also include the ethical clearance and timeframes or procedures for extension of the study period and other concerns throughout the study (Spear, 2000).

It is prudent for supervisors to advise students on appropriate topics and the anticipated time that it could take to research that particular topic (Friedrich-Nell & Mackinnon, 2014; Nulty et al., 2009). This is crucial because some funding agencies make it a requirement, or encourage timely completion of doctoral studies (McCallin & Shoba, 2012).

Doctoral students have also indicated that they expect direction and guidance from their supervisors on what the PhD entails (Gill & Burnard, 2008; Pole et al., 2006). In a study by Pole et al. (2006) doctoral students were asked directly what they expected from their supervisor during their research. Most of the students admitted that they knew very little about the PhD and its requirements. While explaining their uncertainty and confusion, many of the students' major expectation from the supervisors was direction and clear guidance (Pole et al., 2006). They look to their supervisors to provide direction for the learning process, especially on specific tasks to be undertaken and how to do them (Gill & Burnard, 2008).

It also appears that if supervisors show interest in the student's work, they inspire them to work smartly in their research projects (McClure, 2005). Some supervisors have little or no interest in the students' work, instead, they tend to give a higher priority and interest to their own research work compared to the students' research projects (McClure, 2005).

Nita (2015) found that students expect to have regular contact with their supervisors during their study period. Erratic or infrequent contact with supervisors is one of the complaints that is common among doctoral students (Nita, 2015). This is due to the busy schedules of supervisors who have other responsibilities like teaching, administration, or many students to supervise or even engaged with other tasks outside the university (Spear, 2000; Nita, 2015). Students look to their supervisors to provide timely and constructive criticism of their written drafts (Sayed, Kruss & Badat, 2006). Most students have complained that their supervisors are slow in reading the submitted work (Galt, 2013). According to Galt (2013) some supervisors take a lot of time to read and give feedback on the students' work. Furthermore, it is the expectation of many students that supervisors provide critical feedback (Sayed et al., 2006). The supervisors' critique is an

important factor that provides a blend of ideas to strengthen the student's research project (James & Gabrielle, 1999). However, it is important that the critique should not become destructive or discourage the student (James & Gabrielle, 1999).

While also looking at timely feedback, Grant (2005) realised that whenever students sent their written drafts to the supervisors, they wait for the feedback with anxiety. During this time of anxiety and waiting, students rarely do anything constructive to add to their work (Grant, 2005; Galt, 2013). It is the feedback that enables them to progress.

Students also expect their supervisors to provide them with adequate materials for learning during the research process (Malfroy, 2005; Sayed et al., 2006). Provision of literature materials on the field of study is crucial for the student in developing their thesis (Sayed et al., 2006). Students expect that their supervisors will expose them to a variety of learning materials and academic forums like seminars and conferences, which offer appropriate and special avenues for intellectual development (Lessing & Schulze, 2003). Many students would consider their participation in major conferences as critical opportunities for their academic development (Lessing & Schulze, 2003).

There is also an expectation by students that their supervisors should advise and negotiate with them in respect of any joint publication during or at the end of the doctoral study (James & Gabrielle, 1999; Sambrook, Stewart & Roberts, 2008). For any given publication, it is important to recognise the contribution of both the research student and the supervisor (James & Gabrielle, 1999).

Supervisor expectations of the student-supervisor relationship

Supervisors have several expectations from their students regarding the student-supervisor relationship, this pertains to the doctoral students being in a position to carry out their research and completing their studies.

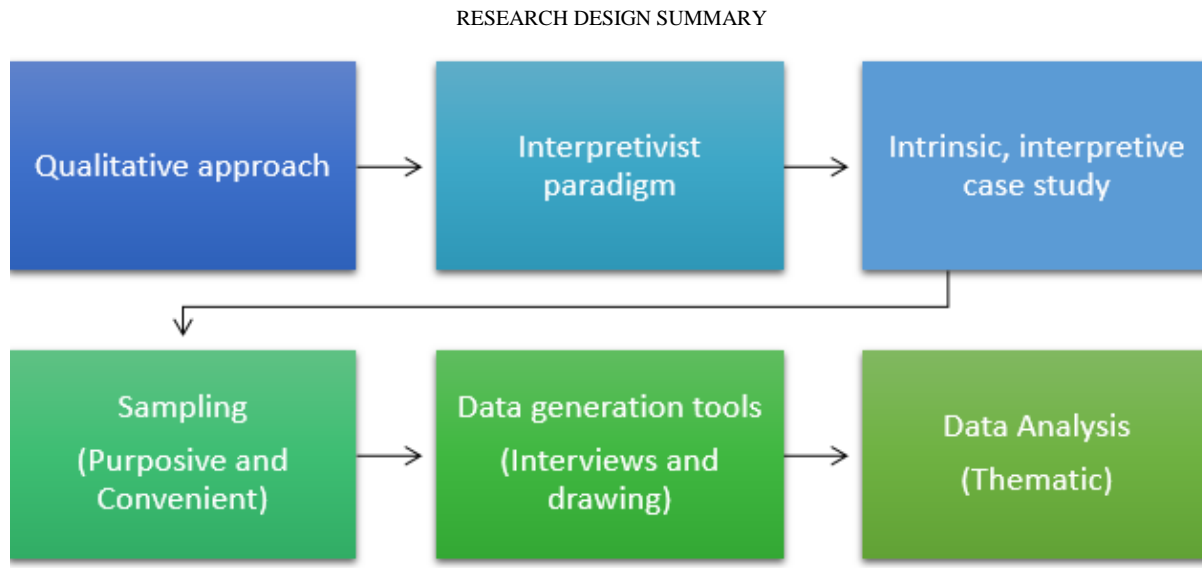
Friedrick-Nel and Mackinnon (2014) found that supervisors expect the doctoral students to be self-motivated and have the qualities that promote the student-supervisor relationship for the success of the research. The qualities expected of the students include being problem solvers, disciplined, innovative, motivated and comfortable in discussing their own issues with their supervisors (Friedrick-Nel & Mackinnon, 2014; Halse, 2011). Supervisors believe that students with these qualities are able to work independently and produce quality work with minimal guidance from their supervisors (Adkins, 2009).

Supervisors expect that doctoral students should be in a position to come up with the research problem, formulate the research question and design the methodology (Halse, 2011). Once the student has produced the first draft, supervisors take the responsibility to guide and shape the research project (Halse, 2011). In addition, the supervisor also requires that doctoral students should be ready to read widely and explore

the relevant literature on the research problem at hand (Litalien, 2015). They also expect the doctoral students to become independent and mature researchers who are able to carry out the research on their own (Phillips & Pugh, 2000).

Most supervisors look forward to working with doctoral students who make efforts to publish their research (Abiddin et al., 2009). Even though many institutions expect doctoral candidates to publish one or two articles before graduation, it is also the expectation of some supervisors that their students

publish their research (Abiddin et al., 2009; Friedrich-Nel & Mackinnon, 2014). Many supervisors tend to work with their students to publish some articles which they can present in academic meetings like conferences and workshops (Lessing & Schulze, 2003). This is important in training the doctoral students to be able to develop research ideas and disseminate it, as part of career development (Abiddin et al., 2009). The hard working students usually exceed the expectation of one or two articles and they graduate with several publications (Abiddin et al., 2009).



III. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Purpose-Focused Relationship

Participants in this study expected that they would have a relationship with their supervisors that is focussed on the purpose of doing the doctoral study. They expected that their doctoral relationship with their supervisors would lead to development in their research field through learning and gaining new skills that would enable them to complete their studies within the expected time. According to the participants the purpose-focussed relationship involved three processes, namely, (i) the supervisor providing effective mentoring, (ii) providing support towards getting the PhD done, and (iii) the induction of the PhD candidate into scholarship and into scholarly networks.

Effective mentoring

Mentoring refers to the work of a trusted advisor with experience, knowledge and wisdom to advise and guide another, in this instance, a supervisor guiding and advising the doctoral student. Participants in this study expected their supervisors to be mentors, who would provide effective mentoring for the success of their doctoral studies. The doctoral graduates found the doctoral studies as a new area for

them and they expected their supervisors to orient and mentor them through regular guidance of what was expected of a PhD, assisting them to shape their work and even directing them on what to do. This is evident from the following quotations:

“My two supervisors were very well qualified and I expected them to be my mentors, they were people who could understand their work well” (Interview, Winny, line 563, {2016-12-17}).

“You see the advantage that I had was that I was a supervisor also, but not at their level of course and so I expected them to be my mentors” (Interview, Careen, line 213{2016-12-22}).

“I can say I expected them to do “panel beating”, you know, to shape my work to the required standard” (Interview, Careen, line 207 {2016-12-22}).

The above quotations explain the doctoral graduates’ expectations of a supervisor as a mentor in the student-supervisor relationship. According to De Boone (2014) the

supervisor is largely responsible for mentoring the research student, using their accumulated knowledge and experience in the academic field to mentor their students. A study by Cadman (2010) showed that students pay tribute to the commitment of their supervisors and acknowledge them as mentors in the doctoral learning process. Supervisors clearly play a significant role in mentoring and coaching the research students (McCallin & Shoba, 2012). It requires that the supervisor meets with the student regularly to discuss ideas, concepts, readings and progress in the writing of the thesis. This ensures that the research student progresses towards timely completion of the research project (De Boone, 2014). The purpose of effective mentoring is to complete the PhD and this will be highlighted in the next category.

Getting the PhD done

Participants described how they looked forward to having a relationship that is focussed on the completion of the study. This involves supervisors assisting the doctoral students to complete their studies within the expected time frame set down for part-time or full-time study in the policies of their respective universities. They are expected to form a productive relationship with their supervisors with which they would work together for the success of completing their study.

The above was highlighted when the participants responded as follows:

“I expected that together we will work to complete the journey within the shortest time possible” (Interview, Newton, line 441, {2016-12-22}).

“He was always there for me in terms of our personal relationship, and this led him towards getting me through the system as quickly as I wanted” (Interview, Dan, line 348, (2016-11-16)).

The quotations above confirm that the completion of doctoral studies was a key expectation of the doctoral graduates. Grant (2005) noted that doctoral students expect their supervisors to support them to complete their studies in time. It however seems that this expectation is sometimes not met for some candidates. According to Grossman and Crowther (2015) most doctoral students in African universities fail to complete their studies within the expected time. A study by Mouton (2011) also found that there is a limited number of PhDs produced in sub-Saharan Africa. One of the reasons pointed out by Grossman and Crowther (2015) for the low number of PhDs in sub-Saharan Africa is the problem of lack of supervision capacity and therefore lack of mentoring capacity, which slows down the completion rate or increases the attrition rate of the doctoral students in the region. The next category focusses on inducting the doctoral student into scholarship and into scholarly networks.

Scholarly induction

Studying towards a PhD also calls for being inducted into the world of scholars, scholarliness, and scholarship, within a research context such as higher education institutions. Participants in this study expected that their supervisors would provide them with such an induction which would enable them to develop into independent scholars through sharing their knowledge of how research works in higher education institutions, guiding them on publishing and exposing them to their research networks. They looked forward to gaining research skills from their supervisors which would guide them to own the research process and become independent researchers. The following quotations from the participants reflected the above:

“Yes, I was working at a level where I expected my supervisors to assist me generate knowledge, not to absorb knowledge, but generating the knowledge together with them” (Interview, Winny, line 599, {2016-12-17}).

“I knew that I would have to do a fair amount of independent work.” (Interview, Dan, line 322, {2016-11-16}).

The quotations above outline the doctoral graduates' expectations of an induction to become independent scholars in academia. Supervisors not only supervise or promote doctoral studies, but play an important role in developing the research students to become independent scholars (McCallin & Shoba, 2012) and to find their own space in the academia. Induction into scholarship is best done when supervision is practiced as a pedagogy (Emilsson & Johnsson, 2007), where the teaching element is emphasised in the research process. According to Radloff (2010) it is the role of the research supervisor to train, empower and facilitate the research student to become an independent researcher. Supervisors also expect the doctoral students to become independent researchers who are able to think critically about their own work and who could work on their own (Halse, 2011). A study by Cadman (2010) also suggests that supervisors prefer working with students who were ready to explore new areas in research and to push the boundaries of knowledge production. These are the students who work together with their supervisors to co-author articles which they can publish and present in academic forums.

Another expectation of the student-supervisor relationship pointed out by the participants is a collaborative relationship, which is discussed as the second theme.

2. Collaborative relationship

A collaborative relationship is where both the student and the supervisor work in unity, that is, working together for the success of the research project. The doctoral graduates expected that they would have a collaborative relationship with their supervisors, which encompasses the following,

namely, (i) harmonious working relationship (ii) productive feedback, and (ii) a relationship of understanding.

Harmonious working relationship

In this study, the participants expected to form a harmonious working relationship with their supervisors. This means a relationship without conflict, as well as a close working relationship with common interest and values. The following quotations highlight the above:

“But working for the best quality possible with no chance of fighting” (Interview, Eve, line 45, {2016-12-05}).

“For the very very important thing was one that the supervisor and I had to connect in terms of our values and our passions and our interests” (Interview, Alice, line 812, {2016-11-15}).

The quotations above explain how the doctoral graduates expected a harmonious working relationship where their supervisors work closely with them throughout the PhD journey without fighting. A harmonious working relationship forms the basis of a productive and conducive environment for the student-supervisor relationship (Hodza, 2007). Both the student and the supervisor should negotiate their expectations to avoid conflict and to enable them to work in harmony (Watt & Chiappetta, 2011). It is important also to note that there are instances in some relationships where students have frequent disagreements with their supervisors (Grevholm et al., 2005). Such relationships which are filled with conflict, hampers collaboration and may negatively affect the progress of the doctoral student (Grevholm et al., 2005). A harmonious working relationship enables the supervisor to provide productive feedback and the doctoral student to accept and engage with the feedback, which is the focus of the next category.

Productive feedback

Productive feedback refers to critical and prompt feedback provided by the supervisor to strengthen and support the research project. This can either be feedback about the submitted work or verbal feedback about their thinking within the study. The feedback forms one of the crucial elements in the student-supervisor relationship. Participants in this study expected their supervisors to provide productive feedback on the drafts they submitted and critique related to their work in a positive way. The participants also emphasised their expectation of timely feedback. Some participants expressed their disappointment on the delayed response from their supervisors. The above is shown by the following quotations:

“So I needed somebody who mmmh would be critical with my work” (Interview, Alice, line 716 {2016-11-16}).

“Yah you are excited and I expected that I will write my work and the supervisors give

the feedback quickly... you know, ahaa... like a young child who writes the work and wants the teacher to put a tick quickly” (Interview, Winny, line 585 {2016-12-17}).

The above quotations speak strongly on the doctoral graduates' expectation of productive feedback, which would advance their work. A study by Sayed, Kruss and Badat (2006) found that students expect their supervisors to provide critical and timely feedback. Often a student just needs some productive feedback to move beyond the stagnation and to be set on task again. When a supervisor takes a long time to respond to students' work, as long as ten months to provide the feedback, the student is at risk of not completing the study (Spear, 2000). As such, it is necessary that the student and the supervisor work in a relationship of understanding, as is elaborated on in the next category.

Relationship of understanding

In order to establish a collaborative relationship, both supervisor and doctoral student should engage with each other in a way that understands. The participants in this study described their expectation of a student-supervisor relationship that is governed by understanding. Students expected that their supervisors would understand the challenges associated with PhD studies and work with them to overcome these. They expected an understanding and caring supervisor who will always show empathy and will be ready to assist in situations of difficulty and at the same time motivate them to work better and harder towards completing the PhD. The above was highlighted when the participants responded as follows:

“I was expecting her to be a bit empathetic in a way, you know, for instance, you know when it comes to personal issues, it is not easy, maybe my child is sick or anything, I expected her to be able to understand that” (Interview, Nelly, line 495, {2016-12-23}).

“I expected them to push me and even motivate me, you know, PhD is a heavy task you need to be motivated always” (Interview, Careen, line 249, {2016-12-22}).

These quotations provide evidence of how doctoral graduates expected their supervisors to have understanding, have empathy and at the same time motivate them. A study by Lessing and Schulze (2003) found that doctoral students celebrate and appreciate supervisors who show understanding as this becomes a source of motivation and encouragement to them. A relationship of understanding provides a supportive working environment that enables the student and the supervisor to work better and faster for timely completion of doctoral studies (Radloff, 2010; Krauss & Ismi, 2010). The participants, however, also expressed their expectation of integrity in the relationship, which is discussed as the third theme.

3: Integrity in the relationship

Integrity refers to the qualities of being honest and having strong moral principles. The student and the supervisor should engage with each other with integrity, upholding the moral principles in the entire research process. Doctoral graduates in this study expressed their expectations of working with integrity in the student-supervisor relationship. Their views accentuated the following; (i) commitment to the PhD work (ii) the need for an ethical relationship and (ii) managing of power in the relationship.

Commitment to the PhD work

Research projects require commitment where the student and the supervisor devote themselves to the research project. Participants in this study outlined commitment to the PhD work as one of the major expectations in the student-supervisor relationship. This involves the expectation of frequent meetings with the supervisor, taking responsibility, supervisor support in the relationship and working with an available supervisor throughout the study. The above became evident from the following responses:

“So I expected to walk with them throughout my journey, to guide me step by step” (Interview, Beatrice, line 1174, {2016-12-20}).

“So I expected that they will always be available for me” (Interview, Winny, line 576 {2016-12-17}).

From the quotations above it is evident how these doctoral graduates expected a commitment to the relationship that supports them throughout their research journey. According to Cadman (2010) students value the commitment of their supervisors and appreciate the frequent guidance and direction given by their supervisors during the research process. However, it appears that sometimes some supervisors have no time for the students and they consider the students they supervise as an afterthought (Spear, 2000). Spear (2000) argues that some supervisors seem to have many pressing responsibilities which often lead to little attention provided to the supervised students as these students are not their first priority. The student therefore has to make every effort to take the responsibility of understanding the field and methods necessary to carry out the research project (Abiddin et al., 2009). Commitment to the PhD work also requires that the student and the supervisor work in an ethical way, as elaborated on in the next category.

Maintaining an ethical relationship

An ethical relationship refers to a relationship where the student and the supervisor uphold the moral principles in their working relationship; ensuring that they engage in the right practices in the research process and avoid any disreputable issues. The participants in this study expected an ethical relationship with their supervisors in which there would be

mutual trust, openness and honesty. They also expected confidentiality, keeping what happens in the student-supervisor relationship to them, aspects which became evident when the participants articulated it as follows:

“That is what I am saying in my mind it was this person either understands my values and ethics or they don’t work” (Interview, Alice, line 864 {2016-11-15}).

“I expected that we will work within the norms, to be respected as I respect them, to maintain the respect for a good working relationship” (Interview, Newton, line 409 {2016-12-22}).

The quotations above provide evidence that the doctoral graduates expected an ethical relationship where there is mutual trust, honesty, confidentiality and openness. Radloff (2010) concurs that there is a need for doctoral students and their supervisors to develop an ethical relationship during the research process. Nita (2015) also points out that the student-supervisor relationship will usually work best when the student and the supervisor are open and honest with one another. Doctoral students seem to have more confidence to work on their research studies when they know that their supervisors trust them and there is respect in the relationship (Nita, 2015). However, lack of honesty and trust between the student and the supervisor create a strained relationship which might negatively affect the progress of the research student (Radloff, 2010). An ethical relationship also brings the notion of managing power between the student and the supervisor, which is the focus of the next category.

Managing power in the relationship

The supervisor, by virtue of being the supervisor, is positioned as the expert professional who supervises the doctoral student and as such is in a position of power. How the power is used in the relationship, can influence the quality of the relationship. Participants in this study explained how power in the student-supervisor relationship affects their doctoral studies. The participants expected that they would have a relationship with their supervisors where there are no power plays, where their supervisors relate to them without showing that they have more power than them and as such, provide the necessary space to enable them to engage as emerging independent scholars. They also expected their supervisors to listen to them and consider their ideas. The above is shown by the following quotations:

“And if I am coming with ideas, I wanted her to listen not to always regard me as a student, you know” (Interview, Alice, line 836, {2016-11-15}).

The quotations above show that the doctoral graduates expected to be recognised in the student-supervisor relationship. The power relationship between the student and the supervisor has a great effect on the progress of the

research student (Grant, 2005). Since the student and the supervisor have unequal power, it appears that there is always a hierarchy in the student-supervisor relationship. However, to break the hierarchy, Grant (2005) proposes that the student and the supervisor should always negotiate the balance of power in the relationship. The students' research productivity might be affected negatively in a relationship where the supervisor controls everything without considering the student's opinion or ideas and as such hinders the development of the doctoral student. A power struggle between the student and the supervisor limits the chances of success in the research process (Gurr, 2010).

Synthesis of expectations of the student-supervisor relationship

Collectively, the three themes (with their categories) in response to the question "What were their expectations of the student-supervisor relationship during the study?" point to the expectations of a relationship which is purpose-focussed, collaborative, and underpinned by integrity (See also, 2.4.5). In the next section I discuss the findings of the second sub-research question.

IV. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

Expectations of the student supervisor relationship From the thematic analysis three themes emerged to answer the first sub-research question: "What were their expectations of the student-supervisor relationship during the study?"

It is evident from the findings that doctoral students expected a relationship that would support their doctoral research towards completion. They pointed to the expectation of a purpose-focused relationship where they wanted their supervisors to provide effective mentoring that would assist them in completing their studies within the expected time. At the same time, they wanted an induction into academia and their development as independent scholars to be enhanced. Furthermore, they expected a collaborative student-supervisor relationship underpinned by a harmonious working relationship to foster understanding and allow for honest and productive feedback from the supervisor, built on commitment and support to get the PhD efficiently done. They held a high regard for integrity in the student-supervisor relationship and expected that moral principles such as mutual commitment, mutual trust, honesty and no power plays, which guide the research process, should be upheld.

The thematic analysis and the summary above lead me to conclude that doctoral candidates expect a relationship that is supportive of completing the doctoral study and in the process be mentored to develop as independent scholars. This however, should take place in a relationship that is respectful of the other enabling the student and supervisor to productively work together.

The findings

The findings revealed the students' expectation of a supportive relationship and the importance of it in the completion of doctoral studies. While some relationships contained tensions, it seemed that negotiation is a vital activity that needs to be continuous and done cordially, to maintain the relationship and to sustain the forward movement in the study. It was evident that the supervisor's establishing a nurturing and efficient relationship is central to the doctoral student's success and when this is not established, the doctoral study is in jeopardy.

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