

UBUNTU-INFORMED MENTORSHIP MODEL: AFRICA PERSPECTIVES

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Abstract

This qualitative case study investigates the application of Ubuntu philosophy in doctoral supervision within South African universities, aiming to transform hierarchical supervisory dynamics into relational, dignity-affirming partnerships. The study examines how Ubuntu principles are reflected in daily supervisory practices and identifies organisational and interpersonal barriers that hinder their adoption. Adopting an interpretivist paradigm, the study employs a multiple-case design involving five supervisor-candidate groups from diverse disciplines, with data collected through semi-structured interviews and analysed thematically. Findings reveal four key themes: the clash between hierarchical and relational paradigms, mutual accountability as a foundation for trust, holistic support that acknowledges the whole person, and the dialogic co-construction of knowledge. While Ubuntu-aligned practices fostered collaborative dynamics and epistemic reciprocity, institutional barriers such as excessive workloads and neoliberal academic norms often undermined these efforts. The study contributes to a decolonial supervision model that integrates relational foundations, dialogic processes, and institutional enablers, challenging Eurocentric mentorship frameworks. By centring African epistemologies, this research advances the decolonisation of doctoral pedagogy and offers practical strategies for equitable, contextually responsive mentorship in higher education. The proposed model not only addresses power asymmetries but also redefines supervision as a mutually accountable, holistic partnership, thereby enriching global discourses on transformative academic mentorship.

Keywords: *Ubuntu-informed mentorship model, supervisor-candidate relationships, gatekeeper supervision model.*

1. Introduction

South African doctoral supervision remains deeply shaped by Western legacies. Despite post-apartheid reforms, hierarchical dynamics continue to marginalise indigenous knowledge systems and reinforce power asymmetries (Costa, 2018). Neoliberal academic cultures compound this problem by prioritising productivity over relational mentorship, leaving little room for alternative epistemologies (Pule et al., 2025). Ubuntu philosophy, expressed through the maxim "umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu" (a person is a person through other persons), offers a transformative response (Mosala, 2025). Its emphasis on interconnectedness, mutual respect, and collective well-being challenges dominant supervision models. This study asks two questions: (1) How do Ubuntu principles manifest in daily supervisory practices? (2) What organisational and interpersonal barriers hinder their adoption?

The significance of this study lies in bridging the gap between policy and practice. South African higher education policies advocate for transformation and inclusivity (Gasa & Gumbo, 2021), yet structural barriers persist. Ubuntu-informed supervision, with its emphasis on relational accountability and holistic support, presents a viable alternative to transactional mentorship models.

2. Literature review

Decolonial scholarship increasingly challenges traditional doctoral supervision models rooted in hierarchical master-apprentice dynamics (Gasa & Gumbo, 2021). These models perpetuate epistemic violence by sidelining indigenous knowledge. Ubuntu, with its principles of mutual care, dialogic engagement, and holistic personhood, offers a compelling counterpoint (Matheka et al., 2024). The tension between neoliberal academic demands and relational mentorship is well-documented. The "McDonaldization" of higher education, characterised by efficiency metrics and standardised outputs, undermines the time-intensive nature of Ubuntu-aligned supervision (Pule et al., 2025). Supervisors face institutional pressure to prioritise throughput rates, leading to what this study calls "academic triage." Yet

Ubuntu's relational ethos provides a framework to resist such commodification by centring trust and shared accountability (Mavuru et al., 2024).

Ubuntu's application across disciplines, from leadership to health promotion, demonstrates its versatility as a pedagogical tool (Shabalala et al., 2025; Nakanjako et al., 2014). Cultural humility, which Ubuntu inherently promotes, emphasises ongoing self-reflection and power-sharing rather than static competence (Yende, 2021). Studies confirm that candidates supervised through collaborative decision-making report lower burnout rates (Capurchande & Almlöv, 2024), a finding that resonates with Ubuntu's emphasis on seeing the whole person. Despite this potential, systemic barriers persist. South African universities lack institutional mechanisms to recognise pastoral care as legitimate academic labour (Herman, 2021). Western knowledge production paradigms dominate reward systems (Leshem & Bitzer, 2024). This study advances the discourse by grounding Ubuntu principles in lived supervisory experience, identifying both enablers and obstacles in practice. Mavuru et al. (2024) further demonstrate that supervisory enablers, such as relational trust and shared goal-setting, directly shape candidate progression, whereas structural constraints, such as unmanageable supervisee loads, undermine even the most committed supervisors. Mosala (2025) argues that Ubuntu-aligned inclusion actively counters the isolation experienced by marginalised doctoral students, building communities of belonging that sustain academic perseverance. In Kenyan universities, Matheka et al. (2024) found that a doctoral candidate's sense of belonging, cultivated through relational supervision, predicts both timely completion and scholarly confidence. Nakanjako et al. (2014) corroborate this at Makerere University, where structured mentoring practices grounded in communal accountability reduced candidate attrition. Taken together, these studies establish a compelling African-grounded evidence base for Ubuntu as a practical and rigorous supervision framework.

3. Methods

This study adopts an interpretivist paradigm, foregrounding subjective meaning-making within socio-cultural contexts. A qualitative multiple-case design examines five supervisor-candidate dyads from three South African public universities spanning education, social sciences, and STEM. Cases were purposively selected to ensure disciplinary breadth and documented relational tensions.

Participants included five doctoral candidates (ST1-ST5; three female, two male; aged 28-45) and their primary supervisors (SP1-SP5; three professors, two senior lecturers with 10 or more years of experience). Selection criteria required candidates in their second or third year of study, supervisors with at least five completed doctoral supervisions, and dyads with prior evidence of relational tensions.

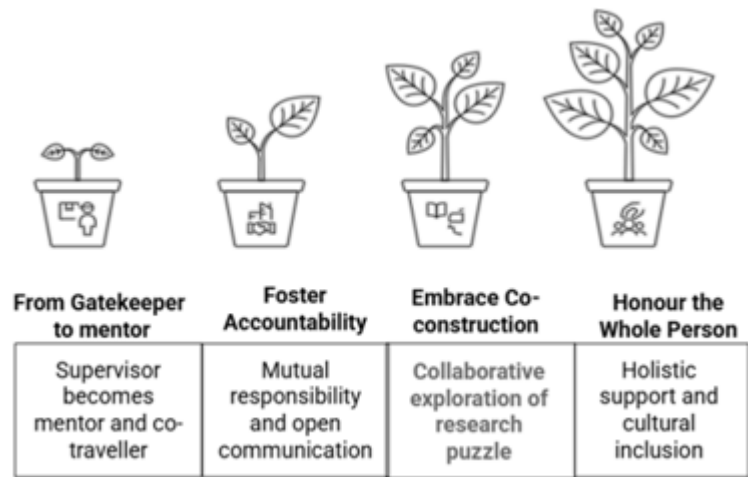
Data were collected through semi-structured interviews of 2 hours each, conducted virtually, recorded with consent, and transcribed verbatim. Interview questions explored relational dynamics, Ubuntu principles in practice, and institutional barriers to collaborative mentorship. Two dyads participated in joint interviews to observe interactional patterns.

Thematic analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2021) six-phase framework, using NVivo 12 for open coding. Member checks with three participants and peer debriefing addressed researcher bias. Ethical approval was obtained from all participating institutions. Pseudonyms protect participant identities throughout. Figure 1 presents the four themes that emerged from this analysis.

4. Findings: Thematic analysis - emerged themes

Four themes emerged from the thematic analysis, depicting the transition from hierarchical to relational doctoral supervision within an Ubuntu-informed mentorship framework. These themes did not emerge in isolation. They intersected, reinforced one another, and at times created productive tensions that pushed participants to articulate what Ubuntu-informed supervision actually looks like in daily practice. Each theme captures a dimension of relational supervision that Western academic models tend to overlook or undervalue. Gasa and Gumbo (2021) note that supervisory support, when structured around mutual obligation rather than compliance, generates the psychological safety candidates need to take intellectual risks. Mavuru et al. (2024) extend this argument by showing that supervisory reflection on power dynamics is not incidental to good supervision; it is foundational. The four themes below reflect these dynamics as they unfolded across five dyads and three institutions.

Figure 1. Ubuntu-informed mentorship emerged themes.



5. Discussion

Figure 1 depicts four themes that emerged from the thematic analysis. Each theme reveals how Ubuntu principles reshape doctoral supervision while exposing persistent institutional constraints.

5.1. Clash between hierarchical and relational paradigms

The most immediate tension participants described was what SP3 called a "paradigm war" between institutional norms of authority-driven mentorship and Ubuntu's relational values. Supervisors averaged 12 to 15 supervisees per faculty member. This volume forced a triage approach that crowded out deeper mentorship. Candidates in STEM fields were particularly affected, reporting feelings of being "like data-producing machines" (ST4). Power asymmetries were sharpest around authorship. One candidate described drafting six journal sections only to be excluded as first author: "Ubuntu means we rise together, but here it is every scholar for themselves" (ST1). This reflects broader critiques of how Western academic individualism undermines communal knowledge production (Herman, 2011). Dyads that navigated this tension successfully relied on two strategies. First, co-created supervision contracts that outlined response times and feedback modalities reduced ambiguity. Second, supervisors like SP5 intentionally ceded epistemic authority: "I stopped assuming my methodological approach was superior." Promotion criteria that ignore mentorship quality remain a structural obstacle, though some departments began recognising candidate-nominated mentorship excellence awards (Leshem & Bitzer, 2024). Pule et al. (2025) confirm that when supervisors adopt Ubuntu-aligned approaches, even in technically demanding disciplines like mathematics education, candidates demonstrate greater engagement and reduced anxiety about their academic identity. Costa (2018) similarly identifies workload imbalance as a primary driver of supervisory failure in South African universities, a finding directly echoed in participants' accounts. Addressing this paradigm clash requires deliberate institutional redesign, not simply the goodwill of individual supervisors.

5.2. Mutual accountability as a foundation for trust

Mutual accountability transformed supervisory relationships from compliance-driven contracts into what SP2 described as "covenants of care." Partnership agreements used shared language, replacing "you must submit" with "we will review." When supervisors modelled vulnerability, for example, by sharing their own unpublished drafts, candidates felt permission to engage authentically. ST4 noted: "When my supervisor admitted she had struggled with the same statistical analysis, it humanised our relationship." Institutional structures worked against these efforts. Universities tracked submission deadlines and publications but ignored relational indicators such as trust-building practices or emotional support. This is what Herman (2011) terms the "accountability paradox": demanding supervisory excellence while devaluing the labour required to achieve it. Successful dyads responded by forming peer accountability triads and using shared digital annotation tools to maintain transparency. Cultural protocols shaped how accountability was expressed. Several Black African candidates described discomfort with directly challenging supervisors. Ubuntu offered a way forward rather than saying "you are wrong"; ST5 reframed critique as "our approach might need refinement." This preserved relational dignity while maintaining scholarly rigour. Capurchande and Almlöv (2024) document similar dynamics in Mozambican doctoral co-supervision, where power imbalances frequently silenced candidates unless supervisors actively constructed safe spaces for dissent. The use of shared language and co-authored agreements in this study

directly countered those silencing tendencies. Mavuru et al. (2024) argue that supervisors who model reflective accountability, openly revisiting their own assumptions, produce candidates who apply the same critical rigour to their research. Mutual accountability, this study shows, is not a soft practice. It is a disciplinary one.

5.3. Holistic support acknowledging the whole person

Ubuntu-aligned supervisors rejected the idea that a candidate's personal circumstances were peripheral to their research. Adapting caregiving deadlines was not merely logistical; it was ethical. One candidate described her supervisor visiting the hospital during her child's illness and later helping her connect that experience to her research on healthcare disparities (ST2). This is Ubuntu-botho, shared humanity, in practice. Gender disparities surfaced in who readily received this support. Female candidates more often had to justify caregiving-related needs. ST4 noted: "When my male colleague needed time off for his wedding, it was understandable, but my maternity leave was treated as a disruption." Ubuntu's egalitarian ideals do not automatically eliminate patriarchal norms. Intentional, gender-conscious mentorship is required. Workload models failed to account for pastoral care. One supervisor calculated that they spend 23 unpaid hours monthly on non-academic support activities. Promotion criteria that ignore emotional labour further disincentivise holistic mentorship (Costa, 2018). Successful dyads created "community care circles" and "crisis response teams" to distribute this labour sustainably. As SP2 reflected: "When a candidate's grief over losing her grandmother inspired a breakthrough in her analysis of mourning rituals, it confirmed that our whole selves are not obstacles to research, they are its medium." Leshem and Bitzer (2024) document that early career supervisors who attend to doctoral candidates' socio-emotional needs report stronger supervisory relationships and fewer mid-study withdrawals. Mosala (2025) reinforces this, arguing that Ubuntu-informed inclusive practices directly reduce the attrition of first-generation doctoral students who lack institutional social capital. Holistic supervision is not a departure from academic rigour. It is, as this theme demonstrates, one of its preconditions.

5.4. Dialogic co-construction of knowledge

The most transformative finding was how Ubuntu reframed knowledge production as genuinely collaborative. Dyads that practised epistemic reciprocity treated candidates' professional and cultural knowledge as equally valid as academic expertise. Storytelling sessions were particularly powerful. When candidates shared personal narratives related to their research topics, for example, childhood experiences of communal land use informing environmental policy analysis, methodological rigour deepened rather than weakened (Capurchande & Almlov, 2024). Position-switching exercises, where each party defended the other's theoretical stance, exposed blind spots that conventional feedback missed. Co-authored reflection journals maintained intellectual continuity between formal meetings. ST5 described these journals as "our academic indaba, a meeting place where we could revisit ideas across months and see how our thinking matured." Dyads using journals showed greater methodological coherence and fewer last-minute revisions, consistent with Matheka et al. (2024). STEM dyads initially struggled with Ubuntu's collectivist ethos, given field-specific norms of individual authorship. Some supervisors adapted by creating lab-based "idea circles" where all members contributed equally to research design critiques. Institutional resistance to co-publishing persisted, with some departments labelling shared first authorship as "handholding." As ST1 responded: "Ubuntu teaches that independence and interdependence are not opposites." Shabalala and Uren (2025) provide supporting evidence from professional training contexts, where Ubuntu pedagogy in group supervision produced richer learning dialogues and stronger peer support networks than individual supervision alone. Gasa and Gumbo (2021) similarly find that supervisory relationships built on dialogue and shared ownership of knowledge significantly raise candidate satisfaction and completion intent. These findings confirm that dialogic co-construction is not a methodological preference. It is a measurable driver of doctoral quality.

6. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that Ubuntu philosophy, when intentionally applied, transforms doctoral supervision from hierarchical transactions into relational partnerships that affirm human dignity. As depicted in Figure 1, four themes emerged: navigating paradigm clashes, building mutual accountability, supporting the whole person, and co-constructing knowledge dialogically. Together, they form a decolonial mentorship model grounded in African epistemologies. Critically, Ubuntu-aligned supervision is not soft or unrigorous. Candidates in this study produced methodologically stronger research when supervision was relational rather than transactional. The challenge is structural: institutions must revise workload allocations, promotion criteria, and accountability metrics to recognise and reward relational labour. Without systemic change, Ubuntu principles remain aspirational rather than operational.

Future research should explore how this model translates across diverse African institutional contexts. Longitudinal studies tracking doctoral completion rates under Ubuntu-informed supervision would strengthen the evidence base. Comparative work across Global South universities could reveal how indigenous knowledge systems collectively inform a decolonial turn in graduate education. The Ubuntu model offered here is not merely an alternative approach. It is a reimagining of academic mentorship as a practice of mutual humanisation.

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