

SUPERVISORS WORKSHOP



PART 1

Introduction

The Consortium for Advanced Research Training in Africa

Formed in 2008, the Consortium for Advanced Research Training in Africa (CARTA) is led jointly by the African Population and Health Research Center (APHRC), Kenya, and the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits), South Africa. This collaboration supports the development of a vibrant African academy able to lead world-class multidisciplinary research that impacts positively on public and population health. The consortium enhances the capacity of African universities to create sustainable multidisciplinary research hubs, by supporting junior faculty members to undertake their doctoral training locally, and to become internationally recognized research leaders. Ultimately, CARTA strengthens university-wide systems to support research, teaching, doctoral and postdoctoral training.

The Supervisors Workshop

The need for doctoral training as a means of fast-tracking the development of Africa cannot be over-emphasized. Compared to the rest of the world, Africa lags behind other continents in global knowledge production, including in the number of people who hold doctorate degrees (Fonn et al., 2018). Faced with the world's highest disease burden, the continent needs original thinkers to solve numerous challenges, including communicable and non-communicable diseases, poverty, poor infrastructure and security. A specific and related challenge is high attrition and low rate of timely completion of the doctoral programmes in many African universities (Tetey, 2010; Wamala et al., 2012; Olubusoye & Olusoji, 2013).

Effective and efficient supervision plays an important role in the experience and outcomes of doctoral research (Mothiba et al., 2019). Appropriate supervision ensures that candidates receive the education and training that will establish them as career researchers who are, in turn, equipped to train the next generation of researchers. High-quality supervision is essential for the timely completion of high-quality doctoral research projects. Supervisors play multiple roles, guiding doctoral students to identify feasible research topics, formulate appropriate questions, develop feasible study protocols, provide oversight of the research process and complete their projects on time. Good supervision is important for launching candidates into academia or research institutes (Kiley, 2011).

Crucially, supervision is a team venture. Effective collaboration between multiple supervisors is essential to effective completion of doctoral degrees. Achieving synergy within supervisory teams is increasingly important in the modern academic world as multidisciplinary studies become more common, which in turn requires the support of supervisors from diverse specialties and disciplinary working cultures. Collaboration of this kind facilitates peer-to-peer learning between supervisors. Many institutions team less experienced supervisors together with more experienced colleagues as a way to maximise institutional memory.

Unfortunately, training of supervisors for doctoral candidates is inadequate in many institutions and qualification requirements for supervisors are inconsistent. Many supervisors of PhD candidates learnt the process of supervision on the job, but this is often not enough to guarantee quality. Formal and professional development education and dedicated peer-to-peer learning experiences are essential for academics to achieve their full potential as PhD supervisors. CARTA recommends that such experiences be repeated throughout one's academic career to maintain the quality of supervision.

CARTA has developed a program to support the supervision process, including training of the supervisors. The program is based on experiences from the first ten years of the CARTA program, including a comprehensive two weeks' workshop for the CARTA supervisors (Manderson et al 2017, Igumbor et al 2021).

This training curriculum contains thirteen sessions covering the entire process of the supervision of PhD research from recruitment and selection of doctoral candidates, integrity in supervision, supervision process, to detachment and post-training mentoring of successful PhD graduates. Each session has a brief overview which presents a synopsis of the session. The session objectives specify the task to be accomplished and what trainees are expected to learn from it. While these formal a priori frameworks are essential for underpinning and managing each session, it is equally important to keep them flexible and participatory and to also maximize informal interactions between facilitators and participants through relaxed, enjoyable social formats.

References

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Wamala R, Ocaya B and Oonyu JC (2012). Extended candidature and non-completion of a PhD at Makerere University, Uganda. *Contemporary Issues in Education Research* 5 (3): 175–183

What this workshop offers

The overall objective of this workshop is to ensure that the next generation of PhD supervisors in Africa are well prepared for the supervisory process, based on the experiences of the CARTA program.

Outcomes

By the end of the workshop, PhD supervisors should be able to:

1. Apply best practices in the recruitment and selection of PhD candidates.
2. Prioritise measures to ensure scientific integrity in their supervisees' work.
3. Apply the most appropriate PhD supervision approach with their supervisees.
4. Appreciate the role of academic institutions in the supervision process.
5. Critically examine the practical logistics of PhD supervision.
6. Create a nurturing relationship with their supervisees.

A participatory approach

The CARTA approach is problem-posing and participatory. Each session presents situations and poses problems. Participants work with each other and with inputs from the trainer to find solutions. Problem-posing education bases itself on creativity and stimulates true reflection and action upon reality (Freire, 2020). It is different from the transfer or transmission of knowledge or facts to the passive learner, where the trainer is seen as possessing all essential information, and trainees as “empty vessels” needing to be filled with knowledge. The choice of participatory method is deliberate: there is a coherence between the values we promote and the way we go about sharing them. From the beginning, we recognize all participants as thinking, creative people with the capacity for action. Each person is a contributor, bringing different perceptions based on their own experiences. As facilitator, make a conscious effort to use participatory methods to enable participants to grow in awareness.

Facilitators' attributes

Some people assume that facilitating a workshop will be an easy process, until they try doing it. The participatory method for the Supervisors workshop requires facilitators to do guide the workshop, appreciating that the participants are in charge. The facilitator's responsibility is to create an enabling environment that allows participants to learn from each other, come to an understanding, and pool their collective wisdom in resolving issues. We recommend these attributes for facilitators.

An unbiased perspective

Participants should feel comfortable that their opinions are welcomed and encouraged. An unbiased facilitator creates a neutral zone where alternative points of view can be shared and debated in a respectful manner. This is key to driving a constructive, productive discussion.

Sensitivity to individuals

To create and maintain an atmosphere of trust and respect requires you to be aware of how people are responding to the topics under discussion and to the opinions and reactions of others. Most people will not articulate their discomfort, hurt feelings, or even anger; instead, they silently withdraw from the discussion and often from the group. Sensing how people are feeling and understanding how to respond to a particular situation is a critical skill of facilitation.

Sensitivity to the group

In any group, the whole is greater than the sum of the parts, and group 'chemistry' generally reflects shared feelings: eagerness, restlessness, anger, boredom, enthusiasm, suspiciousness, or even silliness. Perceiving and responding to the group's dynamic is essential to skilful facilitation.

Ability to listen

One way the facilitator learns to sense the feelings of individuals is by listening carefully, noting both the explicit meaning of words and their tone and implicit meaning. A good facilitator practices 'active listening'. She or he may repeat, sum up, or respond directly to what a speaker says to ensure that the speaker's meaning is correctly understood by the group.

Tact

Sometimes, a facilitator must say difficult things for the good of the group. The ability to do so carefully and diplomatically is critical. Examples include: a group discussion dominated by one person or a group of silent participants. The facilitator must find a gentle, tactful way to engage the team so everyone can participate and get the most out of the session. Often, a participant asks a question, and then rambles on, eventually answering his own question. A capable facilitator knows how to diffuse these awkward moments and maintain a productive atmosphere.

Commitment to collaboratio

Collaborative learning can occasionally seem frustrating and inefficient. At these moments, every facilitator feels tempted to take on the familiar role of the traditional teacher and to lead, rather than facilitate. However, genuine conviction about the empowering value of cooperative learning will help the facilitator resist a dominating role. Likewise, a good facilitator is willing to share facilitation with others in the group. The goal is always to conduct the best and most effective discussion. To that end, a good facilitator knows how to adjust his or her role accordingly.

A sense of timing

The facilitator needs to develop a sixth sense for time: when to bring a discussion to a close, when to change the topic, when to cut off someone who has talked too long, when to let the discussion run over the allotted time, and when to let the silence continue a little longer.

Resourcefulness and creativity

Keep an open mind, as each group of participants presents different dynamics. Despite a well-planned agenda, discussions may not unfold as anticipated. A good facilitator should be able to think on his or her feet. This may mean changing direction in mid-stream, using other creative approaches to engage the group, or welcoming ideas from the group on how to shift the agenda. Good facilitators always have tricks up their sleeves that will help a group move forward while still keeping an eye on the overall objective of the meeting.

A sense of humour

As in most human endeavours, even the most serious, a sense of humour enhances the experience for everyone. A good facilitator appreciates life's ironies and is able to laugh at themselves and share the laughter of others.

In summary, a good facilitator works as an ally to ensure that meetings, seminars, planning sessions, and workshops deliver the intended and desired outcomes. It is very difficult to facilitate a meeting yourself when you also want to participate in it as an equal. But not all facilitators are alike. Identify facilitators who have the personality and aptitude to understand the goals, objectives and expected outcomes of the curriculum.

Preparation

Facilitation team

In plenty of time, identify and engage the co-facilitators and the different contributors for the Supervisors workshop. Hold planning meetings until the team members are on the same page. To prepare, advise facilitators to read and re-read the curriculum until they feel comfortable and confident that they know what is expected for all the workshop sessions.

Venue

Identify a location that will allow participants to move around easily, for example for role-plays. Make sure there are enough break-away rooms for small-group activities, and adequate wall space for poster tours and other elements of the workshop methodology.

Participants

Two weeks before the workshop, send detailed information to participants on workshop logistics, the participatory workshop method, what is expected of them as participants, and the reading lists (see Part III).

Prepare and share an online pre-workshop survey link to get the participants' profiles. Ask:

- What are your expectations of this workshop?
- What are you willing to contribute to ensure a successful workshop?

You can then analyse the information and adapt the workshop program, as much as possible, to accommodate the needs that participants express.