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Main Article:

A Dual Perspective on Risks and Security Within Research Assistantships

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Abstract

Although research assistantships are considered research learning venues in graduate education, there is a scarcity of literature that examines ethical elements attached to the employment of graduate student research assistants or the position of their research supervisors. This article explores the need to implement formal regulations specific to research assistantships in order to increase security and decrease risks for research assistants and research supervisors. Relationships between research assistants and research supervisors have some similarities with regular employment relationships; yet some distinct differences arise due to the educational and developmental nature of research assistantships. The article is written from a dual perspective reflecting the authors' roles (a research supervisor and a research assistant, respectively) and institutional locations (Faculties of Education in South Africa and Canada). The authors draw from existing literature, an analysis of institutional policies and practices at their universities, and their personal and professional experiences to illustrate risks that research assistants and their supervisors may face within research assistantships. They assess the extent to which existing and proposed policies and practices influence working conditions and safeguard experiences within graduate research assistantships. The findings reveal that research assistantships are a unique form of employment focused on educational and professional development that requires specific documentation of expected standards of practice. The authors argue that lack of clear regulations exposes both parties to unnecessary risks and offer recommendations for creating a "Standards of Good Practice" document that will be useful for individuals engaged in research assistantships.

1. Introduction

Graduate education is expected to prepare highly skilled researchers able to engage in the diversified global research environment. Research assistantships are educational employment venues designed to provide an educational space for graduate students to acquire research knowledge and skills while assisting professors with their research projects. In an ideal world, research assistantships would be highly educational and mutually beneficial for all parties involved. Research assistantships provide distinctive spaces where graduate students can exercise their theoretical knowledge in a nurturing environment and where novice researchers can be effectively shaped. Students engaged in research assistantships can acquire valuable skills as they learn how to conduct research projects (Pearson & Brew, 2002) that could ultimately result in publications or conference presentations. Research assistantships also represent an opportunity for students to contribute to knowledge creation while attaining financial support for their studies (Steward, 2010). At the same time, researchers are able to mentor dedicated students, enhance their research output, and co-author journal articles or co-present at conferences.

Relationships between research assistants and research supervisors have some similarities to regular employment relationships; however, some distinct differences arise due to the educational and developmental nature of research assistantships. Research assistantships represent an employment relationship that is based on the acquisition and sharing of skills as well as the desire to promote student and researcher learning and career development. Research assistantships are transitory and risky (Zinni, Singh, & MacLennan, 2005, p. 150). Sometimes they constitute "forms of employment involving atypical employment contracts, limited social benefits and statutory entitlements, job insecurity, low job tenure, low earning, poor working conditions, and high risks of ill-health" (Cranford, Vosko, & Zukewich, 2003, p. 455). Considering these factors, we argue that research assistantships are a unique type of employment relationship that requires specific guidelines. Edward's (2009) investigation of research assistantships at Simon Fraser University (Canada) showed that there is no central place to find information regarding research assistantships. Based on our exploration of regulations at our two institutions (in South Africa and Canada), we will show that research assistantships rely on sections from several scattered documents and depend on individual perceptions about what makes an experience ethical or educational. The lack of clear documentation regulating research assistantships and informing research assistants as well as research supervisors about their roles, rights, and responsibilities exposes both parties to unnecessary risks and reduced security. Similar to

many employment relationships, research assistants may find themselves in vulnerable positions. Research supervisors are in power positions (based on their employer status and advanced standing), yet they may also experience risks when working with research assistants.

Our goal is to provide evidence that there is a need to implement formal regulations for research assistants and research supervisors. We draw from existing literature, institutional policies and practices at our universities, and our personal and professional experiences. Research assistantships are a unique form of employment focused on educational and professional development and they call for specific documentation outlining standards of good practice.

2. Research Approach

The impetus for this article originated from our informal discussions regarding risks we experienced in our respective positions as a research supervisor (first author) and a research assistant (second author). Discussing research assistantships from a dual perspective based upon these roles and our institutional locations in two different countries (South Africa and Canada), we soon realized that we share similar concerns. As a result, we decided to extend our informal analytical discussions and transition into an interpretive research approach. As Given (2008) explains: "In interpretive research, meaning is disclosed, discovered, and experienced. The emphasis is on sense making, description, and detail. . . . Therefore, meaning-making is underscored as the primary goal of interpretive research in the understanding of social phenomena" (p. 465).

Following the common methods used in interpretive research (Given, 2008), our study draws from: (a) a comprehensive literature review, (b) document analysis pertaining to research assistantships at our universities, (c) informal conversations with administrators familiar with organizational characteristics of research assistantships, and (d) our personal and professional experiences within research assistantships. All these sources informed us about risks that research assistants and research supervisors are experiencing.

Coming from different perspectives in terms of roles (research supervisor and research assistant) and institutional locations (Faculties of Education in South Africa and Canada), we both recognize the educational value of research assistantships and are committed to contribute to the enhancement of this research learning venue. We have worked on research projects focused on research assistantships, co-authored articles, presented at conferences, and reviewed literature on this topic. Our ongoing interest in research assistantships allowed us to draw on our own experiences and analyse the documents from an informed position. We selected our own departments as sites for investigation for two reasons. First, during our ongoing conversations we realized that despite many differences between our states and systems, we faced similar issues in terms of limited regulations for research assistantships. Second, being familiar with our respective institutions allowed us easier access to collect data.

With regard to reviewing the literature, we conducted database and online searches for literature related to research assistantships and research education. Through that process we discovered limited literature around research assistantships and an alarming lack of regulation specific to this learning space. We identified the main themes emerging from our readings and incorporated them within this work. As to document selection and analysis, we engaged in reviewing and analysing documents and online information related to research assistantships at our universities. We located the documents through searches of Faculty and institutional websites as well as recommendations received from administrators. The document analysis provided insights into the ways research assistantships are carried out and managed at the universities in question.

The following text will first provide a literature review on research assistantships. Second, we will review policies and practices pertaining to research assistantships at our institutions (South African and Canadian). Third, we will present the dual perspective on risks and security within research assistantships based on our lived experiences and reviewed literature. Then, in the Discussion and Recommendations section (Section 7), we will consider the extent to which the described policies and practices address working conditions and challenges experienced by graduate research assistants and their supervisors. Section 8 will include recommendations for creating a *Standards of Good Practice* document that will be useful for individuals engaged in research assistantships. Before moving forward, considering the international and multidisciplinary readership, we clarify terminology used within our work.

3. Relevant Terminology

In North America, students who enter studies after their first degree are mainly called *graduate students*; in most European countries and South Africa, students pursuing master's degrees and doctorates are referred to as *postgraduate students*. To ensure consistency, the term *graduate students* will be used in this article to refer to students who have completed their undergraduate degrees. However, the original term will be used where it is part of an established document, such as the *Manual for Postgraduate Studies* of the North-West University, South Africa (North-West University, 2010).

Research assistantship is a position that graduate students can undertake in order to acquire research knowledge and skills while assisting *research supervisors* with their research projects. In some countries and institutions, a research assistant position can also refer to the contractual employment of undergraduate students or non-student researchers assisting in academic research. In this article, however, research assistantship refers exclusively to a position for graduate students.

The term *research supervisor*, in this article, refers to researchers (professors or academic staff) who employ graduate students as their research assistants to provide support for their research projects. Through this arrangement, research supervisors are expected to provide practical training for a future generation of researchers.

In this article, the term *risk* refers to challenges and damages research assistants and research supervisors may encounter when collaborating within research assistantships. The nature of these risks may put both parties in vulnerable positions or hinder their research projects.

In general terms, *security* can be defined as the absence of risks. The proposed idea of creating standards of good practice specific to research assistantships is meant to provide a safe, stable, and respectful environment for research assistants and research supervisors. Secure working conditions and respectful partnerships benefit both parties and the research project.

The word *ethical* is used to emphasize the importance of respectful and reciprocal conduct within research assistantships. Ethical behaviour lies at the heart of considerate collaboration and mutual commitment to deliver quality work for the benefit of the project.

Attention is paid in this article to the *power dynamics* between research assistants and research supervisors. Power imbalances within these relationships may result in research assistants feeling vulnerable. Research assistants may maintain compliance and feel reluctant to speak their minds, being aware that they have too much to lose. The power dynamics within research assistantships are not necessarily one-sided in which only the supervisor possesses power. Research assistants also have a definite influence on the success of the research project, which means supervisors are dependent upon the assistants' performance.

4. Literature Review

Most of the research assistantship literature originates from Australia, Canada, the UK, and the US. Published literature consists of articles related to mentoring within research assistantships, benefits and challenges of hiring research assistants and of becoming research assistants, development of researcher identity, and the educational potential of research assistantships. Edwards (2009) noted that a very small collection of writings examines ethical elements attached to the employment of graduate student research assistants and the ways institutional regulations affect working opportunities, conditions, experiences, and challenges experienced by research assistants and their supervisors. Our intention is to begin filling the existing gap in the literature and bring attention to regulations and practices that affect research assistantships as educational spaces where graduate students have opportunities to acquire research knowledge and skills and grow as future scholars and researchers. McGinn (2006) refers to research assistantships as "one of the most powerful forms of researcher education" (p. 133) and McWey, Henderson, and Piercy (2006) describe them as cooperative and participatory environments where graduate students learn research by doing research.

There is recognition of the importance of supporting and encouraging students' development as researchers (Nicolas, 2008). According to the American Educational Research Association (AERA, 2011), research supervisors should commit to the support,

welfare, and progress of student researchers during their academic journeys. Moreover, research supervisors have obligations to nurture, provide proper training, and ensure the eventual competence of novice researchers (McGinn, Niemczyk, & Saudelli, in press; Strike, Anderson, Curren, Van Geel, Pritchard, & Robertson, 2002). These standards illustrate researchers' obligations to train and educate graduate student research assistants. Responsibility in the relationship between a research supervisor and a research assistant, however, is not one-sided. Students have responsibilities toward research supervisors and a duty to adhere to the ethical dimensions of research. Further, Strike et al. (2002) state that the selection of student researchers should be based on their competence and their potential research contributions. Conversely, Nicolas (2008) suggests that the opportunity to become a research assistant should also be given to students who have limited research skills yet are eager to acquire them. Graduate students have to acquire research experience somewhere and opportunities to learn research skills should also be provided to less qualified students who are researchers-in-the-making (Nicolas, 2008).

Research assistantships can be especially valuable if a student is matched with a supervisor who is conducting research in the student's area of research, thus supporting the particular student's interests. These students may participate in diverse tasks such as developing a study design, applying for ethics clearance, writing reports and articles, and presenting at conferences. Other duties may include creating bibliographies, conducting and transcribing interviews, creating survey instruments, assisting with data analysis, co-ordinating times and dates for interviews, preparing material for conferences, and editing or formatting articles. McGinn (2006) states:

> Mundane tasks such as photocopying or data entry have limited educational potential and should not be the full extent of a research assistantship. By participating in more varied research tasks, new researchers have the best opportunities to capitalize on the research learning opportunity. (p. 133)

Being associated with a committed and skilled mentor is an essential part of a graduate student's education (Barnett, 2008). Lovering-White, McGinn, and Niemczyk (2009) found that a mentoring relationship that emerged from a research assistantship significantly benefited the research assistant (protégé) as well as the research supervisor (mentor). The protégé learned research and presentation skills, acquired knowledge about life in academia, and increased her status by acquiring the sought-after role as a research assistant. The mentor benefited from the contributions to her program of research as a result of work undertaken by this newly competent and confident collaborator. Additionally, the mentor derived personal satisfaction as she observed the protégé's development as a researcher and the ways she subsequently shared her new knowledge by mentoring others.

Unfortunately, not all research assistantships provide research assistants or supervisors with positive experiences (Grundy, 2004; Hinchey & Kimmel, 2000; Hobson, Jones, & Deane, 2005; Niemczyk & Hodson, 2008). For example, Hobson et al. (2005) reported limited acknowledgment for the role of research assistants in knowledge production in

Australian universities. They suggested that the status of research assistants varies significantly as some may undertake tasks focused on clerical functions such as photocopying, while others may be required to undertake significant analytical work. According to the above-mentioned literature sources, research assistants represent a low-paid workforce and are vulnerable to intellectual exploitation where aspects of ownership and authorship may be subject to informal arrangements and expectations. Further, research assistants tend to receive little recognition and are frequently silenced partners in knowledge generation (Hobson et al., 2005).

5. Regulatory Framework

In this section, we review existing documents and practices pertaining to research assistantships in the Faculties of Education at our universities. The first university is a large university in North-West Province, South Africa. The second one is a medium-sized university located in Ontario, Canada. It is our intention to provide an understanding of the institutional regulations and practices relating to research assistantships and thus the working conditions of research assistants and research supervisors in these locales. The two universities provide site-specific examples of the ways institutions structure the work of research assistantships as research learning spaces.

5.1. North-West Province, South Africa

The employment of research assistants at North-West University is not specifically regulated by any institution-wide policy that specifies the standards of good practice. The *Statute of the North-West University* (South African Government Gazette, 2005) includes regulations governing the staff. These provisions apply to all staff members. The *Statute* is silent, however, on whether research assistants should or should not be considered staff members, and hence whether these provisions do or do not apply.

Although the *Statute* describes the employment of staff in general terms, more specific guidelines for research assistantships may be drawn from the *Manual for Postgraduate Studies* (North-West University, 2010). This document was developed to clarify academic rules pertaining to master's and doctoral students with the purpose of regulating study supervision. This type of formal academic supervision is akin to the kind of relationship found in research assistantships, so the requirements for study supervision may be extended to requirements for research assistant supervision. There is one major difference specifically relating to the absence of an employment relationship in formal academic supervision and an employer-employee association in research assistant supervision.

The academic relationship between a supervisor and a student is based on providing an educational experience to a student. This is embedded in an academic contract between the institution and the individual student. The employer-employee relationship, inherent in a research assistant position, is based on a trading of work for pay and governed by employment policies of the university and laws of the country. Even though there are clear differences between the two relationships, the *Manual for Postgraduate Studies*

does provide applicable and valuable guidelines that can be followed to formalise the relationship between a research supervisor and research assistant. For example, the *Manual* discusses the expected volume of work, timetabling, and scheduling of appointments within the student-supervisor relationship. These details and the associated roles and responsibilities of students and supervisors may be applicable to the employer-employee relationship of supervisors and research assistants.

Of particular interest is the code of conduct within the *Manual for Postgraduate Studies*. The expertise of the supervisor is addressed in this section as well as his or her ability to manage and assess the student's work. These kinds of interactions are directly applicable to research assistantships as well. For example, guidelines pertaining to the establishment of a collegial and professional relationship, suggested methods for motivating and steering the student to increased independence, and strategies for introducing him or her to the academic community, are applicable to both relationships. The efficacy of these guidelines in both relationships may depend more on the research supervisor's ability to engage the student in a meaningful and ethical manner, rather than merely adhering to prescribed regulations.

5.1.1. Recruitment Process for Research Assistants

Although the *Manual for Postgraduate Studies* mentioned above can be used to address issues associated with being a graduate student or research assistant, there is no detailed guideline on recruiting. Only one reference in the *Manual* indicates that a supervisor may recruit a specific student for study supervision, as an alternative to those instances where students report themselves to subject chairpersons in order to find a suitable supervisor.

To recruit suitable candidates as research assistants, it is left to the discretion of an individual research supervisor, based on her or his understanding of the particular skills needed to undertake the work required for the specific research project. One process that may be followed, similar to the normal employment-relations approach, is to advertise the positions in media that are accessible to the student group from which candidates may come. On receiving applications, interviews and a selection process follow, resulting in the appointment of one or more research assistants.

Most often, however, the potential research assistant becomes known to the specific research supervisor as a result of ongoing course or research-related activities. These contacts can lead to informal recruitment: researchers approaching students, interviewing them, and making an offer. Contrary to more formal employment processes, the informal recruitment approach may not be viewed as "fair" because all other potential candidates have not had an equal chance of applying for the vacancy. In the absence of more formal regulations, this approach might be established as the common practice. A reasonable alternative would be to advertise the vacancy and follow a fair process of selection.

5.1.2. Employment Contracts

Employment contracts vary in their details, but most include items such as the number of working hours, the particular service expected, a beginning and end date, and details of remuneration. The assistant enters into a contract with either the university or the specific research supervisor, and payments are made through the official university financial system. In the Faculty of Education at North-West University, the rule is to make only one payment per semester.

Because contracts only specify very basic conditions as noted in the previous paragraph, it is up to the research supervisor and assistant to negotiate, often only verbally, the nature of the actual duties that are expected for the duration of the appointment. This approach can be vague and misinterpreted by both sides because it is not in writing. The result can be frustration, conflict, and ineffective research work. This informal modus operandi may be the most prominent lacuna in the approach to current research assistantships.

The minimum remuneration offered to research assistants depends on the qualifications of the individual who has been appointed. Official rates apply across Faculties, but the remuneration can be increased by the research supervisor.

5.2. Ontario, Canada

The employment of research assistants at Brock University is not regulated by one specific document that applies to the entire university or individual department. There are policies in place however, outlining appropriate academic behaviour and prohibited conduct that in turn provide guidelines for research assistantships. Some of the policies are *Respectful Work and Learning Environment Policy* (Brock University, 2007), *Integrity in Research and Scholarship* (Brock University, 2011), *Academic Integrity Policy* (Brock University, 2008), and *Ownership of Student-Created Intellectual Property* (Brock University, 2013, Section 3, Subsection 23). For instance, the *Respectful Work and Learning Environment Policy* aims to promote a respectful work and learning environment and support a work and learning culture that values diversity and inclusion, and does not tolerate prejudice, discrimination, or harassment.

Integrity is considered fundamental to research and scholarship. Brock University acknowledges and accepts responsibility for maintaining ethical standards in research and scholarship and agrees to investigate and resolve promptly and fairly all instances of alleged misconduct. The *Integrity in Research and Scholarship* policy applies to academic activities of all registered students. It establishes principles that promote integrity in research and scholarship, and procedures to investigate allegations of misconduct.

The *Ownership of Student-Created Intellectual Property* policy provides guidelines that cover the rights of current and former students, research assistants, and postdoctoral fellows who attend the university and after they leave, with or without a degree. Although

no policy can anticipate all possible situations, the university policy on *Integrity in Research and Scholarship* and the guidelines on different aspects of intellectual property rights (including copyright) in the *Ownership of Student-Created Intellectual Property* policy cover ethical standards and the rights of students with explicit descriptions of the expectations in research assistantships.

Section 3 of the *Faculty Handbook* (Brock University, 2013), entitled "Academic Regulations," describes students' rights and responsibilities as well as expectations for graduate supervision. It states that the role of a supervisor is to advise, monitor, and mentor. Supervisors are expected to not only provide guidance, instruction, and encouragement in the research activities of their students, but also take part in the ongoing evaluation of their students' progress and performance. Graduate supervisors, early on in their students' programs, have a duty to discuss accepted authorship practices within their disciplines and to encourage their active engagement in the dissemination of research results in scholarly journals and presentations at conferences and seminars.

There are two internal documents—a contract of employment and a student assistant rate schedule—that provide expectations regarding workloads and wages for full-time and part-time student research assistants. It is assumed that the number of hours required to complete the assigned research work may vary, but the Ontario Council on Graduate Studies (OCGS) mandates province-wide standards with the expectation that all universities will comply. Full-time graduate students are expected to devote time to their studies, thus OCGS mandates a maximum of 10 hours per week a graduate student can devote to research assistantships or any other employment (Council of Ontario Universities, 2013, para. 1).

University-related employment for positions such as research assistantships provides financial support for graduate students and work experience that is designed to supplement their formal academic programs, and contribute to skills development relevant to graduates' future careers. Despite the OCGS guideline, students may extend the number of paid employment hours with the permission of their supervisor, Chair of the relevant department, and the Dean of Graduate Studies. Such requests may be denied when additional work hours could compromise or interfere with students' progress toward degree completion. The situation differs for part-time students as they are eligible to work over 10 hours per week, but not more than 44 hours as per the provincial *Employment Standards* (Ontario Ministry of Labour, 2013).

5.2.1. Recruitment Process

Full-time students are usually given preference over part-time students for research assistant positions. In the Faculty of Education, there is a mechanism in place where students interested in working as research assistants are asked to complete a Student Application Form and submit it along with their current curriculum vitae (CV) to the Faculty's Research Officer. A student's CV, along with the form, is placed in a binder and is made available to professors who are interested in hiring research assistants.

The research assistant application form provides space for students to state their prior research experience and the professor with whom they would like to interact. The form also asks for the type of research training they would like to receive during the assistantship. The application process allows professors to see which students are interested in research assistant positions, the pool of existing skills, and the training students would like to receive. This process helps both students and researchers: it enables students to engage in a research project that offers them opportunities to develop new skills; it supports researchers to find suitable research assistants.

Students also become informed about research assistantship opportunities from course professors and through conversations with other graduate students. In order to inform students about these positions, the Faculty of Education organizes orientation sessions where researchers explain their projects and accompanying assistantship opportunities. These informative workshops promote student participation in research assistantships while disseminating information about professors' current research interests.

5.2.2. Contract of Employment

The contract of employment contains the terms and conditions a graduate student can expect when hired for a research assistant position. It indicates the position title, rate of pay, number of contract hours, and the dates of appointment and termination. The duties, responsibilities, and level of engagement in research assistantships may vary according to the type of research project and its progress. Specific duties and responsibilities may be outlined briefly in the contract, although some contracts may simply state "duties as assigned by supervisor." This lack of a clear job description can lead to misunderstandings and potential conflict.

It is a responsibility of students to accept only as many research assistantship hours as are reasonable for successful completion of assigned duties and successful progress toward their academic degrees. Students' wage rates are based on the level of their last completed degree, but a research supervisor could increase the remuneration based on a graduate student's research skills and experience (if the supervisor has external funds that allow higher rates of pay).

6. Risks Within Research Assistantships

As mentioned earlier, the dual perspective on risks and security within research assistantships derives from our extensive personal and professional experiences as well as the literature reviewed. This section provides evidence that both research assistants and research supervisors face diverse challenges within research assistantships. It is worth noticing that the challenges presented from both perspectives extend beyond our South African and Canadian contexts. The literature provides evidence that the situation seems to be similar across a broad range of institutions and nations.

6.1. Research Supervisor Perspective (First Author)

6.1.1. Novice Research Assistants

As reported by Earley (2007), "Teaching graduate students how to do research can be a challenge for many instructors because 'research education' is not an established field of research like other areas of teaching" (p. 1). The very nature of research assistantships involves inexperienced young researchers engaging in activities which may enhance their skills. The skills needed to complete the project effectively may sometimes be incompatible with the assistant's level and experience. Referring to the complex functioning of a research team, Newbury (1995) confirmed that "the novice researcher is unlikely to have the skills and confidence to do this [conduct research] to best effect" (p. 56). Similarly, Hutchinson and Moran (2005) acknowledged that inexperienced assistants may overlook important aspects of the research material or "go missing in action," both factors that increase the "likelihood of error" (p. 10). Hutchinson and Moran (2005) further reported that a lack of proper communication may undermine the research process and interfere with academic deadlines being met. As a result, funds might be expended on students who cannot complete the work, the project may fall behind schedule, and the supervisor might be left alone to finish the project as funds run out.

With tight timelines and limited funds, it may be difficult for research supervisors to fully engage in the kinds of activity needed to train research assistants. The assistant's involvement should help the researcher make progress in the research project but the time spent on training may be detrimental to the project. The focus sometimes shifts from advancing the research to ensuring a positive educational experience for the student, resulting in a delay or decline in the quality of the project. The prominent challenge for the supervisor therefore is to strike a balance between the progress of a project and the development of a research assistant. My experience as a supervisor provides evidence that appointing more experienced assistants (e.g., postdoctoral fellows) who have already acquired basic research skills benefits progress of research projects. I have observed that supervisors employing inexperienced assistants tend to assign them almost exclusively basic administrative work. In these cases, the inexperienced research assistants were not trusted with bigger responsibilities, which resulted in very little development of actual research skills. I recall collaborating on a project where the project leader preferred recruiting an older research assistant over a young one. Both applicants had the same amount of research experience but the older person was assumed to bring more life experience to the project. Although the project benefited from this selection, the younger applicant was denied an educational opportunity. Further, it is impossible to conclude that the result in terms of the contributions to the project would be different if the other applicant was recruited. At a minimum, research supervisors must follow established labour law principles regarding recruitment, including proper advertising, short listing, and interview processes.

6.1.2. Assistants' Performance

One of the main aims of a research assistantship is to enhance learning while assisting with the completion of a research project. Newbury (1995) rightly suggests that valuable personal and professional relationships develop during assistants' involvement in research projects. In my Faculty, it seems, however, that some research assistants see the position primarily as an opportunity to earn money. This lack of an understanding regarding the importance of the research assistant's role may jeopardize the project and the research assistant's skill development, and may contribute to conduct that is considered unacceptable or even unethical. My experience as a supervisor has further shown that substandard performance prevails among assistants with this attitude as they may be unwilling to undertake the training that is necessary to ensure improvement. Lei and Chuang (2009, p. 237) list several other potential drawbacks of working with inexperienced research assistants: assistants' frequent early departures from the research workplace, low research skill levels, low research commitment, and inadequate adaptation to long research hours and isolation. The first two drawbacks correspond with some of my observations from my Faculty. I have noticed that younger assistants work more effectively in collaboration with peers and under close supervision rather than in isolation. One extreme example I encountered was when a young and inexperienced assistant simply stopped working for two weeks while I was attending an overseas conference. Before my departure, I provided the assistant with clear instructions regarding assigned tasks and office hours; however, upon my return I discovered that my assistant could not carry the responsibilities without close supervision. Unfortunately, I had to invoke disciplinary action, which resulted in termination of the research assistantship contract.

The lack of a deeper engagement in the project, and the resultant substandard work performance exposes the research supervisor to the risk of not completing the project on time and within budget, and not meeting the expected scholarly standards. This risk is not only of a temporary nature; it may harm the academic reputation of the research supervisor.

In an attempt to counter these risks, the standard form at North-West University specifies the frequency of payment, where the research supervisor can reach an agreement with the assistant to make the payment at the end of the month or at the end of the semester. If the employment is for a year, biannual payments are made. In cases of poor performance the research supervisor can temporarily withhold or cancel a payment, or even terminate the employment. Research assistants are required to declare other employment they are engaged in outside the university or in another Faculty as it may have an impact on the quality work they can provide due to a potential lack of time. In addition, two or more employments in various research projects may even put them into a conflict of interest situation (e.g., in cases where the respective projects may compete for the same funding or where the research aims may be in conflict).

6.1.3. Employment Disputes

Hiring research assistants gives rise to an employer-employee relationship with all of its inherent rewards (Newbury, 1995), risks (Turner, 2010), and other typical issues associated with normal labour relations. Lei and Chuang (2009, p. 237) revealed certain drawbacks associated with the employment of research assistants. Research assistants may be expected to engage in research topics in which they have little interest or inadequate skills. Such situations may arise when the focus of a research project changes in unanticipated ways, leading to notable differences from what was originally expected. Assistants may find their income substandard or nonexistent, sometimes receiving academic credit hours in lieu of remuneration, or be expected to work on projects that extend beyond the agreed-upon period. These can lead to perceptions of unfairness and result in disputes.

One risk at my institution revolves around employment law related to the "legitimate expectation" principle (Rossouw, 2010). Normally, research assistants are on fixed-term appointments, but in some instances they may hold the false impression that their contracts would be extended. The research supervisor, on the other hand, may not plan to renew the contract, leading to confusion and disappointment. These unsubstantiated, confusing expectations may occur as a result of verbal statements by the research supervisors that have led the assistant to believe that a contract extension is forthcoming. To lower the risk and prevent such misunderstandings in research assistantships, clauses have been included in relevant regulations at North-West University to clearly state that a new agreement, in writing, has to be reached at the end of every term of employment. Despite such measures, risks still prevail when informal discussions between the parties create expectations contrary to the formal agreement. Research supervisors without adequate knowledge of basic employment principles are particularly vulnerable to such disputes.

6.2. Research Assistant Perspective (Second Author)

6.2.1. Complexity of Multiple Roles

One of the risks research assistants encounter is related to the multiple roles they may occupy within their universities. Research assistants may find themselves in vulnerable positions as they assume the dual role of student and employee. They may wonder if their employment will influence their coursework and progress within the program, especially if their paid research assistantship is overseen by their academic advisor or their course instructor (Skorobohacz, 2013). This dual role of studying and working at the same institution may result in a variety of challenges, such as hesitating to voice concerns or working extra hours without pay. Graduate students eager to acquire research skills and secure financial support for their studies can put extra pressure on themselves to prove their abilities as research assistants. This may manifest in investing extra time to complete assigned tasks and thus fulfill expectations of a research supervisor. Benton's (2004) comment is telling:

> I was always more dedicated to my research-assistant work than to my graduate seminars. If a professor had asked me to locate a 19th-century graffito scrawled somewhere in the sewers of Paris, perhaps below water level, I would have had it done within 24 hours. (p. 2)

This quote also echoes my experiences as a research assistant. I recall feeling compelled to complete tasks assigned within the research assistantship over my own graduate work. The idea of being compensated seemed to define for me how to prioritize my work. During my part-time master's studies, I relied on research assistantships as a main financial support and assumed that not fulfilling perceived expectations of my supervisor could jeopardize my future research assistantship opportunities.

Perceived expectations along with existing power dynamics may slow down graduate students' progress toward their degrees. Hinchey and Kimmel (2000) examined the culture of graduate school and questioned why so many graduate students submit to and tolerate unethical conditions during their studies. They noted "students most commonly do whatever is required of them—however unreasonable or damaging—without protest. But these are smart and articulate people: Why their apparent silent submission?" (p. 19). Student research assistants may feel obliged to complete additional tasks (beyond their job descriptions), invest more hours than those for which they are compensated, and refrain from voicing their concerns because they do not wish to compromise their reputation, limit their future work opportunities, or compromise successful completion of graduate school.

6.2.2. Communication and Fair Expectations

Research suggests that effective assistantship rapport arises from mutual respect, open communication, shared commitment to the project, and understanding of each other's expectations (Hutchison & Moran, 2005; Niemczyk, 2010). Achieving a high and effective level of communication is often dependent on the particular mix of individuals involved in the research project. Nevertheless, it is always essential to engage in open and respectful dialogue and establish a safe space to state divergent views. This type of environment allows research assistants to learn positive skills of communication and negotiation.

Guthrie (2007) explored the similarities between the research student's journey and the artisan's transition from apprentice to member of the guild. Reflecting on her personal doctoral experiences, she concluded that the actual relationship between journeyman and master is integral to the success of the relationship. If the environment is one where communication is stifled, difficulties may arise between a research assistant and a research supervisor. Hutchinson and Moran (2005) identify ineffective communication skills as one of the main challenges that emerge within research assistantships. Miscommunication can lead to conflicts due to the research assistant misunderstanding instructions for assigned tasks and activities, not understanding the project objectives, or not meeting deadlines expected by the research supervisor. To avoid these problems, it is essential that research supervisors assign tasks that assistants are capable of performing

based on their knowledge, skill levels, and the support that is in place. In my master's research, I found that that some research assistants invest a significant amount of time trying to figure out how to complete tasks assigned to them. They feel intimidated by their lack of skill or limited understandings of the tasks at hand, but do not seek clarification due to a fear of being perceived as incompetent (Niemczyk, 2010).

These relate to my personal experience too. I recall investing many extra hours in completing a transcribing task. During the meeting, my supervisor mentioned that usually one hour of recorded interview takes about three to four hours of transcribing. Engaging in transcribing for the first time and not being fast with typing, I invested double the hours indicated by my supervisor. However, dedicated to fulfill expectations of my supervisor and committed to appear qualified for the research assistant position, I worked extra time without communicating the actual number of hours invested in transcribing. With time and experience working on other research assistantships, I realized that open and honest communication is vital. Besides the fact that I was not compensated for work done, not communicating the actual time dedicated to transcribing led my supervisor to believe that it is possible to do it in a short timeframe. This in turn may influence my supervisor to maintain the same expectations for other research assistants.

6.2.3. Recognition of Research Assistant's Efforts

Considering the varied duration of research assistantships, conflicts can arise regarding the contribution that research assistants are expected to make to the project and the recognition they will receive for their efforts. Although most of my research supervisors were eager to acknowledge my contributions to their research, I have also experienced assistantships were I did not feel fairly recognized. In one of the projects, I conducted data entry and statistical analysis for an extended period of time. I hoped that after completing data analysis, I would be invited to present at a conference or co-author a report. Unfortunately, my contract ended without such opportunities. Being a novice research assistant, I hesitated to approach the research supervisor about any potential opportunities to stay involved in the project even outside the research assistantship. Looking back in time, I wish my supervisor had explained more about the project during our first meetings. For instance, it would have been valuable for me to understand how my research tasks interconnected with other research steps and the overall research project. I would have also appreciated being informed about educational opportunities that could arise from the project. To avoid the potential for disappointment and conflict, research assistants and their supervisors should agree on recognition and authorship guidelines early in the project. Such clarification should also address whether the research project may or may not be integrated into the student's thesis work.

According to the publication manual of the American Psychological Association, "authorship is reserved for persons who make a substantial contribution to and who accept responsibility for a published work" (American Psychological Association [APA], 2010, p. 18). The publication manual further specifies that individuals should take credit for the contributions provided, thus contributions do not refer only to the actual writing but also to any substantial scientific contributions to the study, such as conducting

statistical analyses, interpreting results, or structuring the experimental design. The publication manual also indicates that research collaborators (in this case, research assistants and research supervisors) should decide early on what tasks are needed to complete the project, how they will be divided, and if these tasks are expected to lead to joint authorship or conference presentation opportunities (APA, 2010, p. 18).

Based on the literature review, we learned that recognition may be provided in a variety of ways, including at the lower level, a notation in the preface or footnotes, to the highest level of joint authorship (Hutchinson & Moran, 2005). Since research assistants perform a variety of different tasks and contribute intellectually to research studies, it is fair to give them proper recognition (Benton, 2004). Written recognition in published or presented material not only acknowledges the efforts of research assistants but also enhances their career. It is important to note that permission would be required to acknowledge someone in an article (APA, 2010).

7. Discussion and Recommendations

As we have shown through this article, research assistants and research supervisors may be exposed to risks and experience ethical or power-related challenges due to the unique relationship they hold (Löfström & Pyhältö, 2012). Research assistants are a vulnerable group and need to be safeguarded by formal regulations (Fogg, 2004). They assume multiple roles, yet possess little information about effective ways to navigate these roles, some of which may be exploitative (Niemczyk & Hodson, 2008). Students are hesitant to report unfair practices as they are concerned about the impact this action might have on completion of their degrees. Without regulations outlining the ethical standards of practice for research assistants and research supervisors, the former often remain silent.

Graduate students undertaking their first research assistantship may be unfamiliar with what is expected from them. It is essential for research assistants and their supervisors to meet before a contract is signed to discuss reciprocal expectations (Miller & Stephens, 1998) and clarify diverse aspects of the research assistant position, such as hours of work, frequency of meetings, timelines, and scholarly credit. The existing unequal power relationship, however, can place students in vulnerable positions and may affect these discussions.

Research supervisors are also faced with diverse risks. Supervisors may be preoccupied with students' performance and a desire to complete their research projects in a timely manner, which may affect their attention to providing an educational experience for assistants. Less conspicuous, but not less risky, are their roles as mentors and employers, tasks that can be arduous, especially in the absence of a coherent set of guidelines. Research supervisors have the responsibility to support and actively enhance the development of students as future researchers, while simultaneously ensuring that scarce resources are used wisely and project objectives are achieved. They know that mentoring students is an important part of their role and that many students enter their graduate studies with a limited understanding of the complex landscape of higher education

(Wulff, Feetham, Dubrow, Butler, Gething, & Nerad, 2005) or the potential educational value of research assistantships.

Supervisors are also accountable for project completion within time and cost constraints. Therefore, any negligent or tardy performance by the research assistant would pose a challenge to them. Accordingly, in extreme cases, disciplinary action such as termination of the research assistant's employment may be unavoidable.

Due to the relative dependence of assistants on supervisors, it may become challenging for supervisors to support research assistants in dealing with the risks the assistants encounter. As discussed, assistants have to cope with the complexity of multiple roles and aspects related to communication and recognition of their work. It can be regarded as the duty of the supervisor to help reduce risks encountered by assistants.

In short, research assistants and research supervisors may find themselves in challenging positions with limited guidelines. Thus, it is important that the institutions where they work and study, pay attention to ensuring that these relationships are fruitful. Flora (2007) suggests that "graduate administrators should scan the graduate assistantship legal and cultural environment to seek positive and appropriate changes where needed in administering, supervising and monitoring the graduate assistantship process" (p. 320).

Considering the regulatory framework within our South African and Canadian contexts, it is evident that our institutions have in place policies and practices that provide guidelines applicable to research assistantships. Both institutions rely on policies that promote respectful and fair conduct of research activities. Both have evolved transparent processes pertaining to the employment of research assistants (e.g., recruitment procedures, contract of employment, and schedule rates). In addition, Brock University's Faculty of Education (Canada) supports students by sharing information, promoting awareness, and encouraging students to undertake research assistantships. In North-West's Faculty of Education (South Africa), promotion of assistantships is done informally, normally by research supervisors as part of the recruitment process.

Although the above policies and practices safeguard research assistants and research supervisors to some extent, guidelines relating to research assistantships seem to be scattered in various documents. In addition, some practices are left to the discretion of individual research supervisors. We argue that research assistantships provide a unique form of employment focused on educational and professional development, which call for a specific *Standards of Good Practice* document. Newbury (1995) argues that:

> Those who are involved in funding and coordinating research have a responsibility to understand how the process of research is experienced by project researchers and students alike, and to act on this understanding to create the best possible environment for the production of useful knowledge. (p. 58)

We support Newbury's argument and argue that a single formal document at the institutional level would improve the governance of research assistantship. A *S*ocument would inform research assistants and their supervisors about their roles, rights, and responsibilities, thereby reducing risks and increasing security for both parties.

8. Standards of Good Practice Document

Considering the literature reviewed it is evident that the challenges encountered by research supervisors and research assistants extend beyond our South African and Canadian contexts. We envision that a *Standards of Good Practice* document would serve the following general functions:

(a) Clarify roles and responsibilities of research assistants and supervisors
(b) Regulate the recruitment process and remuneration of research assistants
(c) Contain procedures for grievance handling and conflict resolution
(d) Specify additional sources of information and support

It is essential to defineroles and responsibilities of research assistants and research supervisors not only to allow both parties to make informed decisions about engaging in research assistantships but also to fulfill their respective responsibilities. Clear understanding of what is expected fosters a harmonious environment where both parties can work, learn, and grow together (Ratković, Niemczyk, Trudeau, & McGinn, 2013). Clarity around roles and responsibilities fosters not only reciprocal relationships among the individuals involved in assistantships but also enhances the success of the entire research project.

The research assistant recruitment process needs to be fair, transparent, and compliant with institutional and legislative regulations. Transparent procedures are beneficial for both parties. It is important to inform research supervisors how to reach potential research assistants, what procedures to follow to recruit them, and what criteria to consider when selecting candidates. While experienced applicants may contribute to project completion with minimal guidance, first-timers would benefit the most in terms of acquiring research skills.

Procedures are necessary to resolve conflicts arising between research assistants and research supervisors. When a conflict cannot be resolved through communication and mutual understanding, it may require the assistance of a third party.

Additional sources of information and support available to all parties involved in research assistantships may be valuable and save time for graduate students and research supervisors. For instance, research assistants would be able to learn where they can receive training in the skills necessary to complete the tasks assigned to them and supervisors would be informed where to direct students to enhance their skills before they engage in specific tasks. Research assistants would also benefit from Web-based resources that can help them to connect with the research communities at their institution and beyond.

It would be useful to include a list of resource persons both parties can contact in case they require additional information or clarification to carry out their responsibilities successfully. Although the most valuable resource person for research assistants is their research supervisor and other research assistants, it is useful to know that other resource person are in place to share their knowledge and provide support.

9. Conclusion

As demonstrated in our work, research assistantships are a unique form of employment focused on educational and professional development. An effectively formulated *Standards of Good Practice* document has the potential to reduce risks and contribute towards increased security for all parties engaged in research assistantships. Such a document would allow both parties to make informed, ethical, and sound decisions within research assistantships. The document can offer objective criteria to decide on a variety of sensitive matters research assistants and research supervisor may encounter. Besides, this would reduce the chance that one party's issues are more important than the other party's concerns, recognising reciprocity and respect to be at the heart of successful research assistantships.

Although our exploration is context specific, it may inform other institutions as they promote research assistantships as research learning spaces. We encourage research supervisors, research assistants, and administrators to jointly develop *Standards of Good Practice* documents at their universities that focus specifically on research assistantships.

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