

# Supervision of master's students across borders

*Essay written for*

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## Introduction

This paper is based on experiences from a collaborative project in nutrition epidemiology between Kinshasa School of Public Health at the University of Kinshasa (UniKin) in Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Centre for Rural Health at the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN) in South Africa and Centre for International Health at the University of Bergen (UiB), Norway. The project is called GROWNUT<sup>1</sup> and is part of the NORHED<sup>2</sup> program funded by Norad<sup>3</sup>. The aim is to build a master's and PhD program in nutrition epidemiology at Kinshasa School of Public Health.

The project started in 2014 and was originally planned to end in 2018; however, it was extended until 2020. During this period, there have been four cohorts of master's students, with 7 to 15 students per cohort. In addition, a total of five PhD candidates.

GROWNUT was planned to be collaborative such that personnel from all three universities should be involved in planning, teaching and supervision. The students are accepted as students and take their final exams at Kinshasa School of Public Health.

In this paper, I will focus on the supervision of the master's students, the challenges we faced, the measures we took to improve, and some self-reflections about the results. However, first I will describe the actors and the context of the master's program.

### GROWNUT: Actors

At the **University of Kinshasa, DR Congo**, the School of Public Health (KSPH) had been running four to five different master's programs in topics related to public health, but wanted to start a program in nutrition epidemiology. The project manager from KSPH has been involved in the discussions around GROWNUT since the very beginning of the planning in 2012. The establishment of the master's program in nutrition epidemiology also led to the establishment of a nutrition epidemiology unit at KSPH.

At the **University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN), South Africa**, there had been three different institutions involved (see Figure 1). However, from June 2016 to the present, the Centre for Rural Health (CRH) is the South African partner in GROWNUT. The CRH entered into the project when the second cohort of students had started to write their project proposals for their master's theses. They were given the responsibility for co-supervising five out of 12 students. The staff at CRH were very familiar with projects in rural areas, but none of them had been in DRC, and none of them were French speaking.

The Centre for International Health at the **University of Bergen (UiB), Norway**, initiated the project, and has the main project responsibility towards Norad. The main project manager passed away in 2014. From the beginning, two professors, one post-doc and two PhD candidates were involved. I have been the project manager since August 2014. I entered into the project at the same time as the contract was

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<sup>1</sup> Growing Partnership for Higher Education and Research in Nutritional Epidemiology in DR Congo

<sup>2</sup> The Norwegian Programme for Capacity Development in Higher Education and Research for Development

<sup>3</sup> The Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation

signed with Norad. From the UiB side today, there are two professors involved in addition to me, one who have been involved since the very beginning of the project, and one entered into the project in 2015.

	2013				2014				2015				2016				2017				2018				2019				2020			
	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4
1st cohort												Popo																				
2nd cohort																Popo																
3rd cohort																				Popo												
4th cohort																								Popo								
Security problems Kinshasa																																
<b>Project management</b>																																
KSPH	MA																				MM											
UKZN	MC				FV								CH																			
UiB	JB		MC		AH																											

Figure 1: Timeline of GROWNUT - cohorts and management

## GROWNUT: The master’s program

The master’s program is a two-year program. In the first year, there are 18 different modules (see Table 1). The last module in the first year is *Research Methods* – the main aim of that module is for students to write a first draft of the research protocol for their master’s thesis. In the second year, the students first have an internship period in a rural area in Popokabaka in Kwango Province, 400 km southeast of Kinshasa (see Figure 2). In this phase, the students finalize their research protocols and their ethical declaration. The students conduct data collection in Popokabaka immediately after the internship period. The internship and data collection last for four to five months, and the rest of the second year is to finalize the master’s thesis.

Table 1: Overview of modules in Nutrition Epidemiology

Modules 1 <sup>st</sup> year	Hours	Responsible partner
Computer Science and the Internet	18	KSPH
Scientific English	60	KSPH
Nutritional English	30	KSPH
Research and Ethics Considerations	30	KSPH
Computer Literacy	60	KSPH
Basic Biostatistics 1+2	165	KSPH
Principles of Nutrition	60	KSPH/UKZN
Nutrition Problems	60	UKZN
Nutrition Assessment/Measures	120	UKZN
Epidemiology 1+2	150	KSPH
Qualitative Research Introduction	30	UiB
Food Production and Nutrition Security	30	KSPH
Global Nutrition	30	UiB
Hygiene and Nutrition	45	KSPH
Climate Change and Nutrition	30	UiB/UKZN
Gender and Nutrition	30	UiB
Principles of Management	30	KSPH
Research Methods	90	KSPH/UiB

For the first and second cohorts of students, the three collaborating universities were responsible for teaching different modules. For the second cohort, Congolese lecturers were involved in all modules. At the time for teaching the third and the fourth cohorts, the security situation in DRC deteriorated, and teachers from South Africa and Norway were not able to travel to Kinshasa (see Figure 1). This meant that Congolese lecturers took over the responsibility for teaching all the modules for the third and fourth cohorts. However, the system for the supervision continued, with co-supervisors from South Africa and Norway for all the students.

In the following section, I will describe the challenges we faced with supervision of the first two cohorts, and then describe the measures we took for the next two cohorts.

## Challenges

### Unfortunate situations – security, loss of project partners

In September 2016, the *Independent National Electoral Commission* in DRC announced that the presidential election was postponed until 2018. This led to a number of protests in DRC, and the consequence for GROWNUT was that all travels from partners from South Africa and Norway stopped from September 2016 to February 2019. As shown in Figure 1, the security challenges happened at the same time as the change of project management at UKZN. This meant that none of the UKZN partners was able to meet face-to-face either with the students they were going to supervise, or with the main supervisors from DRC. Some of the co-supervisors from UiB had met with some of the students from the second cohort before September 2016. However, this was before the supervisor relationship was

established; thus the UiB supervisors also experienced the situation that they did not know the students they were going to supervise.

## Acquaintance between students and supervisors

Lecturers from Norway and DRC taught the *Research Methods* module in Kinshasa for the first and second cohorts. By the end of the module, all students had a zero-draft proposal for their theses. The students were then allocated to supervisors. All students had one supervisor from DRC and one from either South Africa or Norway. The allocation of students to the South African and Norwegian partners was done in a way where the person responsible in DRC distributed a list of the students and topics to the partners at UKZN and UiB, and the selection was done related to the competence of the potential supervisors.

The co-supervisors received the zero draft of the proposal. In the first cohort, there were ten students. Three of them were co-supervised by UKZN, and the remaining seven by UiB. All the co-supervisors met with the students face to face, and in most cases also met with the main supervisor from KSPH. The allocation of students from the second cohort happened just after the change in project management at UKZN, in August 2016. Out of 11 students, UKZN was responsible for co-supervising five of them, and UiB co-supervised the remaining six.

The communication between students and co-supervisors was mainly by e-mail. In most cases, the students sent their drafts to the co-supervisors for comments. Sometimes, they copied in the main supervisor, but this was not always the case.

## Expectations

What is required for a master's thesis? This was one of the big questions. We were supervisors from three different universities, with three different traditions. At what level should the scholarly content be? How long should it be? Are there a minimum number of references needed for the literature review? What about the language – should the supervisors be responsible for bringing the thesis up to an acceptable level? What are the responsibilities for main supervisors and co-supervisors?

These questions circulated among the co-supervisors, not least when new partners came in for the second cohort. The communication between the main and the co-supervisors was arbitrary – for some students it worked well, for others not.

## Language

The teaching language at KSPH is French; however, it was decided that for Nutrition Epidemiology, the teaching language should be English. The students were also encouraged to write their theses in English. This was to get a community of Congolese scholars in nutrition who could relate to the international community more easily, as well as to make the collaboration between the three universities easier. One module of *Scientific English* was included in the curriculum (see Table 1).

For the fieldwork, there was an additional language issue. All the students speak Lingala, many also Swahili. However, the local language in Popokabaka is Yaka. This implies that, in most cases, the students needed an interpreter or local field workers for their data collection. They had to translate the data from Yaka or Lingala to French. Most of them analysed the data in French, and then translated the results to English for their thesis.

Most of the students struggled with the languages. For the supervisors, it has often been hard to judge whether the problems with the proposals and the theses were related to scholarly content or to language issues. Only one of the co-supervisors was a native English speaker, and only two of the co-supervisors could communicate in French. In general, the students struggled even more with oral English than written. Therefore, the supervision was more efficient by email than by Skype or WhatsApp.

## Timelines

No clear instructions were given from KSPH to the co-supervisors about timelines for the master's thesis writing. We all knew that the internship and data collection were done in the period from December to April, and that the theses should be handed in for evaluation in October. However, there were a number of deadlines along the way. In addition, the proposals had to get ethical clearance from UniKin. The students could not do this before they obtained approval from both their main supervisor and co-supervisor. The process was not clearly explained to the co-supervisors, which resulted in a rush of proposals submitted to the supervisors at the same time, with very short deadlines for feedback. After the fieldwork, some students communicated regularly, others more rarely. However, in October, a big rush came, again with very short timelines. The deadline for their final submission approached. The co-supervisors were informed about the deadlines only one week ahead. However, the deadlines, which were said to be fixed, showed a certain degree of flexibility. So, while some students managed to finish by November, others did not finish until February the following year. The uncertainty of the timelines created frustration among the supervisors.

## Knowledge of the study site

GROWNUT established a rural study site in Popokabaka in Kwango region (see Figure 2). For the first cohort, only four out of ten students did go to Popokabaka. For different reasons, the remaining six

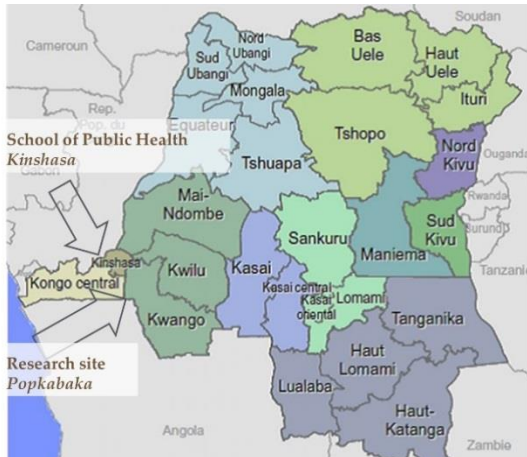


Figure 2: Map DR Congo with GROWNUT research site

students conducted their data collection for their master's thesis in Kinshasa or other areas outside of Kwango region. Two of the Popokabaka students were co-supervised by UKZN, and two by UiB. Even though two of the Norwegian supervisors went to Popokabaka, it was another supervisor from UiB who ended up supervising the two Popokabaka students. However, she had met both students face to face, and had a very good knowledge about DRC. The co-supervisor from UKZN met with the students he supervised in Popokabaka.

For the second cohort, all the students except one went to Popokabaka for their data collection. However, because of the security challenges, their trip was delayed, and somewhat shortened. For the same reasons, none of the co-supervisors went to Popokabaka. Of the 11 students, only two of them were co-supervised by someone that had ever been to Popokabaka.

The challenges faced resulted in some concrete responses that I will present in the next section.

## Interventions

As mentioned, the responsible partners from South Africa changed during the second cohort. With that change, it was obvious that we needed to take some measures to try to alleviate some of the above-mentioned challenges. Two of the measures were to arrange a meeting point for the supervisors, and to arrange proposal-writing workshops for the students and the supervisors.

## Courses for supervisors

In March 2017, we arranged a one-week supervision workshop in Durban. The workshop was tailor-made for GROWNUT. The project managers from all three sites participated, as well some supervisors, but not all from all three universities. In total, there were eight participants.

The South African partners arranged the workshop. A resource person in Teaching and Learning from UKZN guided the workshop. As an outsider, he was in a position to ask all the questions that we as project members more or less took for granted. The main aim of the workshop was to bring us to a common understanding of the master's thesis in nutrition epidemiology from KSPH.

The main achievements from the workshop were:



**Timelines:** We did a full mapping the GROWNUT project steps and processes. This enabled us to develop a common understanding of the timeline for the master's degree process at KSPH. It was not least important that the partners from Norway and South Africa developed an understanding of the different deadlines at KSPH related to the master's students.

**Common standards:** At the end of the workshop, we had developed a clear guide for an outline of a thesis, as well as concrete standards. These included:

A master's thesis does not require **originality**. The student must demonstrate the ability to identify a problem, conceptualise a study, collect and analyse data and write up findings in an appropriate format.

Criteria to guide **topic selection** included: Relevance (broadly) to the field/context; research site; timeframe for data collection; access to participants/sources; personal circumstances; ethical clearance; cost; scale; specialised skills or equipment; availability of phenomenon/cases/sample; coherence between topic and design

**Protocol structure:** Student name; Degree; Title; Table of contents; List of tables and figures; List of acronyms and abbreviations; Introduction: Context and background, problem statement, rationale; Literature review (including theoretical/conceptual framework); Research question and/or hypothesis; Goal, main objectives and specific objectives; Methodology: Study site, study design, sampling, data collection, data analysis, definition of concepts and variables, ethical considerations, limitations; Timelines and budgets (exclude for thesis); References; Annexures: Permission letters, informed consent, data collection instruments, ethical clearance certificate.

**Guidelines developed for master's thesis:** 100 days of six hours per day work; 12,000-15,000 words (excluding figures, tables, references and annexures); 12-pt font (preferably Times New Roman); 1.5-line spacing; 2.5 cm margin all round; Vancouver reference style; expected number of references: 40-60 (minimum 70% peer-reviewed sources within the last ten years and seminal texts).

**Co-supervision:** We agreed that, in principle, all the students should have two supervisors. The main supervisor should be from DRC, and the co-supervisor from either South Africa or Norway. In all written communication with the student, both supervisors should be included. We also discussed the possibilities for having joint supervision sessions via Skype.

**Language:** The main language at the master's program was English. As stated before, that was a challenge for many of the students. In the workshop, we agreed that the supervisors should not act as language editors. We therefore agreed to allocate project funds to a professional language editor in South Africa. We agreed to offer the students the possibility of getting the final version of the thesis language edited.

## Workshops for students and supervisors

As indicated above, the matching of students and supervisors was a challenge for the first two cohorts – both in that the supervisors did not know the students, and that the process of developing research protocols was done a couple of months before the supervisors were allocated to the students.

A measure taken to deal with some of these issues was to modify the *Research Methods* module (see Table 1). A teacher from Kinshasa and one from Bergen were teaching the module for the first two cohorts. However, for the third cohort, the security situation in Kinshasa did not allow any foreigners to enter DRC. We therefore decided to arrange the *Research Methods* module in Durban as a two-week workshop, and bring all the students there. We arranged one workshop for the students in the third cohort in September 2017, and another workshop for the fourth cohort in March 2019.

The aim for the workshop was the same as for the *Research Methods* module: to develop the draft proposal for their master's theses. In addition, the workshop intended to create a stronger link between the supervisors and the students, to improve the quality of the proposal and to give the students an opportunity to practice English. A resource person in Teaching and Learning from UKZN, who had also facilitated the supervision workshop, led the workshop. In addition, supervisors from UKZN, UniKin and UiB were present and active during the workshop. All the students came with an idea of a topic they wanted to work with before the workshop started.

During the workshop, each student presented the proposal three times:

1. The first presentation was on the second day of the workshop. Here they presented the background, rationale, research topic and the research questions.
2. The second presentation was the first day of the second week. Here the student presented a refined version of the first presentation, in addition to hypothesis, research methodology and a list of five relevant articles.
3. The third presentation was at the end of the second week – the student presented for the group the whole proposal that had been reviewed by a peer and supervisor.

In all the three rounds of presentation, the student got feedback from all the supervisors, and from their student colleagues. We matched the students and the supervisors after the second presentation. All the students got two supervisors, one main supervisor from Kinshasa, and one co-supervisor from either Durban or Bergen. For most students, at least one of the supervisors was present in Durban.

We discussed with the students the expected nature of the contact between the student and their supervisors. The main responsibility for contact should be with the student. The students were encouraged always to include both supervisors in the correspondence. We told the students that they could expect a maximum of three rounds of comments on their proposal, and on each chapter of their thesis.

## Results

Did arranging workshops enable us to do something constructive about the challenges we faced? We are planning to conduct an internal evaluation of the project in 2019/2020. There, we will access the voices of the students and supervisors from all three countries. The reflections about the results in this paper are therefore the viewpoints of one Norwegian supervisor.

### Acquaintance between student and supervisor

The possibility of giving feedback on the proposal from an early stage was very important. When supervising the students from the first two cohorts, it took me quite some time to understand the content of projects in the students' proposals. I entered into the scene in a phase where a number of conditions were already set, and therefore could not take such an active role in the development of the study. In addition, I did not know the students; some of them I had met briefly, others I had never met.

For the students I supervised in the third and fourth cohorts, these conditions had changed. Having the possibility to follow the project from the vague idea until it became a proposal with clear goals and a feasible methodology, gave me as supervisor a stronger ownership of the project. As a supervisor, I saw it as a great advantage to be part of the development of the research proposal from the very beginning. In addition, being together with the students for a period of two weeks also gave the opportunity to learn to know the students to a certain degree.

### Expectations

For the first two cohorts of students, I more or less followed my intuitions in judging what was to be expected. My experience in supervising was from master's students at the University of Oslo, as well as from peer-reviewing academic articles in a number of journals, and peer-reviewing writings from colleagues. For the two first cohorts, I took for granted that the internal supervisors in Kinshasa would take responsibility for meeting the requirements at KSPH. It was, however, never stated what these requirements were. The *Guidelines for the master's thesis* agreed on in the workshop for supervisors were thus very helpful, not least to know what the minimum requirement for a thesis should be. These included how many pages, how many references, and what content we could expect for the master's theses. We continued to talk about the expectations in the two proposal-writing workshops with the students. The supervisors from all three universities were involved in discussing all the proposals. By doing so, we also developed an idea of how we commonly judged the approaches. The atmosphere of being open in the discussions of which methods the student should use to solve the different research questions was important for building a common platform for the expectation. This could easily have turned into a 'turf war' where people could have started to defend their own interests. However, my impression was that we managed to create a sense of mutual learning among the supervisors and students.

## Language

Bringing the students to a workshop abroad, namely to Durban in South Africa, forced them to talk English. In the first workshop, we had planned a number of lectures in the first week, with more interactive teaching in the second week. What we experienced was that many of the students struggled with the language, and did not fully grasp the content of the teaching. It was much more effective when the students started to talk themselves. This we used in the last workshop for the students; we encouraged the students to be much more active from the very beginning of the workshop. In addition, we found it quite useful that the Congolese supervisors could intervene in French if it was obvious that the students did not understand the English.

In the first workshop for the students, we found that some of the students struggled so much with the language, that they were encouraged to write their theses in French; however, they could then not get any supervision from South Africa or Norway. This would have been a much harder decision to take if the students had not attended the workshop and had the chance to demonstrate their language ability.

Another measure taken was that we started offering the students professional language editing. To a certain degree, this removed some of the burden from the supervisors from all three institutions. However, it remains a challenge to understand whether it is the scholarly content or the language that is the main problem for some of the students.

However, we have experienced that some of the students, who have really been struggling with the language, have participated in international conferences, presented their results in English, and even asked questions in the plenary sessions.

## Timelines

During the workshops, we discussed the detailed progression of the master's thesis in as much detail as possible. This included the deadline for the ethical approval, the period for fieldwork and procedure for submitting the final thesis. However, there are still challenges for the co-supervisors from abroad in fully understanding the different deadlines. There are some external reasons for this; one is the political unrest that DRC experienced up to the presidential election in December 2018, another relates to periods of strikes at the University in Kinshasa. Both occurrences have hampered the agreed deadlines.

Another factor is that, after the students return from their fieldwork and data collection, many of them return to their place of origin to finalize the writing from home. They do this mainly for economic reasons (it is cheaper for the students to stay at home); in addition, many of them have family and work obligations. Objectively, the idea of allowing the students to travel home in the writing period is not optimal. Many of the students disappear from the radar for longer or shorter periods. As a supervisor sitting far away from the students, I know exactly when someone has pushed them in Kinshasa. After maybe months of silence, suddenly all the students approach the Norwegian or South African co-supervisors within the same week, expecting to get feedback within a very short deadline.

## Knowledge of study site

Most of the students from the third and fourth cohorts went to Popokabaka for their fieldwork. However, the security situation in DRC did not allow any foreigners from the project to travel to the country before the end of the fieldwork for the fourth cohort. During the workshops in Durban, we spent a substantial amount of time discussing what was achievable (or not) in the area. Both workshops were attended by former students who had been in Popokabaka before and therefore knew the area. In addition, some of the students originated from Popokabaka and could inform the other students about the situation. The fourth cohort students all received brief supervision on-site in Popokabaka in June 2019 – this was when they had all more or less finalized their data collection.

## Conclusion

The expectations were clearer and the acquaintance between the supervisor and the students improved with the workshops in Durban. Still, there is room for improvements. The regularity in the contact between student and supervisors, and between supervisor and co-supervisor is still very arbitrary.

However, we have seen that most of the students in the program succeed to finish their masters. So far, we have the results from the three first cohorts - where 31 out of 33 students have finished their master in nutrition epidemiology – so far one has failed, and one is delayed. The results from the eight students in the 4<sup>th</sup> cohort will come by the end of 2019.

From the point of view being a supervisor from abroad, I have the impression of being more hands on the research work of the two last cohorts. The three workshops have created a ground for common understanding among the supervisors from the three countries.

For security reasons we had to take the students abroad – I think this strengthened their language knowledge, and the concentration about the work in the two-week period. Even if the security situation has improved, I will encourage bringing the students away together with the supervisors for such workshops. If there are limited economic resources, a cheaper alternative is to bring the supervisors from all collaborating universities to the location where the students are.

Supervision across borders have some challenges that is different from supervising students on campus – however, it hopefully widens the horizon of both the students and the supervisors.