

PROVISION OF RESEARCH SUPPORT SERVICES TO ODL LEARNERS BY TUTORS: A Focus on the Zimbabwe Open University's Bachelor of Education (Educational Management) Research Students' Supervision Experiences

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ABSTRACT

The study examined the ODL learners' perceptions of the quality of provision of research support services to the ODL learners by tutors. It focused on the Zimbabwe Open University's (ZOU) Bachelor of Education (Educational Management) research students' experiences. It was a qualitative multiple case study of four of the 10 Regional Centres of the ZOU. It purposively sampled 40 out of 160 research participants because they possessed desirable research characteristics for this study. The study was deemed significant in influencing tutors and policy makers to consider their research students' supervision experiences as a basis for improving the quality of services for future research supervision practices and research projects.

The study was guided by a two fold theory namely, the Facilitation Theory (Nyawaranda, 2005) and the Nurturing Theory (Anderson, Pay and Mac Laughlin, 2006). Both theories advocate for the need of the supervisors to give their students a big heart. In terms of research supervision services offered by tutors the study indicated the time students were offered to meet research supervisors, prompt returns of marked work, and tutor student motivation and counselling as key services.

In connection with the joys about research supervision, the students highly regarded: the manner in which tutors motivated them, tutors guidance in choosing research topic, tutor mentorship during research supervision and provision of workshops to polish up their research skills. In line with the challenges to the provision of research support services, three categories of challenges emerged.

First, student-related challenges included lack of time, lack of money, lack of library facilities, lack of motivation and commitment to do research, lack of adequate theory in the area being researched on and family problems.

Second, supervisor-related challenges included: too little direction, too little practical help given, too few meetings with students, no interest in topics and with students, lack of research skills and experience.

Third institution-related challenges included: lack of adequate statistics and research course sat undergraduate levels, lack of adequate courses in research methods and paradigms, exposure to research skills and experiences to name a few.

In a bid to revamp the provision of research services, students suggested the need to improved library facilities, install computers in the library, hire internet services and photocopy relevant research material to name a few. The study concluded that tutors provided average research support services to ODL learners. Students tended to enjoy research supervision if they are exposed to academically nourishing experiences.

Research support services were undermined by student related, supervisor related and institution related challenges. Students failed to visit their supervisors, libraries and purchase research materials due to lack of money. Students in rural areas do not have access to library facilities in their localities. The study recommended that tutors need to be trained, indicated and staff developed in the research support services area. ZOU needs to set up mobile libraries and internet facilities to service students in remote areas. ZOU needs to move its research support services a gear up by exposing students to time management skills.

Keywords: Research support services; tutors refer to research supervisors; research students' supervision.

INTRODUCTION

The study is about the provision of research support services to ODL learners by tutors: a focus on the Zimbabwe Open University's (ZOU's) Bachelor of Education (Educational Management) students' experiences. Background to the study, statement of the problem, research questions and significance of the study make up the first part of the study. Related literature review is second part of the study. Research methodology presents the fourth part of the study. Presentation and discussion of research findings become the fifth part of the study. Conclusions will be based on the research findings. Eventually, recommendations emerging from the study's findings and conclusions end the study.

BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

Research supervision can be both enjoyable and excruciating experiences to some growing research students and beginning researchers (Cresswell, 2005). Open and Distance Learners undertaking Bachelor of Education (Educational Management) in their final year are at the Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU) are attached to a single tutor or research supervisor. These tutors may be on full time or part time basis – although most of them constitute the latter. It is common knowledge that these tutors possess diverse research experiences and exposures. Diversity in research supervision experiences and exposure among tutors is one of the most intriguing challenges bedevilling universities (Pearce, 2005; Nyawaranda, 2005). It is against this background that universities and other institutions of higher learning are called upon to put their learners at the centre stage (Jegede, 1999, Benza, 1999). In a bid to achieve this noble and universities may do so by ensuring that all their students receive first class learner support services (McIlroy, 2003). Some support services to learners in conventional universities are usually provided during the semester and during the holiday because lecturers are always found at their university (Shumba, 2004). Also to extra tutorship in assignment and research as well as examination tips by the ever present tutors (Nyawaranda, 2005).

The preceding findings have managed to indicate the need for universities to justify their learners' needs second to none learner support services. They however did not pin point how research students in ODL settings could be supported. The current study investigated the degree of provision of research support services to ODL learner by tutors to the Bachelor of Education (Educational Management) research students at the ZOU.

It sought to particularise the nature and experiences of support services that ODL learners receive from ZOU tutors in the supervision of their research projects.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

The quality of research students' projects is largely determined by the quality research support services provided to students by their tutors and the university. Research students who are exposed to the right research experiences through appropriate research support services largely succeed in their studies (Cresswell, 2003). The researcher intended to explore the following research question: How does the provision of research support learners by tutors impact on the ZOU's Bachelor of Education (Educational Management) research students' experiences?

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The study sought to interrogate the following research questions:

- From an ODL learner's point of view, how do tutors provide research support services to ODL learners at the ZOU?
- How do ODL learners enjoy research supervision as a result of research support services provided to them by tutors?
- How are ODL learners challenged by research supervision as a result offered to them by tutors?
- How can the provision of research support services to ODL learners be revamped in a quest for raising the standards of research supervision and quality of research products at the ZOU's Department of Education?

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

The nature of research support services offered to ODL learners undertaking Bachelor of Education (Educational Management) and the research products is a clear indication of the quality of academic work going on at the ZOU. This study was important as it attempted to generate new knowledge in the area research support services offered to ODL learners based on the research students' supervision experiences.

The conduct of the study would also go a long way in influencing tutors and policy makers at the ZOU to consider their research students' supervision experiences as a basis for improving the quality of service of future research supervision practices and research projects. It was also valuable to assist tutors explore by means of self reflection and reflection on feedback from others, and how they could go round challenges in research supervision.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In terms of theory, this study was guided by two theories namely, the Facilitation Theory that was advanced by Nyawaranda (2005) and the Nurturing Theory that was put forward Anderson, Day and MacLaughlin (2006).

The Facilitation Theory

According to Nyawaranda (2005) the Facilitation Theory assumes that tutors perform a fold function in the supervision of the students' research projects. First, they arrange meetings with the students. Second, they show interest in the topic. Third, they give practical help to the learner.

Fourth, they guide the learners while the tutor is supposed to perform the above roles. Nyawaranda (2005) points out that students experience challenges regarding meeting tutors, feedback of knowledge of results, tutors absence from work (Department learning noco-supervisors). The facilitation theory is based on the research students' supervision experiences from conventional university settings.

Its assumptions are not tailored to ODL situations. It was therefore in the interests of this study to ascertain the degree of such findings compare with ZOU's students' experiences in the supervision process.

The Nurturing Theory

The Nurturing Theory according to Anderson et al (2006) is about developing research students to reach the fullest potential. Just like in the facilitation theory, the tutor is a guide, a helper and a facilitator as well. The goal of a research supervisor is to groom the student so that one becomes an independent learner researcher. In performing this role, the research supervisor according to Anderson et al (2006) is constrained lack of supervision experience and lack of relevant research skills. The foregoing observations seem to lack context specificity of the Third World ODL settings since they were made in the First World. The onus was on the current researcher to explore the degree to which the tenets of the Nurturing Theory apply to the provision of research support services at the ZOU's Department of Education.

METHODOLOGY

The present study employed a case study as a research strategy. It was a qualitative multiple case study of four of the ZOU's 10 Regional Centres. The studied Regional Centres were Harare, Mashonaland Central, Mashonaland East and Mashonaland West. One of the greatest advantages of a qualitative case study was it is highly interactive in nature (Punch, 2004). It enabled the researcher to gather dense data in connection with the quality of provision of research support services to ODL learners by tutors with particular reference to the ZOU's Bachelor of Education (Educational Management) research students' experiences. Thus, the researcher chose this method as it permitted the students to say exactly what and how they felt about the quality of provision of research support services offered to them by tutors at the ZOU. According to Gill and Johnson (2002), a case study is renowned for theory building. This was one of the primary goals of this study. The use of a multiple case study enhanced the research findings to be generalised to similar situations. The target population for this study was 160 Bachelor of Education (Educational Management) research students in their final year in the studied ZOU's Regional Centres during their first semester of 2011.

A sample of 40 research students comprising 20 male and 20 female students was extracted using a purposive sample. The researcher used purposive sample to select research participants by borrowing Thomas and Nelson's (2001) view that a purposive sample is helpful when selecting respondents who possess desirable research characteristics.

Research data were gathered using in depth questionnaire that had open -ended questions. Such questions enabled students to open up as much as possible in order to indicate the exact nature of the provision of research support services that their tutors offer at the ZOU. To that end, Thomas and Nelson (2001) highly regard the use of in-depth questionnaires for their ability to gather rich, thick and meaningful data, although they run the risk of having some of their sections left unanswered. Research data were contented analysed using themes that emerged from the research. The data presentation and analysis was in two sections namely demographic data (research participants' gender and age) and actual research findings.

FINDINGS

A total of 40 Bachelor of Education (Educational Management) research students from the four select ZOU Regions participated in the study. Their average age was 35,6 years. 50% of them were male and the rest were female. Their highest professional qualification was a Diploma in Education and their highest academic qualification was Ordinary Level. All the research participants were married, thus, they had some family responsibilities to undertake. Also most of the research participants (90%) were employed in the public service as teachers and lecturers and (10%) were employed as soldiers' police or prison officers.

ACTUAL RESEARCH FINDINGS

The study came up with findings that were placed into the following four categories:

- Research support services provided by the tutor from the students' point of view.
- ODL learners' joys as a result of research support services provided by tutors during research supervision.
- ODL learners' challenges to/sorrows in research supervision as a result of research supervision as a result of research support services provided by their tutors.
- Strategies to revamp the provision of research support services provided by tutors at the ZOU with the intent to raise standards in research supervision and the quality of research projects in the ZOU's Department of Education.

Research Support Services Provided by the Tutors to Students at the ZOU

In the open ended responses the research participants (students) put forward striking opinions regarding the research support services their tutors offer them. Chief among the services they indicated were:

- Time to meet students for research supervision purposes.
- Tutorials to carry out research.
- Provision of direction in the research process.
- Returning of marked work.
- Referring the student to extra relevant sources of information.
- Motivating students to learn to research and research to learn.
- Counselling students with problems.

Students provided with such services coupled with other services not listed above could enjoy research supervision to a great extent. The provision of such services is situation specific because ODL learners are housed at a campus.

ODL learners' joys as a result of Research Support Services Provided by Tutors during Research Supervision at the ZOU

The students indicated that they were particularly happy with:

- The manner in which tutors motivated them to research to learn.
- The guidance their tutors give them in choosing a research topic.
- The mentorship approach exhibited by their tutors during research supervision.
- Research workshops that guide the tutors and students.

Students can give proper attention to their research projects if they are enjoying the research supervision. They also become inspired and motivated if the research support services stimulate their academic appetites.

ODL learners' Challenges to/Sorrows in Research Supervision as a Result of Research Support Services Provided by Tutors During Research Supervision at the ZOU

While some research students tend to enjoy research supervision, others feel challenged. Research participants indicated that their challenges or sorrows that ODL learners experienced as a result of research supervision are three fold. They are student -related, institution -related and supervisor -related in spite of the aforementioned research support services. It emerged from the findings that the student -related challenges included:

- Lack of time due to poor time management skills.
- Lack of money.
- Lack of library resources.
- Lack of commitment and motivation to do research.
- Lack of adequate theory in the area being researched on.
- Students' failure to meet regularly with the supervisor.
- Family problems/commitments.

The observation by the researcher is that the research student should be the one who takes the lead in overcoming the above mentioned student related challenges.

Supervisor-related Challenges

In connection with supervisor related challenges, the students pointed out the following as challenges they experience when working with research supervisors:

- Too little direction.
- Too little practical help given.
- Too few meetings with students.
- No interest in topics.
- Failure to return work promptly.
- No interest with students.
- Lack of research experience.
- Lack of research skills.

The present researcher feels that provision of research support services are compromised in view of the above supervisor- related challenges.

Institution-related Challenges

Institution related challenges also militate against the quality of provision of research support services. Students presented the following as some of the institution related challenges:

- Lack of adequate statistics courses at undergraduate level.
- Lack of adequate courses in research methods and paradigms.
- Lack of internet services.
- Lack of research journals and publications.
- Lack of exposure of tutors research skills.
- Lack of exposure to computers.
- Imposing research topics on the students within a prescribed time frame.
- Lack of organising research workshops for tutors and students.

How the University could Revamp the Provision of Research Support Services

Students were asked to suggest any area they felt need prompt revamp. In their narrations they preferred:

- 'Improve library facilities.'
- 'Prolong the period of carrying out research from the current 2 semesters to 3.'
- 'Install computers in the library'.
- 'Hire internet services'.
- 'Employ typists to type research projects to generate money for the Region'.
- 'Photocopy relevant journals'.

The researcher feels that the provision of the above services is worthwhile, but it is subject to the availability of funds.

DISCUSSION

The study sought to find out the quality of provision of research support services to ODL learners by tutors focusing on the Bachelor of Education (Educational Management) research students' experiences. The findings are discussed in relation to research support services provided by tutors, students' joys in research supervision, challenges associated with research supervision and revamping the research support services to ODL learners.

RESEARCH SERVICES PROVIDED BY TUTORS

Research students appear to be content with the time they meet their research supervisors during supervision. In practice, this ranges from 2 to 10 hours per week which appears to be inconsistent with Cone and Foster's (1993) recommendation of 20 hours a week. The researcher subscribes to Cone and Foster's (1993) recommendation that proposes the need to provide research students with more contact time if ever they are to produce research projects of very good quality.

Twenty five students indicated tutorials to carry out research as one of the research support services provided by the tutors to research students. According to the Bachelor of Education (Educational Management) Programmes course structure such tutorials take place during the first and second years of the programme.

Perhaps the above students underwent effective tutorials in research and statistics courses, contrary to what Cone and Foster (1993) point out as not having enough research and statistics courses at undergraduate level. Research supervisors play a vital role in filling up the gap noted by Cone and Foster (1993). Research supervisors would then play a multi-faceted role in providing students with direction in the research process, counselling students with family or work related problems and motivating students to research to learn. Students can be motivated to enjoy research of tutors promptly return marked work.

Joys of Learners

ODL learners tend to derive joy from learner centred tutors. Tutors appeared to motivate their learners by understanding their learners' research needs. They do so by following a programmed learning programme. This consistent with Mclroy (2003) who clearly spells out that well structured examination systems help to motivate learners.

In this regard, learners are motivated to learner if they know exactly what they are supposed to be doing. The students also landed guidance and mentorship sessions took place during research workshops organised for tutors and students. Apparently, these findings compare favourably with Nyawaranda's (2005) Facilitation Theory and Anderson's et al (2006) Nurturing Theory which both prioritises the learners' learning needs in learning research.

Learners' Challenges/Sorrows in Research Supervision

Lack of time was presented as one of the challenges that students experienced in research supervision in spite of research services provided by tutors in the Department of Education. Anderson et al (2006) pointed out that time was a very limited resource for students carrying out research. ODL students face time problems because of work and family commitments. Cone and Foster (1993) recommend that students need at least 20 hours a week in order to fully satisfy their research requirements. In general students and tutors agreed that the provision of research support services was average. Majority of research participants lacked finance to purchase research materials and travel to supervisors' places, purchase computers and access internet services and visit the library. Family commitments and work commitments affected students' capacities to receive research support services from tutors, thereby compromising the quality of their research work.

Tutors who offered below standard research support services had no concern for learners. According to Nyawaranda (2005) such tutors lacked research experience and research skills to enable them assist the students reach their full potential. True research supervisor need to advise the student in time management of the (Mouton, 2001). They show interest in the topics and learners (Nyawaranda, 2005; Shumba, 2004). Lack of training, indication and staff development opportunities worked against tutors' ability to provide research support services. While tutors could offer below par research support services, it is up to the student to pull up one's socks to mitigate such challenges. Such a situation is undesirable as it gives ODL a bad image. Tutors and ODL institutions need to realise that students are so central to their existence; hence, they deserve good service.

Research participants indicated that ZOU offered courses inn statistics and research. These courses need to be undertaken during the third year so that they will prepare students for the research project well in their final year. The Department is constrained in terms of the provision of relevant research materials such as research journals, research text books and internet facilities. Research students are, however, lacking relevant research skills such as identifying areas research, critiquing of research, research methodology and statistical tools in research as well as conventional language in writing research reports.

Revamping Research Support Services

Library facilities could be improved in order to improve the research support services. The Department and the Regions can run around seeking donations for relevant books/journals, as well as buying some One of the greatest benefits of research supervision after the tutor (research supervisor) is a good library (Mouton, 2001). Time spent on doing the research project deserves attention.

Students appear to be hurried to complete their research project at the expense of quality. Research services do not flourish in the absence of computers in the library. A library with computers can easily offer internet services. Regions without typing pools for typing students' research projects tend to work against the quality of research projects.

Regional typists are aware of the ZOU house style of presenting research projects. There might be need to photocopy research related materials for the purposes of boosting library resources.

CONCLUSION

Tutors provided average research support services to ODL learners. Students tended to enjoy research supervision in situations whereby above average research support services are provided to them by tutors. Students become fully motivated in carrying out their research projects if they are exposed to academically nourishing experiences.

Research support services offered to ODL learners depended on student-related, supervisor- related and institution-related challenges. In regard to student related challenges, time was a scarce resource for student carrying out research because of family and work commitments which sometimes made them miss appointments made with their supervisors. Lack of money presented a big challenge in the access of research support services by the students. Students failed to travel to meet supervisors, visit the libraries, access internet services and type their work. Most of the students did not indicate that the provision of research support services by tutors was bad. Most of them acknowledged that their supervisors were ever ready to support them when ever they visited them. Supervisors gave a great deal of attention to their learners and immediate knowledge of results; thus, defying the fact that some supervisors were not trained and lacked research experience and skills.

It appeared that the students' inability to regularly visit the supervisors due to other factors other than supervisors tended to undermine the quality of research support services provided by tutors. Students are therefore not consulting their tutors adequately partly because of the distance between them and their supervisors which has some cost implications. Institutionally, students are exposed to average Research and Statistics courses because they are yet to be exposed to further research skills such as critiquing of research and intensive hypothesis testing. ZOU libraries do not have relevant research material for students. Above all, students in rural areas have limited access to library facilities in their localities. Reliance on photocopied research material could be an option, although it is one of the discouraged forms of piracy. Research typing based at the Region could assist both the Region and students financially.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Having the above findings and conclusions, the research puts forth the following recommendations:

- Tutors should be trained, indicated and staff developed in the field of providing research support services to ODL learners.
- ZOU needs to motivate tutors and students to present papers at local and international conferences. It is in such conferences that tutors and students can polish their research experiences and skills.
- ZOU through the Department of Education needs to support tutors with research workshops where they share experiences with polished scholars.
- Research support services would move a gear up if they expose students to time management skills.
- Given the diverse nature of ZOU students, ZOU might need to set up a mobile library that moves around remote areas of the country so that students can access library facilities. The same could be done for internet facilities.

- Regions can generate a lot of revenue and at the same time ensuring quality of research projects if they employ typists for typing students' research projects.
- Improving the research support services would go a long way in cutting down the number of ODL learners failing to complete their research projects.
- Those researchers interested in extending the study could explore it in the context of other Faculties and possibly compare the implications of the research provision services regionally.

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