



Supervising Distance Students: Practice and Experience at The Open University of Tanzania

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Abstract

Supervising doctoral candidates through a distance mode of delivery poses many challenges for both students and supervisors. The paper presents an overview at the practice and experience of supervising distance students at the Open University of Tanzania and tries to link them with best practices learned from the “DIES/CREST Online Training Course for Supervisors of Doctoral Candidates at African Universities”. Supervision practice and roles at OUT are explained and data on trends of Doctoral candidate enrolment is presented and discussed. Supervision supporting infrastructure is also outlined and discussed. The paper also highlights challenges facing supervising distance students that include; spatial and temporal, workload, technological, giving feedback and cultural challenges. Strategies for effective distance supervision are narrated and discussed and finally, the paper gives conclusions and recommendations based on the knowledge gained from the training and best practice elsewhere.

Keywords: *Distance Learning, Doctoral students, Supervision Practices and Experience*

Introduction

Open, Distance and e-Learning (ODeL) system of education delivery is currently considered the most practical means for increasing educational access, advocating peer-to-peer collaboration and giving a learner a greater sense of independence and responsibility for learning. ODeL is fast becoming an accepted and very important part of the mainstream systems in education in both developed and developing countries, with particular emphasis on the latter (UNESCO, 2002). The

present essay is trying to link doctoral supervisors in distance education set up as a field of scholarship in the changing nature of research in global and African contexts. The paper gives an overview of the practice of Supervising Distance Students at the Open University of Tanzania, one of the pioneers of ODeL in Africa and tries to link them with best practices described in the DIES/CREST Online Training Course for Supervisors of Doctoral Candidates at African Universities (2018).

Postgraduate Studies at The Open University of Tanzania

Currently, OUT have about 3000 registered postgraduate students that include masters by dissertation and thesis and Doctor of Philosophy all studying at a distance. The mode of delivery of taught master's course is through blended learning delivered through an online platform (Moodle) combined with face-to-face sessions. The moodle platform among other services offers a platform for student and staff interactions. All PhD programmes are research-oriented with two one-week structured face to face per sessions per year. Communication between supervisor and student is mainly web-based through e-mail, the internet, Skype etc. (OUT PhD Handbook, 2017/18). Admission criteria and examination processes can be assessed in the PHD handbook 2017/18 and OUT PhD Handbook, 2017/18.

Supervision Practice and Roles at OUT

Supervision of postgraduate students at OUT follows the normal internationally accepted standards applied in both conventional and distance education. The appointment of the supervisor is done by the Senate on the recommendation of the relevant department. The appointment of a supervisor generally concurs with Stellenbosch Case Study (2002). However, the selection and allocation of postgraduate students to supervisors is conducted without consultation. Manyike (2017) observed similar practices in South Africa. This could lead to the misfit between doctoral candidates and supervisors, a factor that can influence the learning environment and completion rates (Pyhältö et.al., 2012). In order to have a more effective practice, OUT needs to adopt best practices as presented in course materials of Module 5

facilitated by J. Botha on “The Preparation Phase: Selection, supervisor allocation, and supervising the doctoral Proposal.”

Supervisors also are required to assist the student in building a scholarly environment that builds confidence and is an essential doctoral success as described in ASSAF (Academy of Science of South Africa) Report: The PhD Study (2010) and Boughey & Mckenna, (2018). The supervisor of a doctoral candidate is required to provide academic guidance and practical support throughout the research journey i.e. from proposal development to submission of thesis. The supervisor's tasks at OUT are generally in line with the lessons provided in Theme 5 facilitated by J. Botha on “Supervising the Preparation Phase: Supervising The Literature Study “ and “Supervising The Preparation Phase: Supervising The Development Of The Doctoral Research Proposal” (See Module Five). Similar practices have been observed by the Stellenbosch Case Study (2002) and as presented in Frick (2018) writing as a tool of learning. Other responsibility of the supervisors also includes integrating the candidate into the academic and social life of the department, providing a collaborative research environment and encouraging open communication. In addition, the supervisor facilitates regular progress meetings in which the candidates are guaranteed individual attention. Generally, supervision practices at OUT are in line (to me extent) with Lee (2008) framework of five approaches to supervision; functional, enculturation, critical thinking, emancipation and relationship development.

Trends on doctoral enrolments and graduates at OUT

The Open University of Tanzania has not been left behind in the global trend of PhD production (Botha, 2018; Mouton & Frick, 2018). OUT enrolled the first PhD candidates in 2001. Since then there has been a dramatic increase in both enrolment and completion rates. PhD enrolment and completion trends at OUT are presented in Figures 1& 2. Up until the mid-2000s, the PhD enrolment was generally low. Enrolment rose significantly beginning from 2010 to 2018 (see Figure 1). The dramatic peak in enrolment observed could be attributed to improved student services. Prior to 2004 postgraduate services were coordinated at the faculty level only.

In 2004 the university established the Directorate of Research and Postgraduate Studies which was mandated to coordinate all research and postgraduate studies activities. Office space and staff responsible for admission, examination, research and publication were put in place. Again, the increase in enrolment can be attributed to the increase of academic staff with PhD qualifications who could therefore supervise doctoral candidates.

On the other hand, the number of master's degree programmes increased from 12 in 2001 to 73 in 2016. The increases in master's degree programmes facilitated the increase in the number of candidates who qualified for doctoral studies (OUT Fact Figures, 2017). The increase in institutions of higher learning last decade in Tanzania has created a need for training qualified academic staff in the universities. Currently, Tanzania has a total of 33 universities (12 public and 21 private universities) (Tanzania Commission of Universities 2016). The first PhD graduates at OUT were recorded in 2006. Almost five years after the admission of the first candidates. The number of completions began to increase considerably in 2010 (Figure 2). Again, the increase in completion rates could be attributed to an increase in enrolment, master's programmes, supervisors and improvement of postgraduate administration and student support services.

From a wide perspective the increase in doctoral enrolment at OUT and Tanzania, in general, could be linked to the global trends in the production of more PhD than ever before (Cyranoski et al. 2011). Doctoral education is key to this rebuilding as it offers the potential for developing skilled staff for academic and research institutions, and is central to the development of much-needed locally relevant knowledge in Africa. Doctoral training is important to develop knowledge that will address important local problems, and produce highly skilled graduates to take leadership positions in their societies (Cross and Backhouse, 2014).

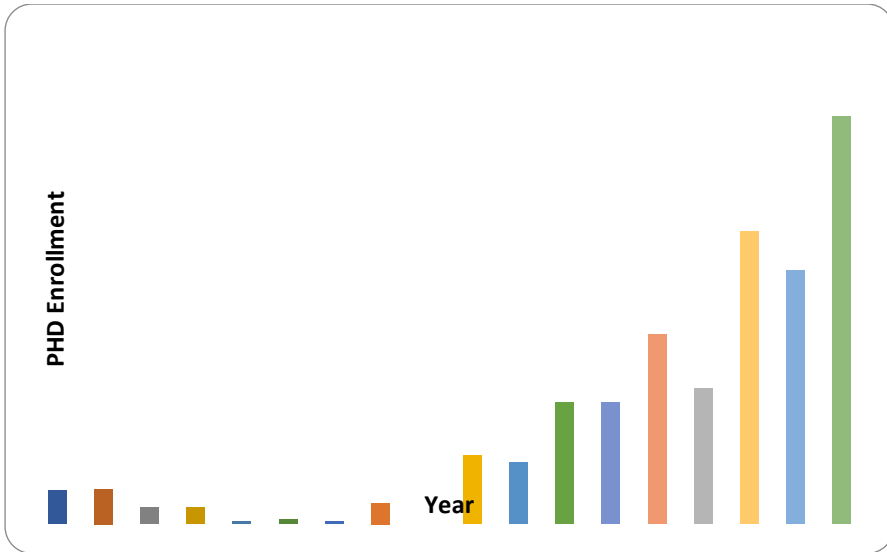


Figure 1: Enrolment of Doctoral Students from 2001 to 2018 (Source. OUT Facts and Figures, 2018)

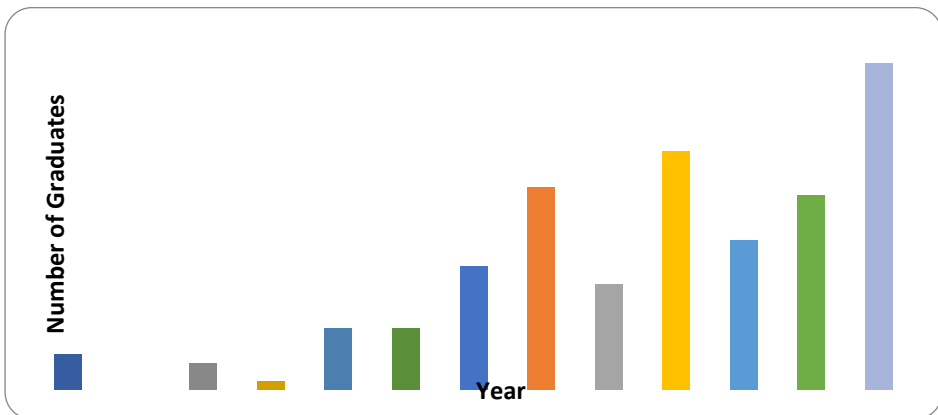


Figure 2: PhD completion rate from 2001 to 2018 (Source. OUT Facts and Figures, 2018)

Supervision Support at OUT

According to Schwartz (2017), there is no gold standard model of graduate supervision which can be applied, across all disciplines. Effective supervision is effected where there are technical and functional administrative structures. Globally ICT is increasingly playing an important role in education and training (UNESCO, 2002).

Furthermore, it has been demonstrated that the use of ICT can improve the quality of the student learning experiences and make education and training opportunities available to a broader spectrum of the population in developing countries (Rahman, 2014). The establishment of the Directorate of Research and Postgraduate Studies (DRPS) (2001) at OUT and the Institute of Educational and Management Technologies (IEMT) (2004) has facilitated functional administrative structures for facilitating postgraduate training through Open, Distance and e-Learning (ODEL). The DRPS coordinate all activities involving postgraduate training; admission, supervision and examination. The IEMT facilitates the application of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) in teaching and learning. The IEMT hosts and maintains the OUT Moodle platform and coordinates the uploading of teaching materials into the platform. Among other ODEL activities facilitated by IEMT include capacity building in the application of e-learning technologies such as Moodle, training in plagiarism software, and online teaching facilitation. In addition, IEMT ensures smooth and uninterrupted availability of internet services and other electronic-based teaching media. A study conducted on the utilization of ICT at OUT by Kagugu (2011) concluded that ICT has brought several benefits to the learner and the instructor in terms of shared learning resources and shared learning spaces.

The combination of ICT and face-to-face sessions Blended learning has created flexibility in programme delivery and created greater access to students who would otherwise be able to pursue graduate studies and meet the needs and learning preferences of diverse populations of learners (Erichsen et al., 2014). The OUT practices of postgraduate training and supervision supports Erichsen et al. (2014) observation that Blended learning is often delivered through three channels: the classroom, the virtual classroom, and self-paced online courses. All these delivery methods are used in postgraduate supervision at OUT although the classroom setting is more often a face-to-face consultation between student and supervisor. Again, the flexible delivery mode facilitated by blended learning has proved to be very appropriate for mature adult learners seeking professional development and advanced degrees in Tanzania (Kagugu, 2011). Several studies have indicated that students who were in the blended programs were more satisfied

than those in programmes primarily delivered online (Erichsen et al., 2014).

Postgraduate studies by distance learning are challenging, especially during the proposal and report writing especially for students doing research degrees without coursework i.e. doctoral students and Master by thesis. The students are separated from their tutors and peers, and most often they have no one to consult. They can easily experience '*Doctoral liminality*', a period which normally occurs between developing a researchable proposal and defending it successfully many students struggle to justify their work and end up in confusion (Keefer, 2016). In this case, the use of technology facilitates creativity and communication which encourages engagement (Kearsley & Shneiderman, 1998). At the Open University of Tanzania, ICT is used to impart both '*hard skills*' and '*soft skills*' to students that help them overcome the hurdles of undertaking research and academic writing activities while studying at a distance.

The Directorate of Research and Publications (DRP) in collaboration with IEMT offer two online courses in research methodologies. The first one is Online Research and Proposal Writing Skills (ORW). The course comprises the following lessons: Literature Review, Research and Publication Ethics Writing a Grant Proposal, Writing a Research Paper and Journal publication.

The course is accessed at:
<https://elms.out.ac.tz/course/index.php?categoryid=231>.

The ORW course is in line with the learning materials presented in Module 6: Guiding and supervising doctoral candidates in the responsible conduct of research (RCR). Research ethics in ORW courses include awareness of fabrication, falsification, plagiarism and other misconduct.

The second course is called Soft Skills Enhancement Research Training for Postgraduate students. The programme contains a series of short courses which are mandatory for all postgraduate students doing Masters by thesis and PhD. The purpose of the programme is to

instil research and publication soft skills in postgraduate students undertaking research and writing their reports. The short courses began in 2016/17 academic year through a blended mode comprising both MOODLE and short face-to-face sessions. The courses include; Proposal Writing Skills, Academic writing skills, Critical Literature review in academic writings, Personalized digital library for students based on their research topics, Research Designs and Sampling Methods, Qualitative data analysis, Quantitative data analysis, and dissemination of research findings. The programme is accessible at: <https://elms.out.ac.tz/course/index.php?categoryid=256>. Below is an extract of student appreciation after completing the 2018 Online Research and Proposal writing Skills Course.

“I enjoyed the course, and I feel a change at the individual level and looking forward to sharing my experience with a colleague on the same. Should you have any other course in future, please share with us”.

The two online research methodology courses highlight creativity and communication encourages student engagement (Kearsley & Shneiderman, 1998). The use of technology at OUT facilitates dialogue between the students and supervisors through interactive forums. It has been observed that group learning facilitates the development of an individual’s knowledge and practice through peer learning, or participatory and proactive-led discussion (Moar et al., 2016; Mapesela & Wilkinson, 2005).

Challenges of supervising students at a distance

Erichsen et al. (2014) observed that supervising doctoral candidates through a distance mode of delivery poses many challenges for both students and supervisors. Some of these challenges are discussed below.

Spatial and temporal challenges

Being at a distance spatially and temporally poses many cultural, intellectual, professional, and personal challenges to research supervisor–supervisee interactions, and the content, progress and

delivery of research activities (Nasiria & Mafakherib, 2015). However, different time zones is not an issue at OUT since most of its students originate from the East, Central and Southern African zone that has not much time differences.

A lack of good personal knowledge about each other sometimes makes it difficult for supervisors to understand the real strength or weaknesses of the students as these are very important attributes for successful guidance to completion of studies. Especially from the perspective of doctoral students that require continuous technical and pastoral support for several years (Nasiri & Mafakheri, 2015; Kung, 2017; Mapesela & Wilkinson, 2005; Picard et al., 2011).

To alleviate the problem of most students being not conversant on how distance learning works, the university conducts Orientation Sessions (induction day) for each new academic student cohort. The sessions are geared toward creating awareness of ODeL and the mode of delivery. Academic staff and ICT technicians are prepared specifically for the task. In these sessions' students receive an advance invitation via email, providing them with a web link to live stream seminars covering an introduction to programme requirements, library resources, various software, and IT resources, formal separate induction sessions could also be organized to discuss cultural issues, diversity, and research methods. Maor et al. (2016) observed similar practices.

Workload challenges

Supervisors may experience an increased workload due to the expectation that they should be constantly open to requests from students and as they sometimes represent the whole university system for a distance student (including includes access to library services, funding opportunities, research seminars, training, and administration) (Nasiri & Mafakheri, 2015; Kung, 2017; Mapesela & Wilkinson, 2005; Picard et al., 2011).

Supervision of postgraduate students at OUT faces several challenges such as increased workload due to constant inquiries ranging from clarification of postgraduate regulations, ICT technologies, how to access materials in e-learning platforms, library services, research

seminars and administrative issues. Communication between supervisors and students is mainly through e-mail and mobile phones. This has necessitated the university to ensure availability and uninterrupted internet communication. It has been observed that when IT-assisted interaction is established, it tends to spill into nonworking hours via email, chat, etc., creating the need for both parties to be equipped with the proper computer systems, hardware and software at home thus extending supervision work beyond working hours (Nasiri & Mafakheri, 2015; Kung, 2017; Mapesela & Wilkinson, 2005; Picard et al., 2011). Again, supervisors of postgraduate students by distance tend to have more than the average number of students to supervise due to the high enrollment of doctoral students in ODeL compared to conventional institutions.

Technological challenges

In Tanzania, a large population of students is located in isolated rural areas, without essentials such as electricity, internet connectivity and computers. Internet connectivity is something the University and the government have to address if they want to empower people around the country through ODeL, namely to strengthen the use of ICT technologies. Again several supervisors (normally nicknamed BBC i.e. Born Before Computers) have no computer literacy and associated ICT skills. Differences in computer literacy and availability between supervisor and supervisee can limit the exchange of information between the old generation supervisors and the new generation students (Nasiri & Mafakheri, 2015; Kung, 2017; Mapesela & Wilkinson, 2005; Picard et al., 2011).

In addition, conventional face-to-face sessions are organized to enable direct contact with students. Supervisors also apply Skype and zoom technologies to recreate the face-to-face environment in a synchronous mode. These technologies greatly reduce the spatial separation between supervisors and supervisees. Also, the university has three centres which are connected by Teleconferencing Facilities (Figure 3).



Figure 3: Students being introduced to Teleconferencing Facilities at Kinondoni Regional Centre, Dar es Salaam.

The IEMT at OUT ensures that all technical challenges that result in communication limitations are taken care of. These include; limits on Internet bandwidth, computer viruses and spyware, access to good quality webcams, hard disk and memory space requirements for audio/video/anti-virus software, and problems with wireless connections. Each centre has an ICT technician who is responsible for hardware repair and software malfunctions to ensure the availability of the e-learning platforms.

Feedback challenges

In distance education, supervisors and supervisees are normally separated in time and space. Feedback is mostly provided through comments on hard copies of the proposal, dissertations and theses or track changes on soft copies of the same. However, as explained in the previous section on technological challenges, there are still several supervisors and supervisees who are illiterate in using computer-assisted track changes.

The present course has enlightened me on how supervision feedback can be provided in a structured way the course material provided by Prof. Jan Botha in MODULE 6: THEME 3; Supervising Doctoral Research Writing and Giving Feedback to Doctoral Students are very

relevant to supervising student at a distance. I will advise the director of postgraduate studies at my university to adopt the practice.

Cultural Challenges

Distance programmes tend to be more diverse as they go beyond the geographical borders of regions, countries, and continents, and cross the cultural borders that may exist concerning race, gender, and religion. The practice of providing distance education at OUT is witnessing these challenges, especially from students coming from francophone countries. A linguistic barrier and difference in curriculums are limiting the proper understanding and awareness of the norms, differences, preconceptions and potential conflicting issues. The linguistic gap is limiting smooth communication and technical gap caused by the fact that supervisor and supervisee have been trained under different systems (Nasiri & Mafakheri, 2015; Kung, 2017; Mapesela & Wilkinson, 2005; Picard et al., 2011).

Strategies for effective distance supervision

Almost all strategies listed by Maor et al., (2016) are being put into practice at OUT. In addition, all postgraduate programme coordinators (course leaders) have created an email list and WhatsApp that provides an opportunity to periodically share useful information, documents, or research articles with a group of distance students. Other information shared includes; examination timetables, face-to-face dates and venues and social events. The course leader (a senior tutor) also oversees administrative issues and provides pastoral to ease the burden on supervisors.

The Directorate of Research and Publication in collaboration with the Directorate of Research and Postgraduate Studies starting from this academic year will be organizing face-to-face Doctoral Research Conferences in which students will present their works to others and receive feedback from fellow students, supervisors and other academic staff. This year's conference could be accessed at:

[https://www.out.ac.tz/banners/new DOCTORAL RESEARCH CONFERENCE.pdf](https://www.out.ac.tz/banners/new_DOCTORAL_RESEARCH_CONFERENCE.pdf)

From the present course, I have learned several best practices that could also be adopted at OUT. These include Group supervision, cohort-based pedagogy, peer learning and a connectedness approach to supervision to create a sustainable community. Annual web-based research conferences as a way of bridging the distance between the students, which also creates an opportunity for making international academic contacts and collaborations for distance students, reducing their reliance on the supervisor as their sole source of feedback. Identify research groups in local universities or other institutions where the quality of research is at a proper level (Maor et al., 2016). In addition, I will encourage students to utilise the <https://www.doctoralnet.com/pedagogy> link that offers affordable online discussion, collaborative writing space and face-to-face meetings that provide a strong digital pedagogy framework.

Conclusions

Generally, supervision practices at OUT follow the framework of five approaches to supervision; functional, enculturation, critical thinking, emancipation and relationship development. From a wide perspective, the increase in doctoral enrollment at OUT and Tanzania could be linked to the global trends in the production of more PhD. Globally ICT is increasingly playing an important role in education and training. Furthermore, it has been demonstrated that the use of ICT can improve the quality of the student learning experiences and make education and training opportunities available to a broader spectrum of the population in developing countries. Spatial and temporal challenges can affect distance students' performance, however, strategies such as inductions days and the use of ICT technologies could greatly assist to alleviate the problem. Supervisors of postgraduate students by distance tend to have more than the average number of students to supervise due to the high enrollment of doctoral students in ODeL compared to conventional institutions. Differences in computer literacy and availability between supervisor and supervisee can limit the exchange of information between the old generation supervisors and the new generation students. These technologies greatly reduce the spatial separation between supervisors and supervisees. Using ICT in the supervision of doctoral research writing and giving structured feedback

to doctoral students are very important to the success and completion of students studying at a distance.

Recommendations

From the present course, I have learned several best practices that could also be adopted at OUT. These include but are not least; group supervision, cohort-based pedagogy, peer learning and a connectedness approach to supervision to create a sustainable community. Annual web-based research conferences as a way of bridging the distance between the students, which also creates an opportunity for making international academic contacts and collaborations for distance students, reducing their reliance on the supervisor as their sole source of feedback. Identify research groups in local universities or other institutions where the quality of research is at a proper level. Applying reading maps helps students to identify different positions in a field of enquiry literally.

The CREST course has imparted me with very useful skills and knowledge in the supervision of doctoral candidates. I highly recommend that the course be scaled up to reach if possible all postgraduate supervisors in all African Universities. Individual universities must put in place mechanisms to ensure the course is mandatory for all academic staff involved in the supervision of postgraduate students. This could greatly improve the quality and completion rate of the doctoral scholarship.

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