CONDUCTING RESEARCH FOR THE FIRST TIME: EXPERIENCES OF UNDER-GRADUATE SOCIAL WORK STUDENTS

Sello Sithole
Associate Professor, School of Social Sciences,
University of Limpopo
sitholes@ul.ac.za

ABSTRACT

This article reports on a study that was conducted amongst a group of fourth year under-graduate Social Work students who embarked on a research project for the first time. The aim of this study was to explore the challenges that fourth year students face when doing research for the first time. The study's objectives were to understand the challenges and experiences of students and to determine the best ways to help students undertake their projects as easily as possible. The approach for this study was qualitative. The design was phenomenological and descriptive. The population for this study was 120 enrolled under-graduate (fourth year) final year Social Work students. An availability sample of 10 students took part in this study. The findings indicate that, amongst other things, students experienced challenges in formulating a research problem, understanding the role of the supervisor, accessing library resources and translating knowledge into practice. The recommendations emanating from the study are, inter alia, that supervisors need to be consistent in giving feedback and there needs to be a contract between the student and the supervisor.

INTRODUCTION

Mastery of research calls for advanced cognitive abilities. In terms of Bloom's (1956) taxonomy, the most relevant and appropriate cognitive domains for this kind of activity would be analysis, evaluating and creating. Needless to say, success at operating within these advanced cognitive domains is highly dependent on successful mastery of the basic lower level skills. In a considerable number of instances, under-graduate as well as post graduate students may not be ready to conduct research for the first time because they do not fully understand what it means to be a researcher and only remember research content taught at the lower levels.

Conducting research at under-graduate level for the first time is a daunting task for students. At the University of Limpopo, the Department of Social Work offers a preparatory module with twelve credits at the fourth year level to help students overcome some of the difficulties and challenges in translating knowledge of research into practice. This translation often encompasses teaching with the purpose to achieve at cognitive, emotional and skill level. To this end, students embark on a research project of a limited scope – small enough to be completed within ten months. The purpose of this approach is to expose students to the intricacies of conducting research. As a result, ambitious goals of the project becoming more robust and rigorous are not primary, even though they could be achieved inadvertently. As it is, the research project is initiated and completed within one academic year, which in our case runs from January to October of each year.

The preparatory module for students, of course, assumes that rudimentary, basic research concepts have been covered significantly at the lower levels; that is, from first to third year; and that the purpose of the course at this stage is to translate that knowledge into practice. The application of knowledge into practice feeds into an inquiry-based learning model that was found useful for pedagogical design and research/evaluation (Spronken-Smith and Walker, 2010; Wood and Levy, 2009). However, should students express the need for revision of some of the more murky areas of research with which they do not feel confident, this research module is sufficiently flexible to accommodate this.

To that end, the preparatory module covers mundane research topics such as the following:

- what is research?
- defining research problems
- doing a literature study
- designing the study (MacLaughlin 2012)
- the research process

The students would have already begun working on their individual research projects as the preparatory course unfolds. Working on their research projects invariably entails searching for literature, making contacts with stakeholders, seeking permission, where necessary, and preparing proposals and data collection tools, amongst other things.

A critical element in the lectures provided in the preparatory course is what I would term the 'surgery session'. In this session, students raise practical problems that they encounter in the planning and execution of their projects, for example, conducting a study amongst prisoners. Such a study would require students to obtain permission from the prison authorities and, because of bureaucratic red tape coupled with security clearances, it would

not be possible to carry out such a study in the short time available. I have observed that students enjoy this part of the lecture more than if I was standing before them teaching them what a qualitative study entails, just to give an example. Students enjoy the practical side of the course rather than participating in 'dry' theoretical lectures. Some of the reasons that make this part exciting for them include the fact that this course takes a hands-on approach, accommodates their pace, individualises each situation and provides an opportunity for each of the students to learn from one another, creating a system of mutual support.

This module is structured in such a manner that one lecturer is responsible for the actual course, while the students are allocated different supervisors from within the department to oversee/supervise/support them in their individual projects. Student projects are generally aligned to the supervisors' area of expertise or interest.

Because students would be conducting research for the first time, we were interested in discovering their feelings and anxieties regarding this experience, as well as the challenges with which they have to contend. This is a report on the fourth year, final year under-graduate Social Work class of 2013 who volunteered their views and concerns regarding doing research for the first time. This information was collected at the end of the academic year when the students handed in their completed research reports.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

Conducting research for the first time is quite intimidating for young (under-graduate) and adult (post-graduate) students alike. Students often have to contend with competing needs and demands. Most university under-graduate students are young adults who also have to deal with the challenges of adulthood (Sithole, 1998).

Time is a very limited resource for students carrying out research and time management becomes an important tool at their disposal, particularly as they have to satisfy demands from other courses. Students at this university are required to complete, among other things, modules in management and theories of development, as well as undertake their *practicum.* This makes for a very demanding workload.

Accessing information and using the library are skills which first time researchers must have successfully acquired. Students face challenges with regard to accessing information (Howard and Garland 2015). All students are expected to undergo Library Orientation at the beginning of their first academic year. However, very little of this overwhelming amount of information conveyed in this Library Orientation course is processed and retained for retrieval when students embark on their research three or four years later.

Students also have to contend with important aspects of research, such as those identified by Schwiesow (2010):

- selecting a topic
- looking for a niche to make a difference
- developing a doable topic
- ensuring that the topic ensnares the student's interest
- finding a theoretical base to support the topic
- choosing the right methodology

- finding the participants
- honing the study design

Over the years we have observed that demanding of, and expecting students to carry out research at final year has a maturing effect on students in more than one way. It is not only a requirement that students must "experience the processes of knowledge creation" (Spronken-Smith, Walker, O'Steen, Matthews, Batchelor and Angelo, 2008:273), but there is also a "considerable interest in strengthening the role of inquiry (research) in the under-graduate experience" (Levy and Petrulis, 2012:85). For social workers, research is an underused but essential tool for busy practitioners in undertaking their difficult, and often contradictory, tasks within society. Trevithick (2000) refers to this phenomenon as the anti-intellectual stance in Social Work. For too long research has been relegated to an add-on luxury. There are many reasons why this is so…social workers work with people often at their most vulnerable - children who have been abused, those who have been subject to domestic violence or those with chronic mental ill health (Trevithick, 2000; MacLaughlin, 2012).

In the United Kingdom, a policy recommendation from the Higher Education Academy calls for new models of under-graduate curriculum that incorporate research-based study in order to cultivate awareness of research careers, to train students in research skills for employment and to sustain the advantages of a research-teaching connection in a mass or universal system (Trevithick, 2000; Ramsden, 2008). For social workers, it is important that they exit the university as practitioner-researchers so that they are able to assess the relevance of their interventions with client-systems, account to their sponsors and provide a scientific evaluation of their projects. In addition, by demanding that students carry out research, the Department of Social Work satisfies the 'Exit Level Outcome' 'Plan and use research'. The outcome of doing research independently is aptly captured in the following quotation:

"The independent research experience changes people, not simply in terms of technical expertise and knowledge in their field, but also in terms of the ways they value themselves and their work… A self forged through tackling the difficulties of research, especially when stress from other sources is high, is a new self. So is the self that overcomes the doubts about ability to do the work" (Francis cited in Graves and Varma, 1997:18; see also Brew, 2006; Levy and Petrulis, 2012).

Research and inquiry by students goes beyond simply developing a new and stronger self, but encourages students in their journey towards "self-authorship" - a position of epistemological, intra-personal and interpersonal maturity characterised by awareness of knowledge as constructed and contextual, belief in oneself as possessing the capacity to create new knowledge and the ability to play a part in knowledge production communities (Magolda, 2004; 2009; Healey and Jenkins, 2009; Padashi and Mozaffari, 2009).

Levy and Petrulis (2012) have recognised the importance of inquiry and research. They maintain that, despite the extensive literature on the broader theme of the first experiences in conducting research, there is little reported research on fourth year first time research.

Aim of the study

The aim of this study was to describe the challenges that under-graduate final year (fourth year level) social work students at our university face when conducting research for the first time.

Objectives

The study pursued the following objectives:

- to understand the challenges and experiences of students;
- to identify some structural factors that influence the students' experience of conducting research for the first time.

Assumptions

The study was based on the following assumptions:

- students doing their first research projects do not really understand the research process very well, hence the challenges
- students are overwhelmed by competing demands, such as overload from other courses and from their personal circumstances
- research proposal rejection by the supervisors is demoralising for students.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Experiential learning

The work of Kolb (1984) and others stress that the critical importance of experience in learning explains the gap between understanding and having the ability and skills to practice (Light, Cox and Calkins, 2011). In his seminal work, "Experiential learning", Kolb (1984) developed a comprehensive theory of learning that stresses the fundamental role of experience in learning. "Learning is the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience" (Kolb, 1984:38).

Kolb's ideas are built on those of Dewey (1938). Kolb describes experience as a transaction between an individual and what, at the time, constitutes his/her environment. It is a "fluid interpenetrating relationship such that once they (person and environment) become related, both are essentially changed" (Kolb, 1984:36).

Cox et al. (2011) adviseathat an important feature of effectiveness of an experiential learning cycle is getting the balance right between experience, reflection, theory and the action they lead towards.

Research approach

The approach for this study was qualitative. Qualitative researchers are after meaning. The social meaning people attribute to their experiences, circumstances, and situations, as well as meanings people embed into texts and other objects, are the focus of qualitative research (Creswell, 2006). This study investigated the experiences of under-graduate social work students embarking on a research project for the first time, thus the qualitative approach is appropriate.

Design

The study used a descriptive design that was phenomenological in orientation. There are two approaches to phenomenology, namely: hermeneutic phenomenology (Van Manen, 1990) and empirical, transcendental, or psychological phenomenology (Moustakas, 1994). This study followed the hermeneutical approach in that the researcher developed a textural description of the experiences of the participants, and a structural description of how the participants experienced the situation in terms of the conditions, situation or context (Moustakas, 1994; Creswell, 2006).

Population

The population for this study was 120 enrolled undergraduate (fourth year) Social Work students.

Sampling

An available sample of ten (10) students took part in this study. An availability sample consists of taking all cases at hand until the sample reaches the desired size (Bless, Higson-Smith and Sithole (2013). These ten students were willing to set some time aside from their busy schedule to volunteer information and data about their first experiences of conducting research.

In any event, this study was qualitative and was intent on increasing our understanding of the issues involved rather than making a generalisation about a whole population.

Data collection

Data collection was undertaken through semi structured interviews. An interview guide was designed and used to solicit information from the respondents.

Data analysis

The first step in data analysis within the phenomenological framework is to build on the data from the first and second research question. The researcher went through the transcripts and highlighted significant statements, sentences or quotes that provide an understanding of how the participants experienced the phenomenon (Creswell, 2006).

These significant statements and themes were then used to write a description of what participants experienced (textural descriptions) as well as a description of how the context or setting influenced how the participants experienced the phenomenon called imaginative variation or structural description (Moustakas, 1994).

From the structural and textural descriptions, the researcher then wrote a composite description that presented the essence of the phenomenon called, the essential, invariant structure (Creswell, 2006).

Table 1: Data analysis process

DATA ANALYSIS	TEXTURAL DESCRIPTIONS	STRUCTURAL DESCRIPTIONS
An audio-recorder was used to record data	How did you experience conducting research for the first time	How did the university context influence how you experienced conducting research for the first time
Data were transcribed	Translating theory/knowledge into practice	Timing of research projects
	Selecting a research topic	Accessing relevant information from the library
Themes were selected through highlighting significant statements, quotes from transcripts	Preparation	Financial support
	Importance of conducting research at under-graduate level	Guidance and support from supervisors
Textural themes were separated from structural themes		Roles and expectations of supervisors
		Accessibility of supervisors

FINDINGS

The following findings and themes were generated from this study:

Table 2: Demographic description of the sample

Name*	Gender	Age
Stephinah	Female	23
Kate	Female	27
John	Male	23
Jack	Male	23
Peter	Male	21
Mavis	Female	22
Maxwell	Males	22
Brains	Male	21
Surprise	Female	23
Amanda	Female	22

*Fictitious names were used to protect the identity of the respondents

Gender distribution

Almost an even split of female and male students formed the sample. This distribution reflected fairly on the gender distribution of this class, which was 70% female and 30% male. Our intention was to secure a gender balance in the composition of our sample, but we did not quite succeed in this – hence the gender split (bias) recorded above. Not much should be read into this gender imbalance. It is an established fact internationally that female social work students outnumber their male counterparts as social work is a caring profession and *ipso facto* female dominated (Kadushin, 1976; Stromberg, 1988; Gibelman and Schervish, 1997), a fact that is, however, in dispute (McPhail, 2004). Likewise, the population from which this sample was drawn had a larger female representation.

Age of the students

The age of the participants ranged from 23 to 27.

Significant statements from the transcripts

The following significant statements emerged from the transcripts:

Translating knowledge into practice

The students acknowledged that the preparatory lectures enabled them to carry out their research projects to completion. However, translating their 'abstract' knowledge into a tangible research project was a 'journey'. The following accounts relate to the students' experiences on this very aspect:

'We have been taught research in class and understand what it entails, but the challenge comes when we have to apply that knowledge into practice"

I know what research is, I've been equipped with knowledge…but theory and practice are two different things, hence we struggle a lot to get our projects off the ground (G)

"The situation where one person teaches and another supervises often confuses students, simply because the orientation towards research amongst academics is truly diverse."

These findings represent an old problem of integrating theory and practice (Trethick 2000; Light et al., 2011). Even in this information age, students find it hard to apply what they have learned. This should not come as a surprise as some academics also battle with research. We often hear that some academics do not have tenure as a result of the "publish or perish" obligation. For students who are conducting research for the first time we can also expect a diversity of experiences.

Moreover, students felt that the person teaching the preparatory research module ought also to be the one who supervises. I found this preference fairly reasonable. Researchers have a wide diversity of opinions, strategies and styles. Thus, if one person teaches research in class and another supervises, the student is likely to lose his/her compass in the inevitable epistemological currents that may arise.

Selecting a research topic

Most students struggled with this aspect, though a few found the process plain sailing. The students' experiences were as follows:

"We changed the topic three times before we found a suitable one. This alone delayed us a great deal"

"Most topics we selected were rejected because the supervisor said they were over-researched. Others were turned down for being less academic."

I have found that students confuse selecting a topic and formulating a problem (see Bless, Higson-Smith and Sithole, 2013). Selection of the problem is a big task for most students. The majority resort to selecting already completed projects and resubmitting them, thus making themselves guilty of plagiarism. In such cases, the topic has either been over-researched or lies somewhere in the department's collection. The supervisors, in a way, expect some originality from the students, hence these disturbing rejections that were reported. The aim of the supervisors here is to develop the students' capacity to understand and participate in different ways of creating knowledge in different contexts, or their 'epistemic fluency' (Goodyear and Zenios, 2007).

Adequacy of preparation

Most students reported that they felt adequately prepared for the project because they were introduced to research concepts in courses offered at first, second and third year levels. However, a minority of the students did not feel confident about carrying out their research projects.

The following were typical majority responses to the question:

"Yes I was prepared because since I registered for social work I knew that in fourth-year I will be doing research, and in second year we were taught the introduction to research and started knowing the steps of conducting research"

"Yes I was prepared to conduct research because there are a lot of questions which need answers and there are also lots of problems which need new solutions."

It is interesting to note that none of the respondents referred to the preparatory module offered at the beginning of the year. Instead, they referred to their earlier classes and the fact that they had some kind of idea of what to expect at this level.

The comment by the second respondent coincides with the constructivist educational theory. It demonstrates that students are more likely to adopt deep learning strategies when engaged with tasks that are authentic to their field, using its techniques and tools (Duffy, Lowyck and Jonassen, 1993).

Since the majority is not always right, it is imperative to hear the minority view too. This is how one participant expressed their experience of preparation:

"I do not think that I am prepared to do research because when you learn, it's different when you have to apply knowledge to practical. I think when I am done with the research it is then that I can say I have truly learned to do research for further purposes and one learns from one's mistakes. But now, I can only say I know what research entails though I can't say I am fully prepared."

A similar observation was made by some authors (Turner, Wuetheric and Healey, 2008; Brew, 2006; Breen and Lindsay, 1999; Jenkins, Blackman, Lindsay and Paton-Saltzberg, 1998) who reported that undergraduates often perceive themselves to be recipients of research-based knowledge rather than authors in its production. Zamorski's (2002) observation, however, is more apt, that even final year under-graduates may not generally regard their own research as 'proper research'.

The importance of doing research at under-graduate level

All the respondents confirmed that they recognised the significance of conducting a mini-research project at under-graduate level. Under-graduate students' participation in hands-on research is widely believed to encourage a positive change in students' attitude towards research in general (Light et al., 2011:155); and students who wish to pursue advanced degrees (Mapolisa and Mafa, 2012) and careers in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics fields (Russell, Hancock, McCullough, 2007), in particular. The following statements are students' verbatim accounts:

"I do see the importance of doing research-it will help us if we proceed with our post-graduate studies. And also as a social worker, when you deal with some problems from the grassroots you need to understand where the problems start and find the solutions for the people that are affected."

"It is very important to conduct research because it helps us to solve problems as we encounter them"

'Research exposed us to problems at a deeper level than we were able to go in class.'

This account resonates with the observations of some authorities in this area (Kolb, 1984; Todd, Smith and Bannister, 2006; Light et al., 2011) that doing research provides students with a substantial and deep exposure to a research area that goes beyond normal course work.

Timing of research projects

Most students were of the opinion that research projects should start at the beginning of the fourth year academic programme. However, a significant minority believed that these should be embarked on earlier, even at second year level. From this finding, one could conclude that most students felt that they were adequately prepared to embark on research while the minority, who advocated for an earlier start, were indeed inadequately prepared.

One account from the majority view was as follows:

"The department must assign supervisors soon at the beginning of the fourth year. Delay in this regard is a waste of valuable time for the student."

The delay alluded to by the participants was caused by the process of matching students' research topics to supervisors' areas of expertise.

Accessing relevant information from the library

Participants' responses to this question constitute a structural description of how the context or setting influenced how participants experienced the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). Most students did not have difficulty accessing literature from the library, a lesser number experienced difficulties, while an insignificant number were uncertain about how to use library facilities. In other words, they were not sure whether they could or could not use the library facilities. Few students complained that they had a difficult time searching for research material because the lecturer organised the library class late in the academic year. Those students who struggled to access information expressed their frustration in this way:

"It is a bit difficult because we were only taught about how to search for articles on the internet this year so it is hard to get all the material required, especially because the demand is that articles should be less than 5 years old."

The requirement that only current literature could be utilised ought to be handled with circumspection. There can be no hard and fast rule as far as this is concerned; the literature sought and its age is a function of the nature of the investigation.

Levy and Petrulis (2012:95) as well as Schwiesow (2010) made an observation that resonates with some of these students' challenges as far accessing material in the library is concerned. They found that "many described struggles and anxieties about using library services and the internet effectively, especially towards the start of the year, at which stage they most often emphasised difficulties with foundational information literacy capabilities associated with locating and sifting sources".

Financial support

Research is a costly exercise in terms of money and time, for both students and staff. Extra documents need to be photocopied and, though most submissions can be done electronically, hard printed copies are still required and these do not come cheaply. For students from disadvantaged backgrounds, escalating research costs add to the burden of poverty. As can be expected in our context, 75% of the students lamented the fact that they did not get adequate financial support from parents, while only a quarter could garner support from their families.

One student said the following regarding financial support:

"I do not get financial support, because I told my parents that research is more like any other course. And since they know that I have a bursary sponsoring me they do not expect me to ask for money for a certain course. So whatever they provide I spare it for printing units though our supervisors keeps rejecting our documents and it so costly for us whilst we do not even have enough cash."

Financial support is one the factors that influence how the students experience the phenomenon of conducting research for the first time. This is what Creswell (2006) and Moustakas (1994) refer to as imaginative variation or structural description.

Guidance and support from supervisors

A large proportion of the student sample were of the opinion that their supervisor provided them with much needed guidance, while only a small number voiced their complete dissatisfaction with their supervisors. This minority complained about their supervisors' inconsistent remarks. Sometimes something held to be correct in an earlier submission would be marked wrong in a later submission with the result that the students got confused.

Dissatisfaction from one of the students took the form of this lament:

'We do not receive any kind of guidance; I'm not being biased or anything. He does not give us the time of day for consultation. Since we have submitted proposals, we have changed topics about a hundred times so to speak. We gave him our research proposal before we started examinations, up to now he has not marked it. This is discouraging, he says we should continue with our study but without our proposal we do not know if we are on track or not. We do not even know whom to consult as he has his own demands and style. We never get a chance to see him as he is forever busy. We are frustrated.'

Woodhouse (2002:15) had the following advice for the type of supervisor described in the previous paragraph: "Students expect their supervisors to be friendly and supportive, read their work ahead of time, have relevant experience and knowledge of the research field; help them locate resources and ultimately to be involved and interested in their development" (See also Levy and Petrulis, 2012; Phillips and Pugh, 2005).

Roles and expectations of supervisors

Thirty percent (30%) of the respondents knew the roles but not expectations of the supervisor, while the majority (70%) knew their supervisors' role and expectations. One

thing that became salient in the discussion was the supervisors' inconsistency. This is how students described this 'pain' in their projects:

'For me, honestly speaking, I do not know the expectations of my supervisor. I know the roles, that a supervisor must guide, be there step by step. But we are not working at the moment, we do not know what he expects from us. He expects work to be done, but we do not know whether we are there yet because he does not mark our work. He is not playing his role, we are still at the same place that we were at; and him not marking our work and not providing feedback is something else'.

'These supervisors are frustrating because they are inconsistent. They approve one thing today, tomorrow the same thing that they approved yesterday they change it and give you stories. It's too much frustrating.'

Ambiguities and uncertainties with regard to roles and expectations of supervisors and students respectively are best addressed through drawing up a contract of expectations and responsibilities of each party. At all levels, setting ground rules or even learning contracts (Phillip and Pugh, 2005) and clarifying them, is an important first step. It should not be assumed that because these have been carefully discussed at the beginning they will not be forgotten later under the more stressful conditions of trying to write up the project or dissertation for a deadline (Light et al., 2011).

Accessibility of supervisors

A considerable number of students had difficulty accessing their supervisors. Students reported that supervisors were always busy and did not keep appointments. This undermined the progress of most projects. On the other hand, a minority of students felt that everything went smoothly for them. They recounted that their supervisors had a system (read roster) in place and if they were not available in their offices, the students could call and re-schedule their appointments. This is how students described one such accessible supervisor:

'For me, our supervisor is very much accessible, when you want her you will always find her in her office. If she is by any chance, not there, you may call her and make a fresh appointment. She is there to help no matter what'.

Again issues of accessibility fall within the broad area of contracting that was mentioned earlier. But, over and above that, accessibility focuses on the "practical side of what each can expect of the other". These are more likely to be set out in course outlines (Light et al., 2011:161).

CONCLUSION

The findings indicate that there were more structural than textural descriptions. This suggests that the experience of conducting research for the first time is influenced more by the context of the student learning environment than how the phenomenon, conducting research for the first time, is perceived. Factors that influence students' experiences of conducting research for the first time include the availability of adequate library resources, well trained supervisors, mutual clarification of roles and expectations and accessibility of supervisors, amongst others.

Whereas textural descriptions, in this case the experiences of conducting research for the first time, play second fiddle to structural factors, it would be remiss of any supervisor to emphasise one at the expense of the other. A student's journey through research requires that supervisors pay attention to the phenomenological (lived experiences) as well as the structural factors.

Conducting research for the first time among under-graduate students is, indeed, an academically challenging exercise whose outcome is as worthwhile as the challenge itself. The findings from this study suggest that, at this stage, students require more time for supervision, which is structural. It also finds that the supervisor must always be accessible and supportive and that supervision must be intense in the beginning so as to facilitate an easier transition into consultation, essential to making the project a success. 'Inconsistent' comments only serve to confuse the student and should thus their use should be limited, unless they are absolutely unavoidable. The best the supervisor can do under the circumstances is to explain the reason for the inconsistency.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

Based on the findings of this study, the following suggestions for further research in this area are provided:

Other than individual ability or cognitive development, what accounts for variation in students' preparedness to conduct research for the first time?

Explore possibilities of funding research projects at fourth year (under-graduate) levels
What accounts for inconsistency in marking and giving feed-back to students? Do supervisors ever explain their reason/s for inconsistent comments?

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings from this study, the following recommendations are made:

- Supervisors must strive to be consistent. When the student points out inconsistencies, the supervisor must feel duty and morally bound to explain the reason for the inconsistency and attempt to seek common ground with the student
- Supervisor training or refresher courses are highly recommended. These can be facilitated and organised internally.
- Contracting is the *sine qua non* of effective supervisory practice. An agreement, sometimes flexible, between the supervisor and the student minimises ambiguities, inconsistencies and temper tantrums.
- Let us maximise on information technology for student submissions. By doing so, we will not only save our students money but also the trees, which we need in this era of global warming.
- Apply the principle of currency flexibly.
- Library education/training must be undertaken throughout the student's training at the university.
- The importance of supportive supervision cannot be over emphasised
- Where students are not sure of their supervisors' expectations, supervisors could run preparatory classes, where this is feasible.

- Since research at fourth year level is basic, it is perhaps not necessary that student projects and supervisor expertise be that closely aligned. However, where possible, students ought to be assigned to supervisors able to mentor them with their expertise in the subject matter so that students derive maximum benefit from the research experience.

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