

Research Supervision Practices and Functional Challenges among Graduate Distant Students at the Open University of Tanzania

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Abstract

The study investigated practices and challenges of graduate students in research supervision in Tanzania using the Open University of Tanzania as an example. The research emphasis was to assess graduate students' conception of research in general, to examine graduate students' research supervision practice at the Open University of Tanzania and to find-out ways suggesting the best practice for future research supervision of graduate students. Mixed method approach was adopted using the case study design to investigate the researched problem. 200 participants including academics and students volunteered participation in research. Participants were selected on random and purposive procedures. Data collection involved questionnaires, semi-structured and documentary reviews. Concurrent analysis framework was adopted to ensure complementarity in research process. Results were presented in different formats: graphs, themes and percentages and discussed accordingly. Results showed that academics demonstrated limited research knowledge and skills that called for the need of research-based training opportunities to the OUT academicians. Several recommendations were made including the need for research policy innovation at the institution, investment priority in research, and benchmarking the postgraduate programmes to improve supervision of graduate students at the University.

Key words: Research supervision, graduate students, Tanzania higher education, research supervisor, educational research, Critical Theory.

Introduction

Supervision of graduate students in research has been a critical issue among students and supervisors. Critical issue in the sense that the process challenges the minds of both the academics and graduate students on the appropriate ways to collaborate in carrying out the research to harness quality thesis (Carton, 2014; Ghadirian, Sayarifard, Majdzadeh, Rajabi & Yunesian, 2014; Grant, Hackney, & Edgar, 2014). Mutula (2009) viewed that the challenges of supervising graduate students are relatively a concern of developing and developed countries. Everywhere worldwide, academics and graduate students share debates on the practices and challenges facing the supervision that seem to be half an interesting and half-tedious practice. There are many graduate students enrolled to pursue their degree in universities that requires them to carry out a research project in English Language, which is not their first language. Likewise, the majority of graduate students begin to develop research skills and use them in carrying out research projects under supervision by the experienced academic staff. In addition, academic writing for graduate students prepares them with the advanced research competences of carry out research as experts. Graduate students are likely to demonstrate high level or low level of research expertise depending on their previous educational experience in research and the present supervision practice.

Literature Review

Literature on educational research worldwide debates on the increasing demands to integrate research in the community life practices. The increasing demands to use research skills and results in addressing issues affecting societal roles and responsibilities. The integration of research in societal practices intends to promote a community-based research or community-based inquiry that responds to the gist of solving societal sufferings of life hardship (Mutula, 2009). Taking into account of community-based inquiry, the use of information and communication technology in research has

been agreed by scholars as a significant opportunity to facilitate the inquiry process (Khine, 2006; Mutula, 2009). Different research-based software and hardware have been created to abide to the agreement. Such devices and software include digital cameras, audio tape recorders, video recorders, internet-based programmes, and data analysis software (Koehler & Mishra, 2009).

Grounded on critical theory established by the Frankfurt School of Thought has the capacity to understand the phenomena in three dimensions that include strengths, challenges/weakness and ways towards improving the situation. Critical theory is grounded on the assumptions that (a) all education practices are not free from political influence, (b) generative themes and problem posing are ways to understanding the world, (c) the emphasis of education should to ensure balance between the generation of knowledge and social transformation, (d) neo-colonialism structures and their effects determine the knowledge and education in society, (e) academics should have the role to generate knowledge for individual students to learn, change their behaviour and forces which make them behave the ways they behave, (f) emphasis should be removing and preventing human suffering caused by their background brought with them in classroom learning environment (McLaren, 1994; Kincheloe, 2008). Graduate students and research supervisors relatively experience similar research supervision challenges. Understanding the research supervision experience in Higher Education, studies in developed countries (for example, New Zealand, Ireland, Australia, and United Kingdom) on the supervision of graduate students indicated the need for “research supervisor supports and the professionalization of practices” (Carton, 2014:25). The study revealed that the involvement of academics in professional development as a prerequisite to the supervision of graduate students in research in which the academics volunteered to participate in training. It noted the procedures on the legibility of the supervision and the codes governing supervisors in research practices. Carton’s,

(2014) report recommended the following for effective supervisor supports:

- a) Appreciating supervision environment including determination of needs of the university, roles of supervisor and student needs
- b) Benchmarking supervision from senior universities to enhance credibility of supports and policy implementation
- c) Establishing community of practice focused on identifying specific needs and necessary support programmes for graduate students and supervisors to be able to manage postgraduate research programmes.
- d) Ensuring transparency on research supervisors' information related to eligibility, experience and engagement, utilizing the human resource unit to determine the supervisory activity and the necessary training needs of academics during registration, recognition of excellence in research supervision for graduate students - engages the staff to the 'highest form of teaching' (p.31)
- e) Ensuring a mandatory induction for the beginners, inexperienced and experienced research supervisors to participate in refresher programmes
- f) Integrating new experience to learning environments including the integration according to learning cultures of graduate students and academics across nations
- g) Minimizing bureaucracy to support the graduate students and research supervisor with emphasis on resource requirements and training for supervisors
- h) Planning and enacting appropriate supports for research supervisor by reflecting on research position with reference to economy and culture of the place, at national and international levels. (Carton, 2014).

Arguably, the recommendations address supports for research supervisors only because they set premises to improving supervision for the supervisor and the responsible institution or university.

Equally important, many universities in developing countries including Tanzania have experienced massive enrolment for graduate studies which have increased the load for academics resulting to low quality education. The situation is associated with the increasing shortage of research investigates challenges faced by graduate students and supervisors in carrying out research work. With research experience from Botswana, Mutula (2009:1) explained challenges associated with supervision including:

Low throughput, decreasing government subsidies, inadequate research capacity, poor preparation/grooming of students for postgraduate programmes, inconsistent postgraduate research guidelines, stringent, statutory research permit requirements, bureaucracy in the admission process, slow thesis examination process, poor supervision, balancing occupations (jobs) and academic work, inadequate facilities, and heavy teaching loads. ... [categorized in three themes]: research capacity, research productivity and research utility.

Central to this quote is the idea that challenges related to research capacity of the university to avail facilities and qualified academics to supervise graduate students in research. The capacity of the university to produce research relevant to promoting country's development priorities. Production of research capable generating and optimizing availability of resources necessary for raising research quality. Scholars have proposed the need for interventions programmes to minimize the challenges through seminars, workshops and conferences (Ghadirian, *et al.*, 2014; Carton, 2014; Mutula, 2009). Grant, *et al.* (2014) indicated research supervision pedagogy for supervisors to be able to support research students to carry out research. The scholars are expecting that the pedagogy might minimize the overwhelming complexity, conflict and differences affecting graduate students-supervisor relationships. Grant *et al.*, noted the high need to control graduate students and ensure supervisors follow the policy requirements of universities.

With regard to the significance of interventions on research pedagogical training for supervisors, Mutula (2009) noted that such training helps to eliminate duplication of research, optimize availability of resources, and to develop graduate students' research literacy. Critical lens was used to understand practices affecting graduate students and supervisors in research supervision in improving the research quality and addressing poverty in life.

The motivation of the study based on existing quality concerns of dissertations and theses of our graduate students, graduation disparity among graduate students, increasing complains from research supervisors, institutional self-evaluation regarding quality of research supervision and the need to enhance quality of research supervision and output for graduate students. Additionally, the paucity of research emphasizing on the challenges faced by graduate students at OUT motivated the researcher to conduct the study. Literature on research supervision for graduate students have focused on the existence of many discipline-based studies, and a few on research process itself, especially challenges and adoption of best practices in research supervision (Carton, 2014). What is more, there are limited studies in Tanzania investigated on practices and challenges facing and supervisors for graduate students in research process. Based on the situation, the current study sought to investigate the understanding and practice of graduate students in research supervision at the Open University of Tanzania. The intention of the study was to address three research objectives, namely to:

- a) Assess graduate students' conception of research in general
- b) Examine graduate students' research supervision practice at the Open University of Tanzania
- c) Find out opinions and ways suggesting the best practice for future research supervision of graduate students.

Methodology

Grounded on critical theory lens, the researcher utilized mixed methods approach to investigate the supervision practices of graduate students in carryout their research project at the Open University of Tanzania. The approach triangulated approaches and provided opportunities of complementing the weaknesses and strengths that ensured reliability and validity of results. The study employed case study design with questionnaire survey, semi-structured interview, and documentary reviews (supervisors' reports, examiners' reports, students' research progress report and theses or dissertations) to collect data.

Case study design was considered for the research due to its ability to gather qualitative and quantitative data of the past and present educational experience as well as to provide detailed description about the research supervision practices among graduate students (Yin, 2009; Johnson & Christensen, 2008). In view of the 'critical theory, case study design was considered appropriate to collect information relevant to the study. The study involved a sample of 200 participants who were selected purposively and randomly. For instance, 50 academic staff selected purposively based on their virtue of roles and responsibility performed at the university and 150 students were selected randomly (because of their large size) to volunteer participation in this research. Data related to participants' conception of research, research supervision practice as well as suggestions for improving research supervision were collected at the Open University of Tanzania. Concurrent analysis framework was adopted to ensure complementarity of data in answering the research question and to enhance meaning as well as the interpretation of findings (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011; Johnson & Christensen, 2008). Results were presented in different formats: graphs, themes and percentages and discussed accordingly.

Findings and discussion

The study reported that graduate students showed little knowledge regarding the research which exacerbated their limited understanding of research skills and orientation. It revealed that graduate students could not effectively understand what they were expected to do in the different stages of the research process. It was noted that the graduate students had language dilemma in writing their thesis. They appeared to face difficult in writing their theses in English Language, as their work indicated several editorial and semantic problems. Critical theory in this case advocates localization and elimination of cultural barriers in learning practices (McLaren, 1994; Kincheloe, 2008). The majority of OUT students, English language were used as a third language and made it difficult for them in meaning making practices.

Moreover, the findings revealed the limited understanding among students on the meaning and what they were expected to do for research conceptual and theoretical frameworks as well as their implication in the study. In practice, the graduate students seemed to adapt same sections from the previous research works and led to same writing style among students as well as having irrelevant frameworks to their research. In this way, students seemed to commit themselves into plagiarism in writing their theses. Findings indicated that graduate students were not able to critique research activities due to limited knowledge of critiquing scholarly works. In this case, their literature reviews were reflecting fragmentation of research works that lacked logical coherence, linkage of ideas between sentences, paragraphs and chapters as well as the researched phenomena. Similarly, due to lack of this skill, their literature reviews and discussions chapters reflected limited argumentation and illogical organization of concepts and themes that shaped the study. In addition, the study reports that graduate students faced difficult to establish a justifiable research gaps due to limited knowledge of research skills and ability to review researches related to the studied phenomena. It was noted that graduate students were not able to

explain with evidence to show how they arrived to decisions of the identified gaps in the bodies of knowledge. Findings indicated that graduate students were just fixing paragraphs indicate research gaps; these paragraphs were not justifiable from their discussed literature in general. Perhaps, the problem circumvents the supervisors who orient these graduate students in the research process. Based on the study, there were challenges which influence graduate students to carry out research works effectively. It was noted that lack of commitment among students and supervisors in the supervision process. Findings seem to show that the current supervision rigor is not properly considered as a significant practice in research resulting into poor research report. Nonetheless, the study revealed limited knowledge of research among supervisors which inhibit their ability to effectively guide students. Moreover, the lack of appropriate direction on how to conduct research among supervisors made it difficult to deliver the necessary support for graduate students in research. In the situation, graduate students research problems reflect their supervisors' competence in research.

Further, results showed that 40 (80%) staffs were not comfortable with research due to many aspects included in research as a discipline and supervision. Some perceived research as a discipline and they have to study and pass it rather than a skill to facilitate discovery learning and obtaining solution to problems. Only 20 staff seemed to be comfortable with research supervision though indicated to be challenged with activity overload. Those who viewed research as a supervisory activity had a feeling that supervision was not adequately done and they faced several challenges including receiving untimely and insufficient feedback as well as lack of enough contact hours. For example, 110 (73.3%) out of 150 graduate students demonstrated limited knowledge of what research is and how is conducted and presented high level of dissatisfaction of research supervision practice at OUT. Such situation seemed to suggest poor delivery of the course to graduate students in general. Further, the findings showed the critical need to cultivate research culture at

institution level and at the level of students and academic staff by through maximizing investments in research. The strategy would improve the quality of academic staff in research and teaching as well as produce high quality graduate students. In addition, it appears that there was lack of motivation for both academic staff and students in the research projects. For instance, while the academics were anticipating to be enumerated sufficiently, the students expected effective treatments for the supervisory activity. This situation, tended to compromise the quality of the research programme and quality of research at the university. Findings revealed limited integration of information and communication technology -ICTs in research to both graduate students and academic staff corroborates existing literature (Khine, 2006; Mutula, 2009). It appeared that staff and students were not conversant with the use of some computer software that are useful for carry out research activities including basic tools of data analysis based on MS word, Excel, SPSS, NVIVO, ATLASSTI etc. It was evident from the academic staff feedback to students and the work submitted to the supervisors by students that they showed low quality. The reports were not properly typeset feedback in hard copies written in student's original reports indicated their limited understanding and knowledge of applying the ICT tools in research.

Nevertheless, findings revealed that graduate students had the problem of selecting the research title and stating the problem. It was noted that their titles were too broad revealing that they were over ambitious on the research as they were missing the exact issue to research on and the rationale of researching that issue. In addition, the lack of focus made it difficult for graduate students to identify the research gaps, the appropriate methodology as well as provide informed recommendations and conclusions about the research. The situation reported in this study was that, the academic staff had limited research-based seminars, workshops, symposium and conferences organized at university, national and international platforms as reflected in literature (Ghadirian, et al., 2014; Carton, 2014;

Mutula, 2009). Such platforms could help academic staff and graduate students to participate and improve their research skills for example, training on new research approaches and integration of ICT in research process.

Conclusion and recommendations

The study concluded that the university (OUT) seemed to have missed the focus on research matter across departments, faculties and institutes. The results of limited research emphasis at the university appeared to aggravate the existing challenges of graduate students' supervision and the limited morale among academic staff to conduct research. This research suggests the needs for heavy investments by the university in research to increase the competence and production of high quality research and graduates who could excel in competitive knowledge-based economy.

This research recommends that:

- a) OUT should put in place a clear research policy (in form of a handbook or alike) useful for the OUT community including academic staff and graduate students.
- b) There should be a proper staff-graduate student's ratio, for example, 10 and 5 at PhD and masters' levels each year respectively. This ration could improve the efficiency of supervision among staff and graduate students.
- c) There are needs to increase opportunities for research seminars and conferences to both graduate students and academic staff in which they might be exposed to various educational research innovations. One of the opportunities for students would be encourage them to participate in different national and international conferences. Similarly, academic staffs should be motivated through timely payment of honoraria and supporting them with micro-research funding.
- d) There is a need to improve communication between supervisors and graduate students to promote effective feedback provision from both parts and minimizing personal influence. The

university academics should be strictly discouraged to perpetuate personal influence during supervision and examination of graduate students at OUT. This practice should be considered by all academics to maximize the quality of graduate students and the institution in general.

- e) There is a need to address the language of instruction dilemma, which affects both academics and graduate students in undertaking their programmes. They should be provided training on basic skills of English Language communication to improve their academic and professional performance.

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