Supervision stress: The psychological impact of poor supervision on postgraduate students - A qualitative single-case study design.

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Abstract
Background
Postgraduate students often encounter significant academic pressures, with poor supervision emerging as a critical yet underexplored contributor to psychological distress. Inadequate supervisory support, inconsistent communication, and delayed feedback can severely hinder research progress while intensifying stress, anxiety, and burnout. Although research indicates a strong correlation between supervisory relationships and student mental health, institutional responses, particularly in resource-constrained South African universities, remain insufficient.
Methods
A qualitative single-case study design was employed at a South African public university. Data were gathered through semi-structured interviews and focus groups involving 20 participants: 12 postgraduate students, 5 academic supervisors, and 3 postgraduate program coordinators. Purposive sampling ensured participants had relevant supervisory experience. The thematic analysis focused on emotional strain, academic delays, coping mechanisms, and institutional responses.
Results
Eighty percent (80%) of students reported moderate to severe emotional stress linked to poor supervision. Common stressors included infrequent feedback, unclear research direction, and supervisor unavailability. Students frequently expressed feelings of isolation, self-doubt, and, in some cases, depression. Supervisors cited high workloads and limited training as barriers to effective supervision. Coordinators acknowledged the absence of institutional tools to track student well-being or assess supervisory effectiveness.
Conclusion
The study demonstrates that poor supervision is a significant driver of psychological distress among postgraduate students. Despite the risks, institutions often lack proactive mechanisms to support student mental health or improve supervisory practices.
Recommendations
Universities should implement compulsory supervision training that incorporates mental health awareness, communication, and conflict resolution. A centralized system for monitoring supervision quality and student well-being is essential. This should include timely feedback, accessible complaint processes, and mental health support. Regular supervisor evaluations based on student feedback are crucial to promoting accountability and enhancing postgraduate experiences.

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Introduction

Postgraduate education is a cornerstone of academic advancement, research innovation, and national development. As universities around the world expand their postgraduate offerings to meet growing demands for advanced skills and knowledge production, the quality of supervision has become a critical determinant of student success. Effective supervision is not only essential for timely research completion but also plays a vital role in shaping the intellectual, emotional, and professional development of postgraduate students. It

requires a delicate balance of academic mentorship, emotional support, constructive feedback, and ethical guidance. When well-executed, postgraduate supervision fosters independence, critical thinking, and academic excellence. However, when supervision is inconsistent, inattentive, or neglectful, it can become a source of significant emotional distress and academic stagnation (Manathunga, 2007).

In many higher education institutions, particularly within resource-constrained environments, supervision challenges persist despite the presence of institutional policies. These challenges include poor communication, limited feedback, lack of clear direction, and inaccessibility of supervisors. In such contexts, postgraduate students often experience feelings of isolation, helplessness, and anxiety, symptoms that may escalate into more severe mental health concerns such as depression and burnout. Research indicates that the quality of the supervisory relationship is one of the most influential factors in postgraduate success and well-being (Lessing & Schulze, 2002; Backhouse, 2009). Yet, many universities lack structured systems to monitor supervision quality, offer mental health support, or provide clear mechanisms for resolving supervision-related disputes.

The South African higher education landscape is no exception. As the country seeks to expand its postgraduate pipeline in alignment with national development goals, supervision quality, and student well-being remain pressing concerns. Despite national guidelines provided by the Council on Higher Education (CHE) and institutional policies in place, implementation at the faculty and departmental levels is often inconsistent. Supervisors frequently report high workloads, insufficient training, and a lack of institutional support, while students navigate unclear expectations and limited avenues for feedback or redress (Mouton et al., 2015).

Against this backdrop, this study investigates the psychological impact of poor postgraduate supervision on students within a South African university. The study explores how ineffective supervision contributes to emotional distress, how students cope without institutional support, and what systemic changes might improve the postgraduate experience. By focusing on the lived experiences of both students and supervisors, the study provides insights into the relational and structural factors that shape supervision outcomes. It also highlights the urgent need for more responsive, accountable, and student-centered approaches to postgraduate supervision in higher education.

Background

Postgraduate research is not only an academic pursuit but also an emotionally and intellectually demanding journey. At the heart of this experience is the relationship between the student and the supervisor, which plays a pivotal role in shaping the quality and success of the research process. When supervision is effective, it cultivates independent thinking, academic confidence, and personal growth. However, when supervision is inadequate, it can disrupt research progress and negatively impact students' mental health. In the South African context, postgraduate education is central to national development and transformation goals. As such, postgraduate supervision holds strategic significance. Yet, despite formal policies aimed at improving supervision, it remains one of the most inconsistently implemented and least monitored aspects of higher education. Many students begin their research journeys with optimism, only to face misaligned expectations, infrequent communication, and minimal academic direction. These issues are often exacerbated by broader institutional shortcomings, such as a lack of supervisor training, weak student support systems, and inadequate mechanisms to track progress or address conflicts.

These challenges not only delay academic progress but also contribute to stress, isolation, and, in some cases, attrition. While national bodies like the Council on Higher Education (CHE) and the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) have emphasized the importance of improving supervision and increasing postgraduate completion rates, the everyday experiences of students often reflect limited institutional support, poor accountability, and emotional vulnerability. This study seeks to address this gap by exploring the psychological effects of poor supervision in postgraduate education. It focuses on student experiences within a South African university to understand how ineffective supervision impacts emotional well-being and to identify the systemic factors that contribute to the persistence of this issue.

Research Objectives

1. To explore postgraduate students' experiences of poor supervision and its psychological effects.

2. To identify the main supervisory practices contributing to emotional stress and academic disengagement.

3. To examine the coping strategies students employ in response to supervision-related stress.

4. To assess the availability and effectiveness of institutional support mechanisms for postgraduate students facing supervision challenges.

5. To propose institutional and supervisory reforms aimed at improving the postgraduate experience and reducing supervision-induced stress.

Research Question

What is the psychological impact of poor supervision on postgraduate students at a South African university, and how do institutional practices and support mechanisms shape student coping and academic outcomes?

Methodology

Study Design

This study employed a qualitative single-case study design, which is well-suited for exploring complex, real-world phenomena in depth and within a specific context. The approach enabled an in-depth investigation into the psychological effects of poor supervision on postgraduate students at a single South African university, capturing the nuanced experiences of students, supervisors, and postgraduate program coordinators.

Study Setting

The study was conducted at a public university in South Africa, selected due to its diverse postgraduate student population and ongoing concerns about supervision quality. The research was carried out across three departments within the Faculty of Natural Sciences. Data collection occurred between January and March 2025, involving both virtual and in-person interactions, depending on participant availability and preference.

Participants

The study population comprised postgraduate students, academic supervisors, and program coordinators. Participants were selected using purposive sampling to ensure relevance and depth of insight.

- Eligibility criteria for students: current enrollment in a master's or doctoral program with a minimum of six months of active supervision experience.

- Eligibility criteria for supervisors: experience supervising at least one postgraduate student.

- Program coordinators: selected based on their administrative oversight of postgraduate research programs.

Participants were recruited through email invitations, departmental referrals, and classroom announcements. All participants provided informed consent before inclusion.

Bias

To reduce bias, the following strategies were applied:

- Data triangulation across students, supervisors, and coordinators to validate findings from multiple perspectives.

- Use of a standardized interview guide with open-ended questions to ensure consistency while allowing depth and flexibility.

- Reflexivity: the principal researcher maintained a reflexive journal to acknowledge and monitor personal biases.

- Confidentiality and anonymity were emphasized to minimize social desirability bias.

Study Size

A total of 20 participants took part in the study:
- 12 postgraduate students,
- 5 academic supervisors, and
- 3 postgraduate program coordinators.

The sample size was guided by the principle of data saturation, reached when no new themes emerged during iterative analysis. This number was deemed sufficient for capturing in-depth qualitative insights.

Data Sources

The primary data sources included:

- Semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions with postgraduate students, supervisors, and coordinators, capturing experiences related to psychological well-being, supervision quality, and institutional support.

- Researcher field notes and the reflexive journal documented observations, contextual nuances, and researcher reflections.

- Participant demographic information, including age, level of study, and departmental affiliation, was collected to contextualize the data.

- Supplementary follow-up correspondence (email or phone) was used to clarify ambiguous responses.

These sources were used to explore key variables such as emotional stress levels, types of supervisory challenges encountered, coping strategies, and perceptions of institutional responsiveness.

Statistical Analysis

Data were analyzed thematically using Braun and Clarke's six-phase approach: familiarization, coding, theme development, review, definition, and reporting. Manual coding was conducted first, followed by verification using NVivo 12 software for consistency and reliability. Descriptive statistics (frequencies and percentages) were used to summarize participant characteristics and key response trends (e.g., the proportion of students reporting depression or delays). Missing data were minimal, as interviews were conducted live, and unclear responses were resolved through follow-up engagement.

Ethical Consideration

Ethical clearance was granted by the Mangosuthu University of Technology Research Ethics Committee. Participants received an information sheet detailing the study's objectives, procedures, potential risks, and benefits. Written informed consent was obtained from all participants. Confidentiality and anonymity were strictly maintained, and participants had the right to withdraw at any stage without any repercussions. All data were securely stored in password-protected digital folders accessible only to the principal researcher.

Results and Findings

Participant Demographics

A total of 20 participants were included in the study:

- **Postgraduate students (n = 12)**:

    - Gender: 7 female, 5 male
    - Level of study: 8 master's, 4 doctoral
    - Fields of study: Environmental Science, Biotechnology, and Zoology
    - Age range: 24–38 years
    - Duration under supervision: Ranged from 6 months to over 2 years

- **Academic supervisors (n = 5)**:

    - Gender: 3 male, 2 female
    - Academic rank: 2 senior lecturers, 2 associate professors, 1 professor
    - Supervision experience: 3–15 years

- **Programme coordinators (n = 3)**:

    - Gender: 2 female, 1 male

    - Roles: Oversight of postgraduate registration, progress tracking, and supervisor allocation

Figure 1**(pie chart) illustrating student stress levels** reveals that a significant proportion of postgraduate students (over 80%) are experiencing moderate to severe levels of psychological stress as a result of poor supervision. Only a small portion (approximately 17%) reported mild stress. This distribution signals a major concern within the supervisory structure, where inconsistent or inadequate support contributes to heightened anxiety, frustration, and mental health deterioration. The results reflect a supervision environment that lacks stability, direction, and emotional safety for students, which could hinder academic progression and overall well-being.

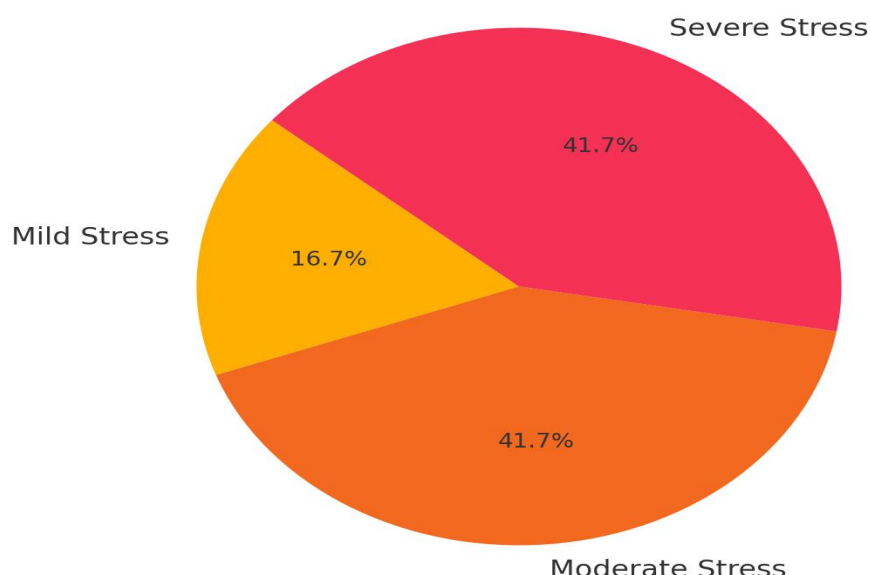## Postgraduate Student Stress Levels Due to Poor Supervision

Figure 1: The graph displays postgraduate students' reported stress levels, showing that most experienced moderate to severe stress due to poor supervision.

Figure 2: (bar chart) presenting supervisor-related stress factors shows that irregular feedback (reported by 10 students), unavailability of supervisors (9 students), and lack of research direction (8 students) are the leading contributors to student stress. These issues demonstrate a breakdown in the foundational elements of effective supervision, namely, consistent communication, timely guidance, and availability for academic mentorship. Unresolved conflict (6 reports) further exacerbates stress by contributing to a hostile or uncomfortable supervision environment, often leaving students without recourse or support to resolve issues constructively.

Figure 2: Highlights the most common supervision-related issues contributing to stress, such as irregular feedback and supervisor unavailability.

Figure 3 (bar) chart on student coping mechanisms indicates that peer support is the most utilized strategy (6 students), suggesting that students rely heavily on informal networks rather than institutional systems. Seeking direct dialogue with supervisors (5 students) shows initiative, although the effectiveness of this approach likely depends on the responsiveness of the supervisor. Alarmingly, coping through avoidance or withdrawal (4 students) and taking time off from studies (3 students) reveals that poor supervision is pushing students toward disengagement. Only 2 students reported accessing academic counselling, which may reflect either limited availability or poor promotion of these services within the university.
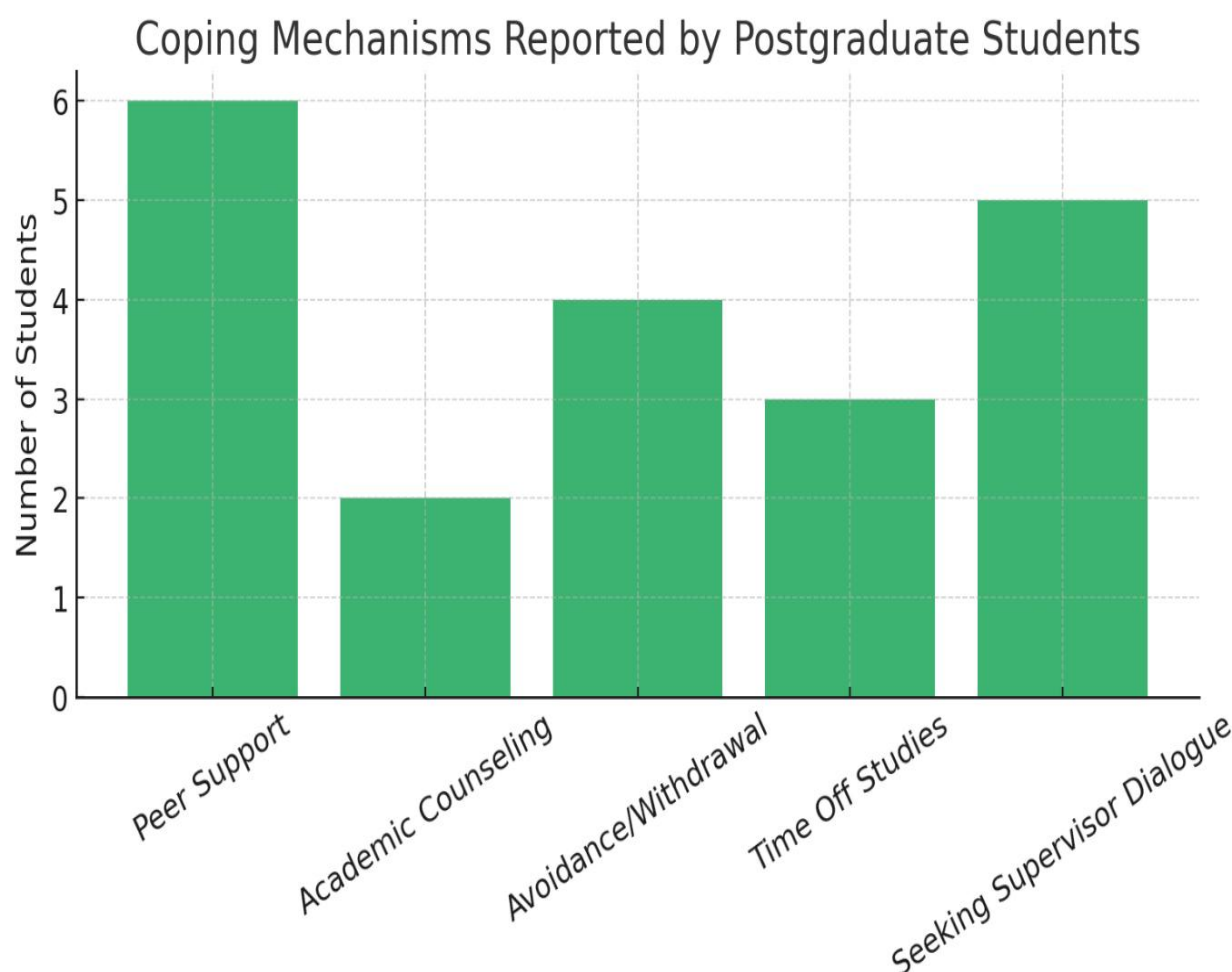
Figure 3: The graph shows Coping Mechanisms Reported by Postgraduate Students

Figure 4: The bar chart on supervisor-reported challenges provides insight into the constraints faced by those tasked with student mentorship. The most reported issue is a lack of training (5 supervisors), followed by high workload and unclear institutional guidelines (4 each). These findings suggest that supervisors are not fully equipped or supported to fulfil their roles effectively, contributing to inconsistent supervisory practices and student dissatisfaction. The mention of too many students per supervisor (3 reports) highlights a structural imbalance that compromises the quality and frequency of feedback, guidance, and emotional support provided to each postgraduate candidate.
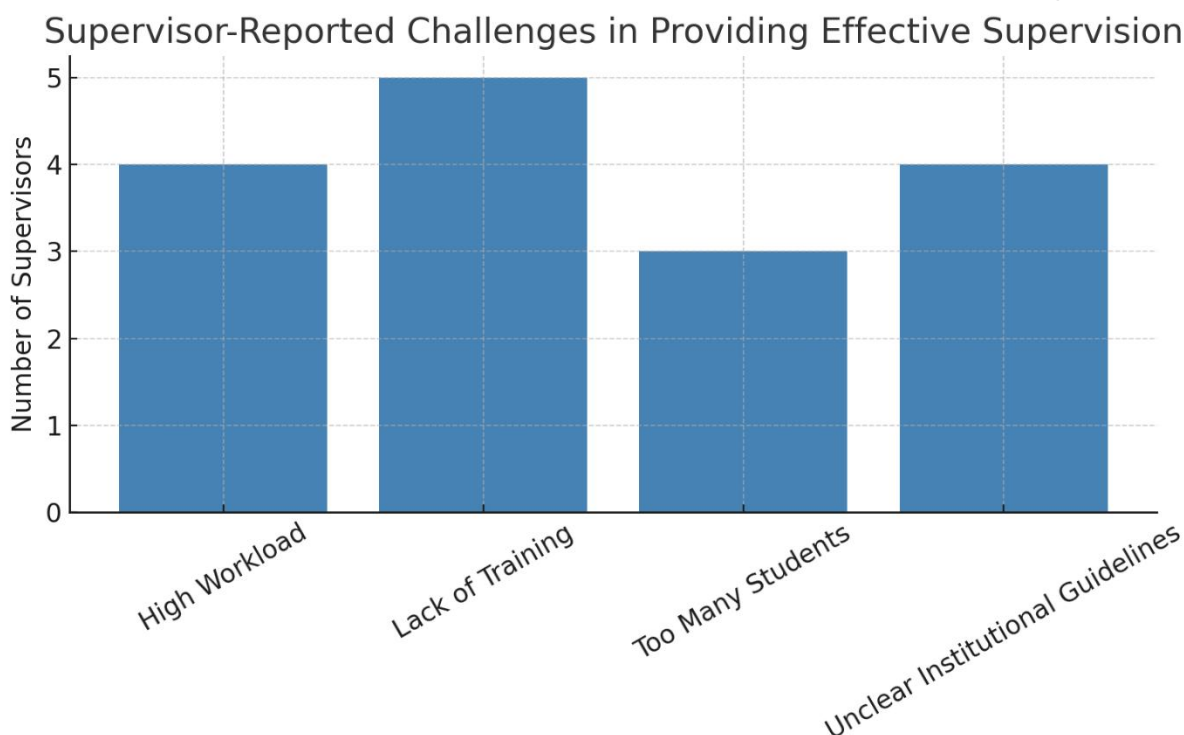
Figure 4: The graph illustrates Supervisor-Reported Challenges, highlights key barriers supervisors face, including lack of training, unclear guidelines, and high workloads, factors that directly affect the quality of supervision.

Discussion

The findings of this study reveal that poor postgraduate supervision significantly affects students' psychological well-being. The majority of students reported experiencing moderate to severe levels of emotional stress, including anxiety, frustration, and in some cases, withdrawal from academic activity. This aligns with the work of Manathunga (2007), who emphasized that supervision is not just a technical process but a deeply interpersonal relationship that, when mismanaged, can lead to emotional exhaustion. The lack of consistent communication, unavailability of supervisors, and unclear direction contribute to feelings of academic insecurity and helplessness among students. The study further revealed that institutional structures meant to support both students and supervisors are largely ineffective or absent. There were no functioning monitoring tools, accessible mental health services, or formalized grievance mechanisms in place. This lack of systemic support reflects a broader institutional failure to safeguard the mental health and academic journey of its postgraduate population. According to Backhouse (2009), institutions must not only define policies but also operationalize them through transparent systems, training,

and feedback loops. Without these mechanisms, policies remain symbolic rather than functional.

From the supervisors' perspective, high workloads, insufficient training, and unclear institutional guidelines emerged as major challenges. These findings are consistent with Mouton et al. (2015), who noted that supervisor preparedness is often overlooked in institutional planning. When supervisors are unsupported, they are more likely to disengage, resulting in neglectful or inconsistent supervision practices. This directly impacts the quality of student learning and research output.

The analysis of student coping mechanisms also raised concerns. While some students rely on peer support or attempt to resolve issues through direct communication with supervisors, others resort to avoidance, withdrawal, or taking time off from their studies. These strategies indicate a lack of formal, accessible interventions. Institutions must recognize that postgraduate students often suffer in silence and may not be equipped to advocate for themselves in environments where power dynamics are skewed in favour of supervisors. This study highlights a deeply fragmented supervision ecosystem characterized by emotional strain, structural

inefficiencies, and limited institutional accountability. It supports the argument that universities must move beyond policy documentation and invest in building responsive, student-centred postgraduate support systems.

Limitations

This study was limited to one university, which may not reflect the supervision dynamics of other institutions in South Africa or globally. The sample size, though adequate for a qualitative case study, may limit the diversity of perspectives captured. In addition, findings are based on self-reported data, which can be subject to recall bias or social desirability effects. Finally, the study did not include perspectives from institutional leadership or policymakers, which may have provided a broader systemic view.

Generalizability

While the findings are context-specific, the themes emerging, such as emotional distress due to supervision, inadequate institutional support, and lack of supervisor training, are common in many higher education institutions, particularly in the Global South. Therefore, the insights gained can inform supervision improvement strategies at other universities facing similar structural and resource challenges. However, careful adaptation to local institutional cultures and governance frameworks is recommended.

Conclusion

This study concludes that poor supervision has a detrimental psychological impact on postgraduate students. Despite formal policies being in place, there is a critical disconnect between policy and practice, leading to stress, academic disengagement, and emotional fatigue among students. Supervisors are also affected, citing institutional inefficiencies and lack of training as barriers to effective supervision. The absence of mental health services and monitoring structures exacerbates the issue, leaving students with limited recourse or support. The findings call for urgent reforms in supervision structures, training, and institutional responsiveness.

Recommendations

To address the challenges identified in this study, a multifaceted approach is necessary. Firstly, institutions should implement mandatory supervisor training that equips academic staff with skills in effective communication, mental health awareness, student engagement, and conflict resolution. This would ensure a consistent and supportive supervisory experience. Secondly, monitoring and evaluation systems must be established to centrally track student progress, the frequency and quality of feedback, and supervisor responsiveness, thus promoting accountability. In addition, there is an urgent need for student support services, particularly mental health and academic counseling, tailored to the unique pressures of postgraduate research. Furthermore, institutions should introduce formal grievance channels that are confidential and student-friendly, enabling safe reporting and mediation of supervision-related issues. Policy communication also plays a critical role; both students and supervisors should be inducted into institutional supervision frameworks through structured orientation workshops and user-friendly policy guides. Finally, supervisor load management must be prioritized to reduce supervision fatigue and ensure that each student receives adequate attention and guidance throughout their academic journey. Together, these interventions can significantly enhance the quality and effectiveness of postgraduate supervision.

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.

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Competing Interests

The author has 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 supporting the findings of this study are available upon reasonable request from the corresponding author. Due to ethical considerations and confidentiality agreements, individual participant data cannot be publicly shared. However, anonymized and aggregated data may be provided for academic or research purposes upon institutional approval.

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