

GUIDE TO THESIS/PROJECT SUPERVISION

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PREAMBLE

*Supervising a thesis student is not difficult. However it is a scary experience for inexperienced supervisors. I recall my own insecurity when asked to supervise my first thesis candidate (**Alfred Shem Ouma**– then a Masters student) barely after a masters Programme myself. I remember complaining to my chairman that I was too inexperienced for the task pointing out that the student was almost my academic equal. I also do remember my mentor's (**Prof. Germano Mwabu**) response that it was the best way to get experience. This dismissive (though not arrogant) answer has resulted in many Masters and PhD supervision and mentoring that I am very proud of. I therefore dedicate this discussion to **Dr. Alfred Shem Ouma**, who acted as my Guinea pig and Professor German Mwabu my mentor whose push and shove has made me who I am.*

This discussion is not an academic treatise, but rather a practical guide to the upcoming supervisors. It is a result of many years of supervising candidates at Masters and PhD levels of study. It is also informed by examination of guidelines by famed scholars plying their trade in equally famed institutions of higher learning. It is foolhardy to say this work is original hence I acknowledge benefiting from the following sources amongst many:

- i. Australia Catholic University*
- ii. University of Melbourne*
- iii. University of Notre Dame, Australia*

INTRODUCTION

Apart from the student, many people do interact with the thesis in one way or another. These partners who play different but interrelated roles include supervisors, proof readers, peer reviewers, research assistant and specific area consultants. The supervisor stands out as the mentor in charge of quality control and direction of the thesis. Though the supervisor can play most of the roles, it is important to emphasise that he/she must not only be fascinated with spelling mistakes, grammar, artistic flow and or conformity with chapternation.

Supervision is a very important and unique academic endeavour since it is an interface between coursework and practice sharpens student's analytical skills and intuition and mentors the student to become a fully fledged academic. Thesis supervision goes beyond good classroom teaching and extends to near physical contact between the student and the teacher. It extends for a longer period and sometimes involves meetings beyond classroom period and often extends to venues outside the classroom (this may and should exclude social joints).

Relationship between a student and the supervisor often takes a personal dimension hence should extend to empathy when the student has problems of academic and sometimes personal nature. The graduate student is always a mature person with ideas of what the thesis is all about and aspiration of where the thesis should take him/her. The supervisor should not suppress talent and enthusiasm therefore from the start should recognise the same and base his/her acceptance to the student's background

and ambition. This does not in any way imply that the supervisor is a mere bystander. Neither does it imply that the supervisor dictates what must be done. There should be a crossbreed between assertion and accommodation.

A supervisor should be is a mentor not a cult leader. He/she should create peers not disciples. He/she must hold the hands of the apprentice only long enough to help cross the rough waters of academia and should remember and be prepared to let go so that the student can blossom. A good supervisor must be endowed with analytical and logical mind to critique content and sometimes learn from it, patience to understand the student, flexibility in time and content in order to beat deadlines and humility to know that in many cases he/she may be on the wrong so as to make appropriate adjustments. Without all these the student will be frustrated and hence lose confidence in the study, topic and/ or the supervisor.

There is always the temptation of attempting to structure a thesis to conform to some traditional chapterization format. However each thesis is far too individual hence such endeavours restrict a candidate's creativity. Each thesis should therefore develop its own chapters and chapter titles as the work develops over time, though I admit that for the purpose of quality control various universities have in place some formats. These however should be restricted to thesis outlook, minimum and maximum number of pages and declaration rubrics.

WHERE DO I GET EXPERIENCE

Supervisors are created not born. It is therefore wrong to think that g a higher degree which is merely supposed to set minimum requirements automatically makes one a good supervisor. The best way to gain the touted experience:

- i. Operate as an associate under the guidance of a more experienced supervisor.
- ii. Read supervision guide (Where (i.) is not feasible or when you are not humble enough to accept apprenticeship)
- iii. Identify your strength early and refer your student to others with strengths in areas you may not have comparative advantage. Start with areas you're absolutely familiar with.

Foundation

The first meeting between the student and the supervisor normally establishes the nature of the working relationship. It is when each sizes the other. How this goes translates into whether or not the candidate has confidence in the supervisor abilities and verse versa. To ensure the chemistry works:

- i. Create a relaxed atmosphere right from the outset.
- ii. Get to know the student's background both academic and social. This will be helpful in case you got to navigate through some problems.
- iii. Discuss the area the candidate wants to work in terms of what they might like to investigate and why.

- iv. Discuss your expectations in terms of the frequency of meetings and the nature of feedback.
- v. Let the candidates understand from the outset that it is they who are responsible for the work and the thesis write up not you the supervisor and that your role is to guide and ensure conformity with minimum standards.
- vi. Don't impose your own research agenda on the candidate or using the candidate to further your own research interests unless you are the sponsor. Instead offer guidance so that they can fulfil their research dream. However if the thesis topic is of no interest to you or you feel intellectually inadequate in the research area or protocol envisaged, then you can advise the student to change either the research focus or the supervisor.
- vii. Let the student know that you are free to re-examine what you've already corrected and even change your mind. To this extent there is no limit to the number of drafts to me gone through and that there is nothing called a final copy hence you can recall a chapter or even an entire thesis if there are reasons to believe that it contains fundamental mistakes.
- viii. If the candidate's interests and that of the supervisor are fundamentally incongruent, either in terms of subject, methodology, frequency of meetings and the mode of feedback then there is no need for further meetings since what follows would add no value to both of you. Then probably there is need for the candidate s to look for another supervisor.

PREPARATION

If you are satisfied that you can supervise the student, then in layman's terms, talk over the what, why and how of the research. Don't get 'technical' at this point but it is important that you cover:

- i. What is it that you want to research?
- ii. Why do you want to research it?(do you have the background, ability and time)
- iii. How do you intend to do it?

Useful Tips

- Advise the candidate to create 'topic folders' for each potential area that might impact on the thesis. As they come across readings relevant to that area of concern, they can simply drop them into the folder for future reference (e.g. folder for: literature review, mathematics content knowledge, qualitative methodology, references).

- Give the candidate some key readings in the area and ask them to familiarise themselves with the content. This may also be a good time to suggest to the candidate that they familiarise themselves with significant resources in the area, for example: relevant electronic databases, key journals in the area and important websites.

GETTING DOWN TO BUSINESS

Now that you have accepted to be a supervisor, the next stage is to now guide the student. It may not be possible to do so if you're unfamiliar with the current directions in the field in terms of both content and methodology. It is even worse if your other supervisors have similar handicaps. Remember you are supervising the generation of knowledge not a person.

Useful tips:

- i. Be familiar with the field of research to provide guidance by being willing to read widely in the area.
- ii. When necessary, assists the student in gaining access to facilities or research materials.
- iii. Don't hesitate to refer the student to a colleague for a second opinion and quality control.
- iv. Improve your accessibility to the student for consultation and discussion of the student's academic progress and research. The frequency and length of meetings should vary according to the stage of work. More consultation may be needed during estimation.
- v. Meeting the student only after you have read the thesis. Avoid reading with the student at the same time.
- vi. Form the habit of writing all your comments on the script.
- vii. At the end of every meeting repeat to the students the corrections you expect to be made before the next submission and what you expect in the next edition.
- viii. Encourage the student to keep a file detailing your meeting dates, corrections made and expectations.
- ix. Take keen interest in the data, estimation technique and output. If possible supervise data collection. Don't be afraid to tell the student to repeat estimation several times.
- x. Give timely response to submitted written work, with constructive suggestions for improvements.
- xi. Makes arrangements to ensure continuity of supervision when you will be absent for extended periods.
- xii. Be civil in your comments. The following are a sample of comments acceptable in certain universities though they vary across disciplines:
 - It is not clear from your introduction that you have clarified the purpose of your research.
 - You should use sub-headings to structure your writing.
 - There is no flow to the writing style. You should use more connecting phrases.

- There is no obvious argument.
- You make too-many unsupported claims.
- The writing style is turgid and inaccessible.
- The style is too-informal.
- You have not explored the obvious sources sufficiently.
- Your referencing style do not comply with the institution's approved convention.
- You are confusing summarising with paraphrasing.
- Your style is too-informal for an academic paper.
- You use jargon.
- It is difficult to recognise the voice of the writer.
- Your positionality is inconsistent.
- The theoretical framework is inappropriate for the topic.

You may also use **directive comments**, such as the following:

- ✚ Elaborate this point
- ✚ Clarify this point
- ✚ Support this point with more literature/references.
- ✚ Re-structure this complex sentence into short sentences.
- ✚ Re-word this more simply.
- ✚ Use sub-headings to organise the structure
- ✚ Connect your argument to the aims and objectives
- ✚ Check that your conclusions are supported with evidence from the earlier parts of your paper.

Avoid the use of the following and other adjectives similar to them:

- Rubbish
- Useless
- You seem not to understand
- You're merely going in circles
- You're heading nowhere
- Did you ever go to school
- Your grandfather could have done better
- A waste of my effort and intellect

METHODOLOGY

Methodological considerations go to the heart of any study. Prior to selecting a preferred methodological orientation, the candidate must first acquaint themselves with available models that are theoretically consistent with the study. As a supervisor it is partly your role to steer the student away from models whose claim to fame is that they have been used somewhere. Remember, repeating a mistake does not make it right.

These questions may help the candidate avoid methodological transgressions.

- i. What over-riding research paradigm is going to be adopted for the study (quantitative or qualitative or mixed methodology)?
- ii. How is data going to be collected (procedure)?
- iii. How is data going to be examined (analysis)?
- iv. How will you determine that you are measuring the same thing every time (reliability in quantitative language; dependability in qualitative language)?
- v. What is the research Timeline?

Useful tips

- i. The conceptual framework must be guided by sound theory. The choice of dependent and independent variable must not be arbitrary or based on mere intuition.
- ii. The methodology must be guided by the objectives. If possible each objective should lead to a methodology. Never accept a statistical package as an alternative to analytical technique (***i.e. data will be analysed using SPSS***).
- iii. Discuss with the candidate various estimation techniques and help in choosing the most appropriate while appreciating assumptions underlying each technique and type of data.
- iv. Avoid the temptation of allowing the candidate to do everything that someone else did when studying a similar topic elsewhere. Let the student know that results that count are those from the objectives and those from research. If there is need to do anything additional, let it make entry as part of problem statement then acknowledged as an objective. Alternatively arguments not supported by output from a sound and pre agreed analytical technique should be treated as a rumour hence expunged from the thesis.
- v. Avoid accepting casual results or the first to be got. Form the habit of exhausting all the diagnostics before a final estimation is accepted. This will ensure that major assumptions are not violated, hence the results are authentic.
- vi. Distinguish between results of an estimation and that of diagnostics
- vii. Do not restrict yourselves to parametric measures since there are some very useful non parametric techniques (see the attached table).
- viii. Encourage the student to talk to other members of staff. However caution should be taken in approaching those who might later be approached as either reviewers or examiners. Getting such people involved in the process might disqualify them from later acting in these capacities.

INTERPRETATION OF RESULTS

Interpretation is the task of drawing inferences after the collected data has been analysed using an appropriate method. It generally serves the purpose of establishing continuity in research by linking a particular study and others and establishing some explanatory concepts. To this end, interpretations confirm existing laws, generate new hypotheses and illuminate a path for future researches.

Useful tips

- ❖ Ensure that only relevant coefficients are interpreted and when so in a manner that is consistent with the model estimated. For example a clear distinction must be made between propensities, elasticities and probabilities. Caution must also be taken when interpreting coefficients dummy variables.
- ❖ Accept only reasonable explanations for relations and all must conform to your subject and must be stated in that language.
- ❖ Be sure that interpretation is inclusive by considering all variables. Let the candidate be restricted to only variable thought to be important. Let research tell the whole story.

USE OF COMPUTERS

There is no doubt that a computer is one of the most important developments in the history of technology. The computer has become an indispensable gadget in research by adding impetus and speed to problem solving involving large data sets to beat very short deadline.

However it is true that there was research before the advent of modern computers and so many groundbreaking findings were achieved without computers. In research a computer should be seen as a precious slave meant to add speed and precision to operations and not the master. Unfortunately many have let the slave be the master. As we celebrate this slave let the supervisor remember that “Garbage In Garbage Out” is an old adage in computer operations. The computer therefore cannot perform the following:

1. Select variables or determine the measure the same.
2. Select an appropriate statistical measure/technique.
3. Executed the programme
4. Interpret the results

FINALISING THE THESIS/PROJECT

After being certain that the thesis/project is ready for examination the last thing a supervisor should allow is complacency. Take nothing for granted by going through the thesis/project page by page to confirm whether it is well bound. It is still important that you:

- Conform to basic principles of decency, academic integrity and professionalism in the relationship with the student. It must be recognized that

there is a power imbalance in the supervisory relationship and that academic, age or gender tyranny is unacceptable

- Assists the student to comply with any changes that need to be made to the project or thesis after the defence.
- Ensure that the entire supervision process is consistent with academic integrity and practice.
- Never accept results whose authenticity is not documented.
- Assist the student to conform with the university regulations on rubrics, formatting and deadlines

Level of measurement	Two-sample case			k-sample case		Measures of association (Chap. 9)
	One-sample case (Chap. 4)	Related or matched samples (Chap. 5)	Independent samples (Chap. 6)	Related samples (Chap. 7)	Independent samples (Chap. 8)	
Nominal or categorical	Binomial test (4.1)	McNemar change test (5.1)	Fisher exact test for 2×2 tables (6.1)	Cochran Q test (7.1)	Chi-square test for $r \times k$ tables (8.1)	Cramer coefficient, C (9.1)
	Chi-square goodness-of-fit test (4.2)		Chi-square test for $r \times 2$ tables (6.2)			Phi coefficient, r_ϕ (9.2) The kappa coefficient of agreement, K (9.8) Asymmetrical association, the lambda statistic, L_B (9.10)
Ordinal or ordered	Kolmogorov-Smirnov one-sample test, $D_{m,n}$ (4.3)	Sign test (5.2)	Median test (6.3)		Extension of the median test (8.2)	Spearman rank-order correlation coefficient, r_s (9.3)
	One-sample runs test (4.4) Change-point test (4.5)	Wilcoxon signed ranks test, T^+ (5.3)	Wilcoxon-Mann-Whitney test, W_x (6.4)	Friedman two-way analysis of variance by ranks, F_r (7.2)	Kruskal-Wallis one-way analysis of variance, KW (8.3)	Kendall rank-order correlation coefficient, T (9.4)
Interval		Permutation test for paired replicates (5.4)	Robust rank-order test, U (6.5)	Page test for ordered alternatives, L (7.3)	Jonckheere test for ordered alternatives J (8.4)	Kendall partial rank-order correlation coefficient, $T_{xy,z}$ (9.5)
			Komogorov-Smirnov two-sample test, $D_{m,n}$ (6.6)	Siegel-Tukey test for scale differences (6.8)		Kendall coefficient of concordance, W (9.6) Kendall coefficient of agreement, u (9.7) Correlation between k judges and a criterion, T_C (9.7.4) Gamma statistic, G (9.9) Somers's index of asymmetric association, d_{BA} (9.11)