Challenges Facing Supervisors and Students in the Process of Writing Theses/Dissertations under ODL: Experiences from The Open University of Tanzania

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Abstract: This paper discusses problems facing supervisors and students in writing dissertations/theses. The paper refers to the Open University of Tanzania (OUT) as the case study. Data were collected using formal meetings, questionnaire administration and documentary analysis. The data from the questionnaire were analysed by the help of the Scientific Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) while the qualitative data were analysed through content and thematic analysis. The paper established that communication, supervisor-student relationship, access to literature, plagiarism, and poor writing skills among some students are some of the key challenges facing students and supervisors in writing dissertations/theses at OUT. The paper recommends that communication between students and supervisors need to be strengthened through both parties abiding by professionalism. Strengthening the use of progress reports and arrangement of supervision seminars more frequently would minimize problems related to miscommunication. Students are encouraged to maximally utilize online sources of literature. The use of internet would also reduce unnecessary delays of supervisors' feedback. The Open University of Tanzania needs to revise payments for supervisors so that supervisors are motivated to timely accomplish their tasks.

Key Words: The Open University of Tanzania, supervision of postgraduate students, communication, motivation, writing skills

INTRODUCTION

Since 2001 The Open University of Tanzania (OUT) has been running a number of postgraduate courses leading to the award of Postgraduate Diplomas, Masters and PhD degrees. The number of students admitted at OUT at postgraduate level has increased from 97 in 2001 to 1,782 in 2010 (OUT, 2010). Postgraduate students are required to produce a dissertation or a thesis in partial or full fulfilment of the requirements for completion of their studies (OUT 2010). Every student is assigned a supervisor or in some cases supervisors to guide him/her in the process of writing the dissertation or the thesis. Experiences around the world show that problems such as poor completion rates of research degrees are highly associated with students and supervisors failing to

accomplish their roles (Burnett, 1999; Garcia et al., 1988). In the United Kingdom, for example, up to 50% postgraduate students fail to complete their dissertations/thesis in time partly due to poor quality supervision (Rudd, 1985; Dillon and Malott, 1981; Zoia, 1981). In Tanzania the literature is dwindling regarding the actual challenges that face supervisors while attempting to accomplish their roles in the process of writing dissertations/theses; this has been the motive behind undertaking this study. The study is referring to The Open University of Tanzania (OUT).

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The overall objective of the study was to identify challenges faced by supervisors and students in the course of writing thesis and dissertation under ODL mode. The study had the following specific objectives:
(i) To identify the roles of students and supervisors in writing dissertations/theses
(ii) To identify and discuss problems encountered by students during the actual writing of the theses/dissertations.
(iii) To examine the role of communication and the social relationship between students and supervisors in accomplishing thesis/dissertation writing.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The Research Philosophy

This study adopted an epistemology from realism where knowledge, is seen as a social and historical product that can be specific to a particular time, culture or situation. A realistic school of thought therefore led to the selection of the case study research strategy. The study adopted qualitative research techniques as key techniques for this study following Dabbs' (1982:32) explanations that: "The notion of quality is essential to the nature of things. On the other hand, quantity is elementary as an amount of something. Quality refers to the what, how, when, and where a thing is – its essence and ambience. Qualitative research thus refers to the meanings, concepts, definitions, characteristics, metaphors, symbols, and descriptions of things, (the focus of this study) (Dabbs, 1982:32). Qualitative research approach is common whenever people are the focus of the study particularly small groups (Walliam, 2006). However the study also adopted quantitative research techniques for data triangulation.

The Research Strategy

The study adopted a case study strategy as mentioned earlier. Robson (2002) describes a case study strategy as a well-established research strategy where the focus is on a case in its own right and taking its

context into account. The Open University of Tanzania, which is the major higher learning institution offering education services under ODL approach in the country is the case referred to in this study.

Methods of Data Collection and Analysis

Data was collected using three main techniques, namely: formal meetings, questionnaire administration, and documentary review. Two meetings were organised - one with students and one with supervisors. The researchers prepared guiding topics for discussion prior to the meetings. During the two meetings different issues were probed by the researchers to get information from the meeting members. The meeting with students involved about 200 students. The meeting with students started by a general discussion; the discussion followed the prior prepared guiding topics. The researchers ensured that every individual had given chance to contribute to the discussion. The researchers were taking notes of all important points that emerged during the discussion. After the general discussion five groups were formed. Each group was tasked to further discuss issues related to supervision at OUT and provide a summary of the discussion. After the discussions each group made a presentation. The group presentations were another opportunity for the researchers to take note of any important issues they missed during the general discussion.

The meeting with supervisors came a day after the meeting with students. About 73 people participated during the meeting with supervisors. The researchers prepared topics for the discussion prior to the meeting. The topics based on matters which rose from the meeting with students.

Further, the researchers prepared two questionnaires, one for students and the other one for supervisors. Thus, at the end of every meeting a questionnaire was administered to a randomly selected sample population among meeting members. A total of 65 students and 36 supervisors were selected to fill the questionnaires. The two questionnaires specifically focused on generating numerical data to compare with the data from discussions with the meeting members. Different documents relevant to supervision of postgraduate students at OUT were reviewed; these included historical information, policies, rules, laws and by laws. The aim was to establish how supervision at OUT is being conducted. Also the analysis of the documents aimed at identifying the roles of students and supervisors in writing thesis/dissertations. The data from the meetings and documents were analyzed using thematic data analysis approach (Robson, 2002) while SPSS was used to analyse data from the questionna

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Role of Students and Supervisors in Writing Dissertations/Theses
One of the objectives of this study was to identify the role of students and supervisors in the process of writing a thesis or a dissertation. In this section the paper is identifying such roles from the reviewed documents as well as from the data from the meetings with students and meetings with supervisors.

Students

According to OUT (2011), postgraduate students at OUT need to understand that the degree requires them to work hard towards intellectual independence within a supportive supervisory environment. Students need to demonstrate a high level of integrity, commitment and personal initiative. They should expect to take the lead in most matters pertaining to the project, adhering to the principle that theirs is the main responsibility for the conduct and progress of the research. Candidates should also ensure that they have acquainted themselves with the regulations and procedures governing the masters or PhD programme, to which end they are strongly encouraged to attend the orientation sessions run by the University. They must be prepared to "drive" the project and to raise matters of concern promptly. They should strive to participate in pertinent workshops and conferences. Postgraduate students also have a duty to listen and work on advice and criticism provided by supervisors (http//www.otago001975.html supervision.htm - accessed on 20/12/2011). Postgraduate students are required to make seminar presentations and participate in the academic, professional and social life particularly of the respective department (OUT 2011). In connection with this, postgraduate students are supposed to attend and present papers at conferences and publish sections of their work where appropriate under the guidance of their supervisors (ibid). More importantly, postgraduate students are supposed to submit a progress report to OUT every six months (ibid).

Supervisors

Supervisors are the most important resource provided by the University to support the student during the research degree candidature (OUT 2011; Marshall and Green, 2010). The roles of supervisors differ with the level of study the student is pursuing. A masters student, for example requires close supervision at all times since it is at this level where the student is introduced to the fundamentals of research and principles of scientific enquiry (OUT, 2010). At this level a supervisor is supposed to ensure that he/she closely guides the student to appropriately apply the fundamentals of research and abide to the principles of scientific research. They need also to guide students to present the results of the

research in a scholarly manner. Supervisors also have the role to ensure that the student's work makes some contribution to knowledge (ibid). A PhD student on the other hand is someone who already acquired some knowledge regarding the principles of scientific research when s/he was pursuing her/his masters. Therefore a supervisor supervising a PhD student has the duty to ensure that the student "makes a distinct contribution to new knowledge, of fact and/or theory; produce considerably much more original work than required for Master's programme; goes much deeper and more extensively in her/his review of the relevant literature than is the case for the master's candidate" (OUT, 2010). Further, the supervisor has a role to ensure that the students is "more critical in his/her analysis of the data he/she has collected" (ibid); also that the student "exercise more initiative in his/her research than for the Master's degree research candidate" (ibid). Unlike the master's student the supervisor is supposed to allow the PhD student to work more independently. PhD students are guided rather than directed by supervisors.

What is very comforting and assuring for students to know is that all supervisors strive in earnest to see their student succeed (Marshall & Green, 2010). At any rate they would rather they didn't fail, because that tarnishes their image.

Communication and Supervisors' Feedback

Delamont et al., (2004) points out that it is very crucial for students to maintain communication with their supervisors throughout the study tenure. As pointed earlier, the supervisors have the task of guiding the students through the postgraduate journey. Delamont et al, (2004) noted that guiding students can be easily attained if there is good communication between students and supervisors. OUT has the role of facilitating communication between supervisors and students. As soon as the supervisor is formally appointed and agreed to supervise a given student OUT (through DRPS) is supposed to contact the respective student to inform of his/her allocated supervisor. This could link the two so they can start arranging meetings for the work. In this study 25 respondents responded to the question which asked time taken for them to be informed of their supervisors since registration (students pursuing degree by thesis). 61.1% of the respondents reported that they were informed of their supervisors in more than a month, 22.2% reported to have been informed of their supervisors within a month and 16%.7 reported to have been informed immediately (Table 1). Clearly, it shows OUT is linking students and their respective supervisors although still some work need to be done to ensure that students are connected with their supervisors as early as possible.

Table 1: Time Taken Before Respondents Assigned Supervisor

Response	Frequency (n=25)	Percent
Immediately	3	16.7
A month	4	22.2
More than a month	18	61.1
Total	25	100

Source: Survey data (2011)

It is surprising however that during focus group discussions students pointed out that there is poor communication between students and supervisors. They pointed out that in most cases supervisors are not available for the regular meetings and they do not pick phone calls from the students. Students further pointed out that some supervisors do not call their respective students arguing that they do not have funds for that.

Students further pointed out delays of feedback from supervisors as one of the problems they do encounter in the course of writing theses/dissertations. Students pointed out that some supervisors tend to reject documents sent through internet, such supervisors prefer document in hard copies. To students, documents in hard copies are too costly and not time efficient compared to emails. However, 77.8% of respondents reported that they normally get feedback from their supervisors within 1-3 weeks (which is fair enough) followed by 11.1 percent who getting feedback from their supervisors takes more than three months as indicated in Table 2.

Table 2: Time Taken to get Feedback from Supervisors

Response	Frequency (n=18)	Percent
1-3 weeks	14	77.8
1-2 months	1	5.6
3 months	1	5.6
More than 3 months	2	11.1
Total	**18**	**100**

Source: Survey data (2011)

It has been established that most students do disappear completely once they start writing their thesis/dissertation waiting until when supervisors enquire for their progress. This delays the progress of the students especially because most supervisors tend to be busy with a lot of other academic responsibilities. The good practice would have been that students make efforts to contact their supervisors every time they think it is important to do so rather than waiting for supervisors to contact them. This study has noted that some students communicate of their progress late - especially near graduation time and they pressurise supervisors so they can graduate. Supervisors criticised this tendency

and were of the opinion that students should allow ample time for supervisors to comment on their work.

The supervisors further pointed out that letters of appointment reach them late. This becomes a problem as far as communication with students and feedback is concerned. There is a need for DRPS to include students' contacts on the letters of appointments so as to link the two. The supervisors noted that in other universities students are required to submit monthly reports and not 6 months reports.

Relationship between Supervisor and Student
There is a big variation in personalities among supervisor as well as among students. Hence, relationships between a supervisor and a postgraduate student are full of idiosyncrasies and peculiarities as observed by Dietz (2006). This study has found that students at OUT experience difficulties with their supervisors where some supervisors are too harsh. Students further perceive to be less respected by their supervisors. On the other hand, supervisors' at OUT perceive harshness to be important in the process of supervision particularly to students who do not take serious supervisors advice and directives. This study has established that a supervisor may use harsh language to insist that he/she is not impressed with the progress of the student. For example students tend to submit documents without incorporating the previously given comments; in such occasions students should not expect supervisors to use soft language. Hence this study concludes that poor student – supervisor relationship can be a result of students approaching their supervisors in undignified way.

This study has noted that by being postgraduate students there is likelihood that students do expect a casual kind of relationship with their supervisors; because of this, students, misperceive harshness to harassment. However this needs further investigation. Supervisors have the obligation to keep the relationship purely as a supervisor-student one; it is only through this way that they can oblige to and observe professionalism. This being the case then, for good relationship between supervisors and students, supervisors and students need to observe professional alliance and professional actions. There is therefore, a need for OUT to find a way to enlighten postgraduate students on how to professionally approach their respective supervisors and also perceive the relationship between them and their supervisors more objectively. On the other hand, supervisors need to understand the kind of students they are dealing with including their academic strengths and weakness so as they can treat them accordingly. It is widely acknowledged that harassing a student is not acceptable. Humiliating and abusive language

is one example of harassment; supervisors are not allowed to use humiliating and abusive language or actions to students. Supervisors recommended the use of the 6months progress reports to be used by both parties to air out issues of concerns especially when a student thinks he/she is not being treated fairly by the supervisor.

Language has been pinpointed to be another obstacle that hinders supervisors at OUT to do their job properly. Supervisors noted that poor English language among postgraduate students discourage supervisors from reading students work. This problem was also observed by a study conducted by Dietz (2006) that South African supervisors complained about major English language problems among their post-graduate students. There is therefore a need for continuous language training and editing assistance for postgraduate students who are not native speakers of English and students are encouraged to use spelling check computer software. Eventually, it may be necessary to introduce a special section in the department of language to facilitate the editing exercise.

The Actual Writing
The appropriate time to start writing the dissertation particularly for students doing course work is not clearly understood among students as well as among supervisors. Further, there are no clear stated guidelines as to when a particular student can start writing his/her dissertation in the OUT postgraduate guidelines rather the norm is that supervisors are appointed after students complete course work and submit concept notes to the respective department. This study found that most students would prefer to start writing as soon as they could. The challenge they will face such students will be working without supervisors until they successfully complete coursework and get assigned supervisors. Two observations emerged from this study. The first observation was that it could be better for students to start writing their dissertation after they have had completed coursework since it is during this time where they would have covered topics on research methods and hence expected to be competent enough to develop a clear research proposal, undertake the rest of research activities and write the dissertation with minimal difficulties. The supervisors noted that writing without complete training on research methods leads to most students to work on evaluation research and action research instead of concentrating on basic/pure research/ and fundamental research. According to the supervisors, the latter are critical for knowledge generation. However, the supervisors did not explain how and why they perceived students who did not complete coursework would always opt to work on either evaluation or action research. The second observation was that, since academic writing is a learning process, students should start writing as

early as they can so as they can have more ample time for practicing academic writing as they go along. Besides, some students do join postgraduate programmes with topics to write about already in mind; such students should be encouraged to start writing as early as they can. Early writing would allow students to re-shape their ideas as they go along.

Dissertation/Thesis Format
The OUT, like any other university in the world has its own guidelines for writing a dissertation/thesis. These are well stipulated in its prospectus (2011/2012 OUT Prospectus). Format of the dissertation emerged to be one of the problems facing students and supervisors at OUT during the writing of the dissertation/thesis. Students experience conflicting directives from supervisors and from OUT. The problem is based on two issues; first, supervisors have their own background and experiences from their former universities other than OUT since most of them are non-OUT graduands. Others are non-OUT employees rather they work with other universities within the country and from outside the country. Thus it happens that supervisors directives base on their own backgrounds and experiences other than the guidelines from OUT. In some cases students make efforts and exercise abiding by OUT guidelines only to find they face challenges from their supervisors; this leads to confusions and frustrations among students. After the frustrations and confusions, students finally follow the instructions from their supervisors; the problem comes during final submission where the document need to be checked by the directorate of postgraduate studies at OUT. At this point students are redirected to re-organise the document to suit the OUT format. This becomes cumbersome exercise for students. In some cases students are assigned more than one supervisor depending on the nature of the research topic. In such cases it is common to find that students experience conflicting ideas from the different supervisors. In such cases students experience delayed progress.

In some cases students find it difficult to come up with a document acceptable to OUT simply because they did not read and understand the OUT guidelines on the format of the dissertation/thesis including the length, pagination, referencing, etc. For example students perceive that it is a mandate for a dissertation to have 200 pages while in reality 200 pages is the maximum required length for the master dissertation at OUT.

Writing Skills

Poor writing skills were noted by supervisors to be one of the major problems they encounter during the supervision process. Supervisors made an observation that some students send documents for supervisors to comment while the documents are poorly organised, too long and unfocused as a result supervisors take too long to mark and comment on such students' works. Generally, poorly written documents create an unfavourable atmosphere for supervisors to quickly act on the document sent resulting to delay in feedback and therefore delay in the whole progress.

Access to Literature

Access to relevant literature is another problem that students encounter while writing dissertations/theses. The data from the formal meetings show that students do not know where they can access the required literature. Students perceive that supervisors have the obligation to direct them where they can get the necessary literature, while supervisors perceive that students are obliged to do so independently. Supervisors reported that currently students are not doing enough to get the literature resulting into students citing archaic literature, mostly due to lack of the skills of undertaking critical literature review. The OUT subscribes to a number of websites that could be good sources of literature; which are scantly visited by most students. This implies that students are not aware of the subscribed websites hence OUT may need to raise awareness among students and supervisors regarding the subject matter. The issue of citation of literature goes hand in hand with the issue of plagiarism as supervisors noted that some students tend to cut and paste documents without proper acknowledgement of the respective source of information.

Payment of Honoraria

Honoraria payments for both local and foreign supervisors remain more or less at par; and they are in general low. With the current inflation rates the remuneration has greatly been affected. In real terms it has been halved, compared to the purchasing power it had when it was approved by the OUT Senate and Council more than five years ago. It is obvious that any changes in the level of payment of honoraria have a direct bearing on the fees paid by the students. A review of fees is probably long overdue and is an issue for consideration.

Late payment of honoraria has been a cause for discontent among supervisors as there are few complaints (37.8%) about non-payment of honoraria to supervisors and examiners as shown in Table 7). However, this could be due to shortage of staffs in DRPS to handle such issues in

the past. The current practice is to pay all supervisors at once immediately after the annual graduation of their respective students. Results indicated that 62.2% of supervisors did receive supervision fee.

Table 7: Payment of Supervision Fee

Response	Frequency (n=37)	Percent
Yes	23	62.2
No	14	37.8
Total	37	100

Source: Survey data (2011)

There were mixed perceptions about the current payment rate to supervisors and examiners (Table 8). Given the current fee structure at OUT there is little that can be done to improve the honorarium unless the supervision fee is increased. However, the supervisors' response to the question is that they are not satisfied with the current rates OUT is offering. In a nutshell the remuneration rates are on the lower side and are a disincentive to supervisors; in addition they are paid late. 58.8% of the respondents considered the current pay as "Satisfactory", 14.7% "Good" and 2.9% "Excellent" (Table 8).

Table 8: Respondents Rating of Amount of OUT Payment of Supervision/Examination Honorarium

Response	Frequency (n=34)	Percent
Excellent	1	2.9
Good	5	14.7
Satisfactory	20	58.8
Poor	8	23.6
Total	**34**	**100**

Source: Survey data (2011)

CONCLUSIONS

This study has identified a number of issues that are a stumbling block to successful supervision of postgraduate students at OUT, such issues include communication, relationship between students and supervisors, honoraria for supervisors, English language among students, timely submission of final documents, access to literature, and writing skills among students. A synthesis of all these issues indicate that postgraduate research demands discipline, dedication, enthusiasm and hard work both on the part of supervisors and students. Foundations of successful research have to be laid down early on by fostering understanding and mutual respect between students and supervisors at the start of the research work. The study has established that OUT is making efforts to address all these issues although it may take some time to accomplish such a goal. For example currently most supervisors are satisfied with the level of services by OUT. This study concludes that Supervisors are a critical and most important resource of OUT in

postgraduate studies; and are working hard to accomplish their roles. Further, most students at OUT are committed into writing their thesis/dissertation but they need a clear understanding of their roles so as to avoid such wrong perceptions that supervisors are there to write the students' dissertations/theses and take such issues as harshness on the side of supervisors positively. Form the the study we also conclude that some concerns of supervisors and students are genuine and need to be listened and addressed. Because of this, the study has a number of recommendations as outlined in the next section.

RECOMMENDATIONS

This study makes a number of recommendations regarding the future of supervision of postgraduate students at OUT.

- One of the recommendations is that OUT should revise the fee structure to reflect the costs of supervision; this will allow the OUT to revise the supervisors' honoraria to cover inflation rate of the Tanzanian shilling.
- The study is further recommending that supervisors should be encouraged to use the internet as a way of communicating with their students and the Directorate for communication efficacy and cost and resources use minimization.
- In connection with the issue of communication, the study recommends that in order to improve students-supervisors relationship there is a need for both parties to observe professional alliance and professional actions. This is because effective and worthwhile communication between students and supervisors depends partly upon approaches of both student and supervisor. Informative work has been published and indicates that the relationship and resulting communication is influenced by the roles adopted by both parties (Hockey, 1995; Hockey, 1996; Deem and Brehony, 2000; Delamont et al., 2004).
- OUT should ensure that all supervisors are familiar with the OUT guidelines on dissertation/thesis format so as they can guide their respective students appropriately; the conduct of seminars can facilitate this. Furthermore, this study recommends that OUT should emphasize that students should allow ample time for supervisors to comment on their work and avoid late submissions of final documents for graduation.

- The study is further recommending that in order to improve access to literature among students, OUT should sensitize and encourage students and supervisors to use the online free resources and websites which OUT subscribes to improve access to literature.

- The issue of plagiarism emerged to be a serious concern among supervisors. This study recommends that OUT should implement the suggestions by supervisors that plagiarism check software should be given to supervisors so they can help their respective students to make sure that their theses/dissertations are plagiarism free or within tolerance limits. (OUT will therefore need to establish levels at which plagiarism can be tolerated).

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