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DISTANCE EDUCATION UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS' EXPERIENCES OF PROJECT WORK SUPERVISION IN NAMIBIA

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ABSTRACT

Meeting with supervisors is part of the practices for any first time graduate research student. However, was the meeting effectively conducted? Did the meeting really help the student to progress in their research and did the supervisor give proper guidance and advice to the aspiring research student during the meeting? Despite several international studies that have been conducted on MA and PhD supervision, little qualitative investigation has been conducted on students doing undergraduate project work in an attempt to understand how the supervisory relationship is experienced. In response, 75 students from rural and urban schools doing Specialised Diploma in Educational Management and Leadership (SDEML) at the Centre for External Studies, University of Namibia (CES-UNAM) were interviewed using focus group interviews. The study results centred on the theme of project supervision as an academic support service with themes such as ineffective supervision feedback from supervisors, supervision feedback too little too late from supervisors, inadequate vacation school guidance on supervision and lack of commitment from supervisors. Supervisors must help their students understand that they need to manage their interactions with supervisors and fellow students doing the same programme. Students empowered with the knowledge of helping them manage their experiences as distance education students could lead to added confidence and decision-making ability, thus reducing the burden on supervisors. Students' and supervisors' combined awareness and acceptance of students as managers of the interactive supervision process could develop into an added dimension of self-regulated learning, which has been identified as an important element in graduate education (Styles and Radloff, 2001).

Key Words: Supervision, undergraduate students, focus group interviews, supervisory relationships, feedback.

INTRODUCTION

We wasted time doing action research that was far away from the process of research during our Basic Education Teachers Diploma at Colleges of Education (Jay, SEDML student).

The "failure" of not getting through a research proposal at any level can be devastating. Lovitts (2001, p. 6) describes the experiences of her respondents in a similar study for PhD students as "gut-wrenching," "horrible," and "disappointing". She goes on to cite a small number of students that have resorted to suicide as a result of not being able to complete their studies on time.

Grant & Graham, (1999); Lovitts, (2001); Terrell, *et. al.,* (2009) amongst others, have documented concerns about the level of non- or late-completion of graduate studies where research is involved. Armstrong (2004) reports that the UK has between 40% and 50% of students that fail to successfully complete research papers in the social sciences. The National Center for Education Statistics (2000) and Smallwood, 2004) report that in North America, failure and completion rates are very similar to those reported in the UK, with as many as 50% of students entering graduate programs dropping out before finishing.

In conventional institutions of higher learning, a variety of reasons for the increase in attrition rates have been advanced. The factors include leaving the university early, too much enthusiasm but too little focus, being too hard to please, too casual in your approach, too compulsive, too much of a procrastinator, having too much independence or too much isolation and having too little appreciation of the scholarly tradition (Madsen, 1992.5-11).

In Great Britain, Students fail to complete the dissertation for a number of reasons: money runs short; ennui sets in; illness, marital discord, and other personal problems make concentration difficult; the dissertation topic proves elusive or unmanageable; enthusiasm wanes (Reis, *Viewed on 2 July 2010 from http://ctl.stanford.edu/Tomprof/postings/145.html).*

Lovitts (2001) argues that the background characteristics that students bring with them to the graduate experience are not what matters, but rather what happens after they arrive that affects the overall outcome of their experience. She continues to confirm that students'

...background characteristics, their external commitments and responsibilities, their socialization as undergraduates, and the clarity of their understanding of the system of graduate education in general and their own program in particular, as well as their adaptive capacities, interact with the structures they confront in their programs to determine their persistence outcomes. (p. 41)

In her review of the literature from Australia, New Zealand and Britain, Moses (1984) identified three categories of student discontent: *personality factors* which include interpersonal differences in language, work style and also personality clash; *professional factors* which include a supervisor who is ignorant, misinformed or who has few or different research interests; and *organizational factors* which include the supervisor having too many students or too many competing responsibilities, and inadequate departmental provisions (Grant & Graham, 1999). Lovitts (2001) broadened the factors influencing postgraduate degree completion to include individual resources such as intelligence, motivation, learning styles and personality, the microenvironment factors such as location, department, peers and other faculty, and advisor) and the macroenvironment factors such as culture of graduate education and culture of the discipline.

Terrell et al., (2009) and Mbukusa, (2009) point to the importance of students' sense of connectedness in the context of the overall graduate experience. Their findings illustrate that low feelings of student-to-student and student-to-faculty connectedness in the learning environment may be predictive of postgraduate studies attrition. Eggleston & Delamont, (1983); Seagram, Gould, & Pyke (1998); Acker (1999); Dinham & Scott (1999); Grant & Graham (1999); Knowles (1999) and Neumann (2003) claim that the heart of a successful supervision process is the quality of the relationship between student and supervisor.

Poor interpersonal relationships and lack of rapport between student and supervisor are the reasons most often cited for problems encountered in the postgraduate studies supervisory process (McAleese & Welsh, 1983 and Hill, *et. al.,* 1994). Armstrong (2004.600) singles out relationships with supervisors as being related to the satisfaction and productivity that students find in their supervision and successful completion. Blumberg (1978) further suggested that trust, warmth and honest collaboration are key elements in successful supervision. Heppner & Handley (1981) indicated that satisfaction with supervision correlated higher with the students' perceptions of the supervisory relationships than with perceived expertise.

The evidence pointing to the importance of the interpersonal aspects of postgraduate supervision is undeniable. Despite the number of studies that have been conducted, an important gap still remains in relation to our understanding of the nature of these interpersonal relationships and supervisory styles, particularly among SEDML students who are challenged by distance and lack of effective supervision. Moses (1984), amongst others has limited his research to identifying the elements of successful supervisory relationships while Gatfield (2005); Gurr (2001); Styles and Radloff (2001) have developed theoretical models in relation to different aspects of the process. McClure (2005) employed a qualitative approach to study the experiences of newly enrolled students from China. Recently, Krauss, *et. al.,* (2009) used prior studies on PhD supervision to guide the process of conceptualizing the interpersonal relations between supervisors and their PhD.

Although a number of factors have been identified relating to the phenomenon of attrition among postgraduate students, most researchers on the subject agree that completing postgraduate especially the PhD

is a process that depends on a close, working relationship between students and supervisors (Grant & Graham (1999); Styles & Radloff (2001); Grevholm, *et. al.* (2005) Lovitts (2001); Zainal Abiddin (2007).

In light of the above studies done on supervision, this study focused on undergraduate levels of learning where much supervision is needed to form a foundation for the senior levels. It queries how the supervisory relationship is experienced by the students including personality/personal characteristics, work style, academic support students' expectations.

The main research question guiding the study was *"how do distance education undergraduate students experience project work supervision at the Centre for External Studies, University of Namibia?"*

METHODS

The findings reported in this paper are based on a study conducted at Rundu, Oshakati and Katima Mulilo distance education campuses, Centre for External Studies, University of Namibia. There were about 250 in 2013 who were enrolled for project work in Specialised Diploma in Educational Management and Leadership. Project Work course aims at helping students to plan and write an academic research project. The structure of the research proposal and final report is expected to be in line with research papers that may be produced at senior postgraduate studies though a little shorter in content than MA and PhD studies.

The supervisors of research projects are based at the main campus in Windhoek and rarely move to campuses around the country to help students one on one. Under CES-UNAM, there are only two supervisors that are based outside the main campus. As a supervisor in the Department of Student Support Services at CES-UNAM and a supervisor of research studies, particularly the SEDML programme, I was coerced by the direct experiences of the students on the programme. As a recent graduate of PhD programme myself (i.e. 2009) through distance education, with a good supervisor, I felt bad when students shared their bad experiences with their supervisors and was thus struck by that and took interest in it for further investigation, specifically around the challenges students were having in working with their supervisors. I could see from the way their research proposals were crafted that something interesting would come from talking to them. CES-UNAM supervisors are too far removed from their students. They only meet once a year to guide them through research writing. Being closer to students, I was more determined to learn what was happening and why.

In my discussions with students in both formal and informal settings, I became increasingly intrigued by the variety of experiences they were having. In addition, I had conducted a workshop for research as a process with colleagues from the nearest former college of education. I learnt here that there were struggles in helping college students understand the process of research. Students who graduated from these colleges would go on to join CES-UNAM and find research as being far different from what was done at colleges of education.

Although the study could have included "both sides of the story" by formally studying the experiences of both students and supervisors, I chose to begin with the stories of the students, in an attempt to understand their experiences in a more structured manner using a contextual and descriptive approach. I chose to use a generic, descriptive method not based on any formal qualitative research tradition in order to "discover and understand…the perspectives and worldviews of the people involved" (Merriam, 1998:11). I found out that although much research has been conducted on PhD supervision, certain gaps remained related to understanding the qualitative nature of these interpersonal relationships and supervisory styles (Armstrong, 2004), particularly at CES-UNAM.

Target group and sample

A total number of students involved in the study was 250. 75 students were used as a sample. They participated voluntarily and therefore were placed in groups for interviews. Those who did not want to participate were left out.

A combination or mixed purposeful sampling procedure was chosen for the study. This combines various sampling strategies to achieve the desired sample. It helps in triangulation, allows for flexibility, and meets multiple interests and needs. The mixed approach also fitted the purpose of the study, the resources available, the question being asked and the constraints being faced. All respondents were selected using a criterion-based approach. All students that were part of the study had done their research proposals before they could attempt the data collection and analysis stages. Their experiences were the same. They were all adult students. They had a one day vacation school orientation experience on how to write research proposals. About 75% of the total population had not received their research proposals after two months of submission for guidance.

The study combined extreme and deviant case sampling procedure notable failures and possible dropouts were eminent in the programme. The second procedure was homogeneous sampling that facilitates group interviewing. Like instead of having the maximum number of undergraduate programmes as in maximum variation procedures, the focus was on students doing the same programme (Patton, 1990:169-186; Creswell, 2003; McMillan & Schumacher, 2006; De Vos, 2009).

Data collection

75 students were interviewed using focus groups. They were placed in groups of 5 discussions (Toner, 2009) in a big community hall before class contacts began. Each group had its own pseudo name on their summary script. Three open questions on the topic were distributed to groups with group leaders and scribes. Prior to each focus group and follow-up face-to-face interviews students were informed of their right to privacy. The data would collected would remain anonymous and confidential. The results would be used for research purposes only.

In-depth interviews with students who volunteered to be interviewed after the contact sessions were added to focus groups to provide an opportunity for sharing information or insights that students may have not been willing to share in a group settings. This was noted as the researcher moved from group to group. Field notes that addressed both the content and the process of the sessions were kept for later analysis. Adding in-depth interviews to the study helps in triangulating the focus group data with individual interviews in an attempt to account for possible threats to validity from relying on focus groups alone. It helps dismiss the doubts that Morgan (2002) had on focus groups.

'Memoing' (Miles & Huberman, 1984:69) is another important data source in qualitative research that I used in this study. It is part of the researcher's field notes recording what the researcher hears, sees, experiences and thinks in the course of collecting and reflecting on the process. Researchers are easily absorbed in the data-collection process and may fail to reflect on what is happening. It helped me in staying current with insights, hunches, and perceived relationships that presented as the work developed (Toner, 2009).

Lofland and Lofland (1999:5) emphasise that field notes "should be written no later than the morning after". Besides discipline, field notes also involve "luck, feelings, timing, whimsy and art" (Bailey, 1996:xiii). The method followed in this study is based on a model or scheme developed by Leonard Schatzman and Anselm Strauss supplemented by Robert Burgess.

Four types of field notes were made:

- Observational notes (ON) — 'what happened notes' deemed important enough to the researcher to make. Bailey (1996) emphasises the use of all the senses in making observations.
- Theoretical notes (TN) — 'attempts to derive meaning' as the researcher thinks or reflects on experiences.
- Methodological notes (MN) — 'reminders, instructions or critique' to oneself on the process.
- Analytical memos (AM) — end-of-a-field-day summary or progress reviews
  Memo writing added value to the study especially during data analysis.

An interview guide (Kvale, 1996) consisted of three open-ended questions (see Appendix) designed to help students describe the nature of their relationship with their supervisors. Each group was given 30 minutes to

respond to the three questions. I moved around groups to help clarify areas that they thought were unclear to them.

Data analysis

During data collection, I read the transcripts carefully, trying to "immerse" myself in the data (D'Cruz, 2002). Although observation was not a formal method used in this study, I found that integrating it in the process of data collection helped to better understand the issues at play. Interacting with and supervising students, discussing relevant issues with colleagues and being involved in allowed me to feel highly immersed in the research setting. In this manner, methodological rigor was enhanced through what could be considered as prolonged engagement (Lincoln & Guba, 2000). Such immersion helped me to identify themes, categories and patterns emerging from the data (Marshall & Rossman, 1999 and Miles & Huberman, 1994).

The three main research questions were used as the focus for forming the categories. The responses from the interviews were coded, and used to analyze and generate themes as well as conclusions. All of the open codes were first examined to find whether individual codes could be combined into higher conceptual categories. Once these categories were developed, they were examined for their properties and dimensions (Rausch & Hamilton, 2006). Through the process of constant comparison (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), the categories were then analyzed to investigate their relationships to each other across the student interviews. After repeated reflection and inspection of the codes used and categories it became clear that the concept of "consistent supervision" was sufficiently broad to become an overarching theme encompassing the preponderance of the statements voiced by the students. "Consistent supervision" identifies what emerged as the dominant experience for students in this study (McClure, 2005).

Trustworthiness

As the study was conducted during contact sessions, issues of bias had to be explicitly dealt with and disclosed to ensure trustworthiness of the results (Flick, 2007). Bias was initially addressed through my position as a young supervisor engaged in an attempt to better understand the experiences of students for the enhancement of my own practice as a supervisor. Biased results would certainly not benefit me in this regard, as I needed as clear a picture as possible of what the students were experiencing in order to be able to maximize my supervising role, as well as to provide inputs to fellow supervisors and university decision-makers. Therefore, bias was checked against my strong desire to "objectively study the subjective states of our subjects" (Bogden & Biklen, 2003, p. 33), for I felt strongly that the data could significantly contribute to my own supervisory practices and those of my colleagues. With this in mind, I maintained a high level of sensitivity through the use of detailed field notes and by using the answer scripts on which students wrote their responses, which allowed me to check my data and findings for possible bias (Bogden & Biklen).

The choice of respondents was critical in guarding against bias, to ensure that respondents would not "hold back" due to the fact that I was a supervisor from the same university. Thus, I carefully had to make them to be aware of this to help them share openly.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Grant and Graham (1999) describe the supervisory relationship as a "pedagogical power relation" where both supervisor and student are both capable of acting to change the relationship dynamic. They assert that the supervisory relationship is one that allows for the empowerment of students. The current study findings assert that but with a different angle where supervision feedback takes the centre stage as students such as in the example of Jay have found it hard to work with supervisors.

The results from the respondents focused on almost different areas of difficult. Respondents presented the responses from three main research questions, "how did you experience academic support (supervision of project work) during yours studies", "how often should supervisors help you with your project?" and "Is there anything that you want to suggest to supervisors about your research/project work studies? Several repeating statements were summarised from their responses. These included:

- No continued and close supervision
- no enough time to write the project,
- no clear information from supervisors,
- no better libraries,
- no further guidance for drafting the proposal,
- feedback from supervisors is delayed,
- corrections from supervisors are not meaningful,
- the academic support is inadequate,
- vacation school comes a little late when we have already made mistakes,
- correction is slow and drafts take more than two months to return to students,
- there is no supervisor in the regions,
- vacation school lessons are too short,
- the resources in the library is too limited,
- supervisors during vacation school do not seem to care about students

Four main themes resulted from the analysis relating to the supervision of SDEML students. These were ineffective supervision feedback from supervisors, supervision feedback too little too late from supervisors, inadequate vacation school guidance on supervision and lack of commitment from supervisors.

Ineffective supervision feedback from supervisors

The focus groups and in-depth study revealed that supervisors did not give meaningful feedback to students. When probed on the issues surrounding ineffective feedback from supervisors, Group 1 respondent who willingly wanted to say more separate from others had this to say:

My experience with supervisors is not good to mention. Some write whatever suits them. My draft proposal had almost nothing in the text or in the margins. But I only saw comments that suggested that I have done well on the front cover. What is 'done well'? Maybe open comments could guide me improve for a better final report (Jay).

When the respondent was asked to elaborate more on exactly what he wanted to see in the margins of his assignment he had this to say:

Good comments that look at our ability to express ourselves in content and language use will help greatly. What does a supervisor lose in making me know that my language is weak or my analysis of the content given is also weak? Nothing. He or she simply shows that I am part of his or her student body including those that he is teaching fulltime (Jay).

The student continued saying 'we want feedback from supervisors that tells us what to do next not comments that that do not show us where need to grow in research skills and knowledge".

One group mentioned that:

It is difficult to read the comments in the margin of the proposal. Some supervisors seem to have difficulties with writing. They do not know how to write words that help students. What do you do with words like 'good', 'not clear' or 'what is this?' These words do not help. As students we learn nothing from such interaction with our supervisors. They forget that they are not with us. They are far away from us ((Group 3).

It is difficult for students who were far away from their supervisors especially when the separation is exacerbated by the absence of telephones or any medium of communication to be satisfied all the time.

When respondents were asked through in-depth interviews on what supervisors needed to do for the students in order to help them complete faster, other respondents insisted that supervisors should:

Find time to discuss content with them, grade the assignments with intent to guide, provide feedback on progress, motivate students in the marking, praise students where they have done well, and supervise projects closely.

I came to understand that the presence of supervisors who pay attention to students' work and who help students feel that they are supported is highly important in project work writing. It is therefore a responsibility of supervisors to pay attention to the work of students be it in the form of feedback or direct telephone calls made to the students (Jackson, 2001 and Thompson, 2003).

Supervision feedback too little too late from supervisors

Through the probes, the *timing of feedback* came out as an issue that was raised in the discussions. Feedback arrived late to students and in some cases did not arrive at all. Supervising through distance education is different from face-to-face teaching and learning. Distance education supervision should provide as many additional resources and opportunities as possible to facilitate learning. It is not enough that students are only supervised once during the vacation school which is almost only two hours in a year. The present situation where students receive almost one hour of supervision is not good for research studies. Guidance through research studies should not be perceived by supervisors and students as disconnected from learning. Students should see supervision feedback as part of assessment that builds future learning. Good feedback taps on the students' potential for development and helps establish a stronger dialogue between the supervisors and students.

Quite often, students have received their drafts of research proposals with fewer than five words in the margins of a possible 20 paged document. Some of the instructions that surface on the cover page are quite unclear. *Unclear instructions* reveal the weak organisational skills of supervisors during supervision. Learning alone in isolation can be frustrating for distance education students in remote rural areas. The instructions therefore need to be clear. The organisational skills of supervisors to facilitate meaningful learning need to be revisited as well. Instructions should clearly delineate the task and/or explain the expectations of the supervisor. Instructions should indicate the degree of freedom given to students in structuring the task. "Time on task" is a critical factor to student achievement. Tasks should be structured to make distance education content easy and desirable. Proper use of feedback with clear instructions in assignments forms good dialogue in distance education (Moore & Kearsley, 1996:201 in Mbukusa, 2009).

Feedback is essentially a major part of the learning cycle (Weaver, 2006 in Mbukusa, 2009). As part of the interaction theory, it helps build a student-teacher relationship well if properly written and administered. It was clear that all five groups in the study expressed that they were dissatisfied with the helpfulness of supervisors' feedback (Hounsell et al., 2008 in Mbukusa, 2009). Students need meaningful and constructive written assessment feedback (Higgins et al., 2001 in Mbukusa, 2009). They need feedback to guide them through their learning all the time (Duffield and Spencer, 2002 in Mbukusa, 2009). Feedback in research writing should be effective in guiding learning by focusing on the growth of the student rather than on grading. In this way, feedback encourages student learning (Sadler, 1983 in Mbukusa, 2009). Feedback will not encourage learning if misunderstandings exist in the comments written by supervisors and students are not able to make sense of feedback (Gibbs and Simpson, 2004 in Mbukusa, 2009).

Supervisors who do not listen to the student voice may be following a traditional model of providing written assessment feedback that could be described as a transmission process and considered to be about justifying the mark awarded (Nicol and MacFarlane-Dick, 2006; Weaver, 2006 in Mbukusa, 2009). This kind of feedback only exacerbates the misunderstandings between student and supervisor. Students may not understand the intentions of the supervisors and the students may fail to interpret what the supervisors intended them to understand. Eventually students may not use the feedback at all in their preparations for future assignments and examinations (Lea and Street, 2000 in Mbukusa, 2009).

There are numerous skills for distance education students that could be inculcated into feedback. For example, amongst many, students need to be encouraged to critique their own work. A lot of assignments that have failed to attract good marks could have been poorly written as a result of students who failed to edit or critique their work before sending it for marking.

The students' experience of timing of feedback showed that there is no fixed time by supervisors when they would send feedback to students. Some mentioned a few weeks, some mentioned months and some have never received feedback at all. The ones that never received feedback could fall into the group of lost assignments. This clearly indicated that supervisors did not have a system in place when feedback is due to students. Most universities have a stipulated time for feedback to be returned to students (Mannion and Eadie, 2005 in Mbukusa, 2009). This has been done so as to facilitate learning in the next parts of their studies and the preparation of the next work. The timing of feedback is significantly important to student learning as highlighted by Gibbs and Simpson (2004) in Mbukusa (2009. It is difficult for students when they do not receive feedback as they may find it difficult to move on to new content. They may regard even the next feedback as irrelevant in their studies.

The primary rationale for having supervisors is to provide students with individualised instruction in their courses. In many situations of remote rural areas the supervisor is the only person a distance education student ever has contact with. Having supervisors in a distance education system greatly improves student completion rates and achievement, although such outcomes depend on the nature of the course, the supervisor, and the student.

The future of CES-UNAM in the absence of the electronic age lies in proper and effective feedback. The comments made by respondents clearly demonstrated that feedback from CES-UNAM supervisors have not been helpful to students especially to students in remote rural areas where no one would easily help them while in isolation (Hara & Kling, 2001 in Mbukusa, 2009). Feedback should guide students properly and be made part of students' learning cycle. Feedback has been defined by Jacobs (1974) as 'verbal and non verbal responses from others to a unit of behaviour provided as close in time to the behaviour and capable of being perceived and utilised by the individual initiating the behaviour'. In other words, feedback in assignments should enable change to take place in an individual and this change is brought about in the individual if the feedback information is understood and used. Improperly done feedback will not help students in distance education change from wrong answers to meaningful answers. Poorly structured and handwritten comments which move back and forth from general to specific issues with less legibility can affect students' response to feedback. The barrier of submission of student homework coupled with the supervisor providing timely feedback to the student at the right time should always be avoided.

As much as feedback makes meaning in students' lives, they will always positively learn and will get connected with the stuff that they learn and should promote reflection (Terrell et al., 2009). Embedded in feedback is the ability for students to reflect on what they have learnt. Students should interact with feedback received from their supervisors so that they know what they should do with it. Supervisors should enable distance education students through feedback so that students will understand and interact with feedback as 'it cannot simply be assumed that when students are 'given feedback' they will know what to do with it' (Sadler 1998, p. 2 in Mbukusa, 2009).

The level of detail and usability of feedback comments should help students to progress. When the physical separation between students and supervisors is so wide in the regions under study, and creates more transactional distance, (a space for interaction between the supervisor and the students) misunderstandings are likely to fill the gaps (Moore, 1986, p. 1). Students may not attempt their project work with greater confidence. Anxiety, confusion and frustration could cause attrition (Mood, 2004 in Mbukusa, 2009). Therefore improved written communication to distance education students is essentially important to help supervisors and students achieve a better reciprocal understanding and maintain the quality of guidance and learning. If we accept the view that the effectiveness of feedback is intrinsically connected to its communicative power, pedagogical practice should aim to implement a model that facilitates good communication between students and their supervisors, (Higgins *et. al.,* 2001). It is therefore essential to identify the factors that intervene in the feedback exchange and to what extent they affect the potential to promote learning.

Students need to get used to the comments supervisors make from time to time. The mnemonics, short forms and style of commenting help students get acquainted with the supervisor's language. Hughes (2005); Walker (2006) and Sadler (1998) in Mbukusa (2009) argue that feedback should be expressed in a language that is already known and understood by students as students need this feedback for future use.

As revealed by the interviews, the idea of feed forward and less description about the content of the work should be strengthened in distance education. Students do not want to see 'what' was wrong but want to see the 'how' so that they are enabled to respond differently next time. The *'why'* and *'what'* asserted by Jack and Jam in this study are neither encouraging nor particularly constructive in the eyes of the distance education students. Feedback should actually feed forward as it is needed to prepare students for future skills, content and language development. The FAST Project (2005) in Mbukusa (2009) showed that 'feedback, in order to influence learning, should not only be framed in retrospective terms but should also provide advice for future learning and allow students to build on existing knowledge'. It is highly essential that this becomes CES-UNAM's practice for students in remote rural areas.

Unless the meanings of the contents are unpacked and qualified they will always create misunderstandings, and unmet expectations. An important task of the feedback tools for the supervisor is to help identify the source of difficulties and the misconceptions students have about a topic. As a result of feedback on students' work, those doing very poorly can be identified quite early.

Specifically, the isolation from other students can decrease the likelihood of networking with other students, can affect identification with the campus from which the student will graduate, can limit access to campus resources, and can lower the identification with student culture, all of which can affect the student's motivation and accomplishment within the distance learning process (Donnan, 1993).

Inadequate vacation school guidance on supervision

One respondent complained that vacation classes are only held once in a week long period. This could be two to three hours of "boredom and unguided videoconferencing where lecturers talk general things (sic)". Supervisors need to attend to face to face supervision so that students find a bridge before they would face their supervisor during the vacation school. Meeting the needs of students is essential in distance education (Steyn, 2001).

The inadequacy or lack of closer supervision during vacation schools affects students in many ways. It is about the whole person development. Students need to be shaped by the content that they learn as such learning is needed for their jobs. Putting up a good project proposal has benefits for a student. Such skills could spill into the actual writing of reports for their jobs and the communities around them.

Students who fail to do well in their studies feel the pressure of embarrassment from the public. Some students want to apply what they have learnt in their courses at school to real life. It is frustrating and depressing when they find that they have learnt nothing meaningful from their studies. Eventually they feel alienated from the learned groups of their societies. They themselves dissociate with groups that have succeeded with their studies.

Lack of commitment from supervisors

Supervisors need to make it clear to the students at the beginning of supervision that they will always be honest with their opinion and judgments. Because their role is to be that of a devil's advocate, that is, not to let anything get through which is below standard or which would be called into question by moderators of the final reports. Some of their comments about the students' work may be felt initially as a personal blow or a humiliation or a devaluation of their work. The supervisors need to periodically emphasise that their critical comments are 'professional' and related to the students' work and that they are not 'personal' comments. The supervisor's role is to help the students become more critical of their own work, their own logic and their own writing.

Rosy (one respondent) complained that "our supervisors lack commitment with our work and us as students. How could supervisors tell us to go and do shopping when we have come to Windhoek for studies? Some dodge at any time they want leaving us alone and with nothing learnt from the day's work". I have learnt from my supervision time that research writing is difficult. Students need a closer way of supervision to help students do well with their studies. It is not only about writing a good research paper, it about obtaining the necessary skills in writing, conducting literature review from books or from the electronic libraries. It is about showing the students all the skills that they need in ensuring that they continue to conduct research. SDEML students are managers-to-be of schools. There are numerous problems that they face each day in their management of human and physical resources. They need research skills and knowledge to daily understand what is happening and how to handle it for improvements' sake.

Commitment of supervisors in research writing defines relationships between supervisors and students (Moses, 1984);Gatfield (2005); Gurr (2001) and Styles and Radloff (2001. The relationship could result in good student researchers or weak student researchers as the quality of relationships between student and supervisor determines success rates (Eggleston & Delamont, 1983; Seagram, Gould, & Pyke, 1998; Acker, 1999; Dinham & Scott, 1999; Grant & Graham, 1999; Knowles, 1999 and Neumann, 2003)

Poor interpersonal relationships and lack of rapport between student and supervisor are the reasons most often cited for problems encountered in the postgraduate studies supervisory process (McAleese & Welsh, 1983 and Hill, *et. al.,* 1994 and Armstrong (2004.600). the absence of trust, warmth and honest collaboration could jeopardise the success of supervision (Blumberg,1978). Heppner & Handley (1981) indicated that satisfaction with supervision correlated higher with the students' perceptions of the supervisory relationships than with perceived expertise.

Completing a postgraduate research programme is a process that depends on a close, working relationship between students and supervisors (Grant & Graham (1999); Styles & Radloff (2001); Grevholm, *et. al.* (2005) Lovitts (2001); Zainal Abiddin (2007). There is a need therefore that supervisors at CES-UNAM rethink on how to help distance education students. These students have many ordeals in their life that make their learning very difficult. Some of the students find it difficult to use English as a medium of instruction and learning as they had a different medium during their own learning time, i.e. Grades 1-12 in the olden days.

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