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## LETTER FROM OUR CHAIRPERSON

It is with great honour and humility that I extend heartfelt greetings to the readers of the first 2020 issue of the Postgraduate Forum Newsletter. The PGFSA would like to extend a very warm welcome to new members who have joined this year. We are pleased to inform members that we are now registered with the Department of Social Development and with SARS as an NGO.

The PGFSA is deeply concerned about the impact of COVID-19 on the welfare and wellbeing of postgraduate students and their supervisors. Some of the academic challenges facing our postgraduate students currently are: navigating online learning; dealing with the consequences of research activities being paused, and the suspension of the professional engagement and networking opportunities critical to their success. In addition, some face uncertainty about funding; concern about food and housing, and lack of access to mental health services.

These issues as you know affect students differently, depending on their discipline, socioeconomic status, and location. Those

most seriously affected are international students, financially disadvantaged students and rural students in areas where there is no reliable internet connection.

The PGFSA is especially committed to addressing the impacts of COVID-19 on postgraduate students and postgraduate education. Consequently, we provide in this issue, a number of links and resources designed to guide research postgraduate and supervisor activity during this time.

In order to better support postgraduates and their supervisors, the PGFSA is working on providing additional online resources that may mitigate the negative impact of Covid-19. As the PGFSA continues work on addressing these pressing issues, we will keep you posted.

We thank you for your continued engagement with the PGFSA.

Sincerely,  
Mamadi Matlhako

## RECOGNISING EXCELLENCE IN RESEARCH SUPERVISION

Research supervisors play a critical role in the quality of postgraduate education and significantly influence

the postgraduate experience of candidates. In the last ten years, South African higher education institutions have increasingly focused attention on the skills development of research supervisors to ensure that postgraduate students receive effective supervision. Apart from supervisor development /training strategies aimed at improving the quality of supervision offered to students, many institutions formally acknowledge the achievements of excellent supervisors through annual supervision excellence awards. Evidence of these awards can be found on the websites of numerous American, Australian, British, Canadian and European universities. However, when it comes to the formal recognition of excellent research supervision South African universities seem to lag behind their international counterparts. In addition to institutional awards for exemplary supervision practices, both the Australian Council of Graduate Education (ACGE) and the UK Council of Graduate Education introduced national awards for exceptional research supervisors, in 2017 (ACGE) and 2019 (UKCGE) respectively. No evidence could be found of equivalent awards established in South Africa. Universities use a diverse range of criteria to identify

supervisors who provide exceptional research support and guidance to postgraduate students. Many institutions make use of a student-led process of identifying academics who demonstrate the qualities and capabilities associated with high quality supervision. Unfortunately, research candidates use subjective criteria when they evaluate the quality of the supervision they have received. Institutional or faculty based processes of identifying and evaluating excellent supervision practices sometimes lack consistent detailed criteria that complicate the identification of excellent supervisors across faculties and institutions.

The judging criteria of supervision excellence awards displayed on the websites of international universities include four common criteria indicating an outstanding record of:

- 1) postgraduate supervision practices, as evidenced in the number of students supervised to completion, the time to completion, prizes and awards won by students supervised, and student publications;
- 2) support for the development of discipline-specific and transferable skills of students as independent researchers and scholars;
- 3) mentoring of candidates and supporting their career

development through induction into the broader research community;

- 4) promoting and contributing to excellent supervisory practices in the wider faculty and/or institution.

As can be inferred from the abovementioned criteria, the definition many institutions use in the judging of applications for supervision excellence awards reflects a strong focus on managerial considerations, such as the number of students supervised to completion and the completion time of the students. Conceptually, excellence refers to exceptional performance, exceeding the minimum standards of competence. Therefore, it is important to distinguish between criteria for supervision competence (such as the successful and timely completion of students) and criteria for supervision excellence. Nulty, Kiley and Meyers (2009) propose an evidence-based framework for the determination of supervision excellence. Their framework includes an outline for the collection and use of evidence to demonstrate supervision excellence, as well a template that can be used by applicants of supervisory excellence awards to motivate for the exceptional quality of their supervisory practices. In a more recent article in

*Quality in Higher Education*, McCulloch et al., (2016) provide an overview of various perspectives on research supervision excellence and conclude that the increasing role complexity of research supervisors make it difficult to reach consensus on a set of comprehensive standards that fully demonstrate excellence in research supervision. Furthermore, current practices of appointing a supervision team, rather than individual supervisors, as well as drawing on a range of support structures within institutions that complement the input of supervisors, complicates the process of defining the criteria used to judge supervision awards.

McCulloch et al. (2016) emphasise the potential impact of supervision excellence awards on the prominence given to research supervision as one of the most important roles of academics. In South Africa, research supervisors play a pivotal role in the improvement of the quality of postgraduate education. The introduction of institutional awards for research supervision excellence is long overdue. Therefore, the Executive Committee of the Postgraduate Forum would like to initiate a conversation with member

institutions regarding contextually relevant criteria for supervision excellence awards and discuss how institutions can acknowledge excellent research supervision practices.

#### References:

Australian Council for Graduate Research (ACGR). (2019). ACGR Awards for Excellence. <https://www.acgr.edu.au/about/awards-for-excellence/>

McCulloch, A., Kumar, V., Van Schalkwyk, S. & Wisker, G. (2016). Excellence in doctoral supervision: An examination of authoritative sources across four countries in search of performance higher than competence. *Quality in Higher Education*, 22:1, p. 64 – 77. DOI: 10.1080/13538322.2016.1144904.

Nulty, D., Kiley, M. & Meyers, N. (2009). Promoting and recognising excellence in the supervision of research students: an evidence-based framework. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*. 34(6), pp, 693-707.

UKCGE (2019). Rewarding excellence in doctoral supervision. <http://www.ukcge.ac.uk/article/rewarding-excellence-doctoral-research-supervision-340.aspx>

Van den Berg, H.S. Manager: Transforming the Professoriate Mentoring Program, University of Free State

#### PGFSA WORKSHOP OCTOBER 2019

On 25 October 2019, the PGFSA held a full day workshop at the University of Fort Hare's new venue, the Phyllis Ntantala Collaborative Library in East London. The participants were HEI staff involved with the strategic leadership of postgraduate education, HoDs, programme directors, and postgraduate supervisors. The workshop, 'Thesis Development and the Framing of Research Issues as Threshold Concepts in Supervision', facilitated by Professor Vuyisile Nkonki, focused on helping emerging supervisors to acquire knowledge and skills relevant to the stages of the postgraduate research journey. Experience has shown that thesis development and the framing of research issues are some of the most problematic areas, affecting not only the quality of theses, but also supervision relationships. As a result, the workshop took a developmental approach, offering guidance on how supervisors can assist their supervisees with these troublesome aspects. Professor Nkonki's presentation was followed

by a panel discussion led by Dr Mamadi Matlhako and Professor Moya Keane.

### **ONLINE RESOURCES FOR SUPERVISORS AND POSTGRADUATE STUDENTS**

In support of the work that supervisors are doing to help their postgraduate students to maintain their momentum and stay motivated, we share the following online resources:

#### **Online research supervision, supporting students at a distance:**

The UK Council for Graduate Education (UKCGE) has recently published a guide to online supervision, which can be downloaded as a PDF [here](#).

The UKCGE has produced a document providing guidance on maintaining quality research during the Covid-19 crisis. Find it [here](#).

The UKCGE has also released a recorded webinar of a panel discussion addressing effective practices in supervising doctoral candidates at a distance. The recorded webinar, *Effective Practices in Supervising Doctoral Candidates at a Distance*, is available [here](#).

#### **Webinars and tips about remote delivery of postgraduate education:**

#### [Adapting postgraduate education for remote delivery 1](#)

A webinar panel of 6 members of the UK Council for Graduate Education including colleagues from Imperial College, London, Graduate School) 59 minutes.

#### [Adapting postgraduate education for remote delivery 2](#)

A Panel of 6 members of the UK Council for Graduate Education including colleagues from Imperial College, London, Graduate School) 65 minutes.

#### [COVID-19: 10 steps for transferring your course online](#) by the World Economic Forum.

#### **Writing resources for graduate students and researchers**

Supervising the writing of postgraduate students is an important task of research supervisors. The following blog provides a discussion of and links to ten great academic writing resources for postgraduate students. The ten resources include a comprehensive resource book on academic writing and publishing, as well as worksheets for writing a thesis and a research article. Dr Sarah Eaton, a faculty member and academic writing specialist in the Werklund School of Education, University of Calgary, Canada, write this blog. Find it [here](#).

#### [Writing your World: Finding yourself in the academic space](#)

A popular Coursera free online course offered by UCT.

#### **Online research ethics training:**

Students and supervisors can complete the following free online courses. Both training organisations are accredited with international institutions (WHO and NIH) and issue a certificate to participants after completion of the course. The courses provide options for researchers focussing on health-related research ethics and for social and behavioural researchers.

The Society of Behavioral Medicine offers free National Institutes of Health (NIH) training and certification for good clinical practice in social and behavioural research. Register [here](#).

The Global Health Network (affiliated with the WHO) have developed ethics training courses in collaboration with Oxford University and other highly regarded universities. They offer various ethics training courses, for instance, a course on visual methodologies in research.

Their *Good Practice Certificate* training for ethics reviewers is being updated, but will be available again soon. They issue certificates after

completion free of charge. For more information about their training, click [here](#).

### Resources on the personal efficacy of postgraduate students:

Postgraduate students often deal with critical feedback and have to establish effective personal habits to stay motivated and achieve their objectives. These resources provide guidelines for improved personal efficacy:

- [Dealing with critical feedback](#) by Sheila Heen, TEDx.
- [The best way to accept constructive criticism](#) by Brian Tracey.
- [Major revisions: Dealing with negative feedback](#) by Annabelle Workman.
- [Best ways to deal with negative feedback](#), by InterVarsity, USA.
- [Formative feedback \(for supervisors\)](#)  
This resource gives supervisors direction and advice on developing their postgraduates' writing.
- [Getting the feedback you need \(for students\)](#)  
This resource gives postgraduate students proactive and constructive pointers.
- [The Examination Process: assessment of written theses or dissertations](#)

This resource takes one through the steps of the examination process. It stimulates supervisors and postgraduate students to think about their tasks and roles in the examinations process.

### Dealing with fear of failure:

- [Don't fear failure, unlock your inner creativity, and say yes](#) by Don Dodge at TEDx Athens 19 Minutes.
- [Failure is part of success](#) by Eduardo Zanatta at TEDx BYU.
- [Dealing with PhD impostor syndrome](#) by James Hayton.

### Dealing with anxiety and stress during COVID-19:

- [Helpful Tips To Manage Your Stress and Anxiety During This Time](#) by the South African Depression and Anxiety Group.

### UPCOMING ONLINE COURSES FOR POSTGRADUATES

- Stellenbosch University's (SU) African Doctoral Academy is taking their upcoming Winter School this July online. Applications close 1 July 2020. Read [more](#).
- SU's new Africa Science Data Academy recently launched their first online courses running 20 - 24 July 2020:

- [Introduction to statistics with R](#),
- [Introduction to data science](#)

Read more [here](#).

### COURSES FOR SUPERVISORS

The University of Johannesburg's Postgraduate School and the Education Faculty, offer a **Postgraduate Diploma in Research Supervision** and seven Senate-approved **Short Learning Programmes (SLPs)** on research supervision.

The SLPs and PG Dip modules are offered in blended mode spread over a semester, supplemented by contact sessions (currently via digital remote teaching technology). The two SLPs being offered in the second semester of 2020 are 'Current and Emerging Issues in Postgraduate Supervision' and 'Supervision of Quantitative Research Design'.

The SLPS that will be offered in 2021 are: Supervision of Qualitative Research Design; Research Ethics in Postgraduate Supervision; Academic Literacies in Research Supervision; Postgraduate Research Supervision. Applications for 2021 close on 30 October 2020.

For more information contact Tebogo Mokgokong [supervisioncourse@uj.ac.za](mailto:supervisioncourse@uj.ac.za).