

**POLICY GAPS IN POSTGRADUATE SUPERVISION: AN EVALUATION OF UNIVERSITY GUIDELINES AND ENFORCEMENT USING A SINGLE CASE STUDY DESIGN.***Sibonelo Thanda Mbanjwa\**

Mangosuthu University of Technology P.O. Box 12363 Jacobs 4026 Durban, South Africa

**ABSTRACT**Page | 1 **Background**

Postgraduate supervision is central to research quality and student success. However, a disconnect between formal supervision policies and their implementation often leads to inconsistent experiences and outcomes. At the selected South African university, concerns have arisen regarding unclear supervisory roles, lack of support mechanisms, and inconsistent enforcement of guidelines. This study evaluates the effectiveness of the university's postgraduate supervision policies and identifies gaps in their enforcement.

**Methods**

A qualitative single case study design was employed. Data were collected through document analysis and semi-structured interviews with academic supervisors (n=10), postgraduate students (n=12), and postgraduate coordinators (n=3) from the Faculties of Science, Engineering, and Humanities. Thematic analysis was used to explore clarity, accessibility, and enforcement of policies, as well as perceptions of institutional support structures.

**Results**

Participants included 7 female and 5 male students aged 24–38 years, enrolled in Master's (n=8) and PhD (n=4) programmes. Supervisors (6 males, 4 females) had 5–25 years of academic experience, while postgraduate coordinators (2 males, 1 female) held senior academic roles. While formal supervision policies were in place, their enforcement was inconsistent across faculties. Many supervisors lacked formal training, and students reported limited awareness of their rights and insufficient support during conflicts. Although some departments demonstrated good practices, the absence of a centralized monitoring mechanism weakened overall policy effectiveness.

**Conclusion**

The study highlights a significant gap between supervision policy and practice. Inadequate training, poor communication, and lack of enforcement contribute to uneven postgraduate supervision experiences.

**Recommendations**

The university should improve policy visibility, mandate supervisor training, and establish a monitoring and grievance unit within the postgraduate office. Regular policy reviews involving stakeholders could enhance accountability and consistency.

**Keywords:** *Postgraduate supervision, Policy implementation, Higher education, Supervision guidelines, Supervisory relationships*

**Submitted:** 2025-04-30**Accepted:** 2025-05-29**Published:** 2025-06-01**Corresponding Author:** Sibonelo Thanda Mbanjwa\***Email:** [mbanjwa.sibonelo@mut.ac.za](mailto:mbanjwa.sibonelo@mut.ac.za)

ORCID 0000000319417669

Mangosuthu University of Technology P.O. Box 12363 Jacobs 4026 Durban, South Africa

**INTRODUCTION**

Postgraduate education plays a vital role in the intellectual, economic, and social advancement of any nation. In the South African context, postgraduate studies are central to developing a knowledge-based economy, fostering innovation, and producing skilled professionals capable of addressing complex

developmental challenges (Mouton et al., 2015). As universities expand their postgraduate offerings, the quality of supervision becomes increasingly critical in determining the success of research outputs, student experiences, and academic throughput. The supervisory process is not only a pedagogical function but also an ethical, institutional, and relational commitment that

requires well-defined policies, competent academic staff, and consistent institutional support.

Effective postgraduate supervision is underpinned by institutional policies that define roles, responsibilities, timelines, feedback procedures, and escalation mechanisms for conflict resolution. These policies are intended to ensure academic rigor, promote equity in learning, and uphold the integrity of the research process. However, studies have shown that in many cases, the existence of supervision policies does not automatically translate into effective implementation or enforcement (Backhouse, 2009; Manathunga, 2007). There remains a substantial gap between policy frameworks and the actual day-to-day supervision practices experienced by students and academic staff.

Within this gap, numerous challenges arise. Students often report a lack of clarity regarding expectations, insufficient feedback from supervisors, and uncertainty about how to raise concerns when difficulties occur. Supervisors, in turn, may be overburdened, undertrained, or unaware of the institutional policies that should guide their engagement with students. In some cases, supervisory practices are shaped more by departmental culture or individual discretion than by standardized institutional procedures (Govender & Naidoo, 2020). The result is a fragmented supervision environment where students' academic experiences vary widely, sometimes within the same faculty or program.

Institutional monitoring mechanisms that are meant to ensure compliance with supervision policies are either weak or non-existent in many universities. This is particularly true in resource-constrained institutions, where limited staff capacity, lack of supervisory training, and administrative inefficiencies impede quality assurance processes. The absence of these enforcement structures not only undermines the purpose of having supervision policies but also places students at risk of academic exploitation, delays in completion, and psychological distress (Lessing & Schulze, 2002; Waghid, 2018).

The Council on Higher Education (CHE) and the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) have emphasized the importance of structured postgraduate support, ethical supervision, and regular monitoring of academic performance in their national frameworks. Yet, supervision-related challenges remain widespread. This dissonance between policy intent and practical reality calls for a focused institutional investigation. A deeper understanding of how supervision policies are implemented and where they fail can provide a foundation for reforming postgraduate support systems and enhancing student success.

## **Background Information**

Postgraduate supervision policies are designed to regulate the roles, responsibilities, and expectations of both supervisors and students. These policies also ensure that academic standards are maintained and that the learning process remains structured, transparent, and equitable. However, policy documents alone do not guarantee effective supervision. In many institutions, there exists a disjuncture between the formalization of policies and their enforcement, leading to inconsistencies in postgraduate research experiences (Govender & Naidoo, 2020). Issues such as a lack of supervisor training, unclear complaint resolution mechanisms, and inconsistent departmental implementation often go unaddressed. This situation is exacerbated in resource-constrained institutions where staff shortages and limited administrative capacity hinder policy enforcement and monitoring. The South African Council on Higher Education (CHE) and the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) have called for strengthened postgraduate frameworks that are quality-assured, student-centered, and ethically sound. Despite these calls, supervision-related complaints persist, and many students feel unsupported during their academic journey. Given this context, it becomes imperative to critically evaluate not just the existence of policies but how they are understood, implemented, and experienced at the ground level. This study aims to evaluate the effectiveness of postgraduate supervision policies at a selected South African university, with a focus on identifying gaps between policy design and implementation and understanding stakeholder experiences across different faculties.

## **Research Objectives**

- Assess the level of awareness and understanding of postgraduate supervision policies among academic supervisors and students.
- To evaluate the accessibility and clarity of institutional supervision guidelines.
- To examine the presence and functionality of mechanisms for addressing supervision-related grievances.
- To identify institutional and departmental structures responsible for enforcing supervision policies.
- To propose recommendations for improving policy enforcement and creating a supportive postgraduate supervision environment.

## Research Question

How effectively are postgraduate supervision policies implemented and enforced at a South African university, and what gaps exist between the formal policy framework and actual supervisory practice?

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

### Study Design

This study adopted a qualitative single case study design to explore the implementation and enforcement of postgraduate supervision policies at a South African university. A case study approach was selected to allow for an in-depth, contextual analysis of institutional practices and lived experiences related to policy awareness, application, and oversight. This design is particularly suited for understanding complex phenomena within real-world contexts and is widely used in educational policy research.

### Study Setting

The research was conducted at a public university located in South Africa, selected due to its growing postgraduate enrolment and documented challenges related to supervision quality and consistency. Data collection took place between January and March 2025, across three academic departments within the Faculty of Environmental Science and Agriculture. These departments were chosen based on the availability of postgraduate programs and diversity in supervisory practices.

### Participants

The study involved three categories of participants:

Postgraduate students ( $n = 12$ ) are currently enrolled in master's or doctoral programs and have completed at least six months of supervision.

Academic supervisors ( $n = 10$ ) actively supervising at least one postgraduate student during the study period.

Postgraduate coordinators ( $n = 3$ ) are responsible for managing research programs and ensuring policy compliance at the departmental level.

Eligibility criteria included active involvement in postgraduate research, willingness to participate, and informed consent. Participants were selected using purposive sampling to ensure diversity in experience, discipline, and roles within the supervision process. Recruitment was facilitated through departmental invitations and direct referrals. A total of 30 individuals

were initially identified as potentially eligible for the study. Of these, 27 were examined for eligibility based on their active involvement in postgraduate supervision or enrolment, willingness to participate, and availability during the study period. Two individuals declined to participate due to time constraints, and one did not meet the minimum supervision period required for inclusion. Ultimately, 24 participants were confirmed eligible and included in the study.

### The final participant cohort consisted of:

Postgraduate students ( $n=12$ ): Seven females and five males aged between 24 and 38 years, enrolled in Master's ( $n=8$ ) and Doctoral ( $n=4$ ) programs. Students represented disciplines within the Faculty of Natural Sciences, including Environmental Science, Microbiology, and Chemistry.

Academic supervisors ( $n=10$ ): Six males and four females with supervisory experience ranging from 5 to 25 years. All were actively supervising postgraduate students and held academic positions from lecturer to professor across three departments.

Postgraduate coordinators ( $n=3$ ): Two males and one female, all senior academic staff with administrative oversight of postgraduate programs within their departments.

All 25 participants completed the interviews and were included in the final data analysis. The diversity in gender, academic roles, and disciplinary backgrounds provided a comprehensive view of the policy implementation landscape across the selected university departments.

### Study Variables

In this qualitative case study, the research focused on exploring conceptual variables related to the implementation and enforcement of postgraduate supervision policies. These variables were derived from the study objectives and guided data collection and thematic analysis. The key study variables include:

#### Policy Awareness

The extent to which postgraduate students, supervisors, and coordinators are familiar with the university's formal supervision policies and guidelines.

#### Policy Implementation

How supervision policies are applied in practice across departments, including alignment between documented procedures and actual supervisory practices.

## **Institutional Support and Oversight**

The presence and functionality of institutional mechanisms (e.g., training programs, monitoring structures, grievance channels) are intended to support effective supervision and enforce compliance with policy.

## **Stakeholder Experiences**

Perceptions and lived experiences of postgraduate students, supervisors, and coordinators regarding the clarity, fairness, and effectiveness of supervision policies.

## **Supervision Challenges and Gaps**

Issues such as inconsistent enforcement, lack of training, and inadequate communication affect the quality of supervision and the student experience.

These variables were explored holistically to understand the relationship between policy design and its practical outcomes in postgraduate supervision.

## **Bias**

To minimize bias, several strategies were employed:

Triangulation of data sources (students, supervisors, coordinators) ensured multiple perspectives on supervision policies.

Anonymous participation helped reduce social desirability bias, especially when discussing institutional weaknesses.

Interview protocols were standardized, and open-ended questions allowed participants to express concerns without leading them.

The principal investigator maintained a reflexive journal throughout the research to document and reflect on personal assumptions or influences on data interpretation.

## **Study Size**

The final sample size of 25 participants (12 students, 10 supervisors, and 3 coordinators) was determined by data saturation, the point at which no new themes emerged from interviews. Qualitative research emphasizes depth over quantity, and saturation was reached after iterative analysis of responses across participant groups. The sample size is considered adequate for a single case study focusing on institutional processes and relational dynamics.

## **Statistical Analysis**

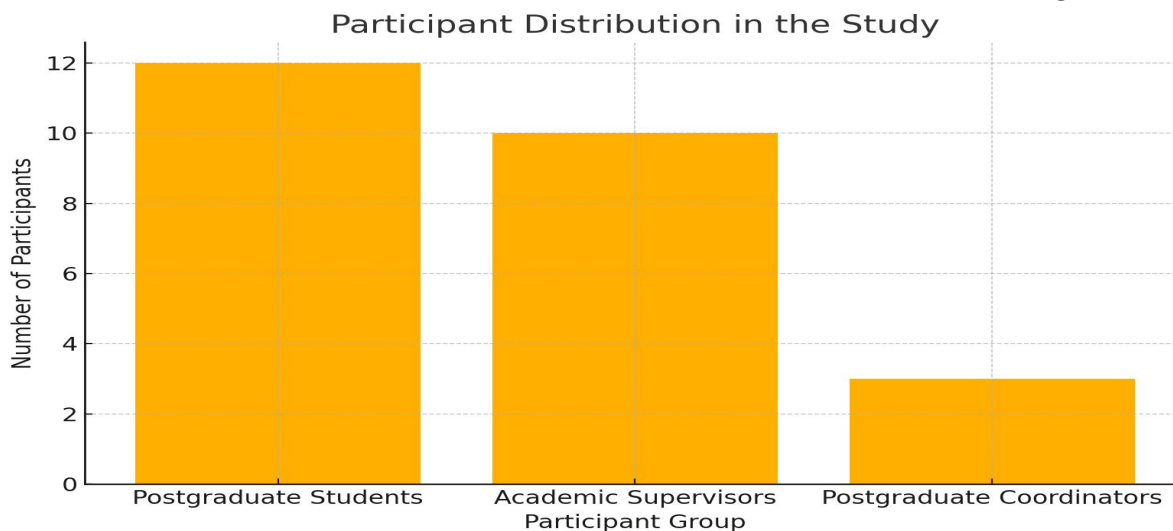
Qualitative data from semi-structured interviews were transcribed and analysed using thematic analysis, guided by Braun and Clarke's six-phase framework. Data coding was conducted manually and verified using NVivo software to enhance reliability. Themes were organized around the conceptual framework constructs, including policy awareness, implementation, monitoring, and student support. Basic descriptive statistics were used to present participant distributions (e.g., pie charts and bar graphs). Since this was a qualitative study, inferential statistical methods were not employed. Missing data were minimal due to real-time interviews, and any incomplete responses were addressed during follow-up clarification sessions.

## **Ethical Consideration**

Ethical clearance was obtained from the Mangosuthu University of Technology Research Ethics Committee. The study was approved on 10 January 2025. All participants signed informed consent forms. Confidentiality and anonymity were strictly maintained. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any time without any consequence. All data were stored securely in password-protected files accessible only to the research team.

## **RESULTS AND FINDINGS**

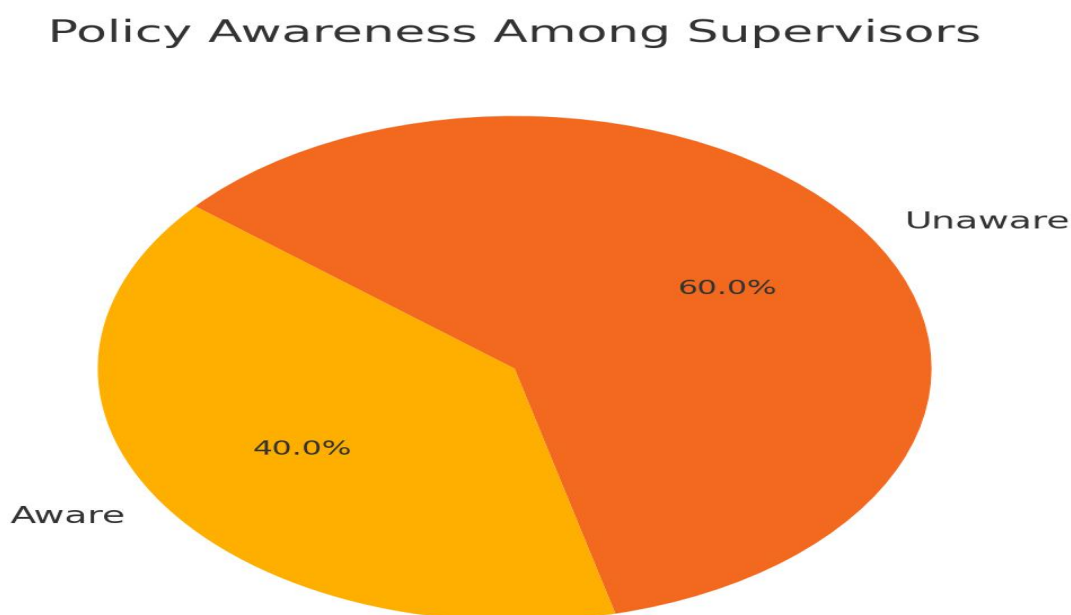
Figure 1 illustrates the distribution of participants involved in the postgraduate supervision study across three key stakeholder groups. The highest number of participants was postgraduate students, totalling 12, reflecting the study's emphasis on capturing student experiences and perspectives. This was followed closely by academic supervisors, with 10 participants, whose input was essential in understanding policy implementation and supervisory practices. Postgraduate coordinators formed the smallest group, with only 3 participants, likely due to their limited numbers within departments and specialized administrative roles. The graph indicates a deliberate sampling approach aimed at achieving balanced insights from both supervisory and administrative stakeholders, while prioritizing the voices of those most affected by postgraduate supervision policies, the students.



**Figure 1: The graph showing the distribution of participants in the study. It illustrates the number of postgraduate students, academic supervisors, and postgraduate coordinators who took part in the research.**

Figure 2 indicates that only 40% (4 out of 10) of academic supervisors were aware of the university's postgraduate supervision policy. The remaining 60% (6 out of 10) lacked awareness. This points to a significant knowledge gap among those tasked with guiding postgraduate students. The absence of policy awareness

among the majority of supervisors raises concerns about unstandardized supervisory practices and inconsistent quality of mentorship across departments. This may result in violations of academic integrity or unmet supervision expectations.

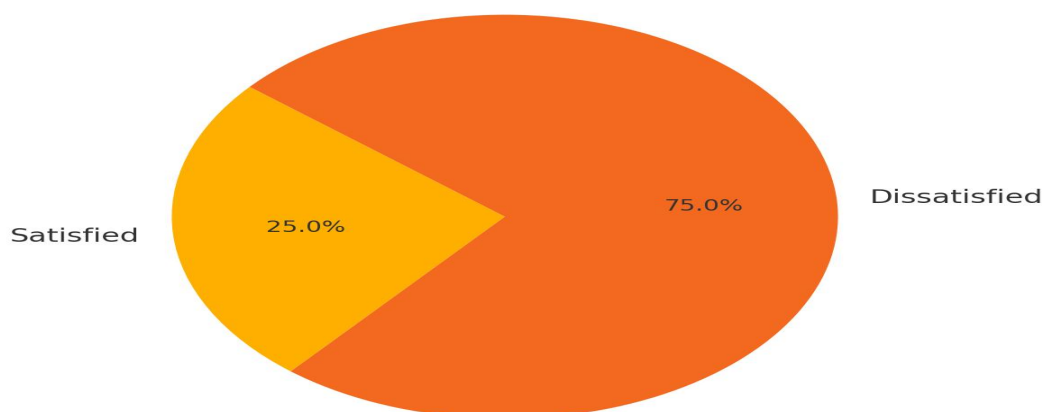


**Figure 2: The graph illustrates policy awareness among supervisors**

Figure 3 indicates that only 25% (3 out of 12) of postgraduate students were satisfied with the clarity of supervision expectations, while 75% (9 out of 12) expressed dissatisfaction. The high rate of dissatisfaction suggests that students are either not adequately informed

of their rights and responsibilities or that supervision practices are poorly communicated and implemented. This lack of transparency can negatively impact research progress, emotional well-being, and student retention.

### Student Satisfaction With Supervision Clarity

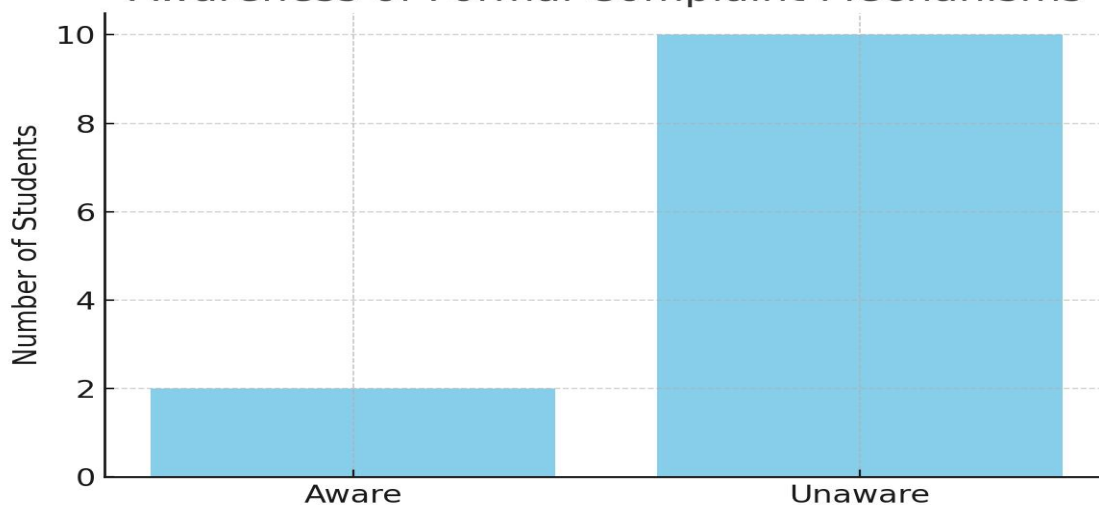


**Figure 3: The graph illustrates student satisfaction with supervision clarity**

Figure 4 indicates that only 2 out of 12 students (17%) knew how to escalate issues through a formal complaints process; 10 students (83%) were unaware of any such mechanism. This reflects a failure in institutional communication and support. Students experiencing

difficulties are unlikely to seek recourse if they don't know where or how to raise concerns. The lack of visibility of grievance channels contributes to feelings of isolation, academic delays, and power imbalances in the supervisor-student relationship.

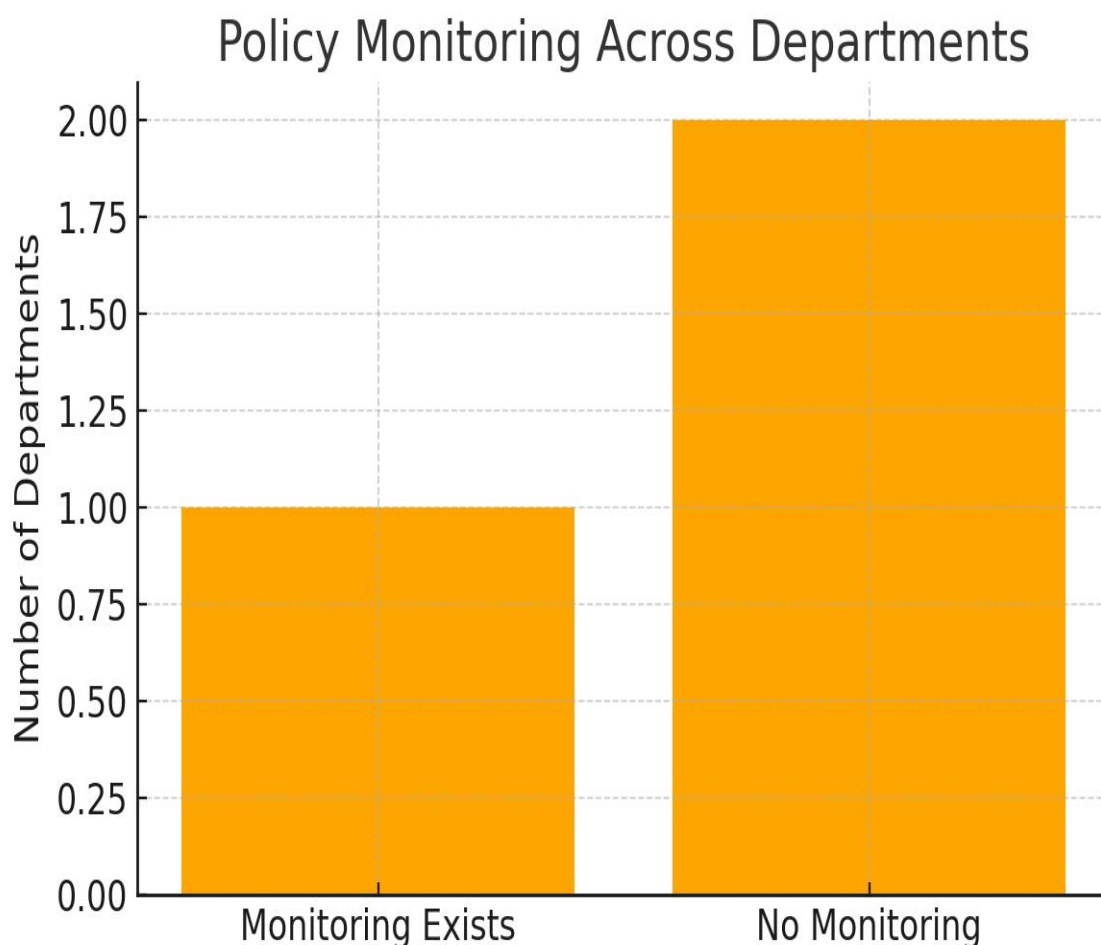
### Awareness of Formal Complaint Mechanisms



**Figure 4: The graph illustrates awareness of formal complaint mechanisms among students**

Figure 5 indicates that only 1 department had an active policy monitoring mechanism, while 2 did not. With limited internal accountability, departments are unlikely to enforce policy compliance or detect supervision

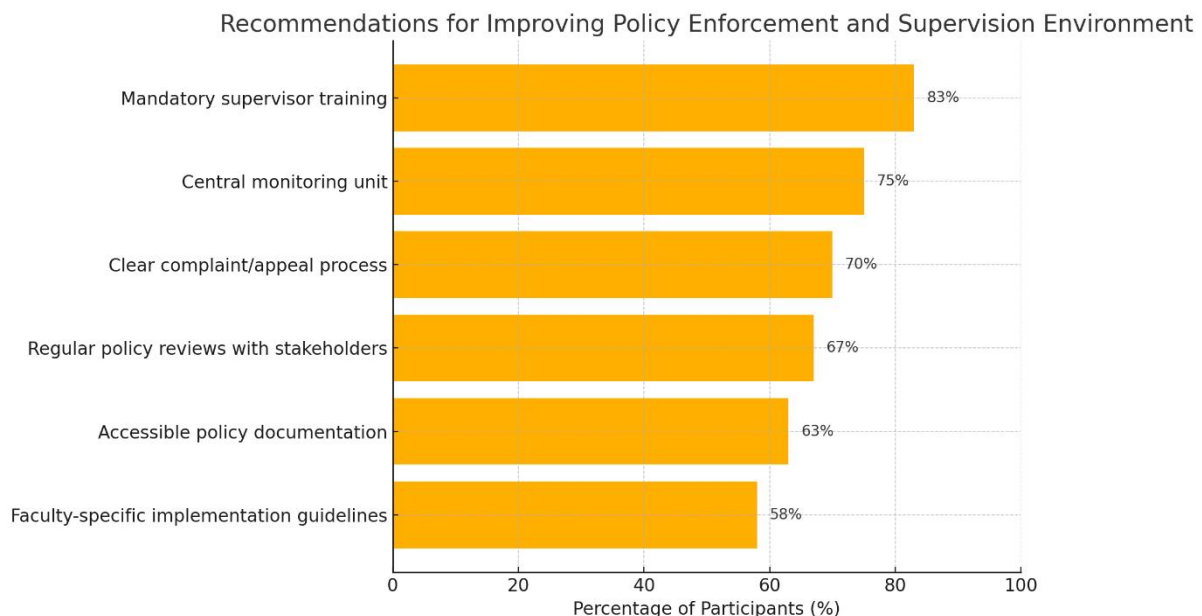
problems in time. This systemic weakness exacerbates inconsistencies in how postgraduate policies are applied, potentially widening equity gaps and diminishing research quality across faculties.



**Figure 5: The graph illustrates the presence of policy monitoring across departments**

The graph illustrates participants' recommendations for improving postgraduate supervision policy enforcement and creating a more supportive environment. The most frequently cited recommendation was mandatory supervisor training, endorsed by 83% of participants. This highlights a clear concern regarding supervisors' preparedness and awareness of institutional policy requirements. Following this, establishing a central monitoring unit (75%) and introducing a clear complaint and appeal process (70%) were also strongly supported, indicating a need for structured oversight and accessible conflict resolution mechanisms. Regular policy reviews involving stakeholders (67%) reflect the desire for more

inclusive, iterative policy development that responds to changing academic realities. Additionally, 63% of participants emphasized the importance of making policy documents more accessible, suggesting that current communication and dissemination practices may be insufficient. Finally, 58% recommended faculty-specific implementation guidelines, underscoring the variability across departments and the need for context-sensitive approaches. Collectively, these recommendations point to systemic gaps in policy communication, enforcement, and support structures, and suggest that improvements must address both institutional frameworks and the lived realities of postgraduate supervision.



**Figure 6: The graphical representation of the key recommendations made by participants for improving policy enforcement and creating a supportive postgraduate supervision environment**

## DISCUSSIONS

This study aimed to evaluate the gaps in policy enforcement and support structures for postgraduate supervision at a South African university. The findings, supported by figures and thematic data, point to substantial weaknesses in supervisory training, student protection mechanisms, and institutional monitoring frameworks. Figure 2 highlights a critical concern: only 40% of supervisors (4 out of 10) were aware of the university's postgraduate supervision policy. The remaining 60% were unaware, reflecting poor institutional efforts to socialize or train supervisors on their formal roles. This supports the argument by Waghid (2018) that policy presence alone is insufficient; active training and integration into academic practice are essential. The lack of training mechanisms contributes to inconsistent supervision styles, which can negatively impact postgraduate research quality and throughput. Further, Figure 3 illustrates that 75% of postgraduate students (9 out of 12) expressed dissatisfaction with the clarity of supervision guidelines and expectations. This result aligns with the findings of Manathunga (2007), who warned that unstructured supervisory relationships often result in delayed completions and student demotivation. The data indicates a significant communication gap between supervisors and students, possibly exacerbated by the lack of formal induction processes for postgraduate candidates. A major red flag

is shown in Figure 4, where only 17% of students (2 out of 12) were aware of any formal complaints or escalation mechanisms related to supervision. This finding implies that most students are navigating supervision without the safety net of institutional accountability. This may increase vulnerability to power imbalances and supervisor misconduct, an issue previously raised by Backhouse (2009) in critiques of postgraduate frameworks in developing contexts. Institutional fragmentation is further evident in Figure 5, where only one department out of three was found to have an active supervision policy monitoring mechanism. This lack of monitoring reinforces the conclusion that policy enforcement is decentralized, inconsistent, and largely ineffective. Without an institution-wide monitoring strategy, quality assurance across faculties remains elusive.

## GENERALIZABILITY

Given the single case study design, the generalizability of these findings is limited. The study's results cannot be assumed to reflect the realities of all South African universities or institutions in other countries. However, many of the challenges uncovered, such as inadequate policy enforcement, lack of supervisory training, and insufficient student support structures, are widely documented in higher education literature. As such, the

study offers valuable insights that may be transferable to other institutions facing similar structural and supervisory challenges. The findings can serve as a reflective framework for universities seeking to evaluate and improve their postgraduate supervision practices, particularly those operating in resource-constrained environments. While context-specific, the themes emerging from this research resonate with broader systemic issues in postgraduate education.

## CONCLUSION

This study has revealed critical policy gaps in the postgraduate supervision process at a South African university. Although the institution has formal supervision policies in place, their implementation is inconsistent and poorly enforced across departments. The lack of awareness among supervisors, combined with students' dissatisfaction regarding unclear supervisory expectations and the absence of accessible complaint mechanisms, highlights a disconnect between policy and practice. Furthermore, the minimal presence of departmental monitoring systems undermines accountability and quality assurance efforts. These findings reflect a broader institutional challenge where policy frameworks exist symbolically but lack practical application, thus limiting their intended impact on enhancing postgraduate research experiences.

## LIMITATIONS

This study is not without its limitations. The research was conducted at a single university, which restricts the scope of its findings to the institutional context in question. As such, the perspectives gathered and the patterns observed may not fully represent the diversity of supervision experiences across different higher education institutions in South Africa. The study relied heavily on self-reported data from students and staff, which may be influenced by personal bias, selective memory, or reluctance to critique institutional practices. This can affect the objectivity and reliability of certain qualitative insights. Furthermore, the representation of academic departments in the study was limited, potentially affecting the comprehensiveness of the findings. More nuanced trends and policy enforcement discrepancies might have emerged had more faculty been included in the research.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

In response to the issues identified, several recommendations are proposed to improve postgraduate supervision at the institutional level. Firstly, mandatory supervisor training should be introduced to ensure

academic staff are well-versed in university policies and ethical responsibilities. This training could be formalized into a certification program and periodically reviewed to stay current with evolving postgraduate needs.

Secondly, there is a need for comprehensive orientation and induction programs for both students and supervisors. These programs should include clear communication of supervisory roles, expectations, and available support structures, including detailed guidelines on how students can seek help when challenges arise. Thirdly, the establishment of a centralized monitoring and evaluation unit within the postgraduate office is essential. Such a structure would provide oversight on policy compliance, promote consistency across departments, and act as a central resource for resolving supervision-related issues. The institution should introduce an anonymous, student-friendly complaint and feedback mechanism. This would empower students to report supervision concerns without fear of retribution and enable early intervention in problematic supervisory relationships. Finally, it is recommended that the university institutionalize regular policy reviews. These should be informed by input from supervisors, students, and support staff to ensure that supervision frameworks remain responsive, inclusive, and aligned with best practices in postgraduate education.

## BIOGRAPHY

Dr. Sibonelo Thanda Mbanjwa is a dedicated lecturer in the Department of Nature Conservation at Mangosuthu University of Technology (MUT), South Africa. He holds a Ph.D. in Environmental Science and specializes in biodiversity conservation, sustainable development, and environmental education. Dr. Mbanjwa is deeply committed to community engagement, student mentorship, and the integration of indigenous knowledge systems into conservation practices. His work bridges academia and practical application, empowering students and communities through innovative teaching, research, and outreach initiatives.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I acknowledge the moral support and encouragement from the Deans and HOD of the Department of Nature Conservation, Faculty of Natural Science, Mangosuthu University of Technology.

## FUNDING

This work was not supported by any grant. The author did not receive research support from any company. The authors declare that no funds, grants, or other support were received during the preparation of this manuscript.

## **COMPETING INTERESTS**

The authors have no relevant financial or non-financial interests to disclose.

## **AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS**

I, the author, contributed to the study conception and design. Material preparation, data collection, and research were performed by Mbanjwa S.T. The first draft was written by Mbanjwa S.T.

## **DATA AVAILABILITY**

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the author, but restrictions apply to the availability of these data, which were used under license from various research publications for the current study and are therefore not publicly available.

## **REFERENCES**

1. Backhouse, J. (2009). Doctoral education in South Africa: Models, pedagogies and student experiences. Pretoria: Council on Higher Education (CHE).

2. Creswell, J. W., Creswell, J. D., & Plano Clark, V. L. (2021). Designing and Conducting Mixed Methods Research (4th ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
3. Govender, K., & Naidoo, D. (2020). Postgraduate supervision experiences of South African students: Challenges and prospects. South African Journal of Higher Education, 34(6), 144-162.
4. Lessing, A. C., & Schulze, S. (2002). Postgraduate supervision: Students' perceptions. South African Journal of Higher Education, 16(2), 139-149. <https://doi.org/10.4314/sajhe.v16i2.25253>
5. Manathunga, C. (2007). Supervision as mentoring: The role of power and boundary crossing. Studies in Continuing Education, 29(2), 207-221. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01580370701424650>
6. Mouton, J., Louw, G. P., & Strydom, A. H. (2015). A systematic analysis of South African research supervision literature. Higher Education Research & Development, 34(5), 972-986.
7. Waghid, Y. (2018). Towards decolonising postgraduate supervision: A philosophical reflection. South African Journal of Higher Education, 32(6), 1-9.

## **Publisher details**

# **Student's Journal of Health Research (SJHR)**

**(ISSN 2709-9997) Online**

**(ISSN 3006-1059) Print**

**Category: Non-Governmental & Non-profit Organization**

**Email: [studentsjournal2020@gmail.com](mailto:studentsjournal2020@gmail.com)**

**WhatsApp: +256 775 434 261**

**Location: Scholar's Summit Nakigalala, P. O. Box 701432,  
Entebbe Uganda, East Africa**

