

Announcing the third biennial conference on RESEARCH into POSTGRADUATE SUPERVISION

**Hosted by the Centre for Higher and Adult Education, Stellenbosch
University,
South Africa: 18 – 21 April 2011**

Conference topic: 'Promoting a culture of postgraduate scholarship'

Background

In 2007 the Centre for Higher and Adult Education (CHAE) at Stellenbosch University held its first international conference in Africa on the topic: 'Postgraduate supervision – the state of the art and the artists'. It attracted 160 participants from nine countries. The agreed success of this event was due to the quality of the papers that were presented, the value of the internationalist perspectives that were exchanged and the applicability of the research that was contained in the papers.

The next conference was announced and took place from 27 – 30 April 2009 at the Spier wine estate outside of Stellenbosch. This four-day postgraduate supervision conference addressed the topic of 'Research and Practice in Postgraduate Supervision', attracting 198 participants from 11 countries.

Given the international and multidisciplinary composition of the second conference, the issues addressed also represented constant talking-points outside the formal settings of keynote or paper presentations. It was apparent that the majority of papers were based on research that was institutionally-located, practice-based and rigorous.

The international arena is where the academy exchanges scholarly ideas and practices that transfer easily between higher education institutions. That was the experience of many participants at the 2009 event.

The third conference: April 2011

The CHAE's next international conference on research into postgraduate supervision will take place from 18 – 21 April 2011 at a venue close to Stellenbosch – probably Spier Estate again – but the organisers are currently also looking into other options. Nelda Rousseau and her team from Consultus will again be organising the conference, so those who were present in 2009 will know that they can look forward to excellent and friendly service.

Important dates

First call for abstracts: 15 May 2010

Abstracts to be submitted: 15 August 2010

Feedback to proposers of abstracts of papers: 15 September 2010

Final submission of abstracts of papers: 15 October 2010

Final submission for full articles (for those who wish to contribute papers to a special issue of the *South African Journal of Higher Education* on 'The Scholarship of Postgraduate Supervision'): 1 February 2011

Conference topic

The conference topic that was chosen from eleven entries by a panel in 2009 is: 'Promoting a culture of postgraduate scholarship'.

Lee Andresen (2000: 141) has described the notion of scholarship by pointing to at least three characteristics:

- Critical reflectivity as a sensibility, a habit of mind
- Scrutiny by peers, which is what publication permits, as a *modus operandi*
- Inquiry, as a motive or drive

As regards supervisory practice, there seems to be ample evidence to suggest that supervisors frequently base their approach on their own, often unexamined, experiences as research students (Bartlett & Mercer 2001:77). What is important, however, is not simply reflecting on past practice, but reflecting critically in the light of research evidence and theoretical frameworks derived from a knowledge of the literature on supervision. The importance of supervisors developing a repertoire of knowledge and understanding about different aspects of supervisory practice cannot be too strongly emphasised. If supervisors are to be effective, it is necessary for them to be capable of carrying on a critical conversation about supervision itself with colleagues and with students. This conversation will also need to encompass a critical appraisal of supervisors' interpersonal and communication skills. It requires from supervisors to be open to gaining critical feedback on their practices and their performance as coaches and mentors.

Much of the literature (Heath 2002:52; Taylor 2002:65; Bak 2004:76; Mapesela and Wilkinson 2005:1241) recognises postgraduate supervision as a practice involving complex academic and interpersonal skills. These skills include guiding postgraduate students towards sound proposal preparation, methodological choices, documenting and publishing their research, maintaining both supportive and professional relationships, as well as reflecting on the research process. Considering supervision, thoughtfully using reflection strategies such as challenging dominant ideas or redefining a problem, requires higher order-thinking and deep approaches to learning. These requirements pose challenges to both students and supervisors, also asking questions of whether supervision implies that research training should be the sole focus of postgraduate supervision.

Obviously, this topic lends itself to an array of possibilities and the programme team has decided on the following five themes related to the topic for proposed contributions:

- A Enhancing the scholarship of postgraduate supervision – the lense on supervisors
- B Enhancing the scholarship of postgraduate supervision – the graduate experience

- C The scholarship of assessing and evaluating postgraduate theses and dissertations
- D Diverse postgraduate candidates – a challenge to the scholarship of postgraduate supervision
- E Support roles – promoting the scholarship of postgraduate supervision

Papers on completed research or research in progress within any of these broad themes are most welcome. Please consult the brief outline on each theme below.

Theme A: Enhancing the scholarship of postgraduate supervision – supervisors in the lense

This theme addresses any aspect of supervisor involvement in or concern regarding the idea of a scholarship of supervision. For example, it may involve research questions about links between teaching and research (the ‘nexus’ question), research into the formation of communities of scholarly practice, research on and examples of reflective practice, innovative supervision of and research into reviewing and revitalising supervisory practices, researching the links between supervision and the scholarship of engagement, research into supervision and the scholarship of integration, and many more. Priority will be given to scholarly papers that emphasize the role of supervisors in preparing master’s and doctoral candidates for what Angela Brew (2006:180) calls “uncertain, supercomplex, unpredictable” futures.

Theme B: Enhancing the scholarship of postgraduate supervision – graduates’ experiences of being supervised

Theme B points to research on the supervision experiences of master’s and doctoral candidates / graduates. Reported projects can include lived experiences of supervisory practices or case studies on how students were or are being instrumental in enhancing scholarly postgraduate supervision practices. Postgraduate students have reported challenges in their studies, and authors (e.g. Seagram, Gould and Pyke 1998; Dinham and Scott 1999; Knowles 1999; Hatton in Wisker and Sutcliffe 1999) have indicated the relationship between supervisors and candidates as a key factor in postgraduate study success. Also, relationships among doctoral candidates’ background characteristics and dissertation progress have been scrutinised (Faghigi, Rakow and Ethington 1999), indicating the impact of research preparation, research environments, student-supervisor relationships and self-efficacy on study success and time to graduate. Other studies (Conrad 1994; Lussier 1995; Seagram, Gould and Pyke 1998) point to female doctoral students reportedly most affected by interpersonal factors, whereas for males academic factors seem to be more prominent. Postgraduates also indicate multiple responsibilities as an important factor that impacts on study progress and success (Strauss 2001). Overall, evidence points to four major challenges involving postgraduate study experiences: relationships with supervisors, the importance of support structures, study isolation and confusion over resources (Johnston and Broda 1996; Aspland, Edwards and O’Leary 1999).

Theme C: The scholarship of assessing and evaluating postgraduate theses and dissertations

A theme that has received continuous attention is the assessment and evaluation of student learning. As it is generally assumed that assessment and feedback has an overwhelming influence on postgraduate students' study and research behaviour and performance, it appears that assessment at the postgraduate level begs for more attention – both in terms of the effectiveness and quality of formative feedback and the evaluation of postgraduate outcomes such as written theses and dissertations as well as oral examinations. Paper proposals in this theme might address all relevant forms of research and excellent practice on assessment and evaluation at the master's or doctoral level. Any proposed contribution that does justice to theory, empirical evidence and practical experience or combinations thereof will be considered.

Theme D: Diverse postgraduate candidates – a challenge to the scholarship of supervision

Postgraduate candidates differ from one another in important ways, including international students and those studying at a distance, students engaged in professional or creative practice, and different kinds of learners. Thorough assessments of students' needs, especially in the early stages of studies, are essential. Supervisors need to know what knowledge and skills students bring to their projects. Supervisors need to know what knowledge and skills students bring to their projects, areas in which they need special assistance, and how they are likely to approach their research. The latter is determined by a complex mixture of factors, both personal (motives for doing research, preferred learning style, confidence, past experiences, ideological perspective) and social (cultural background and gender). Research on these issues and the challenges they bring to supervision can be addressed in this theme.

Theme E: Support roles – promoting the scholarship of postgraduate supervision

Several key institutional support systems and services are involved in effective and scholarly postgraduate supervision. Language editors, library staff and writing advisors come to mind. Without this support available, the quality of postgraduate work in general might be seriously compromised. The complex process of academic writing, for instance, represents a case in time. It is suggested that rhetorical, social, behavioural and psychological elements are involved in academic writing and that these elements can be combined in writing models (Murray and Moore 2006). From an editing of academic texts perspective one might highlight the deficiencies of postgraduate students in respect of research writing, bibliographic citation and compilation, as well as delineating the role and responsibility of the supervisor in the writing process. The ethics of editorial intervention, particularly in the case of theses and dissertations, seems an equally important issue. Finally, technicalities of research writing and improving the writing skills of ill-prepared students, which are much needed in present-day supervision, pose another challenge. An interesting array of paper proposals appears to be possible under this theme.

References

Andresen L. 2000. A useable, transdisciplinary conception of scholarship. *Higher Education Research*

- and Development* 19(2): 137 – 153.
- Aspland, T., H. Edwards and J. O’Leary. 1999. Tracking new directions in the evaluation of postgraduate supervision. *Innovative Higher Education*, 24 (2): 134-154.
- Bak, N. 2004. *Completing your thesis. A practical guide*. Pretoria: Van Schaik.
- Bartlett, A. and G. Mercer. 2001. *Postgraduate research supervision: Transforming relations*. New York: Peter Lang Publishing.
- Brew A. 2006. *Research and teaching: beyond the divide*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Conrad, L. 1994. Gender and postgraduate supervision. In *Quality in Postgraduate Supervision*, eds. O. Zuber-Skerritt and Y. Ryan. London: Kogan Page.
- Dinham, S. and C. Scott. 1999. *The doctorate: Talking about the degree*. Nepean: University of Western Sydney.
- Faghigi, F., E. A. Rakow and C. Ethington. 1999. *A study of factors related to dissertation progress among doctoral candidates: Focus on students’ research efficacy as a result of their research training and experiences*. ERIC Web Portal
[<http://eric.ed.gov/ERICWebPortal/custom>]. Retrieved on 2 August 2007.
- Heath, T. 2002. A quantitative analysis of PhD students’ views of supervision. *Higher Education Research and Development*, 21 (1): 41-61.
- Johnston, S. and J. Broda. 1996. Supporting educational researchers for the future. *Educational Review*, 48(1): 269-281.
- Knowles, S. 1999. Feedback on writing in postgraduate supervision: echoes in response – context, continuity and resonance. In *Supervision of postgraduate research in education. Review of Australian Research in Education*, 5, eds. A. Holbrook and S. Johnston. Coldstream: Australian Association for Research in Education.
- Lussier, T. 1995. *Doctoral students at the University of Manitoba: factors affecting completion rates and time to degree by gender and field of study*. Unpublished master’s study. Winnipeg: University of Manitoba.
- Mapesela, M. L. E. and A. C. Wilkinson. 2005. The pains and gains of supervising postgraduate students from a distance: the case of six students from Lesotho. *South African Journal for Higher Education*, 19 (special issue): 1238-1254.
- Murray R and S Moore. 2006. *The handbook of academic writing. A fresh approach*. Maidenhead: Open University Press.
- Seagram, B., J. Gould and S. Pyke 1998. An investigation of gender and other variables on time to completion of doctoral degrees. *Research in Higher Education*, 39 (3): 319-335.
- Strauss, J. 2001. *Inquiry into the capacity of the public universities to meet Australia’s higher education needs*. Canberra: Submission from the Australian Federation of University Women.
- Taylor, J. 2002. Changes in teaching and learning in the period to 2005: the case of postgraduate education in the UK. *Journal of Higher Education*, 24(1): 53-73.
- Wisker, G. and N. Sutcliffe (Eds). 1999. *Good practice in postgraduate supervision*. Birmingham: SEDA.