Postgraduate Students' Common Errors in Writing Education Studies Dissertations: Lessons from the University of Dar es Salaam in Tanzania

George Kahangwa ⬤
University of Dar es Salaam, School of Education
Email: georgekahangwa@gmail.com

Abstract

The purpose of this study was to investigate common mistakes that postgraduates make in writing dissertation chapters at the University of Dar es Salaam in Tanzania, then propose corrective measures. Using a desk research design, the study reviewed 200 randomly selected master's degree dissertations. The document review guidelines also facilitated the study's review of examiners' reports on the dissertations under review. The information collected was subjected to content analysis. The study found that postgraduate students struggled in stating explicitly the research problems and ended up with vague problem statements. In the limitations section, most of the postgraduates mention trivial issues that the researcher could otherwise address during the planning of logistics. Moreover, the students struggled to critically review literature and, instead, simply described the details or provided summaries of findings from other empirical studies. As a result, the literature review is usually devoid of their respective voices. Students also found difficulties in describing the relationship between the proposed methodology and their study specifically by failing to explain adequately the coherence between the methodology and the nature of the study. Furthermore, some postgraduates failed to analyse data with the required precision; for instance, they use codes and themes interchangeably. Based on the findings, the study recommends intensive and adequate orientation and training of postgraduate students both theoretically and practically on fundamental academic skills for effective writing of quality dissertations.

Keywords: Postgraduate studies, dissertations, academic writing errors, scholarly communication
https://dx.doi.org/10.4314/udslj.v19i1.2

Introduction

Writing a quality dissertation remains a mandatory undertaking and requirement for postgraduate students or simply postgraduates in Tanzania and elsewhere to qualify for the conferment of a master's degree. Moreover, writing a dissertation serves as a stepping stone for launching a career in research and academic scholarship. The dissertation writing journey is coupled with significant hurdles for many postgraduate students, who naturally find the process arduous, since they are still novices in the world of academic writing and scholarship. Thus, they must invest adequately in acquiring, developing and honing their research and academic writing skills. Indubitably, the ability to write high quality scholarly research reports has recently raised concerns and remains an academic puzzle today amidst easy-of-access of scholarly materials relative to the bygone decades. Such inability is
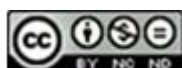
evident in the difficulties that postgraduate students grapple with that lead to their failure to complete the dissertations or low progress in writing (Garcia-Castilo, 2019). Paradoxically, postgraduate students by their very definition are supposed to be advanced students, which belies their apparent struggles in dissertation writing

Indeed, many postgraduate students continue to perceive writing dissertations as difficult in accomplishing tasks around the globe (Ocholla, 2024). In fact, literature evidences these struggles and mistakes postgraduate students experience in different contexts in both writing and organising their dissertations. Some writers have described challenges encountered in all the chapters whereas other scholars have specified these challenges as they materialise in respective chapters. For instance, Lessing and Schulze (2003) identify aspects of designing research, data collection and processing and writing of dissertations as areas of common challenges that postgraduate students mostly encounter. Likewise, Shahsavar, *et al.,* (2020) claim that most students are unable to synthesize, critique, or explain the review of literature in their writing.

Postgraduates in Tanzania are not immune to the challenges associated with writing dissertations. Scholars in the country have similarly documented the magnitude of such problem that make postgraduate students struggle with the modalities of academic writing, on the one hand, and the English language in which they mostly write, on the other hand. Kikula and Qorro (2007), for instance, claim that students have issues with composing the statement of the research problem, specifically in writing a logical problem with clarity while focusing on relevant issues. Komba (2016) raised a concern that students from universities in Tanzania face significant challenges in writing all the chapters of their dissertations. Likewise, Bushesha *et al.,* (2012) established that, postgraduate students struggle with writing skills and using appropriate formats for dissertations.

Such inability to write concise, clear, and quality dissertations has several implications for both the students and their supervisors. To begin with, the students spend a considerable time to complete studies, hence their low completion rates in universities. Second, the time spent in supervision lengthens and results in frustrations for both the student and the supervisor, poor communication and relationships, pilling up of a backlog of students to a supervisor, and eventually a heavy supervision load. As expected, with a heavy supervision load, supervisors tend to overlook mistakes the students committed, which results in the production of dissertations that are riddled with technical and grammatical glitches, hence below the expected standards of scholarship because of the questionable quality.

Paradoxically, amidst rapidly bourgeoning enrolments of postgraduate students in Tanzania's universities over the past decade and heightening concerns about the quality of the dissertations candidates churned out coupled with dwindling completion rates of postgraduates, there is a dearth of literature in the Tanzanian context that vividly specifies the errors that postgraduates commit in writing their dissertation chapters and the correct path that students could otherwise have taken. This paper, therefore, serves the purpose of using empirical evidence to shed light on specific mistakes that postgraduates make in the process of writing dissertation chapters and how to avoid them. As such, the paper attempts to address the following questions: What are the common errors that postgraduate students make in their writing of dissertations; and, how can postgraduate students improve their writing of dissertations required for master's degree awards?

Postgraduate Students' Common Errors in Writing Education Studies Dissertations: Lessons from the University of Dar es Salaam in Tanzania

George Kahangwa

Literature Review

Several studies (e.g., Shahsavar *et al.,*2020; & Fatiha, 2023) have established the challenges postgraduates encounter when writing their dissertations generally. Shahsavar *et al.,* (2020) highlight the prevalence of deficiencies in synthesising and critiquing literature, with a staggering majority of the students failing to grasp the significance of a robust literature review. Instead, they simply summarise or describe the findings and interpretations of other researchers. Other studies (e.g., Ali *et al.,* 2022; & Akindele, 2008) have indicated that postgraduate students lack the ability to summarise the weaknesses of previous studies, use analytical and critical thinking in framing their arguments and, finally, assert their identity or voice in the writing.

Studies from the Global North have also exposed a prevalence of a plethora of problems that postgraduates contend with when writing their dissertations. In this regard, Hawari *et al*.,'s (2022) study found that students in Jordanian universities had problems with the generic dissertation structure, specifically in writing the research problem statement, understanding the research method, appropriately reviewing extant literature and other segments of the thesis. Previously, Huwari *et al.,* (2017) similarly found that Malaysian students did not grasp what to write precisely in the introduction section and did not write accurately other parts of their theses. Shahsavar *et al.,*'s (2020) investigation on literature review writing established that 80 percent of postgraduates did not understand the importance of literature review and 60 percent believed that an author should remain neutral in their writing. Such studies, however, fall short of specifying how the students actually write.

Empirical evidence from Africa further supports claims that students make intolerable mistakes in writing dissertations and research proposals. Manchishi *et al.,*'s (2015) study at the University of Zambia found that failure to state explicitly the research problem, inability to identify gaps in literature, use of inappropriate methodologies, and failure to explain how research methodologies relate to the study were key mistakes of students when writing dissertations and proposals. Furthermore, the study found that students failed to phrase research objectives and questions. Similarly, Munyao and Oduol's (2021) study in Kenya revealed that postgraduate students faced major challenges in identifying research problems and many of them lacked adequate knowledge of conducting data analysis and presentation. Yet, these studies pay either little or no attention to how students could have improved their writing.

In Tanzania, few studies conducted have similarly strived to identify challenges postgraduates countenance in their quest for writing dissertations. Kikula and Qorro (2007), who examined the common mistakes and problems in research proposal writing, found that 72 percent of the proposals had issues in the introduction section, with some lacking a clear focus. Only 16 and 29 percent had clearly stated the research problem and objectives, respectively. Moreover, 86 percent of proposals had issues in literature review, especially by having inadequate literature in the proposed study. Komba (2016), who examined the challenges to effective writing of theses and dissertations among postgraduates in selected Tanzania's higher learning institutions, found that up to 67 percent of the students did not have clear problem statements and students used different titles to write the introduction chapter, including phrases such as introduction, preamble or background to the problem. Besides, 63 percent of the postgraduates did not analyse their results adequately. Only 47 percent of students had adequately contextualised their findings.
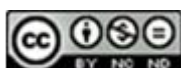
Also, Bushesha *et al.,*'s (2012) research aimed to identify challenges that supervisors and students experience during the course of dissertation writing under the open and distance learning (ODL) mode, found the first hurdle for students to be inadequate training in research methods. Second, the students demonstrate poor writing skills evidenced by long, poorly organised and unfocused documents they produce. The study also reported that students lacked significant skills for conducting a reviewing literature critically, with the problem stemming from their inability to access adequate and relevant literature. Such literature, however, remains generic and pays little, if any, attention to the overriding issue of resolving these seemingly endemic and intractable problems, thus creating a need to depict the exact erroneous style of dissertation writing prevailing among the University of Dar es Salaam postgraduates, for example, and accordingly suggest means for correcting them based on what students ought to master.

Study Methodology

The study employed a desk research design, which is appropriate for collecting and analysing information from secondary sources, in this case, master's degree dissertations and examiners' reports. The study adopted a qualitative research approach in a bid to generate an understanding of concepts postgraduates use and their practices in research report writing.

Subsequently, the study reviewed master's degree dissertations produced from 2014 to 2023 at the University of Dar es Salaam (UDSM)'s School of Education (SoED) repository. The 10-year period was deemed adequate to represent the recent context of the university that has witnessed a spiralling number of not only matriculating postgraduate students but also a steady growth in the volume of dissertation/theses output partly to plug the gap in the skilled manpower of newly-opened institutions of higher learning particularly in the private sector. By July 2021, the number of university institutions were 30 fully fledged universities and 17 university colleges, hence a total of 47 university Institutions in Tanzania, 19 public-owned and 28 privately-run (UNESCO World Higher Education Conference, WHEC, 2022). UDSM was chosen because it enrols more postgraduate students than any other universities in the country. Meanwhile, SoED, the focus of this study, hosts the targeted discipline of education and has diverse postgraduate programmes. During the 10 years, postgraduates produced 977 master's degree dissertations at the school. From this voluminous output 200 dissertations were randomly sampled and examined against an established guideline for rating the adequacy of contents written by the students. To protect the students' identity, this paper has substituted their names with alphabetical letters such as A, B, C, and D (for the students whose dissertations' extracts used as data in the paper). Moreover, the review of 10 external examiners' reports (covering the targeted period) helped to identify what the examiners repeatedly pointed out as inappropriate dissertation writing and their proposed corrections. This review further helped to confirm the common, repetitive errors of the postgraduates during their dissertation writing.

Besides, the evaluation of the dissertations was facilitated by a guide developed after an extensive review of literature related to structure and standards for writing various chapters and sections of a dissertation. Dissertation structures are, for instance, guided by the funnel model, alternatively known as IMRAD (Introduction, Methods, Results, and

Postgraduate Students' Common Errors in Writing Education Studies Dissertations: Lessons from the University of Dar es Salaam in Tanzania

George Kahangwa

Discussion), whose genesis can be traced back to the 1970s when it gained significant popularity among scholars and became a standard for academic writing (Sollaci & Perreira, 2004). IMRAD provides a framework for writing scientific investigations, especially scientific journal articles and dissertations of original research type. More importantly, the structure provides students with an easy application of research concepts. IMRAD's Introduction section intends to introduce the research, highlighting the key research problem while considering other research works in the field and existing gaps that a proposed study could fill. However, the IMRAD structure does not explicitly state the review of literature as a separate section but makes it an integral part of the introduction section where the writer can critically examine the literature, analyse debates, and contestations and establish own arguments based on the literature synthesis.

In IMRAD, the methods section describes research approach employed, designs and the rationale for utilising them in the study. The section also covers the target population, sample size and sampling procedures, with a justification of how the sample was selected and the extent of its representativeness. Moreover, it covers the data collection methods in use with their justification. The researcher must also describe in the methods section how the data collected were analysed, highlighting data analysis methods and how they address each research question.

The results and discussion section in IMRAD focuses on reporting results in accordance with the research objectives or questions. In this regard, the writer situates the results within the study contexts, interpreting and discussing the results in relation to other studies and theories guiding the research. Discussion of results ought to be engaging and not merely a mention of the study results and how they concur or differ from those of other scholars. IMRAD partly agrees with Creswell and Creswell's (2018) formats for research proposals, whose common sections for qualitative and quantitative proposals are the Introduction, Literature review, and Procedures/Methods.

At the UDSM, dissertations—particularly at the master's level—require the assessment of five chapters but with additional considerations pertaining to dissertation presentation and the contribution to knowledge[1]. Thus, the sections and their assessment marks (in brackets) are as follows: presentation (5), introduction (5), Literature Review (10), Methodology (20), Results and Discussion of Findings (35), Conclusions and Recommendations (10), and Originality and Contribution to Knowledge (15), hence 100 marks. In this regard, the guideline helped the study examine closely the appropriateness of writing the chapters.

The information collected from the dissertations and examiners' reports was subjected to content analysis to identify common mistakes that are committed by postgraduate students in the writing of dissertation chapters in relation to the established standards. Thus, document extracts with technical errors and proposed alternatives were coded manually to categorise them in accordance with the objectives of the study and the sections in dissertation chapters.

Results

The subsequent sections present the way postgraduate students mistakenly compose the dissertation chapters before suggesting how they could have done it differently in an

---

[1] At the doctoral or PhD level chapters could be more numerous depending on several factors, including whether each objective is assigned a separate chapter, or whether the findings are separated from the discussion chapter.
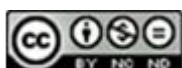
appropriate manner. These sections are organised along the common chapters of a dissertation.

Writing an Introduction Chapter

Many of the students simply write what comes to their minds or what they simply glean from literature and/or emulate what they see in dissertations found in repositories. As such, they ought to ensure that they do not just write anything, but also that their paragraphs are coherent, well-developed marked by a good flow with a logical connection between sentences. This introductory chapter also serves as the mirror that gives a gist of the entire dissertation and what the reader should anticipate.

Writing the Background Section

Several university postgraduate guidelines require research students to write a background in their research proposals and then dissertations. Some students are uncertain about what a background to the study or a background to the research problem entails. Out of the 200 dissertations reviewed, 71 had a section called "background to the study" at a place where "background to the research problem" could have been used. The latter is more reasonable because it is a section that precedes the problem statement. Nevertheless, a student can check what his/her institution recommends or follow suggestions in the literature.

Moreover, there could be different styles of writing the background. The analysis of the dissertations demonstrates that some backgrounds written had historical information around the subject of research whereas others are mere recaps of literature and, thus, lack consistency. The most appropriate background to the research problem is the one that traces current concerns revolving around the key variables of a particular study. These concerns can be at the global, regional and local levels, as articulated by researchers (hence literature is cited), or by policymakers and/or other stakeholders as presented at conferences, in documents, and/or agreements.

The review of the examiners' reports further helped to determine the common errors students make in this section. In this regard, one examiner reported: "Some of the candidates have too long background information which seems to be duplicating part of theoretical perspectives which should normally be addressed in chapter two". Such a statement suggests the need for candidates to understand the difference between a background and other aspects of the dissertation. Such understanding could make them know where to place a specific component of the dissertation.

Writing a Research Problem Section

When students write a section of the statement of the research problem, what quickly comes to their minds is explaining something about a practical problem that they perceive in the field of their study. As a result, they end up writing vague research problems, which tend to undermine their research project, its validity and justification. This problem was evident in more than 50 percent of the dissertations that the study reviewed. A problem statement of one of the dissertations (by student Y) reads in part:

> Despite the efforts made by the government in enhancing performance through various strategies the performance in public secondary schools is still not good. Therefore, this study investigates teacher-students interaction practices and their enhancement of students'

Postgraduate Students' Common Errors in Writing Education Studies Dissertations: Lessons from the University of Dar es Salaam in Tanzania

George Kahangwa

academic performance of public secondary schools in Meru district council in Arusha region.

Such a statement puts heavy emphasis on practical strategies the government deploys to address issues of academic performance, with little focus on theoretical arguments on how teacher-student interactions are connected to the academic performance of public secondary schools. The same pattern of expression is also observable in the dissertation by student E who presents the statement problem as follows:

> There are still many challenges facing the Tanzanian secondary education, most secondary schools have shortage of buildings, poor supply of textbooks and other teaching and learning materials, competence of teachers in delivering knowledge and poor teaching abilities, student access to resources and unstable education policy. Therefore, this study was called to assess the qualities in communities' secondary schools in Ilala district and provide appropriate ways on delivering quality education.

Student E goes further by suggesting that the study has a potential of providing practical solutions to a practical problem of delivering quality education. This articulation could have been a bit okay had their studies been basic research-orientated. For scholarly purposes, students need to state a theoretical problem. They should state it in such a way that they manage to indicate what exactly is not known before embarking on their research. Such observation has been recurring in the reports of examiners at SoED. One of them writes:

> [Some] candidates [have written] unclear statement of the problem where they commonly fail to show what exactly is unknown either based on empirical studies or life experiences, significance of knowing what is unknown, providing unjustified information, unclear presentation of what is already known or less connection with the stated objectives.

Besides stating the unknown, students need to indicate whether there is a dispute in the literature, in the sense that scholars do not agree, or there remains something that is not clear despite the abundance of research undertaken on the issue of focus. Students, therefore, must read widely on what constitutes their research problem and how to state it. In addition, they ought to master the statement of both theoretical and practical problems.

A theoretical problem focuses on expanding knowledge and understanding rather than providing direction to the change (Mc Combes, 2019). With that in mind, an individual can easily identify a problem by reading recent studies, theories, and debates on a certain topic to establish a gap or what is current about it, for example, a phenomenon that has not been well-studied, or contradictions between competing perspectives. Even though, a theoretical problem often has a practical consequence, studies that deal with it lack focus on solving an immediate issue in a specific place; nevertheless, its results can serve as a case study.

On the other hand, a practical problem in a research context is a challenging issue that has been experienced by practitioners in a particular field and they are yet to find a solution for it. Identifying such a practical problem requires intensely reading reports, following up on previous research and talking to people who work in the relevant field or organisation (Mc Combes, 2019). In educational setting, challenging issues are such as poor academic performance, school inefficiency, increased truancy and dropout.

Writing the Study Objectives Section
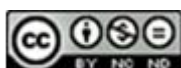
When writing research objectives, some students have just been writing anything that comes to mind despite being vaguely connected to what exactly they would like to work on without making sure that every objective is in line with the research title and the study purpose. In this study, the 196 dissertations reviewed appeared to have objectives non-aligned with the research title. In a dissertation by student C whose study was on teaching methods, for example, the second objective reads: "To examine [the] availability and utilisation of teaching and learning materials." Such an objective does not resonate with the purpose of the study, which centres on the utilisation of classroom interactions method. Retrospectively, the student could have had an objective focusing on a particular subcomponent of the main variables embedded in the title. The widespread nature of such difficulties in objectives framing and composition also recursively appear in the examiners' reports, as one of them states:

> Research objectives and questions of some students were unclear or repetitive. Hence, suggestions were given on how they should be improved or merged. …use of general action verbs e.g., explore, investigate, evaluate, assess, etc. to state specific objectives has continued to manifest itself, thus affecting specificity and measurability of the stated objectives.

Such an observation further indicates that students commit an error of making the research objectives not researchable, which defeats the very essence of such endeavours. Thus, students should also note that there are specific terms for stating the objectives. Some terms such as 'explore' are too big for specific objectives much as they *might* serve the purpose for the general or broad objective of qualitative research. They should be using more specific terms such as identify, find out, and correlate.

Writing Delimitation and Limitations of the Study

Some students write the delimitation section by simply duplicating what is in the sample, instead of indicating the spatial-temporal boundaries they set for their studies. This anomaly was observable in most of the dissertations reviewed. In this connection, Student C's dissertation reads:

> The study on the influence [identity removed] among high school students was only delimited to [name] region. All secondary schools found in this area were included in the study.

Such a statement fails to describe the set temporal dimension of the boundaries. Moreover, it has also been a worrisome practice that when students resent the limitations of their respective studies, they resort to listing trivial matters such as fear amongst respondents, and uncooperative respondents. For example, student F's in a dissertation reads in part:

> During data collection, the researcher was denied access to some documents like black-books and dismissal letters due to their privacy... school daily routines were somehow fixed, thus it was not easy to get participants, specifically misbehaving students.

Such a statement reveals nothing about what the chosen methodology can capture and what it cannot. Moreover, as one of the examiners' reports pointed out:

> Some candidates considered normal challenges encountered during data collection as limitations of the study even where such challenges did not affect quantity or quality of the

Postgraduate Students' Common Errors in Writing Education Studies Dissertations: Lessons from the University of Dar es Salaam in Tanzania

George Kahangwa

> gathered information. Corrections on what constitutes limitations of the study were given
> including examples of issues that could   be considered as limitations of the study …
> Some candidates could not explain how limitations of the study were mitigated without
> compromising data quality.

Indeed, casting the limitations requires an understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of different research methodologies. Thus, a student should explain the limitation of the methodology of his/her choice, how such weaknesses affected his/her particular study, as well as measures taken to mitigate the effects.

## *Writing Literature Review Chapter*

Most research students find it difficult to decide on naming sections in the literature review chapter. Apart from a section that introduces the chapter, followed by the one that explores the conceptualisation, research students should write sections and sub-sections that correspond with both the purpose of the study and its research objectives. Moreover, each section in the literature needs to show at the end what is missing in the literature such that necessitate a certain research question or objective. Such information also informs the generation and production of research articles out of a long work—dissertation. It would be prudent, for example, to use the literature related to one objective and the respective findings in producing an article. Moreover, the writing of a separate literature chapter follows a tradition in positivism. Otherwise, literature also serves a valuable purpose in the introduction chapter, especially in the background and, subsequently, in discussion chapter, particularly when comparing and contrasting the findings (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

In line with previous studies, the present study has also identified several mistakes that postgraduates commonly make in the review of the literature section. First, we identified how many students struggle to provide a logical flow of sections and sub-sections. They tend to jump from one idea to another. Second, many students provide a lot of expendable information that is irrelevant to the study objectives. In addition, most of the students simply summarise ideas gleaned from literature without analysing and critically engaging with them not only to contextualise their research in existing discourse but also identify research gaps, key assumptions, and arguments, debates and contestations around the concepts and theories and the points of view in relation to their research interests. Such weaknesses are not only evident in the dissertations but were also a source of primary concerns among examiners. In this regard, one of them notes:

> Though most of the candidates included a number of previous studies that address both
> theoretical and empirical perspectives of their studies, most of them could not use such
> studies to synthesize knowledge gap appropriately. Suggestions were given for them to
> synthesize knowledge gap objective-wise staring from studies at global   level then down to
> local context focusing on not only findings or conclusions but also on methodology used,
> place and time aspects.

Implicitly, failing to synthesise literature with a purpose constitutes a vexing error. Moreover, the incoherence in the literature review is worrisome.
The analysis further indicates that students also struggle with identifying quality and reliable sources of literature with some using very outdated sources despite new editions and developments already available. In fact, all the dissertations reviewed had some citations that were older than 20 years. Another examiner also observes:
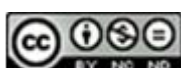
This observation implores dissertation writers to ensure that their literature review also captures the methodology employed in the previous studies, which can also help establish a methodological gap.

Writing Research Methodology Chapter

When writing the methodology chapter, many students simply pick what is in the reference books about a certain methodology, directly quote, or paraphrase these pronouncements without 'domesticating' them into their study. In some of the dissertations reviewed, there was no mention of how the chosen research approaches for the studies aligned with the entire work. One of the dissertations simply refers to the utilisation of "the mixed methods research approach" whose "characteristics are as outlined by Creswell (2014)" with no accompanying explanation on how the mixed methods approach could help address the study research questions or fits in with what the study wants to establish. Table 1 exemplifies how some students write contrasted with how they should have written:

Table 1: Students Statements on Research Paradigms and What They Should Write

How they write	How they should have written
"The chosen paradigm for this study is pragmatism which is flexible."	By its nature, the current study requires maximum flexibility in its methodology. Hence pragmatism which allows such flexibility is opted for.
"Qualitative research focuses on the experiences of people as well as stressing the uniqueness of the individual (Burns and Grove, 2003). Wheeler (2002) defined qualitative research as a form of social inquiry that focuses on the way people interpret and make sense of their experience and the world in which they live."	Being qualitative, this study will focus on the experiences of the participants (e.g., teachers) and individual teacher's unique explanations of what he/she has experienced (Burns and Grove, 2018). thus, drawing from Wheeler (2002) as well, this study is a social inquiry that focuses on the way teachers interpret and make sense of their experiences (on how academic masters work) and the teaching environment that they work in.

Likewise, when using citations to support the methods chosen, many of the postgraduates at the UDSM simply cite readings when they could have added value to their writing by embedding words and phrases that add clarity and coherence such as "[method] is chosen with an understanding that [citing and citation]" vis-à-vis their intended purpose.

Describing Research Design

Most of the dissertations that were reviewed during this study had very short explanations about the designs for their respective studies. Students cosmetically describe what constitutes a design and wind up the section by simply mentioning the design they have chosen. One dissertation reads in part to illustrate this problem:

A qualitative oriented case study design was adopted because of its flexibility in terms of varied data at the district that guaranteed in-depth investigation of the unity of inquiry. According to [citation] case study is useful "when" 'why' or 'how' questions are asked about a set of events over which the researcher has no control. Moreover, [citation] defines a case study as a technique

Postgraduate Students' Common Errors in Writing Education Studies Dissertations: Lessons from the University of Dar es Salaam in Tanzania

George Kahangwa

by which an individual factor (whether it is an institution or just an episode in the life of an individual or a group) is analysed in its relationship to any other in the group.

Such writing does not only fail to describe how the chosen place qualified to be a case but also does not show the association between the design and the objectives as well as how the citations relate to the study in question. Moreover, the description fails to mention that a research design is an established plan, structure and strategy for collecting and analysing data to answer the research questions under a controlled condition. What it overlooks is that such a design is essentially a master plan that specifies the methods and procedures for collecting and analysing the required information. Also, it is evident that though different types of research designs such as case study, phenomenology, cross-section surveys, and correlational designs exist, they may be compatible with specific studies, and not necessarily universally applicable.

As such, a research student should adopt a research design depending on the nature of the study or problem under investigation. The choice should also be in line with the chosen approach. For instance, a case study design is suitable when the place or a subject to be researched qualifies to be a case. The place has to have unique qualities, that is, bearing characteristics which differentiate it from the rest of the places/subjects in relation to the issues or topic of the research. For the phenomenological study research, on the other hand, requires studying lived experiences. Additionally, the postgraduates should also be specific enough to mention what type of phenomenology—whether descriptive or hermeneutic or transcendental. Besides, within these types, they should specify the approach used, such as Giorgi's, Van Kaam's, Moustaka's and/or Colaizzi's methods (Phillips-Pula, *et al.,* 2011).

Writing the Findings Chapter

Many of the research students—based on the 200 dissertations reviewed—tend to present findings that are irrelevant to the purpose of the study and research objectives. For example, student D's study was on how parents influence students' career choices but simply stated the percentage of students who were either supported or not supported financially by their parents without linking this information to students' career choices. The analysis also shows that many of the postgraduates fail to match what they have observed in the field and what the study intends to find. Moreover, some research students present data that are biased to one source and with little interpretation or no interpretation at all of such information. Failure to use different sources was reported by one of the examiners as follows:

> There were few studies whose findings lacked the perspective of triangulation; for example, if the candidate had three or four means of data collection, one or two sources of data were not triangulated together in some sections.

This observation signals the need to use data from all instruments employed in the study. Since tools are associated with research objectives (Creswell & Creswell, 2018), the research students should present research findings as per objectives with their voices on the meaning of the findings presented clear and articulative to avoid simply dumping raw data and expect it to interpret itself.

Performing Data Analysis
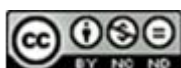
Another set of errors in dissertation writing is observable in how postgraduates analyse the data. When they are required to perform thematic analysis, for example, they simply assume codes are themes, hence ignoring their difference. Whereas codes are normally short, themes are in form of phrases or statements. Moreover, a theme can serve as an umbrella for several codes. Even though a code is drawn on a category, a theme may bring together several categories. This confusion between codes and themes leads to incomplete analysis and, as a result, one may find a theme containing unrelated codes.

In one of the dissertations, student G provides a theme labelled "views on [the] utilisation of counselling services", which at some point presents a code named "counselling services as lacking confidentiality in higher learning institutions". This code could have augured well with another theme labelled challenges students encountered in utilising counselling services.

Writing Discussion of Research Findings

Research students tend to discuss findings by simply stating and re-stating that their findings concur or are consistent with research findings from the literature. Instead, after the data presentation, they are supposed to discuss intensively and extensively their findings by comparing and/or contrasting them with other relevant empirical studies and seeking explanations from theories, paradigms, or philosophies. They should also draw implications of their findings for the issue under investigation.

The present study found that discussion of results poses significant challenges to the postgraduates as most of them reported the concurrence of results between their findings and those of previous studies. They fail to discuss their findings in relation to the adopted theories and to contextualise their findings to their study settings. In consequence, many students discuss their findings more or less in the following manner based on a student's excerpt: "This view backs up findings from [author's name] who discovered that… Furthermore, these results back up findings from [author's name] who discovered that…"

Writing Conclusions and Recommendations Chapter

Most of the research students write conclusions and recommendations from their minds instead of drawing from the research findings. Student C, for example, recommends as follows:

> There is a need to introduce other means of getting financial assistance in order to support students from low-income parents to manage to meet school costs, when their income is not enough, e.g., Loan Board for Secondary School Students.

This recommendation is not derived from the study findings as none of the study objectives and questions were about the financial ability of parents in relation to meeting the school costs. Similarly, student D concludes as follows: "[The] MoEVT [Ministry of Education and Vocational Training] needs to ensure that sufficient qualified teachers are allocated in secondary schools in order to alleviate the acute shortage of geography teachers in [name] region." Such recommendation deviates from the study's concern on how teachers interact with students to the adequacy of Geography teachers. Notably, research students should draw conclusions based on the research objectives and their associated research findings,

ostgraduate Students' Common Errors in Writing Education Studies Dissertations: Lessons from the University of Dar es Salaam in Tanzania

George Kahangwa

not otherwise. Moreover, research students should provide recommendations in response to their study findings and indicate necessary associated actions.

Discussion

The findings presented in this paper are consistent with worldwide concerns on the writing of dissertations. For instance, the finding that students state their research problems inappropriately corresponds with concerns from many writers in the global research contexts (Akhidime, 2017). To qualify for a degree conferment during commencement, students must therefore learn to state research problems appropriately, lest they compromise the research undertaking and its intended purposes. As Bryman (2007) contends, a problem statement concisely presents an overview of a phenomenon existing in the area that has been nominated for the study. The statement explains the concept, which is the key to a study in a particular context, and which inspires the researcher to conduct a thorough inquiry to generate knowledge or solve a practical problem. Research students also need to consider plausible points before writing a problem statement. Creswell (2012) insists on including the following in the statement of the problem: i) the topic, ii) the research problem, iii) a justification of the importance of the problem as found in the past research and in practice, iv) the deficiencies in the existing knowledge on the problem, and v) the audience that will benefits from a study of the problem. Bryman (2007) also outlines five key statements of the problem issues, which slightly differ from issues in Creswell (2012), namely i) the actual research problem, ii) justification of the importance of the problem as found in current studies and practice, iii) deficiency (gap) in present literature about the problem, iv) method (timeframe, participants, location and trend) and v) the organisation or individual that will benefit from the clear understanding or solution to the problem. Under the meaning criteria, Creswell (2012) and Bryman (2007) are not far apart, what differentiates them is only formulation and presentation of content in the context of their respective books.

In this regard, Pardede (2018) further contends that the format of the statement can have three parts: Part A—'the ideal'—that describes a desired goal or ideal situation or value to show how things should be; Part B—'the reality'—that dwells on the condition that prevents the goal, state, or value in part A from being achieved or realised at this time, and explains how the current situation falls short of the goals or the ideal; Part C—'the consequences'—allows the researcher to pinpoint the proposed way of improving the current situation and moving it closer to the goal or ideal. This format is a scaffolding model for young researchers across the globe in their journey to complete their theses or dissertations as requirements to scoop the prize—award of degrees in various higher learning institutions.

As Akhidime (2017) aptly observes, a proper statement of the research problem demands an understanding that the award of research-based degrees is inextricably linked to the production of dissertations or theses that bear well-stated research problem. Indeed, it is the research problem that decides all the aspects in the research process and provides a bases for making logical conclusions and study-based recommendations. In other words, a research problem is an engine of the whole research process.

Arguably, a research problem is something that people rarely paid their attention to earlier (Krathwohl, 1993). It is an issue of controversy or concern that initiates the study and is an integral part of the introduction of the study report. Omar (2011) agrees with Krathwohl (1993) on the research problem since, for him, the problem implies a controversy or existing deference of opinion about the matter. The problem involves sentences and
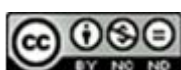
paragraphs aimed to legitimise the formulation and foundational meaning of the study (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010). In this regard, McMillan and Schumacher (2010) contend that the problem can indicate the beginning or starting point of individual interest, for example, formative classroom assessment, reading difficulties of biased schools' students. They further proffer that a research problem consists of three important factors: context, significance and purpose. On the other hand, McCombes (2019) defines a research problem as a specific issue, difficulty, contradiction, or gap in knowledge that an individual aims to address in their study. This concept is closely related to Bryman (2007), who describes it as an area of concern or troubling question that requires thorough comprehension or concise exploration. Also, Creswell (2012) believes that the problem of the study pertains to educational issues, controversies, or concerns that guide the arising needs for conducting research. The educational arena is one of the most valuable contexts for finding a good research problem, and the academic arena also happens to be the most accessible source for research problems. The concept of problems in a research context raises a plausible point for the researchers and other scholars, especially regarding a category where the problem can be nominated, i.e., the type of the research problem.

Moreover, the study found that postgraduate students at UDSM are usually unable to conduct proper and critical literature review, which renders credence to previous claims that students fail to master the intricacies of rigorous literature review, as reported by Akindele (2008), Leite *et al.,* (2019) and Shahsavar *et al.,* (2020). Such mastery is imperative for production of valid research findings. Furthermore, the findings that many of the postgraduates at the university under review fail to domesticate the proposed methodologies augurs well with Qasem and Zayid's (2019) claim questioning the students' competencies in research methods. Such findings alert universities to the urgent need to ensure methods mastery as a mandatory criterion for completion of postgraduate training.

Generally, the findings in this study build on previous studies that were undertaken within Tanzania's higher education contexts to further shed light on the difficulties that postgraduate students contend with in writing their dissertations. The present study contributes to the subject by identifying common errors postgraduate students make across all key sections of the master's degree dissertations. These findings suggest such errors, if targeted in the training of students, can equip the postgraduates with the means to avoid them and improve the quality of their output.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The research findings found every section of a dissertation at UDSM to be prone to errors that research students make, especially when they are not aware of how to avoid such errors. Because many postgraduate students make a myriad of common errors in different sections of research-based dissertation, there is an overriding need for them to be mindful of the potential errors and avoid them. These errors include writing backgrounds in a wrong manner, vague statements of the research problem, incoherent paragraphs, inappropriate synthesis of literature, weak justification of methodologies, unconvincing reporting of research findings and drawing ungrounded conclusions. Implicitly, there is a need for a thorough preparation of postgraduate students for dissertation writing. As such, students should ensure that they grasp the meaning of each dissertation section and develop their skills and abilities to write various chapters of the dissertation. Moreover, their universities should prepare them adequately both theoretically and in practical terms on how to write effectively critical, adequate and professional research proposals. Likewise, the students

Postgraduate Students' Common Errors in Writing Education Studies Dissertations: Lessons from the University of Dar es Salaam in Tanzania

George Kahangwa

need exposure to relevant, practical and experiential training on academic writing prior to proceeding to the data collection phase. Furthermore, students should be trained in analytical and critical literature review to enable them to identify research gaps and go beyond mere descriptive writing. Likewise, postgraduates should also be well-trained in data analysis techniques to strengthen their ability to follow and apply the procedures for analysis of their data. Indeed, when students get an opportunity to realise the mistakes that other postgraduates have been making in their dissertation writing and how to write differently, they could register a significant improvement in the academic world and help improve the quality of postgraduate research output—dissertations and theses.

References

Akhidime, A.E. (2017). The importance and development of research problem: Didactic discuss. *International Journal of Economic, Commerce and Management, 5 (8),* 631-640

Akindele, O. (2008). A critical analysis of the literature review section of graduate dissertations at the University of Botswana. *ESP 7 (20)*, 1-20.

Ali, G., Ishaq, M., Hassan, M., Ishaq, I., & Ahmed, M.I. (2022). Challenges in writing a research thesis/dissertation: It's effect on PhD students. *International Journal of Management Sciences and Business Research*, 11(2), 35 -42.

Bryman, A. (2007). The research question in social research: What is its Role? *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*. 10 (1), 5-20.

Bushesha, M., Mtae, H., Msindai, J., & Mbogo, S. (2012). Challenges facing supervisors and students in the process of writing theses/dissertations under ODL: Experiences from the Open University of Tanzania. *Huria: Journal of the Open University of Tanzania*, *12*(1), 118-131.

Creswell, J. W. (2012). *Educational research: Planning, conducting, and evaluating quantitative and qualitative research (4ᵗʰ Ed)*. MA: Pearson.

Creswell, J. W. (2014). Research design: *Qualitative, quantitative and mixed methods approaches* (4ᵗʰ ed.). Sage Publications.

Creswell, J.W., & Creswell, J.D., (2018). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative and mixed methods approaches (5ᵗʰ ed)*. Sage Publications.

Garcia-Castillo, K. (2019). The challenges in dissertation writing: The ABD phenomenon and its possible solutions. *International Education & Research Journal*, *5*(6), 62 – 65.

Fatiha, S. (2023). Investigating challenges in thesis writing for non-native MA students of English: The case of second-year MA students of English in Algeria. *Bulletin of the Transilvania University of Braşov, Series IV: Philology & Cultural Studies*, *16*(2), 89-104.

Hawari, O. M. D. A., Al-Shboul, Y., & Huwari, I. F. (2022). Supervisors' perspectives on graduate students' problems in academic writing. *European Journal of Educational Research*, *11*(1), 545-556.

Huwari, I. F., Albzour, A., & Alqaryouti, M. (2017). Supervisors' written feedback on Jordanian master's students. *Academic Research International*, *8*(4), 121-130.

Komba, S. C. (2016). Challenges of writing theses and dissertations among postgraduate students in Tanzanian higher learning institutions. *International Journal of Research, 5(3), 71-80.*
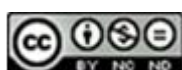
Leite, D. F., Padilha, M. A. S., & Cecatti, J. G. (2019). Approaching literature review for academic purposes: The literature review checklist. *Clinics*, *74*, 1-8.

Kikula, I. S. & Qorro. M. A. S. (2007). *Common mistakes and problems in research proposal writing: an assessment of proposals for research grants submitted to Research on Poverty Alleviation REPOA in Tanzania.* Special Paper 07.24, Dar es Salaam, REPOA.

Krathwohl, D. R. (1993). *Methods of educational and social science research: An integrated approach.* Longman.

Lessing, A. C., & Schulze, S. (2003). Lecturers' experience of postgraduate supervision in a distance education context: research in higher education. *South African Journal of Higher Education*, *17*(2), 159-168.

Manchishi, P. C., Ndhlovu, D., & Mwanza, D. S. (2015). Common mistakes committed and challenges faced in research proposal writing by university of Zambia postgraduate students. *International Journal of Humanities Social Sciences and Education, 2(3),* 126-138.

McCombes, S. (2019). How to Define a Research Problem/Ideas and Example.

McMillan, J. H. & Schumacher, S. (2010). *Research in education: Evidence based – Inquiry* (7th Ed*).* Pearson Education, Inc.

Ocholla, D.N. (2024). Predominant shortcomings experienced by examiners of LIS master's and doctoral theses and dissertations. An examiner's perspective. In: Ocholla, D., Onyancha, O.B., Adesina, A.O. (eds). *Information, knowledge, and technology for teaching and research in Africa. Synthesis Lectures on Information Concepts, retrieval, and Services*. Springer, Cham.

Omar, I. M. (2011). *Education research, concepts and methods: a practical guide based on experience.* Delah Educational Publishers Ltd.

Pardede, P. (2018*). Identifying and formatting the research problem. research in ELT. (MODULE 1).* Research Gate.

Phillips-Pula, L., Strunk, J., & Pickler, R. H. (2011). Understanding phenomenological approaches to data analysis. *Journal of Pediatric Health Care*, *25*(1), 67–71.

Qasem, F. A. A., & Zayid, E. I. M. (2019). The challenges and problems faced by students in the early stage of writing research projects in L2, University of Bisha, Saudi Arabia. *European Journal of Special Education Research*, *4*(1), 32-47.

Shahsavar, Z., Kourepaz, H., & Bulut, S. (2020). Postgraduate students' difficulties in writing their theses literature review. *Cogent Education*, 7(1), 1 -11.

Sollaci, L. B., & Pereira, M. G. (2004). The introduction, methods, results, and discussion (IMRAD) structure: a fifty-year survey. *Journal of the Medical Library Association*, 92(3), 364.

Suter, N. W. (2012). *Introduction to Educational research: a critical thinking approach.* Sage publications, inc.

UNESCO World Higher Education Conference, WHEC (2022), Section for Higher Education, | Division for Education 2030 Higher Education Report, United Republic of Tanzania UNESCO National Commission in alliance with [Ministry Education, Science and Technology and Tanzania Commission for Universities].

Postgraduate Students' Common Errors in Writing Education Studies Dissertations: Lessons from the University of Dar es Salaam in Tanzania

George Kahangwa