

Research Examining the Relationship between Chapter Demarcation and Research Quality in Postgraduate Research Supervision: A South African TVET Department Case Study

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ABSTRACT

Research quality and supervision methods are receiving greater attention as postgraduate research output becomes increasingly important in South African higher education. Postgraduate students in Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) departments are expected to conduct research that significantly advances academic understanding, policy formation, and institutional change. The influence of chapter demarcation on research quality has received less attention than research methodology, supervision models, and knowledge generation. This essay investigates the connection between research quality and chapter demarcation in a TVET department in South Africa. The research argues that chapter demarcation is more than just a structural or formatting requirement, based on a qualitative case study informed by supervisory reflections, postgraduate supervision seminar debates, and current South African literature. Instead, it serves as an intellectual framework that improves academic rigour, methodological transparency, coherence, and scholarly communication. The results indicate that by promoting logical development, encouraging critical engagement with the literature, enhancing data presentation, and bolstering supervisor-student interactions, effective chapter demarcation significantly contributes to postgraduate achievement. Chapter demarcation should be specifically taught as part of postgraduate supervision and academic writing development in South African universities, according to the article's conclusion.

Keywords: Chapter Demarcation, Postgraduate Supervision, Research Quality, Tvet, Academic Writing, South Africa

INTRODUCTION

There is growing demand to increase postgraduate enrollment, boost research output, and enhance completion rates in South Africa's higher education system. Through the creation of knowledge, universities are supposed to support social change, technological advancement, and economic growth. As a result, postgraduate research is becoming a key tool used by universities to achieve these goals (Council on Higher Education [CHE], 2022). As a result, research quality has become a crucial issue for postgraduate students, institutions, supervisors, and policymakers.

In Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) departments, the value of postgraduate research is especially clear. TVET research has historically been marginalised in South African higher education. Scholarly interest in the field has, however, greatly expanded as a result of recent institutional and regulatory changes.

According to Papier and McGrath (2020), a growing research community devoted to vocational education studies has emerged from the significant expansion of postgraduate research in TVET over the past ten years. This expansion reflects broader national initiatives to enhance the TVET sector's role in workforce preparation and economic development.

Despite these advancements, there are still several issues with the study's calibre. Supervisors often work with postgraduate students who struggle to produce theses that are analytically complex, methodologically sound, and cohesive. These difficulties may stem from flaws in academic writing and thesis structure, even though they are often linked to shortcomings in study design or conceptual understanding.

Chapter delineation is a topic that has received very little scholarly attention. The arrangement of a thesis into separate but related portions that together convey the reasoning, methodology, and conclusions of a research effort is known as chapter demarcation. Chapter demarcation is seen as a technical problem pertaining to formatting standards in many universities. Evidence, however, indicates that chapter demarcation affects how students plan, carry out, and present their study.

Supervisors at a postgraduate seminar held at a TVET institution in South Africa frequently stressed the need for chapter organisation to preserve the calibre of research. Students were reminded that research chapters are linked parts of a wider academic argument rather than stand-alone pieces. Participants in the seminar reported that many postgraduate challenges stem from students writing chapters independently and then, frequently unsuccessfully, trying to combine them into a cohesive thesis (Molele & Muzite, 2025).

Therefore, the goal of this work is to investigate the relationship between the quality of postgraduate supervision research and chapter demarcation. In a South African TVET environment, the article specifically examines how chapter demarcation supports scholarly coherence, methodological rigour, engagement with the literature, critical thinking, and supervisory efficacy.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Academic Literacies Theory (Lea & Street, 1998) and Communities of Practice Theory (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998), which together offer a thorough lens for comprehending the relationship between chapter demarcation and research quality in postgraduate supervision, serve as the foundation for this study. According to these theories, chapter demarcation is a scholarly technique that helps students build, organise, and express knowledge rather than a technical prerequisite.

According to academic literacies theory, academic writing is more than just learning how to write; it is a socially situated practice that involves disciplinary standards, identity formation, and knowledge building (Lea & Street, 1998). Chapter demarcation is a crucial literacy technique in postgraduate research that aids students in organising scholarly arguments, presenting evidence rationally, and coherently communicating research findings. Therefore, the ability to present knowledge in ways that are consistent with disciplinary norms is just as important to the quality of research as methodological rigour. This viewpoint is especially pertinent in the context of TVET in South Africa, where many postgraduate students from professional backgrounds enrol in research programs and need to learn to convert real-world knowledge into recognised academic formats (Castle et al., 2021).

Communities of Practice Theory, which supports this viewpoint, describes how students acquire these academic practices through engagement with scholarly communities (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998). Through seminars, supervisory meetings, presentations, and feedback procedures, postgraduate supervision provides students with opportunities to interact with seasoned academics. Students progressively pick up the conventions, values, and writing styles that define academic study throughout these exchanges. This study was informed by seminar discussions that showed how supervisors help students comprehend scientific writing standards, chapter organisation, literature review development, and methodological justification (Molele & Muzite, 2025).

Taken as a whole, these ideas imply that successful chapter delineation involves both a social learning process and a reading practice. While Communities of Practice theory describes how students acquire these conventions through supervision and involvement in academic networks, Academic Literacies theory explains why chapter arrangement is crucial for the communication of knowledge. Therefore, by improving coherence, methodological transparency, critical engagement with literature, and academic communication, chapter demarcation directly helps the quality of research.

As a result, the study supports the idea that chapter demarcation is an academic literacy skill learned through involvement in a scholarly community of practice. The quality of research is influenced not only by methodological decisions but also by students' ability to organise and present information in accordance with academic standards. Effective supervision helps students in South African TVET departments move from inexperienced researchers to capable contributors in the creation of academic knowledge.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Research Quality in Postgraduate Education

One of the most crucial markers of academic success is still the calibre of research. According to the American Educational Research Association (2011), the main standards for assessing the quality of research are validity, dependability, transparency, rigour, and contribution to knowledge. These characteristics offer a foundation for evaluating the reliability and applicability of research findings in a certain subject.

Research quality and national development objectives are intimately related in South African higher education. According to the CHE (2022), master's and doctoral research are essential for bolstering knowledge economies, innovation systems, and evidence-based policymaking. As a result, institutions are under growing pressure to increase student participation while producing high-calibre postgraduate research outputs.

But choosing a suitable approach is only one aspect of conducting high-quality research. The organisation, communication, and articulation of ideas all have an equal impact on the quality of research. Effective academic writing, according to Hartley (2008), improves the impact, coherence, and accessibility of scholarly work. Therefore, if a study is badly organised, it may be evaluated negatively even if the methodology is sound.

Maintaining research quality is especially difficult in situations where postgraduate enrollment has grown rapidly. According to Castle et al. (2021), institutions must reevaluate academic writing support systems and supervision procedures in order to increase postgraduate participation. Universities must address varying levels of readiness for advanced academic writing as student populations become increasingly diverse.

Postgraduate Supervision in South Africa

From a conventional apprenticeship model, postgraduate supervision has developed into a sophisticated pedagogical approach that incorporates academic development, intellectual socialisation, and mentoring. According to Wilkinson (2011), supervision is a sophisticated teaching and learning approach that goes beyond tracking the advancement of research. Supervisors are expected to assist students in developing their academic identities, critical thinking skills, and knowledge.

Numerous difficulties with postgraduate supervision have been highlighted by South African academics. Effective supervision, according to Mofolo and Lukman (2024), requires cooperation, communication, dedication, and confidence between supervisors and pupils. Research quality and completion rates may suffer in the absence of these components. In a similar vein, Govender and Markus (2025) found that postgraduate supervision often entails navigating ambiguity, institutional demands, and divergent expectations between supervisors and students.

The massification of postgraduate study presents another difficulty. According to Castle et al. (2021), supervisory capacity has been significantly strained by rising postgraduate enrollments. It is now expected of supervisors to assist more students while upholding standards of academic excellence. These conditions necessitate more systematic approaches to student growth and supervision.

In TVET departments, the value of supervision is very clear. According to Papier (2024), developing skilled researchers capable of producing rigorous and influential scholarship is crucial to South Africa's efforts to strengthen its TVET knowledge base. As a result, effective supervision is crucial to both the area's overall development and the success of individual students.

Understanding Chapter Demarcation

The methodical division of a research work into distinguishable portions that fulfil specific academic objectives is known as chapter delineation. The majority of postgraduate theses incorporate elements such as an introduction, literature review, methodology, findings, discussion, and conclusion, but chapter formats vary across subjects and approaches.

Chapter demarcation may seem like a technical issue at first. Nonetheless, the basic logic of the research itself is reflected in the chapter structures. Every chapter adds a distinct component to the main point. The research problem is presented in the introduction; the scholarly background is established in the literature review; the methodology describes how evidence was gathered; the data are presented in the findings; and the findings are interpreted in the discussion.

Chapter demarcation is a method for guaranteeing coherence and methodical organisation in postgraduate study, according to Molele and Muzite (2025). Chapters should interact with one another and work together to create a cohesive research narrative, according to their seminar reflections.

This viewpoint supports Hartley's (2008) assertion that good organisation improves reader understanding. When arguments are given in a logical order of related chapters, readers are more likely to comprehend and assess the research.

Chapter Demarcation and Academic Literacies

Chapter demarcation can be viewed from the standpoint of academic literacy as a process that helps students develop disciplinary methods of knowing and writing. Scholars of academic literacy contend that writing is a socially situated activity that involves engagement with academic communities rather than merely a technical skill.

Chapter demarcation is one of the essential conventions used in postgraduate education to organise and transmit disciplinary information. As a result, students need to learn not just what to write but also where and why to include certain details in a thesis.

This shift can be difficult for many postgraduate students in South Africa, especially those starting research degrees from professional backgrounds. Despite having a wealth of practical information, teachers, lecturers, and vocational practitioners may find it difficult to incorporate it into traditional academic frameworks.

Effective chapter demarcation is, therefore, a crucial component of academic growth.

METHODOLOGY

A qualitative case study methodology was used in this investigation. The issue concerned a postgraduate seminar held in a TVET department in South Africa. The session examined the function of chapter demarcation in thesis construction and discussed quality standards in postgraduate research.

Because it enabled a thorough analysis of a modern educational phenomenon in its natural setting, the case study approach was suitable. The study sought to develop a detailed understanding of the relationship between chapter delineation and research quality, rather than to generalise statistically.

Two primary sources provided the data. A discussion article on research quality and chapter delineation in academic writing served as the first source (Muzite & Molele, 2025). The second source was a transcript of a postgraduate webinar in which departmental leaders, supervisors, and students discussed thesis organisation, supervision techniques, and research quality (Molele & Muzite, 2025).

A thematic analysis was performed on the data. Recurring conversations on study quality, chapter structure, methodological rigour, literature reviews, supervision, and student experiences received special emphasis.

Findings

Chapter demarcation is much more than just a formal requirement in postgraduate research supervision, according to the report. Supervisors and students in the South African TVET department under study consistently linked chapter organisation to good supervision outcomes, academic identity, research quality, and methodological rigour. The results revealed five interconnected themes: the literature review as the cornerstone of high-quality research, coherence and logical flow, and chapter demarcation as a tool for supervision and academic progress.

Chapter Demarcation as Intellectual Architecture for Knowledge Construction

The first significant discovery is that chapter demarcation serves as the intellectual framework for postgraduate research. Participants highlighted repeatedly that chapters are interrelated frameworks that generate, organise, and transmit knowledge rather than discrete parts of a thesis. This result is consistent with academic literacies theory, which contends that learning how information is created and presented within disciplinary communities is just as important as technical proficiency in academic writing (Lea & Street, 1998).

Supervisors pointed out during the seminar that many postgraduate students have excellent research ideas but find it difficult to express them in cohesive chapter formats (Molele & Muzite, 2025). One supervisor claims that students often write several chapters as stand-alone projects before combining them into a thesis later. The end product is frequently a paper with insufficient integration between sections, contradicting ideas, and repetition (Molele & Muzite, 2025).

The participating department is not the only one facing this difficulty. Universities in South Africa have reported similar issues. According to Castle et al. (2021), assisting students in comprehending how various thesis components contribute to a cohesive scholarly argument is one of the biggest obstacles in postgraduate supervision. Chapters are frequently seen by students as discrete academic assignments rather than as components of a cohesive research narrative.

Numerous TVET-related master's programs that examine the integration of digital technology into vocational teaching and learning provide real-world examples. Supervisors often come across dissertations in which the findings chapter focuses on institutional difficulties but fails to maintain conceptual consistency, while the literature review covers educational technologies in great detail. The study's total contribution is diminished by the lack of apparent chapter linkages, despite the potential value of both talks. These examples show that the coherence of the thesis as a whole, as well as the content of specific chapters, determines the quality of the research.

It is interesting that participants described chapter delineation as a form of intellectual discipline. Chapter structures force students to think methodically about their research approach, according to several supervisors. Students are required to make thoughtful choices about the placement of concepts, arguments, evidence, and interpretations rather than presenting material at random. Chapter delineation facilitates writing and thought in this way.

Coherence and Logical Flow as Indicators of Research Quality

The connection between coherence and chapter demarcation was the subject of the second theme. Coherence was regularly mentioned by participants as one of the most obvious signs of high-quality research. Supervisors claim that a good thesis demonstrates a logical flow from start to finish, with each chapter contributing to the study's goals (Molele & Muzite, 2025).

A postgraduate student's question on whether it was necessary to present the following segment before concluding the current one was one of the seminar's most memorable exchanges. In response, supervisors explained that because research is a continuous argument rather than a collection of disparate pieces, these transitions are crucial (Molele & Muzite, 2025). This conversation brought to light a crucial but frequently disregarded component of academic writing: coherence is produced by the connections between chapters as much as the content.

Research on postgraduate supervision supports the importance of coherence. According to Wilkinson (2011), students must craft arguments that make sense at every stage of a study to write excellent research papers. In a similar vein, Bitzer and Albertyn (2011) contend that postgraduate supervision should help students see how each step of the research process adds to a larger academic discourse.

One especially pertinent example from South Africa is found in technology universities, where many postgraduate students work full-time as practitioners or educators. These students' theses may be fragmented, as they frequently write for extended periods while juggling professional obligations. Students frequently produce excellent individual chapters but struggle to maintain consistency throughout the work, according to seminar supervisors (Molele & Muzite, 2025). This problem reflects broader national concerns about writing assistance and postgraduate completion.

The results imply that coherence is more than just a visual attribute. Instead, it shows that pupils comprehend the reasoning behind research. Even when methodological techniques are acceptable, examiners may doubt the study's trustworthiness if coherence is lacking.

The Literature Review as the Foundation of Research Quality

The importance of the literature review is arguably the most prominent theme that emerged from the findings. Because the literature review informs every other chapter of the dissertation or thesis, supervisors frequently referred to it as the "engine" or "heartbeat" of the research process (Molele & Muzite, 2025).

According to participants, many postgraduate challenges start with insufficient literature reviews. Instead of critically engaging with scholarly disputes, students sometimes regard the literature review as a task of summarising prior research. As a result, they are unable to pinpoint research gaps, lay theoretical underpinnings, or defend methodological decisions. The quality of later chapters is thus impacted by this flaw.

A prominent scholar stressed that research questions and objectives, not the availability of materials, should serve as the basis for literature assessments. He pointed out that students who do not connect their literature studies to research topics often gather inaccurate data, leading to conclusions that do not adequately address the main study issue (Molele & Muzite, 2025). This finding is consistent with research indicating that poor literature reviews are a major factor in postgraduate failure and completion delays (Castle et al., 2021).

A TVET study from South Africa offers helpful examples of this difficulty. According to Papier and McGrath (2020), the ability of researchers to critically engage with existing scholarship and identify significant gaps for further exploration is crucial to building a strong TVET knowledge base. However, many inexperienced researchers find it difficult to progress from descriptive reviews to analytical synthesis.

An example from the session sheds light on this issue. A supervisor described how students often turn in literature evaluations with many citations but little critical thinking. Even though these chapters seem substantial,

they often fail to demonstrate the study's uniqueness or to show how the proposed research advances knowledge (Molele & Muzite, 2025). Therefore, the quality of the literature's synthesis rather than its quantity is the problem.

The results also show that the way literature reviews operate inside the thesis is influenced by chapter demarcation. A solid basis for the entire study is provided by the literature review chapters, which are thematically interwoven with other chapters and clearly defined. However, methodological, analytical, and conceptual issues frequently surface throughout the thesis when literature reviews are poorly organised.

Methodological Transparency and Rigour

Methodological transparency was the subject of a fourth theme. Participants stressed that methodological decisions must be clearly justified and research techniques systematically explained to produce high-quality research. Because it offers a specific area for methodological reasoning, chapter demarcation is crucial to accomplishing these goals.

According to supervisors, students often define techniques using general textbook definitions without explaining the methods they chose for their research (Molele & Muzite, 2025). Because readers cannot assess whether methodological choices are suitable for addressing the study's challenge, such techniques undermine the research's credibility.

The literature on higher education in South Africa frequently addresses this issue. The CHE (2022) emphasises the importance of ensuring that research designs align with research aims and objectives and promotes methodological rigour as a crucial indicator of postgraduate quality. In a similar vein, Gumbo (2019) found that supervisors appreciate transparent communication about methodological decisions because it enables meaningful interaction with student work.

Discussions about qualitative research gave rise to an interesting example. Supervisors observed that many students use standard definitions to support qualitative approaches but fail to explain why these approaches are suitable for examining their specific circumstances. For example, methodological sections of studies examining TVET instructors' experiences frequently do not explain why focus groups, interviews, or observations are the best methods for gathering evidence. Methodological chapters remain descriptive rather than analytical in the absence of these explanations.

Participants also mentioned that methodological chapters with distinct boundaries improve credibility by making the research process easier for readers to follow. The evaluation of validity, reliability, and trustworthiness is supported by this openness. Therefore, rather than just recording methodological choices, chapter demarcation directly improves methodological quality.

Chapter Demarcation as a Tool for Supervision and Scholarly Development

The role of chapter delineation in postgraduate supervision and researcher growth is the last theme. Chapter structures were frequently cited by supervisors as crucial tools for tracking student development, providing feedback, and promoting academic advancement (Molele & Muzite, 2025).

Feedback inclusion was one of the topics that kept coming up during the seminar. Supervisors noticed that some students receive a lot of feedback on their initial chapters but do not successfully incorporate it into later edits. Students who operate within well-structured chapter frameworks, on the other hand, typically have a greater capacity to monitor changes and methodically address feedback (Molele & Muzite, 2025).

This result is consistent with the Communities of Practice Theory (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998), which views supervision as a means by which newcomers progressively acquire the customs and norms of an academic community. Supervisors assist students in learning how researchers convey knowledge by providing input on chapter structures, argument development, and coherence.

Research seminars and postgraduate writing workshops are two particularly important examples from South Africa. These workshops are held at numerous colleges to assist students in developing conceptual frameworks, chapter plans, and thesis formats. According to Castle et al. (2021), these programs acknowledge that academic writing is acquired through involvement in scholarly communities rather than solely through individual effort.

An illustration of this kind of community of practice was the seminar itself. Students addressed questions about chapter structure, interacted directly with seasoned researchers, and received advice on technique, literature reviews, and referencing styles (Molele & Muzite, 2025). In addition to providing opportunities for professional academic socialisation, these exchanges helped students gain a deeper understanding of scholarly expectations.

Students' doubts about chapter transitions and referencing methods were a significant anecdote. Supervisors utilised these problems as teaching opportunities to discuss broader scholarly communication concepts rather than treating them as discrete technical challenges (Molele & Muzite, 2025). These instances show how chapter

demarcations encourage critical evaluation of academic writing techniques, thereby benefiting postgraduate development.

Overall, the results show that chapter demarcation has several uses in postgraduate education. Coherence is improved, methodological transparency is strengthened, interaction with the literature is encouraged, supervision is facilitated, and academic identities are developed. These roles are especially crucial in the South African TVET setting because they help up-and-coming scholars navigate the challenges of postgraduate research and knowledge creation. Students who successfully demarcate their chapters are better able to express their own ideas, engage critically with prior research, and contribute meaningfully to academic communities.

DISCUSSION

The results show a strong correlation between research quality in postgraduate education and chapter demarcation. The research indicates that chapter demarcation plays a crucial role in structuring academic thinking, supporting methodological rigour, and enabling scholarly communication, contrary to the belief that chapter organisation is merely a technical necessity.

Because many postgraduate students in South African TVET departments come from professional rather than academic backgrounds, chapter delineation is especially important. These students may need assistance in translating their practical knowledge into academic arguments, even if they frequently have extensive practical experience.

The seminar talks shed important light on this problem. Supervisors frequently stressed the importance of coherence and transitions, implying that organisational flaws, rather than intellectual shortcomings, are the root cause of many students' challenges. These findings provide credence to the idea that chapter demarcation serves as a framework for scholarly growth.

Additionally, the results support previous research on postgraduate supervision. Effective supervision entails more than just giving technical guidance, according to studies by Wilkinson (2011), Castle et al. (2021), and Mofolo and Lukman (2024). Supervisors need to help students learn academic conventions and make it easier for them to join intellectual groups.

The seminar talks offer insightful information about this problem. Supervisors frequently stressed the importance of coherence and transitions, arguing that organisational flaws, rather than intellectual shortcomings, are the root cause of many students' problems. The idea that chapter demarcation serves as a framework for academic advancement is supported by these observations.

The results also support previous research on postgraduate supervision. Effective supervision requires more than just giving technical guidance, according to studies by Wilkinson (2011), Castle et al. (2021), and Mofolo and Lukman (2024). Supervisors must help students learn academic conventions and make it easier for them to join intellectual groups.

This study's applicability to national discussions about postgraduate quality is another contribution. In terms of doctorate creation, research output, and knowledge generation, South Africa is still pursuing lofty goals (CHE, 2022). It is necessary to pay attention to the calibre of research writing and supervision procedures in order to accomplish these goals.

A useful way for institutions to raise the caliber of their research is with effective chapter demarcation. Supervisors can improve coherence, analytical depth, and academic communication by helping students understand the goals and connections among chapters.

CONCLUSION

This study examined the relationship between research quality and chapter demarcation within a TVET department in South Africa. The study showed that chapter demarcation greatly improves the quality of postgraduate research, drawing on seminar discussions, supervisory experiences, and current South African scholarship. The results show that chapter demarcation serves as an intellectual framework that promotes methodological rigour, coherence, critical literary engagement, and efficient supervision. Chapter demarcation should be seen as an essential component of scholarly practice rather than as a formatting necessity.

The ramifications are obvious for TVET departments and South African universities in general. Academic writing rules, chapter functions, and thesis architecture should all be explicitly taught in postgraduate development programs. The connections between chapters and the significance of preserving coherence throughout the research process should also be emphasised by supervisors. In the end, strengthening research quality, increasing postgraduate success, and fostering a more robust South African research culture are all possible outcomes of improved chapter demarcation methods.

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