




## Reimagining Postgraduate Supervision: Fostering Inclusivity and Support for Students at-risk in Open and Distance Learning Environments

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### ABSTRACT

This qualitative study involves six lecturers who have supervised students with disabilities. Participants were purposively selected and interviewed telephonically using semi-structured interviews. The study adopted a thematic data analysis approach to identify patterns in supervision experiences. The paper problematises a deficit approach that is dominantly adopted to identify and design programmes and manage students-at-risk. The analysis of the supervision of postgraduate students-at-risk is framed within the Humanising pedagogy which advances the accommodation of students' unique needs to develop their capacities for success. This theoretical framework is not adopted much in the open and distance learning context at postgraduate level and the use of supervisors' insights adds new knowledge to the field that is dominated by students' experiences. The study established that students do not communicate their disabilities to supervisors timely for early intervention, supervisors are responsive to students' challenges which include difficulties in academic writing and limited access to research resources and technologies, and supervisors experience systemic challenges in acquiring assistive technology for students with disabilities. This study proposes a humanised supervision model that advances disability inclusivity.

### KEYWORDS

Humanising pedagogy; open and distance e-learning; postgraduate students-at-risk; students with disabilities; Postgraduate supervision.

## INTRODUCTION

The concept 'at-risk' students refers to those who are incompetently equipped to perform at expected academic standards and have high chances of not completing a degree on time or at all (Quinnan, 1997). Generally, literature on students-at-risk like that of Wolff *et al.* (2014) & Mayet (2016) is concentrated on undergraduate students and focuses mainly on factors that make them less suitable for the successful completion of higher education. The general view pictured in the available literature is that students need to be supported to reduce the risk of dropping out of university, with deficits mainly located in students' failure to meet the required standards. Mayet (2016) focused on students at a comprehensive university in South Africa and suggests that the articulation gap between high school and higher education makes it difficult for students to cope with the demands of university. The articulation gap is often perpetuated by underdeveloped academic literacies, poor conceptual development, and bad socialisation skills that hinder learning. Hence, a deficit approach is applied to identify students who are considered at-risk.

Within South Africa, the term 'at-risk' emerged during the apartheid era (in the 1980s) when black students and other historically excluded populations were allowed to be admitted at White Universities (Boughey & Niven, 2012; Thesen, 2013). A typical 'at-risk' student was "Black, working class, rural, and spoke English as an additional language" (Thesen, 2013: 13). These students were presumed as needing extra academic support for them to succeed since their capabilities were doubted (Boughey & Niven, 2012). To date, many students-at-risk can be identified among those who still experience the effects of marginalisation advanced by the exclusive apartheid regime that offered inferior education to black students. The appalling learning conditions that include inadequate learning resources, inadequately qualified teachers, and teaching and learning in students' mother tongue constitute some of the inequalities of the apartheid education system that disadvantage(d) black students. The effects of apartheid are pervasive at the outcomes level too as demonstrated by the South African Department of Higher Education and Technology (DHET) statistics that historically disadvantaged students have poor university throughput and completion rates — 75.5% for white students versus 64.8% for black students (DHET, 2019:19). This suggests that black students had racially defined risk and still experience the effects of segregation.

The views expressed in the extant literature show that the term 'at-risk' is understood relationally, mainly against a norm, history, location, and rooted in economical, biological, and other social factors that impede meaningful academic progression and success. Nonetheless, not much focus is given to pedagogical factors that purport risk to students at a postgraduate level, nor is there much on the risk associated with disability at that level of study.

### **Conceptualising Risk at the Postgraduate Level**

At a postgraduate level, students 'at-risk' include marginalised students whose first language is not English, novice writers, working adults whose experiential voice can be suppressed by standardised academic writing requirements (Quinnan, 1997; Thesen, 2013), part-time doctoral

students (Watts, 2008), students with disabilities (Garner & Forbes, 2015), and distance learners (Lekheto, 2022). Postgraduate students are scientific knowledge producers and sharers; whose work/research is recognised predominantly in textual form. Postgraduate writing involves expressing views, either by the author or responses to others (Tran *et al.*, 2022). Hence, risk is embedded in weighing on what or not to write, ensuring that one's voice is not erased, and maneuvering the path between knowledge production, dissemination, and reception (Thesen, 2013). Thus, academic writing competence is important and forms the basis for assessing risk. The role of historical and other situational factors cannot be underestimated in shaping the standard of writing as argued by Boughey (2005) that the context in which a text is written shapes meanings around what is being written on and how.

English language appears as the basis for determining risk at the postgraduate level since research outputs are expected to be in English in most countries. However, most students face some challenges with the language. Manyike (2017) on supervising students at a South African Open and Distance Learning institution highlighted that many students encounter difficulties in expressing views in English, and they not only struggle with content, but with learning to use technology that aid the writing process. Manyike (2017) further argues that most students do not write in ways that make supervisors understand their work, and neither do they understand the in-text feedback from supervisors. Relatedly, Lekhetho (2022) identified poor English language proficiency as one of the challenges that affect postgraduate students' success. In what can be regarded more as a contributing than a determining factor, English as a second or additional second language is attributed to academic writing challenges that engender plagiarism, and limited discursal and linguistic abilities (Brown 2008; Pecorari & Petrić, 2014). Consequently, students who plagiarise assume the role of knowledge reproducers than producers (Boughey, 2005). Even though risk can be perpetuated by many factors such as disability, forced displacement, and prior schooling and undergraduate education, writing competence is predominantly focused on.

Students with disabilities can face the challenge of having a disability and to develop as an academic. They often work extra hard to have standards at par with students without disabilities (Olkin, 2009). Those with physical disabilities can experience fatigue, pain, and weakness that can negatively affect the rate at which one works (Úbeda-Colomer *et al.*, 2019). Those with learning disabilities usually read and write slowly (Khasawneh, 2021), forcing them to work for longer hours to meet deadlines. Notably, supervisors need to create a positive atmosphere for a student with an invisible disability to disclose it since such disability attracts stigma that is related to one's cognitive ability.

Students with disabilities require assistive technology to reduce the risk of under-performance. Blind students require books on tape or in Braille. Those with low vision can benefit from screen adaptations that enlarge the font of the reading material. While access to assistive technology and devices improves academic engagement (McNicholl *et al.*, 2021), various factors impact accessibility. Most assistive technology is expensive and remains

inaccessible to many in developing countries (Eide & Øderud, 2009). According to the World Health Organization (2023), only one in ten people in need of assistive technology has access to it. These statistics underscore the additional challenges faced by those with disabilities.

While most debates situate risk in a person, there are some that locate it in pedagogy, particularly supervision practices. For example, Heeralal (2015) explored ways of improving supervision in an Open and Distance e-Learning (ODEL) environment and maintains that the lack of interaction, particularly face-to-face contact between a student and a supervisor affects degree completion times. Relevantly, Gasa and Gumbo (2021) suggest a blended approach (face-to-face and virtual) interaction to augment distance postgraduate supervision in open and distance learning. This paper posits that in cases of ODEL institutions where most students access learning content remotely, this blended approach could be facilitated through effective and innovative use of technological affordances like mobile applications, electronic mail, virtual meetings, and many other remote platforms.

### **Supervising Postgraduate Students: Roles and Approaches**

Specific to education, supervision, is regarded as a form of specialist teaching and learning (Kumar & Stracke, 2007) that involves an expert guide (supervisor) and the guided (student) who engages in a dynamic research process to produce a dissertation or a thesis and other subsequent research publications. This working relationship is referred to as the traditional supervision approach (McCallin & Nayar, 2012) and assumes an internship model. Different supervisory role analogues associate a supervisor with being a manager, guide, mentor, and facilitator (Wisker *et al.*, 2003:388; Manyike, 2017:9). This stance is suggestive of a vertical relationship between a supervisor and a student with the supervisors having a leading role.

A more relational and supportive role of a supervisor is suggested by Bitzer and Albertyn (2011:881) who characterise the role of a supervisor with management, social, intellectual, and emotional aspects to fulfill the educative (promoting “skills, abilities, understanding, personal awareness, and academic awareness”), managerial (“supporting, appraising and assessing a supervisee’s work against the norms and standards of the institution”), and supportive and creative functions (encouraging supervisees to acknowledge and explore how personal issues and their own life events affect their work”). Therefore, supervision comprises intellectual and pastoral elements (Watts, 2010: 336), advisory, quality control, support, nurturing, and other social roles (Mouton, 2001) cited in De Beer & Mason (2009; Rodwell & Nueman, 2008). Within this thinking, a supervisor is expected to be innovative, empathetic, a creative problem solver, resource-oriented, work-focused, decisive, dependable, technical expert, and a facilitator in ensuring meaningful progress in the research process (Vilkinas, 1998). Supervisors are further expected to integrate research management and support systems while ensuring that they understand a student’s background, identify challenges, and manage any tensions that arise from social differences (Wisker *et al.*, 2003). Such understandings reflect the role of a supervisor as multi-dimensional and attentive to students’ needs. The body of literature further suggests that the supervision process is complex, and dynamic. It can involve challenges that require a

collaborative effort between a supervisor and a student to have a successful postgraduate experience.

### THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Humanising pedagogy is adopted as a relevant framework to analyse the postgraduate supervision of students-at-risk in this study. A literal meaning of humanisation is a process of making pedagogy, in this case, supervision, suitable and accommodating of students' needs. The humanising pedagogy framework follows vulnerability and thus requires an approach that accounts for students' needs, cultivates capacities, and make students more capable and productive (Freire, 2020).

This paper concurs with Huerta's (2011) assertion that marginalised, in this case, students with disabilities differ in how they learn, not in their ability to do so. With suitable support, students with disabilities perform well academically (Kim & Lee, 2016) to align with the concept of humanising pedagogy that involves developing students' capacities for success. The supervision approach adopted in this study thus positions a human into pedagogy.

The position maintained in this paper is that supervisors should be fully aware of and present for students' needs, implying the need to understand students' social contexts. In Freire's *Pedagogy of Hope* (2021), the need for pedagogy to consider matters of context, language, and the everyday experiences of students is stressed arguing that a pedagogy that is connected to students' lived experiences balances power between the lecturer and students with a more student-focused approach that focuses on students' strengths and weaknesses. A humanistic approach to supervision is said to reduce student burnout, attrition and improve their mental health and self-efficacy (Cloete *et al.*, 2015).

### METHODOLOGY

This qualitative study examines postgraduate supervision that involves students with disabilities at an Open and Distance Learning university. The main research question is, 'What are the supervisors' experiences of working with postgraduate students at-risk?' The study's objectives are; to identify the challenges that supervisors face in supervising students with disabilities; to examine the support mechanisms supervisors adopt in working with students with disabilities, and to examine the level of inclusivity in supervising students with disabilities.

Six participants were purposively selected and individually interviewed using audio recorded telephonic semi-structured interviews on Microsoft Teams. The sample consists of four females and two males with an average year of experience of 13 years. The selection criteria were that the participant should be currently employed by the university under study and have supervised or are supervising students with disabilities. Selection was not limited to gender, race, position, work experience, college, or regional centre – note, this university has nine regions plus the main campus. Two participants were identified from students' dissertations and theses that are available at the university's repository. They were identified after reading students' positionality

in the research they conducted. Four participants were recruited through referrals by other participants after enquiring about their willingness to be involved in the study.

The study was granted the ethical clearance from the university's relevant ethics review committee; reference number 2023/02/08/90501586/25/AM. All the participants volunteered to take part in the study and gave a written informed consent. Only one participant gave a verbal consent due to technological challenges in signing a soft copy of the consent form. Participants' real names are not revealed to protect their identities following a confidentiality clause in the consent form.

Data were analysed thematically (Clarke et al., 2015) and presented descriptively, with excerpts from the interviews to represent participants' first-hand narrations. Codes were manually generated by systematically colour-coding parts of the interviews with similar meanings. Data were then categorised into themes relevant to the focus of the paper, highlighting the challenges that supervisors identify among students and ways they support them. The themes were interpreted within the existing knowledge and theoretical framework.

## FINDINGS

Various supervision practices, challenges and support systems were unpacked. The study established some communication challenges where students with disabilities do not disclose their disabilities on time for early intervention. However, the supervisors are sensitive to students' health conditions and offer different support systems that assist in reducing risk. The study further noted from the supervisors that they struggle to devise mechanisms that address students' needs, and they experience systemic challenges in acquiring assistive technology for students. Among the challenges that the supervisors observed among students are those related to academic writing and access to research resources and assistive technology. These are further unpacked and supported with extracts from the interviews.

### **Communication Challenges**

Communication challenges were identified where students with invisible disabilities do not timely disclose their disabilities to supervisors. The supervisors reported that students disclosed disabilities after confronting them about repeated poorly presented work, and after suggested interventions such as academic writing workshops fail to yield positive outcomes. In addition, the supervisors observed that students do not openly communicate the challenges that are associated with their inherent health conditions, leaving supervisors to make assumptions on the causes of poor performance. This is demonstrated in the following interview excerpts:

I had my own suspicions, and it took months for them to be confirmed. What happened is, this student brings a chapter, you read it and hey, you, you keep wondering how on earth can someone write like this. It was difficult to understand what was wrong. Then one day I just asked her, "Have you ever been assessed for dyslexia?" That is when she opened up. After about what? two and so years. (*Female Supervisor 5*)

I remember struggling to bring up the issue. I had this difficulty, right. I am seeing that there is something disability-related, but how was I supposed to bring it up? I wasn't seeing it physically. Do you know that I had to consult google (laughs) to get some ideas on how to approach the student? (*Male Supervisor 1*)

Regardless of the challenges above, all the study participants reported that they acknowledge diversity and students' different learning needs.

### **Writing Difficulties**

The main challenge observed by supervisors concerns the presentation of work by students, which often exhibits underdeveloped academic writing skills. Issues such as poor sentence construction, grammatical errors, and sentences that lack clarity were noted as prevalent. The supervisors also highlighted that students frequently submit work that lacks coherence. The findings reveal that severe challenges are represented among students with brain aneurysm and dyslexia. The following quote demonstrates supervisors' comments about students' work:

Sometimes I would just put the chapter aside and said, "Let's talk!" ... I would then call him and have a meeting where we break down the chapter and ask him to submit a sub-section of the chapter at a time. It actually worked well because you could then start to see progress. (*Female Supervisor 6*)

I found that calling the student to the office and brainstorming their ideas helps in clarifying and overcoming those writing challenges. I suggested that the student records their thoughts to help them arrange their arguments. (*Female Supervisor 5*)

The sentiments expressed in the quote above represent what all the supervisors noted in the work that was submitted by students with invisible disabilities. They all expressed concern over the delays in degree completion due to poor academic writing skills. In the case of students with deafness, Matjila (2023) and Skrebneva (2015) attribute this to the fact this group of students might 'lack fluency' in writing due to the limited interactions with others hence not generating adequate vocabulary and argument construction.

A dearth of studies comparing the performance of postgraduate students with and without disabilities makes it challenging to exclusively attribute this struggle to a disability. Nonetheless, these challenges align with the findings of Collins (2015), who asserts that while academic writing difficulties are widespread among students, those with disabilities face a dual disadvantage. These students, often non-native English speakers, encounter complexities with academic writing and additional hurdles posed by disabilities.

### **Limited Access to Research Resources and Technologies**

The supervisors noted with concern that students with disabilities have limited access to assistive technology and platforms that support research and innovation. Three supervisors who supervised students with sight challenges complained that not all research reading material is in formats that meet students' unique needs. This problem is common in some seminal works that cannot be accessed in audible formats. This creates accessibility and usability barriers hence delaying postgraduate studies amongst students with visual impairments. Supervisors

further pointed out that the conversion of reading material to Braille often takes long, causing unnecessary delays and frustrations among students and supervisors. One supervisor reported:

I had a blind student who almost gave up at the proposal stage. She could not handle the pressure of doing a PhD and an added struggle of getting literature in braille. (*Male Supervisor 3*)

Lack of digital access to some seminal works made it very difficult for my blind student to develop his literature review. I remember I had to keep requesting the librarian to convert the materials to audio formats which delayed the students' work. (*Female Supervisor 5*)

In addition, this study's findings reveal that supervisors who worked with students with visual challenges complained about research settings that are marginalising when conducting fieldwork or lab experiments. For example, students with low vision complained about exclusive science laboratories and equipment that are not designed with students' diverse needs in mind. They struggle to read the small prints on tools, causing strain in their eyes and exposing students to accidents through misreading. The supervisors noted that there are very few adaptive technologies in the laboratories to improve the participation of students with low or no vision in research.

Further concerns were raised by supervisors that students with hearing challenges do not benefit much from virtual research seminars, workshops, and conferences. They noted that these workshops are often conducted without Sign Language Interpreters or accurate automatic captions for online seminars. The automatic captions are sometimes inaccurate where they do not recognise African accents, leaving deaf students excluded. One of the supervisors reported that:

My student could not attend conferences because there were no [Sign Language] interpreters ... she also cannot sign to people who do not understand sign language. (*Female Supervisor 2*)

When there was a research methodology workshop which my student needed the most, she could not attend because there was no sign language interpreter for the two days. She could participate because Sign language was not catered for. (*Female Supervisor 4*)

In a doctoral study on students who are deaf and hard of hearing (SDHH) in open distance e-learning contexts by Matjila (2023), it is noted that SDHH experience communication challenges due to the fact that most academics are sign language illiterate. In addition, most universities do not have suitable resources for addressing the needs of students with hearing impairments. This is observed by Aljedaan *et al.* (2022) as the main challenge of online learning and it affects knowledge dissemination.

### **Supervisory Support**

All the supervisors expressed compassion and acknowledged responsibility towards addressing students' challenges. They collaborate with relevant university departments to ensure access to Braille reading material. To address students' writing challenges, supervisors adopt different strategies that promote progress. One supervisor mentioned that she actively assists students



by guiding them in designing a chapter outline that includes vignettes of the main discussion points before attempting to write a full chapter.

However, some experience difficulties in developing measures that effectively meet students' needs. This was highlighted by supervisors who worked with students with disabilities of a neurological nature as noted in the following quote:

It was a challenge. [pause] In fact a big one. Generally, most students do not write well but this one was a bit of an extreme case. I had to ask [name removed] to intervene because it got to a point where he could not tolerate my comments. You see, it's one thing not knowing what to write, and another not knowing how to write. (*Male Supervisor 1*)

### **Systemic Challenges**

Systemic difficulties in securing effective assistive devices and software that fully meet the needs of students were reported by the supervisors. They hinted that the procurement process is complicated by a lack of funds for assistive technology, restrictive processing requirements, and bureaucracy in the procurement system. This forces many students to manage the research process with basic arrangements that offer minimal support and cause some delays in the research process.

## **DISCUSSION**

A reflection on the supervision experiences reveals that postgraduate students-at-risk or students with disabilities in particular are negatively affected by both intrinsic and extrinsic factors. Students are affected by research facilities, resources, tools, and platforms that are inattentive to disability needs on top of the difficulties posed by inherent health conditions that affect proper functionality. Disability, as something that is both inherent and circumambient can affect research writing by creating an imbalance between impairments, discipline-based challenges and an unaccommodating environment. Meaningful research writing necessitates both intrinsic abilities and external resources that facilitate effective knowledge production, consumption, and dissemination. This becomes challenging when students face functional limitations due to a disability, encounter communication and geographical barriers, or lack the necessary support to enhance the research process. Addressing these challenges requires a coordinated and holistic approach that involve a student, the supervisor, relevant institutional support services departments and the university management. Thus, supervisors should work with students to identify possible academic stumbling blocks and formulate proper solutions/interventions at any stage of the research process through supervisory dialogues and proper action as encouraged by Wisker *et al.* (2003). This implies that supervisors should be creative instead of sticking to pre-fixed supervision practices.

One of the key benefits of acknowledging and understanding students' diverse needs is that it allows supervisors to tailor their supervision approaches to meet the needs of students better. Supervisors should not remove themselves from students' challenges as recommended by Rodwell and Nueman (2008) and supported by the principles of the humanising pedagogy

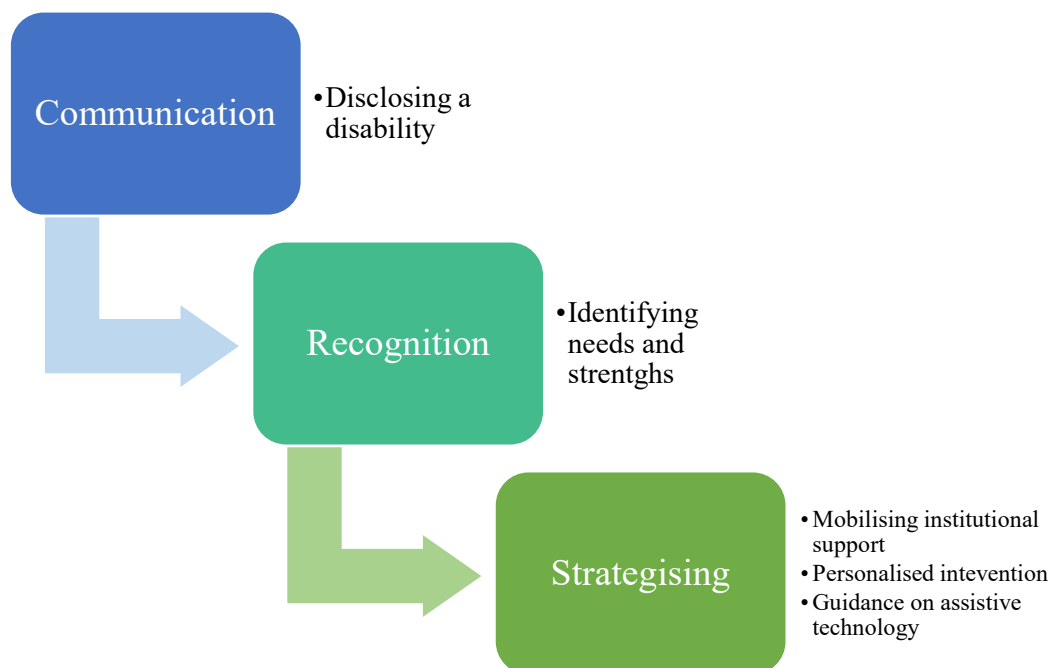
framework. Supervisors who are culturally sensitive are more likely to be empathetic and have better social interactions with students. This can improve or be improved by communication between the student and the supervisor, leading to more open discussions about expectations and sensitive aspects that affect the research process (Masek, 2017).

However, students can easily access support if they disclose a disability to the university and, where possible, state the nature of support they require (Grimes, Southgate, Scevak & Buchanan, 2020). This study, and others, including Mapuranga and Nyenya (2014) confirm that invisible disabilities are not easily disclosed, particularly in the open and distance learning setting. There can be technical and behavioural challenges that affect online communication that is dominant in distance learning as supported in Rasoo (2022). Students may struggle to form a relationship with a supervisor whom they have no physical social interaction with and may not be comfortable to disclose a disability and their learning needs. Open discussions with the supervisors can assist in identifying students' challenges and orienting supervision strategies accordingly, particularly that some students with disabilities find it difficult to understand their needs (Marshak, Van Wieren, Ferrell, Swiss & Dugan, 2010).

### Towards an Inclusive Postgraduate Supervision Strategy

#### Figure 1.

*Disability Inclusive Supervision Model* (authors' illustration)



Given the challenges postgraduate students face, an inclusive supervision model that accounts for personal, social, and institutional factors is appropriate. The proposed model is anchored on the fact that students with disabilities struggle to communicate disability related challenges, and encounter difficulties in accessing suitable support. This paper acknowledges that students with disabilities encounter some difficulties in their postgraduate journey that require a more considerate approach to their needs in line with personalised learning sentiments. Key to this humanised supervision model is the communication of challenges, recognition and

understanding of the challenges faced, and strategising interventions that suit the needs of students as captured in the figure above;

### **Recommendations**

The paper makes the following recommendations while maintaining and supporting Huerta's (2011) position that students with disabilities differ in how they learn, not in their ability to learn: (i) supervisors should also not detach themselves from students' diverse problems that affect academic progress. Rather, students should have access to the necessary support and conditions of supervision that expand their potential. By this, the fundamental tenets of humanising pedagogy are fulfilled. (ii) Open and Distance eLearning institutions should develop specific reasonable policies and accommodations for postgraduate students to ensure that they complete in record time, hence guaranteeing return-on-investment for the student, the university, and the country at large. Most importantly, university libraries must-have resources that cater for the research needs of students with disabilities. (iii) Laboratories should be fully accessible for all. Further to that, there should be dedicated online postgraduate support spaces for students with disabilities. This dedicated online postgraduate support space should also capacitate academics on the intricacies of supervising postgraduate students with disabilities.

### **Limitations of the study**

Students-at-risk in this study are limited to those with disability, yet there are different factors that engender risk at a postgraduate level. However, identifying other forms of risk such as working adults, distance learners, and non-native English speakers was difficult since the research setting (Open and Distance eLearning institution in South Africa) involves most students who fall under that category.

### **CONCLUSION**

Postgraduate students with disabilities have needs that require a collaborative attempt of students, supervisors, and the relevant university support structures to eliminate barriers to successful research writing process. A meaningful postgraduate experience requires functional communication, an understanding of students' challenges, and strategising intervention to match needs. The proposed model, which incorporates functional and support aspects of supervision, is important in addressing students' disability-related needs and the general learning challenges that affect the successful completion of a degree. By accounting for students' needs and placing human experiences in the learning process, the paper fulfills the fundamental principles of the Humanising pedagogy framework that stresses the need to support students and expand their capacities. Therefore, this paper recommends supervision practices that are student-centered, flexible, and inclusive.

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