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Challenges of Writing Theses and Dissertations among Postgraduate Students: A Case Study of a Private University in Kenya

Dr. Solomon M. Munyao
Lecturer, Department of Organizational Leadership, Pan Africa Christian University, Kenya
Dr. Truphena A. Oduol
Head, Department of Organizational Leadership, Pan Africa Christian University, Kenya

Abstract:
The writing of both theses and dissertations remains a challenge to many postgraduate students at the Masters as well as at the PhD levels. The aim of this qualitative case study was to explore the academic challenges that Masters and Doctorate students in private Universities face while writing their theses and dissertations and to propose the remedies for mitigation. Ten postgraduate students (seven Masters and three Doctorate) in the university who had either completed or were at the stage of writing their thesis and dissertations were targeted. Data were collected using an open-ended questionnaire supplemented with semi-structured interviews. The study was grounded on an interpretivist research paradigm which formed the basis for interpreting the results of the data. The results of the thematic analysis of data revealed that students faced challenges in navigating through the following areas of the thesis/dissertation writing: the identification of a research problem, development of a research topic, disagreement between supervisors, and getting responses from supervisors. The study recommends for the intensification of mentoring and supervision, postgraduate research writing courses, and practical involvement of students in practical research.

Keywords: Postgraduate Students, Theses and Dissertation Writing, Academic Challenges

1. Introduction

The slow completion rates of postgraduate students have been increasing in the recent past causing concern to universities across the globe. This is evident in the United States of America and the United Kingdom (Pearson, 2016), South Africa (Cloete& Charles, 2015) where the completion of postgraduate students has been low. This status of affairs is evident in African universities with one of the lowest completion rates (Rongu'uno, 2016;Wamala, Onyno, &Acaya, 2011).Previous studies in Kenya had indicated that the completion rates for postgraduate students at Kenyatta University was 15.4 percent, Moi University was 19.2 percent, Catholic University of Eastern Africa was 10 percent, Nairobi University was 15 percent while the completion rate at Kisii University was 11.7 percent(Siringi, 2011). This problem is more pronounced since the demand for people with postgraduate degrees and high-level expertise has increased recently. Postgraduate studies in universities are offered on coursework and thesis modes only. According to Komba (2016), postgraduate students in institutions of higher learning in Kenya are supposed to complete the prescribed core courses in the program before they can be allowed to proceed to the research phase. The process of writing a thesis or dissertation starts with the development and defending of a concept paper and a research proposal. It is only after candidates have satisfied the board of examiners that they are cleared to proceed to the data collection phase of the study. Komba (2016) explains that the research phase involves a candidate generating a research topic, planning and executing a research activity, and writing a report that contains the results of the data analyzed.

It is well supported in the literature that postgraduate students face a myriad of academic challenges that hinder the completion of their studies (Yasmin, Saeed & Ahmad, 2018; Komba, 2016). This is attributed to several factors such as supervision (Health, 2012;Mapolisa&Maffa, 2011; Wang & Li, 2008), student individual factors or abilities such as language barrier (Qasem&Zayid, 2019)and lack of skills and knowledge in carrying out research and writing of the thesis (Ekpoh (2016). In an Australian study, Health (2012) found that 6 percent of the respondents were not satisfied with their supervisors.Wang and Linda's (2008) study of Australian Universities,the international students'academic challenges in writing their theses and dissertations were attributed to the fact that the method of teaching failed to take into consideration the culture of where postgraduate students came from.

Studies that had been conducted in Africa (Ekpoh,2016; Herman, 2011; Onuka&Onabamiro; 2010) pointed to the fact that postgraduate students faced a myriad of challenges while writing their theses and dissertations.For example,the results of a study by Herma (2011) revealed that postgraduate attrition rates were high due to low student motivation, supervision skills and ability to meet the post graduate expectations. A study by Onuka and Onabamiro (2010) conducted in Liberia indicated that postgraduate students' challenges were associated with supervisor'slack of concerns about the students they were assigned to mentor as well as their research work. In Kenya, the results of a study by Kalei, Bokonko,

and Nyaboga (2021) showed that supervisors delay in giving feedback to students was frequent due to their preoccupation with other tasks at the expense of the student and consequently, hindering students 'progress towards completion of their research work and final reports.

2. Statement of the Problem

The completion rates of postgraduate students in Kenyan Private Universities have witnessed a downward trend lately. Private universities form a very key component in complementing government efforts to provide postgraduate education to supply the high caliber work force needed by the government in Kenya. According to Ekpoh (2016) and Ho, et al, (2012), the demand for postgraduate studies which require a higher level of expertise for transformation of economies has steadily been increasing in the recent past both in the developing as well as in the developed countries. Although this sector has witnessed expansion in the last decade and is recommended for the high standards of education like her counterparts in public university have witnessed a decline in completion rates in her postgraduate programs (Kalei, Bokonko, &Nyaboga, 2021)).Although several factors account for the low student completion rates in postgraduate programs, the academic challenges that postgraduate students face have not been explored extensively.

Although students are allocated supervisors or advisers as mentors to ensure that the research process is engaging and transformative, there are indications that this process and programs are marred by challenges. This is evident in considerable the number of postgraduate students taking too long to complete their studies or abandoning them altogether. The studies available have done little to analyze the challenges or hindrances that students face in navigating through this process. This is of great concern considering that students and universities invest a lot of time and money in both Masters and PhD programs, and thus these delays often result in loss of income to the university and the degrees taking an unusual length of time thereby having an impact on university planning for the resources and learning. Moreover, Governments in Africa valueshigher education as a pillar for development and are thus very keen to ensure that university students and researchers are well prepared (Odhiambo, 2018).

Research studies focusing on the general challenges faced by postgraduate students in public universities while writing their theses and dissertations has been the object of inquiry in most developed countries and the few reported in Africa (Mutula, 2011). However, studies are yet to sufficiently explore the academic related factors that contribute to the slow completion rates in private universities and especially in developing countries. This study thus sought to close this gap by delving deeper on the students' abilities and knowledge of research and the quality of supervision received by post graduate students.

This study was guided by the following research questions in order to establish the academic challenges that postgraduate students in Private Universities faced in the process of writing their theses and dissertations: -
- What academic challenges do you face while writing your thesis or dissertation?
- What suggestions would you recommend for tackling the identified thesis and dissertation challenges?

3. Literature Review

The PhD process varies from one university to the other. For example, as Komba, (2016) explains, some universities require postgraduate students to complete their coursework before embarking on the research process while others undertake research only, which culminates in the writing of a thesis or a dissertation within a stipulated period of time. As Hoon et al (2019) explains, postgraduate studies are taken by a student who has successfully completed a bachelor's degree in a university. The mode of a postgraduate study may be on full-time or part-time basis depending on the occupation of the student. As for Komba (2016), postgraduate studies involve students who have registered in a university to study postgraduate diploma, master's degree or doctorate degree.

Studies have shown that postgraduate students encounter several challenges in their postgraduate studies. Some of these challenges are attributed to supervision (Wadesango et al., 2011; Hudson, 2014). ResearchbyKomba(2016) has also demonstrated that the thesis and dissertation writing phase has presented the biggest challenge to postgraduate students in many universities all over the world. Choosing the right research design, data collection, processing and writing the final report has been an area of concern for postgraduate students.Qasem and Zayid (2019) mixed method study explored the challenges and problems faced by students in the early stage of writing research projects in L2, University of Bisha in Saudi Arabia. They revealed that students faced difficulty in deciding the topic for research, lack of good knowledge of the methodology, inability of finding modern, specialized, and related references, lack of understanding of the subject matter, lack of time, and research guiding. Ezebilo (2012) explored the challenges that Doctoral students face in a Swedish University. The results found access to information, cultural differences, inadequate guidance, and little mentoring from supervisors as being some of the problems faced by postgraduate doctoral students in this university. Keong and Mussa (2015) had their study conducted to determine academic difficulties of Iraqi postgraduate students in Malaysia. The findings revealed that the students had both language and organizational problems such as vocabulary, poor referencing, weak organization, and weak expression of ideas.

In the African context, Komba (2016) used documentary research to establish if challenges of writing theses and dissertations existed among postgraduate students in Tanzanian higher learning institutions. The results showed that students encountered challenges in presenting the background of the study, statement of the problem, literature review, indication of knowledge gaps from the literature reviewed as well as language clarity. Pineteh (2014) conducted a qualitative study using interviews to determine the academic writing challenges of undergraduate students in South Africa. The results showed that academic writing challenges of students in universities of technology were as a result of several factors such as students' linguistic and general literacy backgrounds, attitudes toward academic writing and the privileging of middle-class literacy practices in South Africa. Manchishi, Ndhlovu, and Mwanza (2015) study sought to

establish the common mistakes committed and challenges faced in research proposal writing by University of Zambia postgraduate students. The results indicated unclear topics, unclear statement of the problem, ignorance about research limitations, the omission of philosophical concepts, poor literature review, inappropriate methodology and plagiarism as someof the challenges and problems that they faced.

Using a mixed method research study Bogonko, Kalei, and Nyaboga (2021) assessed the postgraduate thesis writing and its effect on completion rate in selected universities in UasinGishu County in Kenya. They found that students were dissatisfied with supervisors' lack of knowledge of the study area, limited feedback on their research area, the replacement of supervisors and unclear understanding of research methodology. Mbogo et al. (2020) conducted a study on the supervisory challenges and delays in completion of PhD programmes on Public and Private Universities from the perspectives of supervisors and graduate students in Kenya. The results showed that some supervisors lacked knowledge on the student's research area, the existence of conflicting feedback from different supervisors, and supervisors taking too long before giving feedback among others.

Several research gaps made this study worth of investigation. Contextually, majority of the studies found on the academic challenges facing postgraduate students were prevalent in contexts outside Africa and mostly in public universities (l-Khairy 2013; Komba 2016; Mafa&Mapolisa, 2011; Yiu, 2009). Conceptually, majority of the studies on the challenges that faced postgraduate students had used different concepts other than those used in this study. For example, Ezebilo (2012) did a study to assess the challenges of Doctoral students in a Swedish University. Essa (2010) conducted a study to reflect some of the challenges facing postgraduate nursing education in South Africa. In Kenya, Bogonko, Kalei, and Nyaboga (2021) assessed postgraduate thesis writing and its effects on completion rate in selected Universities in UasinGishu County in Kenya. This study was different in that it sought to specially establish the academic challenges that postgraduate students faced at both masters and doctoral levels in a private university in Kenya.

Methodologically, someof the previous studies had used different research methods than the ones used in this study. Awasthi (2019) in a study to investigate plagiarism and academic misconduct between 2009 and 2018 in India used a systematic review method. Ekpoh (2016) in a study to determine the research challenges that faced postgraduate students in writing their thesis in Nigeria used survey research design while respondents were sampled using purposive sampling technique. On their part, Kipchumba et al, (2019) used stratified sampling, simple random sampling, and purposive sampling methods to selects various respondents for the study in a study to determine the experiences of student-supervisor interactions in public universities in Kenya. In order to fill the gaps that had been identified, this study was qualitative in nature where data was collected from postgraduate students using in-depth interviews by use of face-to face and telephone interviews as well as online zoom meetings depending on the prevailing circumstance at hand.

4. Methodology

This study was underpinned by an interpretivist paradigm which postulates that all knowledge of reality is socially constructed by actors (Burrell & Morgan, 1979). The approach was aligned to the qualitative approach and suited to this study because its objective was to gain a rich understanding of the perspectives of students regarding the challenges of postgraduate research writing. A case study was deemed more appropriate because of the need to explore the patterns of meaning shared by the participants about the problem (challenges of post-graduate writing). The unit of analysis was 134 postgraduate students who had completed or were writing their thesis/dissertations. The study was in a private faith-based university in Kenya.

The participants were selected through purposive sampling method because the participants possessed rich information needed for this study (Patton, 2015). The sample population for this study was ten postgraduate students (seven for Master's program and three for PhD program).The number of PhD students was lower than that of Masters Students due to the fact that the university has more Masters Students than those enrolled for PhD program. Crabtree & Miller's (1992) recommendation that a sample of 6-8 participants was ideal for homogeneous group sample was adhered to. The participants were contacted via email with detailed information about the research in order to seek their participation.

Ethical principles of consent and confidentiality were upheld in the conduct of the study. Data was collected using structured questionnairewhich was distributed to the participantsand supplemented with a45-minute face to face semi-structured interviews over a period of four weeks with theparticipantsin order to give the students an opportunity to engage in depth with their experiences (Leedy&Ormrod, 2014). The students were asked to share their experiences based on the question: what challenges have you encountered in your thesis or dissertation writing? Why is this a challenge?

The taped recorded conversations were transcribed, read severally, and then shared with a few participants for verification and confirmation. An inductive approach wasthen used to examine the data using a thematic analysis approach. As Braun and Clarke (2006) explains, thematic analysis is a method for identifying, analyzing, organizing, describing, and reporting themes found within the data sets. This study used Braun and Clarke's (2006) steps to analyze the interview data. Here the participant statements, words wereexamined and labelled or coded. Data from the structured questionnaires were subjected to content analysis where the phrases and statements were examined for patterns, coherence and then subjected to coding process using the priori approach i.e., the codes identified earlier from the semi-structured interviews. The researchers ensured trustworthiness of the research by ensuring that its key components: credibility, dependability, transferability,and conformability (Lincoln &Guna, 1985)were met.

5. Results and Discussions

The results indicated that responses for both structured questionnaire and interviews were obtained from five of the seven Masters students translating to a response rate of 71.4 percent. For the Doctorate program, responses were

received from two out of the three targeted students translating to a response rate of 66.6 percent. The results further indicated that the identification of a research topic was a major challenge that postgraduate students faced in the process of writing their theses and dissertations as was previously discovered by Komba (2016). Students further mentioned reading widely in the specific area of research as another challenge because some of them were studying while working at the same time. Disagreement between supervisors as they guided students presented a challenge to students. It was also discovered that supervisors took too long to respond to the work of their students and that some lacked knowledge in the area being researched by the student as was earlier alluded by Bokongo, Kalei, and Nyaboga (2021).

A considerable number of respondents reported to have a challenge in identifying a research problem besides the research journey being lonely (Manchishi, Ndhlovu, &Mwanza, 2015). Procrastination on the part of the students was found to be a challenge. Further, many postgraduate students lacked the required knowledge in data analysis and presentation. The other challenge was the gap that existed between the research methodology class and the actual thesis/dissertation writing process in terms of presentation, expectation and practical application. Some of the respondents cited inability to access library as another challenge faced by postgraduate students (Ezebilo, 2012).

6. Recommendations

Students recommended for the thesis and dissertation writing process to run concurrently with the coursework. Further, there is need for the university to start a mentor-student relationship to supplement the official supervision. Supervisors should be more committed to the supervision of students and respond to their work in good time. There is also a need to conduct frequent seminars on areas such as data analysis and thesis writing. Students can also mitigate the identified challenges by allocating more time to the process of writing.

7. Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to examine the academic challenges that postgraduate students face while writing their theses and dissertations in Kenya. The study has indeed proved an existence of several challenges such as identification of a research problem and subsequent development of a topic. The study recommends for the thesis and dissertation writing process to run concurrently with the coursework.

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