



SUPERVISORS' EXPERIENCES IN SUPERVISING POSTGRADUATE EDUCATION STUDENTS' DISSERTATIONS AND THESES AT THE ZIMBABWE OPEN UNIVERSITY (ZOU)

Onias Mafa¹
Tichaona Mapolisa²

ABSTRACT

Supervision of students' dissertations and theses is by no means a small task for Open and Distance Education supervisors. Supervisors have diverse research backgrounds, expertise and experience (Pearce, 2005). Some supervisors appear to be more comfortable with the supervision of qualitative research, while others prefer supervising quantitative research instead. Apart from the methodological inclinations of supervisors, ODL research supervision faces challenges that are slightly different from those experienced by supervisors in conventional universities. Most of the challenges in ODL revolve around the distance between the student and the supervisor and problems related to ICT accessibility and affordability, low adoption rate of technology, unreliable postal services, inter alia. It is hoped that the conduct of this study will generate worthwhile knowledge regarding moving towards relevant meanings in the provision of education through ODL. The study adopted a case study design complemented by document analysis. Twenty five ZOU lecturers (from the Faculty of Arts and Education) with experience in the supervision of postgraduate research were conveniently sampled and interviewed. Document analysis was limited to the report of Higher Degrees Supervisors' Convocation of 2011, Reports on Higher Degrees Proposal Defense Sessions of 2010 and 2011 and Examiners' Reports on PGDE and MEd research projects. Data were analysed using grounded theory. Supervisors were excited about seeing their students mature into independent and competent researchers, whose findings could extend the frontiers of knowledge. Time could be a limiting factor especially when dealing with struggling students. Supervisors' experiences revealed that students were experiencing challenges in conducting research – most aspects of research were problematic, while other challenges were

¹ Senior lecturer in the Faculty of Arts and Education of the Zimbabwe Open University, Bulawayo Region, P.O. Box 3550, Bulawayo. E-mail : oniasmafa@gmail.com, o_mafa@yahoo.com

² Senior lecturer and National Programme Leader in the Faculty of Arts and Education of the Zimbabwe Open University, PO Box MP1119 Mount Pleasant, Harare. E-mail: tichmapolisa@yahoo.co.uk, tichmap@mail.com

linked to students' personalities – underestimating commitment and effort needed to produce a good research report, propensity to reproduce other scholars' research reports and not consulting supervisors regularly. Some supervisors felt that failure to consult regularly could be a result of the transport costs involved and network connectivity problems especially for rural-based students. Regular research workshops and seminars, maintaining data bases of research conducted in the past in the University, encouraging students to take part in collaborative research with their supervisors, supervisors encouraged to have working knowledge of both research paradigms as well as research designs applicable to both research paradigms, supervisors to be actively involved in research were some of the recommendations.

Key Words: Supervisors, Postgraduate, Dissertation, Thesis

INTRODUCTION

At ZOU, dissertations and theses are mandatory. The university offers two types of postgraduate research. The first type is faculty based. Under this type postgraduate students are expected to conduct research in partial fulfillment of their diplomas and degrees' requirements. Postgraduate programmes falling under this category are Postgraduate Diploma in Education (PGDE) and Master of Education (MEd) degree. The duration of research under this type is two semesters. The second type consists of Higher Degrees - Master of Philosophy (MPhil) and Doctor of Philosophy (DPhil). These are managed by the Directorate of Higher Degrees, based at ZOU's National Centre. MPhil research degrees should be completed between 2 – 5 years, while the duration of DPhil research degrees is between 3 – 8 years. Supervisors for the Higher Degrees are drawn from ZOU's own staff and sister universities in Zimbabwe and neighbouring countries. To be a supervisor for Higher Degrees at ZOU, one should be a holder of an earned doctorate, while for PGDE and MEd supervision, Masters qualification suffices. Higher Degrees are research-based through ODL. The Directorate of Higher Degrees is responsible for allocating students to supervisors. This is accomplished by circulating names of students and their tentative topics to supervisors to indicate the students they would like to supervise in order of preference. Once this has been done, the Director does the final allocation by taking into cognizance the supervisors' own interests, their preferred research methodologies and the students' research topics and preferred methodologies. Once allocated supervisors, the students begin working on their proposals, an exercise which culminates in proposal presentation and defense. The panel of supervisors, basing on the presentations, decides whether or not the students should proceed to the next step of their research.

This paper explores the supervisors' experiences in supervising students conducting research in the two types of research programmes. It is envisaged that such experiences may help unmask challenges being encountered by students as well as exposing the students' limitations in conducting research. Such information may then be used to design mitigatory strategies, to enable

postgraduate students to successfully complete their theses and dissertations and generate information that extends the frontiers of knowledge.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Conceptualisation of Research Supervision

Research supervision is analogous to the duties of a mid-wife in the labour process. In this analogue, the supervisor is the mid-wife, who assists a pregnant woman (the student), to give birth (conduct research), to a child (dissertation/thesis). In concordance with this analogue, Moira (2011: online) defines research supervision as: ‘. . . a form of teaching that arises out of specialist research identities. . . It includes a commitment to maintaining standards as a reviewer and an examiner as well as to being a supervisor’.

The duties of a professional supervisor are multifarious (Gwarinda, 2010; Wakefield 2011: online). These may include:

- Guiding students to realize their aspirations – the supervisor is a facilitator not a barrier;
- Utilising the students’ accrued knowledge;
- Encouraging candidates pursue what they want without jealousy or disdain;
- Taking cognizance of the candidates’ problems and counsel them;
- Monitoring the progress of the research and to ensure that the student is mastering the appropriate research skills and that the thesis/dissertation is likely to come to a successful conclusion;
- Serving as a good role model of what a professional researcher does;
- Developing a good working relationship with the student, with the supervisor providing encouragement, personal support and guidance at all stages; and
- Initially functioning largely like a tutor, providing much training and help. Subsequent stages might find the supervisor operating more like a coach, building up skills and confidence, and then finally acting more like a colleague and equal.

In light of the above views, we can say that research supervision is the scholarly assistance, advice, teaching, guidance, encouragement, mentoring, tutoring, training, counseling, critiquing and motivation rendered a student by a supervisor, who is usually a fundi in the subject under investigation. The relationship between supervisors and their supervisees is epitomized in the Chinese proverb: *To know the road ahead, ask those coming back.*

RESEARCH SUPERVISION IN OPEN AND DISTANCE LEARNING

Open and distance learning breaks the geographical barriers, availing educational opportunities to individuals and communities who for several reasons cannot attend conventional universities, thereby increasing their life chances (UNESCO, 2002). However, this advantage may come back to haunt the ODL institutions when it comes to research supervision. Distance between the student and the supervisor may become an issue, especially when dealing with students in need of constant

help and monitoring (Moir, 2011). This problem could be compounded by unreliable telecommunication, network connectivity problems, lack of ICT facilities in some remote areas, non-availability of electricity (Commonwealth of Learning International, 2001; Yusuf, 2006; Kashangura, 2011), limited ICT skills in students and supervisors (Ololube, 2006a) low adoption rate of new technologies by institutions, system malfunctioning (Chirume, 2011) and expenses incurred by rural-based students travelling to and from the supervisors for consultations.

Statement of the Problem

The study sought to explore the experiences of supervisors in the supervision of postgraduate students' research and how these experiences can inform practice?

Purpose of the Investigation

The study's aim was to unmask the challenges encountered by and limitations of postgraduate students in conducting research through the interrogation of the supervisors' experiences in supervising postgraduate research.

Research Questions

The study was guided by the following research questions:

- Basing on the experiences of supervisors, what are the challenges and limitations being experienced by postgraduate students in conducting research?
- How can the challenges and limitations experienced by students be addressed?

Research Objectives

- To use supervisors' experiences in supervising postgraduate students' research to unmask postgraduate students' challenges and limitations in conducting research.
- To explore strategies that the University can adopt in order to ameliorate the predicament postgraduate students find themselves in when conducting research.

Significance of the Study

The importance of this study lies in that if supervisors' research supervisory experiences illuminate challenges and limitations being experienced by postgraduate students, measures can be put in place to ensure that students leave the institution equipped with proper research skills, attitudes and ethics and that the research they will be undertaking while at the university, will generate new and useful knowledge, instead of conducting research because it is mandatory.

Limitations of the Study

The study was limited by the absence of the students' voices on their experiences in being supervised. However, researchers felt that triangulating data sources explicitly illuminated the students' challenges and limitations in conducting research.

Delimitations of the Study

The researchers delimited the investigation to establishing challenges faced and limitations displayed by postgraduate students in conducting research by examining the experiences of supervisors in supervising postgraduate research. Data were collected from lecturers drawn from ZOU's five of the ten regions. The following documents were also examined: Minutes of the Supervisors' Evaluation Meeting of December 2010, three MPhil and DPhil proposal defense reports from 2010 and two from 2011 and examiners' 2010 and 2011 semester one comments on PGDE and MEd research projects.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study adopted a qualitative methodology, and made use of case study and document analysis research designs. The methodology and the designs were selected because they afforded the participants to relive their supervisory experiences, allowing researchers to probe, pursuing *how* and *why* issues (Borgdan and Biklen, 1991; Borg and Gall, 1996). The population consisted of ZOU lecturers from the Faculty of Arts and Education. 25 lecturers were purposively sampled from ZOU's five regional centres. An interview guide was constructed to ensure that the interviews remained on track.

Face to face interviews were conducted with participants from Harare and Bulawayo regions, while telephone interviews were employed for participants stationed in Mashonaland West, Matabeleland South, and Manicaland Regions. Dictaphones were used to record the data. Recorded data were transcribed verbatim, and taken to participants for verification before data analysis. Data analysis was based on the grounded theory. Data analysis was preceded by data verification, segmenting, coding, enumeration, generation of master coding list, and categorizing data into themes and sub-themes. Data from interviews were complemented by data from minutes of evaluation convocation for supervisors, reports from proposal defense sessions and PGDE and MEd research projects' examiners' reports for the 2010 academic year and semester one of 2011.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Most supervisors agreed that supervising postgraduate students' research was enjoyable. '*Seeing students develop and achieve professionally*' and '*Observing a student grow into an independent researcher*' was satisfying. Supervisors described the satisfaction of working with enthusiastic people and many described the importance of students coming up with new knowledge.

Notwithstanding the above, supervisors were concerned with the time spent on supervision which was exacerbated by competing demands. Supervisors were cognizant that weaker students needed more attention. The importance of student characteristics – including persistence and capacity to work independently were singled out as crucial for successful completion of the theses/dissertations. Supervisors were comfortable working in their core areas of expertise.

Despite the supervisors' enthusiasm in supervision, they pointed out that their experiences show that most students had a lot of challenges and limitations. These were also evident during document analysis. Presented and discussed below are some of the challenges and limitations which frequently surfaced:

Crafting researchable topics: Submissions on this limitation ranged from the topics being too broad, too narrow, meaningless, and not focused. One supervisor retorted that: '*... on the breadth of research topics I always advise my students not to bite more than they can chew, neither should they bite too little, since they may finish chewing while their colleagues are still chewing*'. An example was also highlighted of a topic from a prospective DPhil candidate which was considered to be too broad; the topic was '*Land reform elsewhere in the world*'. Supervisors indicated that their first task after being allocated students was to assist them coming up with tentative researchable topics. As allude to earlier, in ODL distance may limit the effectiveness of the process in instances where ICT skills of students and supervisors are limited and where internet connectivity is unreliable.

Developing research proposals: Most supervisors concurred that most students had limitations in the development of proposals:- ranging from not knowing what to include in the background to the study and to the ethical considerations, albeit with varying degrees. Most students failed to identify the gaps in literature their proposed studies were to address. This usually led to poorly formulated problem statements. Concern was also raised on the ability of students to formulate research questions/sub-problems, with most questions being *what* questions. In most cases research objectives were not SMART. Supervisors' experiences indicated that while Limitations and Delimitations were usually included in proposals, their weight fell far short of postgraduate levels. Limitations involving money and time were given as common examples in most postgraduate proposals. Yet, as argued by interviewed supervisors, students were expected to come up with *methodological limitations* and explanations on how they intended to circumvent the perceived limitations. Coupled with Limitation shortcomings, delimitation challenges were also pointed out. The general feeling was that students indicate the physical boundaries/locations and the participations, without declaring their theoretical focus.

Literature Review: One supervisor lamented that:

Some of my students do not quite understand the purpose and need for a literature review in research. They are not critical in their review of related literature, they tend to summarise all they had read instead of highlighting major points showing strengths and weaknesses and how their present research fills the gap in research. They also do not know how to structure the chapter on literature review namely, themes, sub-themes and even chronology of the chapter.

Most of the supervisors' experiences indicated that challenges related to literature review were multiple, and included the following:

- students had problems identifying relevant literature;
- some could identify the literature, but had problems pruning the literature, i.e. selecting the literature closest to their investigations;
- students not critiquing the methodologies used in the research studies being reviewed;
- lack of synthesis of reviewed literature – the chapter on literature review ends up being a list of what this and that author says, without linking to own research;
- reviewing ancient literature sources that could have been overtaken by events;
- plagiarism/not acknowledging sources of information;
- referencing problems.
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Most of the challenges that were mentioned during interviews were also evident in proposal presentations sessions, as evidenced by comments such as:

The review of literature was not properly done. The candidate dwelt on the reasons for carrying out a review of related literature, not on the literature itself. .

. . The current review of related literature lacked scholarly content.

The reviewed literature should be extended by including sources found on the web, especially researches conducted by others and what ground they have covered. It should not duplicate what other researchers have documented.

The review of related literature needs to be theme based. The whole chapter needs to be redone, basing on themes.

The cited comments from proposal presentation sessions were in accord with responses from supervisors who formed the study sample. Information from both sources underscored the limitations and challenges that were displayed and faced by postgraduate students in conducting research. In our view, if the supervisors' experiences are anything to go by, the students' challenges in literature review affect the quality of their reports in a number of ways, *inter alia*: Students miss out on the methodological insights likely to be obtained from reviewed literature. Secondly, they may not be able to identify the gap in literature that their research will address – meaning that the capacity of their research to generate new knowledge will be limited. Thirdly, students may not be able to identify a plausible conceptual or theoretical framework to inform their research. Finally, students may not be able to discuss their findings in a scholarly way.

Identification/formulation of theoretical and/or conceptual framework: At MPhil and DPhil levels, students should either identify or formulate a theoretical framework or a conceptual framework that will inform their investigations. Most supervisors indicated that students had problems on this aspect of literature review as evidenced by comments such as:

The theoretical framework contributed nothing of value to the study and the candidate needed to re-configure it to make it more relevant to the study.

The theoretical framework focused on the human capital theory and the social theory but these two do not cover all the theoretical underpinnings of brain drain.

Methodological issues: Supervisors reiterated that this was probably the Achilles' heel of most students. One supervisor quipped:

There are many textbooks on social science methodology that are available to students. But most are essentially high on principles and concepts, but short on practical, hands-on suggestions, tips and illustrations. A result of this situation is that while the typical student can easily define and illustrate a concept, he or she finds it more difficult translating the concept into its measurable or observable indicators when actually conducting research.

Document analysis corroborated this assertion as shown by these quotations:

The methodology was not clear at all – it should either be quantitative or qualitative or a mixed methodology.

The candidate was not explicit on the research paradigm to be used.

The research design was given as emerging, which presupposed a qualitative research paradigm, but this was not what the candidate proposed.

There was the mistake to equate research design to methodology and that impression needed to be attended to urgently as it had been observed in other presentations.

Methodological limitations have far reaching ramifications on the study (Bogdan and Biklen, 1992; Borg and Gall, 1996; Kumar, 2005), since findings, interpretations, conclusions and recommendations are based on the product of research methodology.

Discussion and interpretation of findings: General sentiments were that students normally adopted surface analysis. It was noted that most students had difficulties cross referencing – using theoretical or conceptual framework and reviewed literature to buttress or refute their own findings. Another commonly cited limitation was that most students had problems interpreting the findings – their discussion of findings usually ended with what will be evident from the data. One supervisor remarked that:

Another problem that I have noticed is the inability of students to gather, analyse, and adequately present data in comprehensible manner. This trend often underscores their limitation in understanding the phenomena being studied and their ability to articulate to articulate and interpret their observation of the phenomena. This situation limits in-depth reporting and students' presentation ability in spite of all the efforts that might have gone into the data gathering process.

In our view, failure to discuss and interpret findings means that all the effort, time and resources invested by the student will have been wasted. Failure to interpret the findings may result in the student arriving at incorrect conclusions as well as suggesting inappropriate recommendations. As alluded to earlier, such shortcomings may result in the generation of information that may not extend the frontiers of knowledge.

Students at different levels of proficiency in research: In some universities, students do not undertake research at undergraduate level, as a result, such students will not be at the same level with those who will have obtained their undergraduate qualifications at ZOU, when admitted to the MPhil programme. Supervisors normally experience this challenge in candidates under their supervision. Faced with such a challenge, supervisors have to go back to basics of research – what research is, why conduct research, types of research and issues to deal with research methodologies. In ODL teaching these aspects of research to someone for the first time is not an easy task. Perhaps, there is need for an initial research course or module – say for a semester where all students are exposed to a course on research methods, before they embark on their research proposals.

Students underestimating the amount of effort and time required to produce a good research report: Apart from MPhil and DPhil degrees, all other research projects/dissertations should be done over two semesters, yet some students will want to undertake their research in one semester. Some supervisors corroborated this observation. At the end, students produce shoddy work or fail to meet the submission deadline.

Coping/reproducing/downloading research studies from the internet: In rare circumstances, supervisors indicated that this problem sometimes occur. Students make some few changes to the downloaded research reports, to suit their own circumstances. However, supervisors pointed out that a good knowledge of students under one's supervision may help tell if the work produced is reproduced or original work.

Students not consulting regularly: While not a common occurrence, supervisors reported that in some cases students do not consult regularly. As pointed out by one supervisor: '*One of my MEd students told me that this term I am very busy at school, so I will work on my project next semester*'. While another supervisor said, '*Last semester, my PGDE student only came to consult twice. I am worried because she has a lot of weaknesses especially on methodology. Can't get through to her because of network problems*'. Most supervisors concurred that usually work from such students will be having a lot of mistakes and inconsistencies. However, some supervisors pointed out that at times not consulting regularly could be due to circumstances beyond the students' control. One supervisor said: '*In this dollarized economy, and what civil servants take, frequent trips to town for consultation are a luxury many can hardly sustain*'. Yet another supervisor pointed:

One of my DPhil students is based in Gokwe, more than 300 km from where I am based. The student does not have ICT facilities, cell phone connectivity is a nightmare, postal services are unreliable and he is just a civil servant. Honestly, expecting such a student to consult regularly, borders on cruelty and student abuse.

Supervisors explained that there was no homogeneity in students' challenges and limitations – meaning that the challenges and limitations experienced by students were not uniform.

CONCLUSIONS

Supervisors' experiences revealed that most students experienced challenges in conducting postgraduate research.

- There are challenges related to the different aspects of theses/dissertations; and challenges emanating from the students' underestimation of the task involved in undertaking research.
- Supervisors' experiences also indicated that some students had unethical research practices such as plagiarism and reproducing works by other scholars and present them as their own.
- If supervisors' experiences as far as students' methodological challenges were anything to go by, some of the theses and dissertations produced by postgraduates are devoid of new knowledge.
- Supervisors felt that most students lacked research experiences and competencies because they were not actively involved in research as they were content with undertaking research for the sake of passing their course.
- Some supervisors appeared to be biased towards one research paradigm at the expense of the student during oral examinations. What they may view as students' limitations in conducting research, could be a reflection of their methodological shortcomings.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In our view, the challenges and limitations of students in conducting research as unmasked by the supervisors' experiences can be ameliorated by some of the following interventions:

- The university should conduct research workshops and seminars on the different aspects of research. The focal point of workshops could be to resource students on research skills, while seminars could be used to present with opportunities to present their different aspects of their research to colleagues and supervisors for the purposes of critiquing them, in a non-threatening platform, different from the evaluative proposal research sessions as is the case with higher research degrees. It is our view that seminars may be health discussion forums, generating lots of scholarly debate among students and their

supervisors. Such an approach may also clear a lot of grey areas in the minds of the participants (students and their supervisors). Supervisors may also learn a lot from their students. If attendance levels are high, seminars may provide supervisors with windows to pip into the personalities of their students and know them better.

- The issue of irregular consultations may be solved by coming to some understanding between both parties on how often students should consult. They do not necessarily have to always meet face-to-face, they may use online facilities as is usually the case with our higher degrees.
- The university should also consider a system model of research supervision, with set stages and severe monitoring.
- Supervisors should also counsel students and candidates under their supervision. We recommend that in the initial stages of the research supervision, supervisors discuss with their students their expectations as well as the effort and commitment required in order to produce good theses and dissertations.
- Students should be encouraged to give colleagues their research work for peer review before handing it to their supervisors.
- There is need for data bases on research that has been conducted in the University and in other sister universities. The data bases should be accessible to supervisors so that they can consult them at topic formulation stages, in order to advise those under their supervision accordingly. This could be complemented by the acquisition of software capable of detecting plagiarism.
- Supervisors can also google out topics brought to them by those under their supervision, to find out whether or not suggested topics have been done elsewhere.
- Supervisors need to be actively engaged in research related activities in which they can collaborate with their students so that they can perfect their research skills and at the same time rubbing their research skills on to their students.
- While most supervisors have own methodological inclinations, we recommend that they should have working knowledge of both qualitative and quantitative research methods, and their respective methods.
- We also strongly recommend replication of this study, triangulating methodologies. Future research should take into cognizance postgraduates' experiences of being supervised, *for it is the person putting on a tight shoe who knows where it hurts most*. Such an approach will provide the University data from both perspectives, resulting in well informed intervention strategies.

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AUTHORS' BIO-DATA

1. Onias Mafa (Dr):

He is a senior lecturer and Regional Programme Coordinator in ZOU's Bulawayo Region, in charge of PGDE and MEd (Educational Management) in the Department of Educational Studies, Faculty of Arts and Education at the Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU). He is also in the panel of Supervisors for the Higher Research Degrees at ZOU. Apart from research supervision, he takes part in the critiquing and evaluation of MPhil and DPhil proposals. He has published one novel, four poems (Mambo Press, Gweru) and co-authored four ZOU's BEd Management programme modules. A manuscript, in which he was the research coordinator in CODESREA's Comparative Research Network programme, has been accepted for publication in CODESREA's book series. An OSSREA book chapter that he co-authored has also been accepted for publication. He has

presented several papers at research conferences. He can be contacted at the Zimbabwe Open University (Bulawayo Region) PO Box 35550, Bulawayo or by E-mail: oniasmafa@gmail.com or o_mafa@yahoo.com or by cell: +263 773 724 793.



2. Tichaona Mapolisa (Mr.)

He is a senior lecturer and National Programme Leader for the Bachelor of Education (Educational Management) in the Department of Educational Studies, Faculty of Arts and Education at the Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU). He has published two research articles with refereed journal of the African Symposium. He co-authored seven modules for the Department of Education, Development Studies and Youth Studies in Development. He has presented ten papers at the Africana Womanism Conference (UZ - 16-17 October 2010), LASU International Conference (12 -15 May 2011) and Zimbabwe Open University International Conference (16-17 June 2011). He has also presented two papers for the Zimbabwe Open University Vice Chancellor's day (17 May 2011) and two papers at the ACDE International Conference in Tanzania (13-15 July 2011). He has content reviewed five modules for ZOU's Education Programmes. He can be contacted at the Zimbabwe Open University PO Box MP1119 Mount Pleasant, Harare or by E-mail: tichmapolisa@yahoo.co.uk or tichmap@gmail.com or by cell: +263 733 608 577

