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Original Article

# Supervisory overload and its impact on postgraduate student success: A cross-sectional case study of selected institutions.

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## Abstract

### Background

This study examines the extent of supervisory overload and its impact on the academic experiences and completion outcomes of postgraduate students across selected South African universities.

### Methods

A cross-sectional qualitative case study design was used. The study was conducted at two South African universities between February and April 2025. A purposive sample of 30 participants was selected: 20 master s-level postgraduate students (mean age: 28.4 years; 65% female) and 10 academic supervisors (mean age: 44.7 years; 60% male), all involved in research-based programs. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews exploring supervisory capacity, feedback practices, student satisfaction, and institutional support. Thematic analysis followed Braun and Clarke's framework, with triangulation across participant groups to ensure credibility.

### Results

Seventy percent of students reported inconsistent or delayed feedback, primarily due to supervisory overload linked to teaching, administrative duties, and excessive supervision assignments. Sixty percent of supervisors acknowledged supervising 10 to 15 students simultaneously, exceeding recommended levels. This overload diminished mentorship quality and led to feelings of neglect among students. Participants also reported reduced meeting frequency, delays in research approvals, and a lack of personalised academic engagement. Emotional stress and reduced motivation were frequently cited by students. Institutional mechanisms to monitor and manage supervisory loads were found to be weak or inconsistently enforced across faculties.

### Conclusion

Supervisory overload negatively affects postgraduate success by limiting academic engagement and delaying research progression. Without effective workload management systems, supervisors remain overstretched, and students experience heightened frustration and academic delays.

### Recommendations

Universities should adopt clear supervisory workload caps and implement structured support systems to ensure equitable supervision and improve postgraduate outcomes.

**Keywords:** Supervisory overload, Postgraduate supervision, Feedback delays, Student motivation, Supervisor capacity, Higher education, Academic progress, Research supervision

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## Introduction

Postgraduate education has become a strategic focus for many higher education institutions in South Africa, driven

by national imperatives to strengthen research capacity and contribute to socio-economic development (Council on Higher Education [CHE], 2020). Central to this effort is the role of academic supervision, which functions as



both a pedagogical and mentorship process that shapes the intellectual and emotional development of emerging scholars. Effective supervision facilitates timely research progress, critical engagement, and academic resilience. However, recent evidence suggests that as postgraduate enrolment expands, institutions are struggling to maintain adequate supervisory capacity (Backhouse, 2009; Mouton et al., 2015). Supervisory overload, where faculty members are assigned more students than they can realistically support, has emerged as a significant barrier to postgraduate success. This study investigates the extent and implications of supervisory overload at two South African universities: Mangosuthu University of Technology (MUT) and the University of South Africa (UNISA).

#### Background Information

The increasing demand for postgraduate qualifications in South Africa has placed considerable pressure on universities to enrol more students without a commensurate increase in supervisory staff (Mouton, 2011). As a result, many supervisors are burdened with large supervision loads while simultaneously managing teaching, research, and administrative responsibilities. This has led to a dilution of supervision quality, manifesting in delayed feedback, limited contact time, and insufficient academic support (Lessing & Schulze, 2002). These deficiencies not only compromise research output but also negatively affect students' emotional well-being and academic confidence (Manathunga, 2007). Research has shown that ineffective supervision is linked to high levels of postgraduate attrition, prolonged time-to-completion, and reduced publication productivity (Govender & Naidoo, 2020). While institutional supervision policies often prescribe ideal supervisor-student ratios, implementation remains uneven, and monitoring systems are frequently lacking. The need for evidence-based strategies to address supervisory overload is therefore urgent, particularly in under-resourced universities such as MUT and large-scale distance institutions like UNISA.

#### Research question

How does supervisory overload impact postgraduate student success in South African universities, particularly with feedback timeliness, academic motivation, and research progress?

#### Research objectives

- To assess the extent and nature of supervisory overload at MUT and UNISA.

- To explore the impact of supervisory overload on student motivation and emotional well-being.

#### Methodology

##### Study design

This study adopted a cross-sectional qualitative case study design to explore the impact of supervisory overload on postgraduate student success at two selected South African universities: Mangosuthu University of Technology (MUT) and the University of South Africa (UNISA). The design was appropriate for examining lived experiences and institutional dynamics at a single point in time. The qualitative case study approach enabled a contextualized, in-depth understanding of supervisory practices and their effects on postgraduate students.

##### Study setting

The study was conducted at Mangosuthu University of Technology (MUT), located in Umlazi Township, Durban, KwaZulu-Natal, and the University of South Africa (UNISA), a national distance-learning institution based in Pretoria. These two institutions were selected to provide insights into postgraduate supervision across both contact-based and distance education models. Data collection took place between February and April 2025.

##### Participants

The study involved a purposive sample of 30 participants, comprising 20 master's-level postgraduate students (10 from Mangosuthu University of Technology [MUT] and 10 from the University of South Africa [UNISA]) and 10 academic supervisors (5 from each institution).

##### Inclusion criteria for students

- Active enrolment in a research-based master's program.
- Minimum of six months of supervision experience.
- Willingness to participate and provide informed consent.

##### Exclusion criteria for students



- Students enrolled in coursework-only master's programs.
- Students with less than six months of supervision experience.
- Students currently on academic leave or suspension.

### **Inclusion criteria for supervisors**

- Active involvement in supervising postgraduate research students at MUT or UNISA.
- Minimum of one current supervision and at least one year of supervision experience.
- Willingness to participate and provide informed consent.

### **Exclusion criteria for supervisors**

- Supervisors are not currently engaged in active supervision of research students.
- Supervisors with less than one year of supervision experience.
- Supervisors on extended leave or sabbatical during the study period.
- Participants were identified through departmental referrals and postgraduate research offices using purposive sampling to ensure that selected individuals could directly reflect on supervision practices and experiences.

### **Bias**

To reduce bias, a standardized semi-structured interview guide was used across all interviews to ensure uniformity in question phrasing. All interviews were conducted by the same researcher to ensure consistency in tone and facilitation. Participants were guaranteed confidentiality and anonymity, which encouraged open sharing of potentially sensitive views about institutional practices. A reflexive journal was maintained by the researcher to acknowledge and manage any preconceptions during the interpretation of results. Triangulation across students' and supervisor responses enhanced the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings.

### **Study size**

The total number of participants was 30, consisting of 20 postgraduate students and 10 supervisors. This sample size was selected based on data saturation, which was reached when no new themes emerged from the interviews. Equal representation from both institutions

supported meaningful comparisons, and the sample was adequate for generating rich, thematic insights within a qualitative case study design.

### **Data Measurement / Sources**

Data were collected using semi-structured interviews, conducted face-to-face or via online platforms (e.g., MS Teams or Zoom), depending on participant availability and institutional guidelines. The interviews were guided by a structured protocol that explored themes such as supervisory workload, timeliness and quality of feedback, student satisfaction, motivation, and institutional support structures. All interviews were audio-recorded (with consent), transcribed verbatim, and supplemented by field notes taken during the sessions.

### **Statistical Analysis**

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis guided by Braun and Clarke's six-phase framework, which includes familiarization, initial coding, theme generation, theme review, theme definition, and reporting. Transcripts were reviewed manually and cross-checked for consistency. Common codes and emerging patterns were grouped into themes related to supervisory capacity, student experiences, and institutional practices. Findings were triangulated across both participant groups (students and supervisors) and institutions (MUT and UNISA) to enhance.

### **Ethical Consideration**

Ethical approval for this study was obtained from the University of South Africa Research Ethics Committee. The study was reviewed and approved on 15 January 2025. Participation in the study was fully voluntary. All participants received detailed information about the study's purpose, procedures, and their rights, including the right to withdraw at any time without penalty. Written informed consent was obtained from all participants before data collection. To ensure confidentiality, all personal identifiers were removed during data transcription and analysis, and findings are reported in an aggregated and anonymised manner. All electronic data were securely stored on password-protected devices, accessible only to the research team.

## **RESULTS**

### **Descriptive Characteristics of Participants**

The study engaged a total of 30 participants: 20 master s-level postgraduate students and 10 academic supervisors, drawn from two South African universities, Mangosuthu University of Technology (MUT) and the University of South Africa (UNISA).

Among the 20 postgraduate students:

**Mean age:** 28.4 years (range: 23–35 years)

**Gender:** 65% female (n=13), 35% male (n=7)

**Institution:** 10 from MUT, 10 from UNISA

**Enrolment status:** 100% active in research-based master's programs

**Duration under supervision:** Average of 11 months (range: 6–24 months)

Among the 10 academic supervisors:

**Mean age:** 44.7 years (range: 37–56 years)

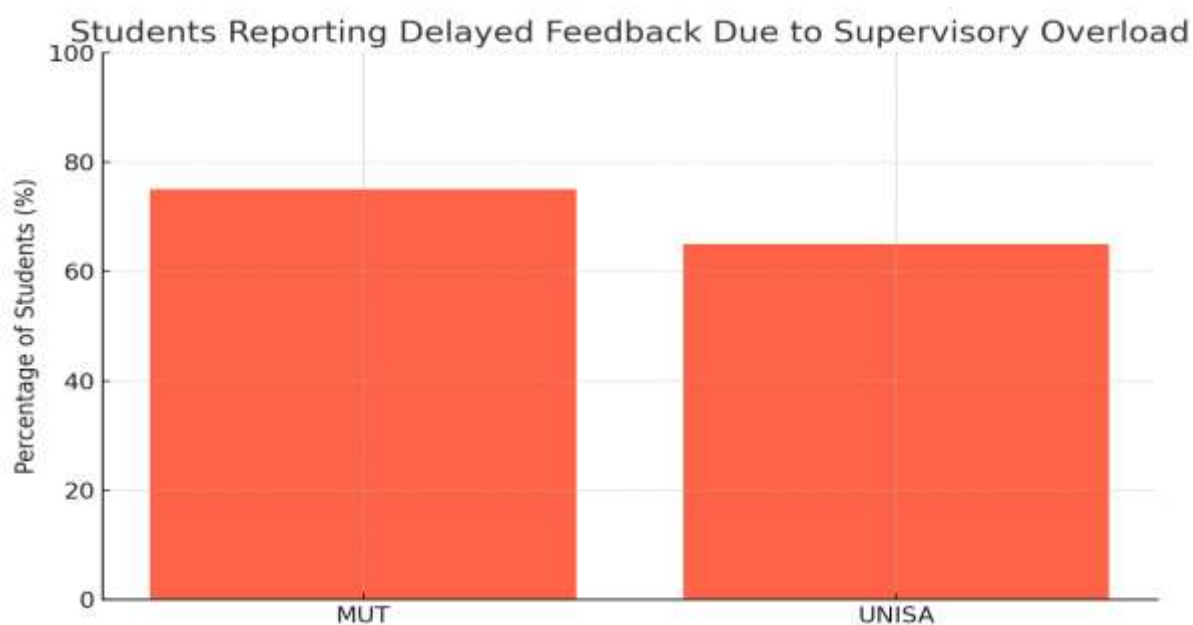
**Gender:** 60% male (n=6), 40% female (n=4)

**Institution:** 5 from MUT, 5 from UNISA

Years of supervision experience: Average of 6.8 years (range: 1–15 years)

**Current supervision load:** Average of 11.5 postgraduate students (range: 8–15)

This socio-demographic profile provides a balanced view of supervision practices across both universities and participant groups, ensuring representation from varying levels of academic experience and institutional contexts. Figure 1 highlights that 75% of students at MUT and 65% at UNISA reported experiencing delayed feedback from their supervisors. This indicates that supervisory overload is more pronounced at MUT, where a greater proportion of students are affected. Delayed feedback disrupts the research process, leading to prolonged completion times and student frustration. These findings suggest that as supervision loads increase, students receive less timely academic input, undermining both research momentum and student confidence. The variation between the institutions may reflect differing staff-to-student ratios, departmental management practices, or levels of institutional oversight.



**Figure 1: The graph highlights the delayed student reporting due to supervisory overload**

Figure 2 highlights that 6 supervisors at MUT and 5 at UNISA were found to be managing more than 10 postgraduate students each, exceeding what is typically considered a manageable caseload. This level of

supervisory burden makes it challenging for academic staff to provide meaningful, individualized guidance. The data indicate that both institutions are struggling to balance postgraduate enrolment with available

supervision capacity. The near-equal figures also suggest a systemic issue across institutions, where academic staffing policies and postgraduate admissions are

misaligned, leading to compromised supervision quality across faculties.



**Figure 2: The graph highlights that supervisors are overloaded.**

Figure 3 shows that 70% of students at MUT and 60% at UNISA reported low motivation as a direct result of inadequate supervision. These emotional and psychological consequences of poor supervision are alarming. At MUT, the higher percentage again points to a more acute problem, potentially due to fewer support

mechanisms or greater variability in supervision quality. When students lose motivation, it not only affects their academic progress but also impacts their mental well-being, increasing the likelihood of attrition or extended study periods. This data reinforces the link between supervisory overload and student disengagement.



**Figure 3: The graph shows that there is low student motivation**





## DISCUSSION

The results presented in Figure 1, illustrating the high percentage of students experiencing delayed feedback due to supervisory overload, clearly reflect similar trends observed in other studies on postgraduate supervision in South Africa. Mouton et al. (2015) and Cloete, Mouton, and Sheppard (2015) also reported that delayed feedback remains one of the most persistent challenges in South African postgraduate education, particularly in institutions with limited staff capacity. The finding that 75% of students at MUT and 65% at UNISA experienced feedback delays reinforces this national pattern and highlights the critical role of timely academic engagement in shaping student progression. As Trotter and Roberts (2019) argue, the absence of regular feedback leads to stalled research progress, uncertainty, and diminished academic confidence, all of which were echoed in the student interviews conducted in this study.

Figure 2, showing that 6 supervisors at MUT and 5 at UNISA were supervising more than 10 students each, provides direct evidence of unsustainable supervision loads. This aligns with previous research by Deuchar (2008) and Backhouse (2009), which emphasised that exceeding a manageable caseload not only reduces the quality of supervision but also increases the risk of academic burnout among staff. Mouton et al. (2015) recommend supervision ratios of 1:5 to ensure effective mentoring, which is being exceeded in the current study institutions. These inflated ratios support students' reports of delayed feedback and reduced personal interaction with supervisors.

Figure 3, which illustrates that 70% of MUT students and 60% of UNISA students reported low motivation linked to poor supervision experiences, mirrors findings from Botha and Muller (2020), who found that inconsistent supervision is a key factor in declining postgraduate morale. Similarly, a study by Lee (2008) demonstrated that emotional well-being and academic success in postgraduate research are deeply intertwined. The cumulative impact of delayed feedback and supervision overload observed here, contributing to diminished motivation, reinforces the notion that emotional consequences are not peripheral but central to the postgraduate experience, as noted in the works of Grant (2003) and McAlpine & McKinnon (2013). Taken together, Figures 1, 2, and 3 provide strong visual evidence that supervisory overload is a multi-dimensional challenge, influencing academic efficiency (via feedback

delays), institutional capacity (through unsustainable supervision ratios), and student well-being (through decreased motivation). The slightly higher figures observed at MUT further suggest that supervisory challenges may be especially acute in historically under-resourced institutions, a finding consistent with Mouton et al. (2015) and Cloete et al. (2015), who highlighted systemic inequalities in supervisory capacity across the sector. Addressing supervisory overload will require holistic reforms, targeting structural, academic, and emotional dimensions of postgraduate supervision. Institutions must balance staff workloads, enforce supervision caps, and implement professional development initiatives to ensure that supervisory practice supports, rather than hinders, postgraduate success.

## Generalizability

Although the study was limited to two institutions, the themes and challenges identified, such as supervisory overload, delayed feedback, and student demotivation, are commonly reported across many South African and global universities. Therefore, the findings are analytically generalizable to similar contexts, particularly within institutions experiencing rapid postgraduate expansion without proportional growth in academic staffing. However, further multi-institutional and longitudinal studies would be needed to establish broader empirical generalizations.

## Conclusion

This study concludes that supervisory overload is a systemic issue that negatively impacts postgraduate students' academic performance, engagement, and emotional well-being. Students at both MUT and UNISA reported high levels of dissatisfaction due to delayed feedback, poor availability of supervisors, and lack of personalized academic support. Supervisors, in turn, are overwhelmed by supervisory loads that exceed their capacity. These findings underscore the urgent need for institutional reforms that prioritize supervision quality, supervisor workload management, and student-centred academic support structures.

## Limitations

This study was limited by its sample size and institutional scope, as data were collected from only two universities, MUT and UNISA, and a small pool of participants (30 in total). As a result, the findings do not capture the full



diversity of postgraduate experiences across other South African institutions or academic disciplines. In addition, the reliance on self-reported data through interviews introduced subjectivity and response bias. Although supervisor perspectives were included, they were not explored as deeply as student experiences, which restricted the ability to present a fully balanced view of the structural and institutional constraints affecting postgraduate supervision.

### Recommendations

To address the challenges identified, universities must adopt a multi-pronged strategy that addresses both the supervisory workload and student support mechanisms. First, institutions should implement supervision workload caps to ensure that no academic is assigned more postgraduate students than they can reasonably manage. This will enable supervisors to provide more meaningful and timely engagement. Second, there is a need to increase supervisory capacity by recruiting and training more staff, particularly in faculties with growing postgraduate enrolments. Third, universities should establish centralized systems to monitor supervision allocations, track academic progress, and flag students at risk of falling behind. In addition, supervisor training programs should be institutionalized, focusing on mentoring skills, communication, and time management. Lastly, student support systems, including peer mentoring, academic writing assistance, and counseling services, must be strengthened and well-publicized to ensure that students do not suffer in silence when supervision fails.

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### 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 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.

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