

## A Review of the Roles of Dissertation Supervisors as Mentors

Authors: Betty. M. Macharia

Department of Research and Evaluation  
 Faculty of Education  
 The Catholic University of Eastern Africa  
 P. O. Box 62157, Nairobi, Kenya  
 Corresponding Author Email: [betty23001@yahoo.co.uk](mailto:betty23001@yahoo.co.uk)

### Abstract

*This paper is a review of the roles of dissertation supervisors as mentors. Primarily, research and enquiry skills are important for doctoral students. Doctoral supervisors should therefore become mentors to assist their students in developing a theory-driven and a research-based approach. The model that dissertation supervisors embed in their students encompasses different approaches that encourage doctoral students to participate in functional thinking, critical thinking, relationship development and emancipation. Effectively, dissertation supervisors should pursue mentorship strategies that will provide their students with a framework for writing to integrate different research approaches in reviewing relevant research and literature in the completion of their doctoral projects. The benefit of mentorship for doctoral students is that it creates an opportunity to develop requisite skills for academic development to conduct an enquiry based learning process. The review content is divided into subsections which explore the relationship between dissertation mentors and doctoral students with a view of assessing whether the involvement of dissertation supervisors as mentors can lower doctoral attrition rates and increase dissertation completion times. The implication and the conclusion of the paper is to urge postgraduate faculties to create a framework where dissertation supervisors act as student mentors.*

**Keywords:** *Dissertation supervisors, doctoral students, dissertation mentors, doctoral projects supervision, mentorship strategies, doctoral attrition rates, doctoral student mentors, doctoral student supervision, doctoral student mentorship*

### Introduction

Taylor, Kiley & Humphrey (2017) argue that numerous studies have been conducted to demonstrate the importance of dissertation supervisors in playing a mentorship role. In spite of the view that doctoral research students exercise a sense of independence, there is need for mentorship from dissertation supervisors. Taylor et. al. (2017) reiterate that the focus of supervision and mentorship is to instruct students in appropriate learning methodology and proper research methods. These may include various activities of mentorship such as sponsoring, coaching and assisting students in developing reflective practices in the research process. Kamler

& Thomson, (2014) observe that supervisors who oversee the work of doctoral students could develop a research framework to assist students in improving their academic research skills. Orellana, Darder, Pérez, & Salinas, (2016) outline that effective mentorship by dissertation supervisors lies in proofreading and guiding students on the research methods that are appropriate in the doctoral research process.

Dissertation supervision is essential since it assists students in understanding how they should approach the writing process at every stage of their research work. Dissertation supervisors who act as mentors can help doctoral students to fill grant application forms. The supervisors could also assist doctoral students in upgrading their papers by providing feedback on the selected thesis for the writing process. Erichsen, Bolliger, & Halupa, (2014) argue that dissertation supervisors who act as mentors resolve problems associated with conceptual thinking which teaches the process of synthesising research material to assist doctoral students in completing their projects in good time. Granted, mentorship by dissertation supervisors is an integral part of the learning process as it enables doctoral students to complete their projects within the scheduled time. Bitchener, (2016) posits that mentorship in doctoral writing is crucial as it creates a supervisory framework to implement different approaches designed to assist students in completing their research projects. Therefore, the study is intended to determine the role of dissertation supervisors as mentors to explore the benefits to students when dissertation supervisors become mentors. Furthermore, the study will seek to establish the relationship between dissertation mentors and doctoral students with a view of assessing whether the involvement of dissertation supervisors as mentors can lower doctoral attrition rates and increase dissertation completion times.

### **The Role of Dissertation Supervisors as Mentors**

Basturkmen, East, & Bitchener, (2014) observe that dissertation supervisors should adopt the role of mentors to assist doctoral students pursuing various disciplines. Dissertation supervisors have several roles in supporting doctoral students in completing their research projects. One of the principal roles that dissertation supervisors perform is a functional role where they help students in managing their projects. Pyhältö, Vekkailla, & Keskinen, (2015) have demonstrated that dissertation supervisors perform the role of assisting students to be critical thinkers where they assist students in analyzing their work critically. Dissertation supervisors should strive to develop an interpersonal relationship with students. As a matter of fact, supervisors perform the role of emancipation where they challenge students to question their knowledge base and to review it before they present a full review. Holloway & Brown, (2016) demonstrate that mentorship is essential to assess the abilities of doctoral students to be inspired to perform an elaborate research process and to complete the project. Dissertation supervisors are also preferred since they are more acceptable to students and they assist them in understanding how they should conduct the research process.

Hakkarainen, Hytönen, Makkonen, & Lehtinen, (2016) argue that writing tasks are considered to be a significant part of the completion of the doctoral project. Dissertation supervisors who are

mentors assist doctoral students in completing their research projects and in assessing the root cause of their research problems that they are writing about. Rogers, Zawacki, & Baker, (2016) argue that mentors should also encourage doctoral students to attend seminars and workshops to assist them in the research process. Devos, Boudrenghien, Van der Linden, Azzi, Frenay, Galand, & Klein, (2017) make the case that the process of mentorship is essential to assist students to develop writing skills in the project completion process. Accordingly, mentors are important as they assist students in understanding the different purposes of writing that exist with the intention of helping them in formulating ideas and in developing their research projects. The establishment of a research framework is necessary to demonstrate how effective writing strategies should be improved. Lim, Loi, Hashim, & Liu, (2015) demonstrate that dissertation supervisors who play the role of mentors play a critical role in assisting doctoral students in developing a conceptual approach which facilitates the process of collecting information from different sources to complete their research projects. Parker-Jenkins, (2018) highlights that mentorship for doctoral students is important as it enables them to focus on different academic approaches instead of working on a limited scope of the research.

Tangen & Borders, (2016) observe that the experiences dissertation supervisors possess enable them to act as mentors to doctoral students through an efficient system of self-assessment. To a large extent, doctoral supervisors play a pivotal role in assisting their students in developing their writing skills and in facilitating the creation of joint learning support groups that provide a framework to assist students in receiving the writing support that they require. According to Aitchison (2015), dissertation supervisors can also assist doctoral students in focussing on areas where they formulate practical solutions to improve on their areas of weakness. The success of dissertation supervisors is increased by mentoring doctoral students and assisting them in brainstorming, drafting and editing their research projects. Lepp, Remmik, Leijen, & Leijen, (2016) argue that academic mentors should assist students in developing a conceptual understanding of how each stage of research should be tackled with a goal of completing the project according to preset schedules and according to set requirements (Aitchison, 2015). At any rate, dissertation supervisors should assist doctoral students in performing research which is holistic and integrates core research ideas.

### **The Benefits of Dissertation Supervisors Becoming Mentors**

Taylor et al. (2017) outline that dissertation supervisors should also act as mentors to doctoral students to provide psychosocial mentorship where students are assisted in articulating their research ideas. Alternatively, dissertation supervisors could also be career mentors who assist the doctoral students in developing appropriate research channels. Pakdaman, Shafranske, & Falender, (2015) have shown that elements of role modelling, friendship and counselling should be adopted in the mentorship process. A review of the relationship between doctoral students and faculty members should be improved through mentorship and academic supervision. Mehr, Ladany, & Caskie, (2015) state that dissertation supervisors who take the role of mentors enhance their effectiveness by instructing students on the most effective research methodology to improve the quality of doctoral education that is offered. Kyiv & Thune, (2015) suggest that

mentorship is important as it provides doctoral students with an opportunity of receiving helpful academic advice. It is crucial for dissertation supervisors to mentor doctoral students. Taylor et al. (2017) further demonstrate that mentorship creates a positive environment in the academic faculty thereby leading to successful socialisation between the department and students pursuing doctoral programs. Blessinger & Stockley, (2016) reiterate that doctoral mentorship is critical in promoting psychological health and propagating student development to assist doctoral students to complete their degree programs on a timely basis. Dissertation supervisors should also act as mentors to guarantee professional development, productivity and identity development immediately after graduation.

The relationship between dissertation supervisors and doctoral students should transition from being a primary academic mentorship role of providing supervision to a new role in providing mentorship (Taylor et. al, 2017). Another objective of mentorship is to assist students in identifying job opportunities in the market and available research opportunities in the field. Carter-Veale, Tull, Rutledge, & Joseph (2016) suggest that mentors could also perform the role of advising students on upcoming conferences and give them advice on how they should balance their personal and academic life. Academic mentors who are dissertation supervisors have also assisted their students in writing grant proposals, preparing presentations and publications and assisting them in accessing research resources. Carter & Kumar, (2017) attest to the fact that dissertation supervisors should be relied upon as mentors to help doctoral students to attain requisite skills and to assist them in executing administrative tasks in their professional life. Mehr, Ladany and Caskie (2015), on the other hand state that academic mentors who are dissertation supervisors can integrate reflective teaching methods in a manner that encourages academic modelling and the coaching of doctoral students. Woo, Jang, & Henfield, (2015) argue that doctoral students who are under mentorship can improve their communication skills as they engage with their fellow students and other members of the academia to receive assistance in completing their research projects.

One of the significant challenges that have affected doctoral students is a lack of sufficient pedagogical preparation (Nethsinghe & Southcott, 2015). Dissertation supervisors who act as mentors have a supervisory role that includes educational mentoring activities which enable students to prepare for a teaching career that they may choose to pursue after completing their research projects. Ghosh, Chauhan, & Rai, (2015) insist that apprenticeship is considered to be critical in assisting students in seeking relevant courses to encourage doctoral students to liaise with their advisors to pursue a teaching career. Dissertation supervisors who act as mentors facilitate their students to gain pedagogical skills by observing them, teaching them and advising them. Berman & Smyth, (2015) conclusively state that the intention of teaching mentorship is to assist doctoral students in satisfying the academic requirements set by institutions.

### **The Relationship between Dissertation Mentors and Doctoral Students**

The role of a dissertation supervisor who becomes a mentor is to create an environment for career preparation suitable for doctoral students. Academic mentors have the responsibility of

preparing PhD students to become skilled researchers in their field of study. According to Tribe & Tunariu, (2016) mentorship can be achieved by ensuring that students receive appropriate training which ensures that they can function according to the regulations set by the academic faculty. Kumar & Coe, (2017) note that a good mentorship program provides an opportunity for socialisation by instructing doctoral students on the intricacies of academic life. In this manner, doctoral students work within a framework which enables them to understand research theories and the teaching methodology that is employed in academia as well as the functioning of different universities. Anderson, (2017) outlines that the dissertation supervisor who is perceived as a mentor guides students to achieve their academic objectives.

The creation of formalised mentoring structures is essential to facilitate idea sharing and to allow students to experiment with their ideas to gain confidence before presenting in public forums. The primary focus of mentorship should be on research and career preparation. Stockman, (2015) has shown that students who associate with the career path of their mentors are also provided with an opportunity to emulate the personalised elements of their mentors. The career path of the mentor could also create a framework which doctoral students can follow and relate to. Mehr et al. (2015) demonstrate that the desire to emulate a mentor's career path is a critical objective in promoting career advancement and in ensuring that the competence of doctoral students is considerably improved. Mentorship relationships between dissertation supervisors and doctoral students are also considered to be critical in assisting doctoral students in achieving capability and in carving out their identity in the academic sphere Aitchison, (2015) has shown that doctoral mentors can assist doctoral students in presenting their ideas coherently.

Dissertation supervisors who become mentors play a critical role in assisting students in achieving academic competence. Dissertation mentorship is made possible through asynchronous communication where feedback is provided, and doctoral students can integrate the feedback received in completing their research projects. Taylor et al. (2017) demonstrate that mutually beneficial relationships that exist between mentors and their doctoral students are considered to be beneficial and motivating than the one-sided relationships that exist between dissertation supervisors and doctoral students. Pakdaman et al. (2015) suggest that doctoral students who benefit from mentorship programs can improve their managerial, social, cognitive and communication competences.

### **The Involvement of Dissertation Supervisors as Mentors to Lower Doctoral Attrition Rates and Increase Dissertation Completion Times**

In doctoral mentorship, students are presented with opportunities that positively engage them in using alternative research methodologies to develop their research projects even as they use appropriate research methods to complete their projects. Pakdaman et al. (2015) posit that mentorship is critical for doctoral students as it ensures that a dissertation supervisor assists doctoral students in achieving research competence and in increasing their skills and knowledge levels. Cognitive capability in the completion of doctoral projects is also considered to be critical as it is necessary for providing doctoral students with expert knowledge which they can use in

disseminating knowledge. Stockman (2015) exemplifies the fact that the benefits of a mentor relationship are assessed by measuring the satisfaction level, the competence level and the academic opinions of the learner.

Taylor et al. (2017) point out to the fact that dissertation supervision and mentorship is necessary to reduce the level of doctoral student attrition which is considered to be a severe problem among students in pursuing doctoral programs. By using mentors in academic research, it is possible for the competence of doctoral students to be enhanced as they will be able to attain self-efficacy in research and expertise in their fields of study. Pakdaman et al. (2015) reiterate that mentorship is critical to encourage doctoral students to get involved in professional organisations and to increase their contribution to academic research processes. In further analysis, Taylor et al. (2017) designate that mentorship also assists doctoral dissertation students to exhibit a high level of commitment, personal responsibility and motivation. As a matter of fact, effective mentorship can help doctoral students in undertaking complex tasks and in ensuring that they have access to professional guidance. Mehr et al. (2015) have shown that when students are demotivated due to the challenges they face, mentorship at the doctoral stage can assist them in regaining their motivational levels and in developing a system of self-regulation. Additionally the role of a doctoral mentor lies in assisting learners to set their goals, analyse their tasks and to monitor the development of projects in completing their dissertation.

Institutions of higher learning are required to create elaborate mechanisms to support doctoral students to complete their research projects. There should be more mentorship programs for doctoral students to establish systems to develop their cognitive abilities, their research skills and their presentation skills. The creation of mentorship programs and the role of dissertation supervisors as mentors remain critical as it enables doctoral students to acquire pedagogical skills to prepare them to teach undergraduate and graduate courses. Further research should be done to evaluate how mentors can assist doctoral students in completing their projects within the scheduled time to achieve their research objectives.

## **Conclusion**

In the increasingly complex academic environment within which doctoral students operate, it is necessary for dissertation supervisors to become mentors. This is an objective that is achievable if academic supervisors adopt a holistic approach to assist doctoral students by providing them with critical support in the research process. By utilizing the role of a mentor, doctoral supervisors assist students in presenting their research in a timely fashion. Dissertation supervisors who act as mentors also create a supervisory framework to assist students in writing papers which are holistic and conceptually sound. The use of a mentorship approach is helpful to a doctoral student who faces difficulties to complete their research projects by using integrated and varied approaches. Dissertation supervisors who act as mentors are also relevant as they assist students in completing their research projects. There is a need for further research to be conducted to establish critical factors which prevent doctoral students from completing their PhD

dissertations. New research is required to determine how dissertation supervisors can become mentors to assist students in achieving their PhD programs according to pre-agreed time frames.

Going forward, there is a need to review the current set up where most dissertation supervisors are not mentors to doctoral students. This review intends to increase doctoral completion rates to ensure that doctoral students complete their dissertations rates within the scheduled time. Since doctoral programs have a high workload, dissertation supervisors who act as mentors guide doctoral students to ensure that they have the requisite skills to complete their dissertations according to preset research methodologies to meet set research objectives. It is also essential for dissertation supervisors to act as mentors to reduce doctoral students' attrition rates.

## References

- Aitchison, C. (2015). Writing the practice/practise the writing: Writing challenges and pedagogies for creative practice supervisors and researchers. *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, 47(12), 1291-1303.
- Anderson, T. (2017). The doctoral gaze: Foreign PhD students' internal and external academic discourse socialization. *Linguistics and Education*, 37, 1-10.
- Basturkmen, H., East, M., & Bitchener, J. (2014). Supervisors' on-script feedback comments on drafts of dissertations: socialising students into the academic discourse community. *Teaching in Higher Education*, 19(4), 432-445.
- Berman, J., & Smyth, R. (2015). Conceptual frameworks in the doctoral research process: a pedagogical model. *Innovations in Education and Teaching International*, 52(2), 125-136.
- Bitchener, J. (2016). The content feedback practices of Applied Linguistics doctoral supervisors in New Zealand and Australian universities. *Australian Review of Applied Linguistics*, 39(2), 105-121.
- Blessinger, P., & Stockley, D. (Eds.). (2016). *Emerging directions in doctoral education*. Emerald Group Publishing.
- Carter, S., & Kumar, V. (2017). 'Ignoring me is part of learning': Supervisory feedback on doctoral writing. *Innovations in Education and Teaching International*, 54(1), 68-75.

- Carter-Veale, W. Y., Tull, R. G., Rutledge, J. C., & Joseph, L. N. (2016). The dissertation house model: Doctoral student experiences coping and writing in a shared knowledge community. *CBE—Life Sciences Education, 15*(3), ar34.
- Devos, C., Boudrenghien, G., Van der Linden, N., Azzi, A., Frenay, M., Galand, B., & Klein, O. (2017). Doctoral students' experiences leading to completion or attrition: a matter of sense, progress and distress. *European journal of psychology of education, 32*(1), 61-77.
- Emmioglu, E., McAlpine, L., & Amundsen, C. (2017). Doctoral students' experiences of feeling (or not) like an academic. *International Journal of Doctoral Studies, 12*, 73-91.
- Erichsen, E. A., Bolliger, D. U., & Halupa, C. (2014). Student satisfaction with graduate supervision in doctoral programs primarily delivered in distance education settings. *Studies in Higher education, 39*(2), 321-338.
- Ghosh, P., Chauhan, R., & Rai, A. (2015). Supervisor support in transfer of training: Looking back at past research. *Industrial and Commercial Training, 47*(4), 201-207.
- Hakkarainen, K., Hytönen, K., Makkonen, J., & Lehtinen, E. (2016). Extending collective practices of doctoral education from natural to educational sciences. *Studies in Higher Education, 41*(1), 63-78.
- Holloway, I., & Brown, L. (2016). *Essentials of a qualitative doctorate*. Routledge.
- Kamler, B., & Thomson, P. (2014). *Helping doctoral students write: Pedagogies for supervision*. Routledge.
- Kumar, S., & Coe, C. (2017). Mentoring and student support in online doctoral programs. *American Journal of Distance Education, 31*(2), 128-142.
- Kyvik, S., & Thune, T. (2015). *Assessing the quality of PhD dissertations. A survey of external committee members. Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education, 40*(5), 768-782.
- Lepp, L., Remmik, M., Leijen, Ä., & Leijen, D. A. (2016). *Doctoral students' research stall: Supervisors' perceptions and intervention strategies. SAGE Open, 6*(3), 2158244016659116.



- Lim, J. M. H., Loi, C. K., Hashim, A., & Liu, M. S. M. (2015). Purpose statements in experimental doctoral dissertations submitted to US universities: An inquiry into doctoral students' communicative resources in language education. *Journal of English for Academic Purposes*, 20, 69-89.
- Mehr, K. E., Ladany, N., & Caskie, G. I. (2015). *Factors influencing trainee willingness to disclose in supervision. Training and Education in Professional Psychology*, 9(1), 44.
- Nethsinghe, R., & Southcott, J. (2015). A juggling act: Supervisor/candidate partnership in a doctoral thesis by publication. *International Journal of Doctoral Studies*, 10, 167-185.
- Orellana, M. L., Darder, A., Pérez, A., & Salinas, J. (2016). *Improving doctoral success by matching PhD students with supervisors. International Journal of Doctoral Studies*, 11, 87-103.
- Pakdaman, S., Shafranske, E., & Falender, C. (2015). Ethics in supervision: Consideration of the supervisory alliance and countertransference management of psychology doctoral students. *Ethics & Behavior*, 25(5), 427-441.
- Parker-Jenkins, M. (2018). Mind the gap: developing the roles, expectations and boundaries in the doctoral supervisor–supervisee relationship. *Studies in Higher Education*, 43(1), 57-71.
- Pyhältö, K., Vekkaila, J., & Keskinen, J. (2015). *Fit matters in the supervisory relationship: doctoral students and supervisors perceptions about the supervisory activities. Innovations in Education and Teaching International*, 52(1), 4-16.
- Rogers, P., Zawacki, T., & Baker, S. (2016). Uncovering challenges and pedagogical complications in dissertation writing and supervisory practices: A multi-method study of doctoral student advisors. Supporting graduate student writers: Research, curriculum, and program design, 52-77.
- Stockman, C. (2015). *Achieving a doctorate through mixed methods research. Electronic Journal of Business Research Methods*, 13(2), 74.
- Tangen, J. L., & Borders, D. (2016). The supervisory relationship: A conceptual and psychometric review of measures. *Counselor Education and Supervision*, 55(3), 159-181.

- Taylor, S., Kiley, M., & Humphrey, R. (2017). *A handbook for doctoral supervisors*. Routledge.
- Tribe, R., & Tunariu, A. (2016). *Turning your dissertation into a publishable journal article*. *Counselling Psychology Review*, 31(1), 50-58.
- Woo, H., Jang, Y. J., & Henfield, M. S. (2015). *International doctoral students in counselor education: coping strategies in supervision training*. *Journal of Multicultural Counseling and Development*, 43(4), 288-304.