The Quality of MBA Research Supervision in Zimbabwean Universities

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Abstract

The need for universities to fundraise coupled with the high demand for the Master of Business Administration (MBA) qualification has led to high student enrolments that may not be supported by the limited resources. This scenario has brought issues of the quality of supervision, research and MBA graduates to the fore. The study explored the perceptions of MBA students on the quality of research supervision in Zimbabwean universities. Documentary evidence and questionnaires were utilised to collect information from 100 current MBA students and 100 students who graduated with MBA in 2014. The study found that the major challenge cited by students revolved around the fact that supervisors generally lacked time to engage with the students that they were allocated to supervise. Ten out of the 15 registered universities are offering MBA programmes in three different delivery modes namely block release, weekend school and/or evening school as well as through open and distance learning. Four of the universities also offer MBA programmes in two or three cities. In all cases, the same lecturers were involved in teaching and supervising all these students, albeit at different times or places. In some cases, up to 20 MBA students were being supervised by one lecturer who also has to teach students in other cohorts or was engaged in demanding administrative duties. Some of the lecturers were themselves also pursuing

doctoral studies and were away from the university too often. The study recommended that in addition to offering incentives for universities should step up their staff development efforts and produce more PhDs in order to improve the supervisory capacity of academic staff members.

Keywords: Research supervision, Quality, MBA, Supervisor, University, Zimbabwe

1. Introduction

The higher education sector throughout the world faces an increasing demand to produce human resources who are highly skilled and innovative enough to drive national development agendas. In this respect, Zimbabwe has witnessed an inelastic demand for professional business executives resulting in an insatiable appetite for Masters in Business Administration (MBA) programmes by students especially from the working class. These students are willing and able to pay market related fees as long as they get access to quality education in order to achieve their individual goals (Zaitun, 2010). Approximately 75% of the students receive financial assistance from their employers. This is because the employers benefit from the expertise and skills derived from MBA training. The graduates are also unlikely to leave the sponsoring organisation in a hurry resulting in high retention of strategic personnel. Given the current situation where almost all public and private universities in Zimbabwe are experiencing financial challenges, they are now relying heavily on full-fee paying postgraduate students. Accordingly, universities are doing their best to improve the quality of their graduates by providing quality tuition and supervision. However, there have been unconfirmed reports of poor quality supervision by students who are undertaking their MBA research projects. This study was designed to investigate these allegations and to explore the perceptions of MBA students on the qualities and attributes of supervisors in Zimbabwean universities.

1.1 The Masters in Business Administration (MBA) Qualification

Davies and Cline (2005) designates the MBA as the flagship and the most popular business qualification in the world. (e.g. the estimated number of MBA graduates is 22,000 and 90,000 in UK and in USA each year (http://www.intstudy.com/study-in-europe/programs/mba-is-important). Crainer (2009) believes that the MBA qualification is one of the greatest success stories in the history of higher education because of its status, glamour and high return on educational investment. Many students and organizations believe that MBA provides the exposure and training required to equip learners with strategic leadership and managerial skills that are vital in the turbulent business environment (Baruch & Leeming, 2001; Nyaribo, Prakash, & Owino, 2012). In addition, MBA widens the students' horizons in all the major functions of a business as well as their interactions in practice (Boyatzis & Renio, 1989). By virtue of it being a generalist programme, the MBA draws learners from diverse disciplines for example: engineering, medicine, agriculture among others (Nyaribo et al., 2012). The MBA programme has anchored itself in industry, health, charity organisations, civil service, education, legal fraternity and in the church. Research has confirmed that holders of the MBA qualification are better managers when compared to non-MBA degree holders (Baruch & Peiperl, 2000; Kretovics, 1999; Sturges, Simpson, & Altman, 2003).

The MBA curriculum in Zimbabwean universities includes teaching (lectures, tutorials and case studies), experiential learning (workshops, conferences, seminars and study visits) and a supervised research project. The research project takes 6-12 months depending on mode of training and the submission of a dissertation is an essential component of the requirements for

the fulfilment of the award of the MBA. Students have generally complained about the poor quality of supervision during this period. Many studies have demonstrated the existence of poor quality postgraduate research supervision in other countries (Agu & Odimegwu, 2014; Duze, 2013; Obi & Agbu, 2002; Okebukola, 2002; Olokoju, 2002; Oredein, 2012). However, no study has been carried out to understand the existence and extend of the problem in the context of Zimbabwe.

1.2 Research Supervision

Postgraduate research has been denoted as a complex form of apprenticeship that initiates learners to be independent researchers and admits them into the academic community (Agu & Odimegwu, 2014). This period of internship is normally performed under close supervision by senior academics (Mutula, 2009) and entails studious, serious and systematic investigation into any aspect of education with the aim of discovering, revising and interpreting facts, applications and theories (Bently & Kyvik, 2013; Ifedili & Ominnu, 2012). Information emerging out of research studies contributes to the improvement of educational outcomes and enhancement of skills, leading to improved livelihoods and national development. According to Mendoza (2007), research students undergo two processes of socialization concurrently, one that pertains to academia and another to personal and professional development. Salminen-Karlsson and Wallgren (2007) remarked that whilst the tangible end product of graduate research project is a dissertation, the intangible and most important part of the process is the socialization into 'academic thinking' by the interaction between students and supervisors as well as fellow students."

Research supervision is a specialised and formal process of training students that is recognised as the highest form of teaching and learning in universities, globally (Knowles, 1999; Morrison, Oladunjoye, & Onyefulu, 2007). Abiddin, Ismail & Ismail, 2011) posit that supervision is an intensive two-way process of engagement between students and their mentors during the process of research that culminates in the writing of a dissertation. The authors argue that this involves a close one-to one relationship that expects both parties to interact with each other openly, honestly and professionally. Mentorship forms the key ingredient in the process of research supervision, in order to effectively steer students towards their ultimate goal (Chan, 2008; Harris, Freeman, & Aerni, 2009; Ku, Lahman, Yeh, & Cheng, 2008; Noonan, Ballinger, & Black, 2007; Persichilli & Persichilli, 2013). Mentorship entails the careful and purposeful attachment of a student under training to a senior, more skilled and experienced tutor with the aim of inculcating knowledge, skills and competencies in the trainee (Affero, Abiddin, & Hassan, 2011; Jowett & Stead, 1994; Taylor, 1995). Hockey (1996) avers that the supervisor also benefits from this relationship through knowledge advancement, co-authorship of publications, financial gain and professional recognition. Thus research supervision is an intricate process that blends academic and professional expertise with interpersonal relationship management and it requires constant adjustment and sensitivity since the two parties involved may exhibit both converging and diverging interests (Donald, Saroyan, & Denison., 1995; Hockey, 1996; Norhasni & West, 2007; Piccinin, 2000).

The quality of supervision determines the outcome of the research project as well as the

success or failure of the student (Cullen, Pearson, Saha, & Spear, 1994). It therefore implies that high quality supervision enables learners to achieve their goals and enhancing the academic profile of the supervisor as well as the scholarly reputation of the university. The major challenges to quality research supervision cited in literature are: inadequate supervision; unfavourable student factors and poor supervisor-student relationship.

1.2.1 Inadequate Supervision

One of the major roles of supervisors is to provide guidance, advice and feedback regarding the direction, topic selection, relevant literature, methodology, data analysis, completeness and clarity of work, writing style, presentation as well as the general progress regarding the research project in order ensure its scientific quality (Blunt & Conolly, 2006; Cryer, 2000; Haksever & Manisali, 2000; Holdaway, 1991; Lessing & Schulze, 2002; Russell, 1996; Spear, 2000). Thompson, Kirkman, Watson, and Stewart (2005) urge supervisors to be always available and to provide adequate, thorough and timeous feedback to students as well as to proffer them with constructive criticism. Brown and Krager (1985), Janssen (2005) and Russell (1996) also add their weight to the assertion that availability and support are most vital attributes of a model supervisor. However, the major challenge often reported by students undertaking graduate research is the inadequate interaction and support from their supervisors (Spear, 2000). Zuber-Skerritt and Ryan, (1994) found inadequate supervision to be triggered by inexperienced, uncommitted and unavailable supervisors. Whatever the reason, these supervisors are unduly slow in providing relevant feedback to students (Kiley, 2000). Studies have confirmed that the quality of supervision is the major factor influencing success of failure of research students (Abiddin et al., 2011; Buttery & Richter, 2005; Tahir, Ghani, Atek, & Manaf, 2012).

1.2.2 Unfavourable Student Factors

Ekstein and Wallenstein (1972) aver that supervisors should be capable of embracing students' challenges by being open to their feelings as well as giving them encouragement and recognition. This is necessary because students face a multiplicity of problems inclusive of emotional, socio-economic and psychological problems inclusive of: private, social and work-related commitments; inadequate funding; limited infrastructure for research; social isolation, insecurity and lack of confidence (Hockey, 1996; Phillips & Pugh, 2000; Rademeyer, 1994; Smith & West-Burnham, 1993). Because students are different, supervisors should understand the psycho-social history and current problems of students and should be flexible enough to customise their supervision strategies to conform to an individual's context, attributes and requirements (Brown & Krager, 1985; Haksever & Manisali, 2000; Hockey, 1996; Holloway, 1995; Hill, Acker, & Black, 1994; Hung & Smith, 2008; McQueeney, 1996; Page & Wosket, 1994). This arises from the realisation that students have diverse intellectual abilities, personalities, motivation levels and attitudes.

1.2.3 Supervisor-Student Relationship

Students and their supervisors interact with each other during the selection of research topics, literature review, resource acquisition, research project management, data collection, analysis

and interpretation, dissertation writing and defence as well as publication of research work (Green, Hammer, & Star, 2009; Healey & Jenkins, 2009; Heath, 2002; Piccinin, 2000). Several studies have underpinned the importance of good supervisor-student relationships in ensuring student success in their research work (Abiddin et al., 2011; Ellis, 2001; Hockey, 1996; Knowles, 1999; Ives & Rowley, 2005; Mapesela & Wilkinson, 2005; McAlpine & Weiss, 2000; Seagram, Gould, & Pyke, 1998; Sheehan, 1994; Smith & West-Burnham, 1993; Whittle, 1999). Indeed, McAlpine and Weis (2000) posit that the relationship becomes privatized and personalized and students often become their supervisor's buddies. Conversely, Malfroy (2005) found that students are often frustrated by the poor relationships prevailing between them and their supervisors. Spear (2000, p. 18) believes that good relationships are predicated on: "communication, communication, and communication." The importance of open and honest communication during supervision has also been reflected in other studies (Armitage & Rees, 1988; Haksever & Manisali, 2000; Holloway, 1995; Phillips & Pugh, 2000; Salmon, 1992). Donald et al. (1995) found that the factors that hinder effective communication include personal ego, age differences, language disparities and different work ethics.

1.3 Roles, Responsibilities and Attributes of Supervisors

Research supervision is a complex process that requires committed and experienced supervisors who possess the following favourable attributes: expertise in the area of research (Abiddin et al., 2011; Brown & Atkins, 1988; Carroll 1996; McQueeney, 1996; Rose, 2005) ability to transmit the knowledge (Abiddin, 2012; Goldhammer, Anderson, & Krajewski, 1980; Hawkins & Shohet, 1989; Proctor, 1988), good interpersonal skills (Berger & Bushholz, 1993) as well as willingness and ability to provide guidance and support in academic and social issues (Lessing & Schulze, 2003). Research suggests that effective supervisors should have a proven research record and should actively contribute to the development of their discipline (Frischer & Larsson, 2000; Phillips & Pugh, 2000). From the foregoing, it is clear that not all academics possess these desirable attributes therefore it is not possible for all of them to provide quality supervision (Thomas, Willis, & Davis, 2007). On the other hand, Kimani (2014) cautions that poor quality supervision leads to students' failure thereby damaging the reputation of the supervisor and the university.

2. Methodology

2.1 Study Design

The study used both quantitative and qualitative research designs to explore the perceptions of MBA students on the quality of research supervision. This was in line with the assertion by Kimani (2014, p. 64) that "just as the taste of the pudding is in the eating, the quality of supervision is best judged from the perspectives of the postgraduate students in terms of meeting their expectations." Documentary analysis of records from universities that were obtained from the database kept at the Zimbabwe Council for higher education was performed. Structures questionnaires were used to gather data from current students as well as graduates who completed MBA studies in 2014.

2.2 Procedure

The researchers first carried out a documentary study to find out the universities that offer MBA programmes in Zimbabwe as well as the graduation statistics for 2014. Table 1 shows the universities that offer MBA programmes and the graduation statistics for 2014.

Table 1. Graduation statistics for universities that offer MBA programmes (2014)

University	Male	Female	Total
1	54	33	87
2	132	60	192
3	3	7	10
4	83	48	131
5	125	100	225
6	Not given	Not given	214
7	88	42	130
8	45	23	68
9	12	24	36
10	25	18	43
Total	567	355	1136

Using the information from Table 1, one hundred current students and 100 recent MBA graduates from the 10 universities were targeted using purposive sampling. For current students, eligibility for inclusion in the sample was for those students who had passed all the taught courses and had commenced research work under supervision by March 2015. The first 5 female and 5 male students that were available from each university at the time of administering the questionnaire were taken as the study sample. The questionnaire comprised of two sections. Section A required yes/no answers and was divided into three parts each with six items focusing on academic, professional and personal attributes of the supervisor. Section B was open ended and invited general comments on students' perceptions on the quality of supervision they were receiving and the reasons behind their perceptions. The students were not required to write their names for confidentiality purposes. A total of 71 and 57 completed questionnaires were satisfactorily completed from current students and recent graduates respectively. The survey response rates were 71% and 57% respectively. Section A comprised of 20 items structured on a yes/no format.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 Student Perceptions

Table 2 shows the of MBA students' perceptions on the qualities and attributes of supervisors regarding the academic and professional development of the students they supervise.

Table 2. Students' perceptions on the qualities and attributes of supervisors

Item	Yes (%)	No (%)
Academic development		
Assists with research topic selection	70	30
Offers guidance on sourcing relevant literature	75	25
Assists with selection of appropriate methodologies	79	21
Assists with instrument construction and validation	15	85
Provides guidance on written and oral presentation	29	71
Familiar with and provides insights on theoretical aspects of research work	65	35
Professional development		
Sets realistic deadlines and expectations for research progress	100	0
Fosters the development of analytical thinking	75	25
Critiques and evaluates students' written work constructively	25	75
Providing feedback on students' written work timeously	20	80
Promotes interaction of student with other academics to widen exposure	45	55
Impresses upon research ethics	65	35
Personal attributes of supervisors		
Open minded and communicates openly and effectively	95	5
Accessible for consultation and discussion of research progress	25	85
Highly organized, thorough and focussed	65	35
Motivates and offers encouragement and support	75	25
Enthusiastic and takes an interest in student career and well-being	75	25
Displays a positive attitude	95	5

Table 1 shows that most students were happy with most of the supervisor attributes to do with knowledge, organisation and attitudes. However, Kimani (2014) cautions that the quality of a supervisor is derived from a blend of many factors. Therefore, it is critical to point to the finding that most students decried the unavailability of supervisors. As a result 85% of the students reported that accessing their supervisors for consultations and discussions of research progress was a night mare. Eighty percent of the students reported that supervisors failed to provide feedback on students' written submissions timeously whilst 90% reported that supervisors failed to critique students' written work constructively. The supervisors had little or no time to assist students with data collection instrument construction and validation as reported by 85% of the students. In the same vein 79% of the students reported that their supervisors did not provide them with guidance on written and oral presentations. Other studies have reported similar findings where students undertaking graduate research reported inadequate interaction and support from their supervisors (Brown & Krager, 1985; Janssen, 2005; Spear, 2000; Zuber-Skerritt & Ryan, 1994).

The unavailability or inaccessibility of supervisors caused the students a lot of stress. The major reasons proffered by students to explain this state of affairs pertains to the large

number of students being supervised by the same lecturer and engagement of supervisors in other activities within and outside the university.

3.1.1 Large Numbers of Students Being Supervised by the Same Lecturer

Documentary evidence revealed that ten out of the 15 registered universities in Zimbabwe are offering MBA programmes in three different delivery modes namely block release, weekend school and/or evening school as well as through open and distance learning. Four of the universities also offer MBA programmes in two or three cities. In all cases, the same lecturers were involved in teaching and supervising all these students, albeit at different times or places. Students reported that in some cases, up to 20 MBA students were being supervised by one lecturer. Some of the universities lack the critical mass of appropriate and adequately qualified academic staff at doctoral level to supervise MBA students hence they end up allocating too many students per supervisor. This overload on supervisors made it virtually impossible for any quality interaction to take place as reported by Kimani (2014) who found that large student numbers per lecturer erode the supervisory energy and commitment to the process. Larsson & Hansson (2012) also found that the constantly increasing postgraduate student enrolments in Sweden that were not complemented with additional resources resulted in academics supervising 15-40 postgraduate students depending on the study discipline. However, in the current study some students reported that some innovative supervisors were turning this situation to their advantage and supervising the students in the form of research groups. These students would meet with the supervisor and engage in discussions where they could then present their work for critiquing in the presence of their colleagues. The supervisor would also provide them with references of key literature to read and help sharpen the students' understanding of research work and analytical thinking. This approach is somewhat similar to the collaboration and blended supervision model described by Gadzirayi, Muropa, and Mutandwa (2004) researching on student teacher supervision. The authors aver that collegial approaches create conducive environment for building the trust required by students to gain confidence quickly. Similarly, Baker, Cluett, Ireland, Reading and Rourke, (2013) illustrate that group supervision is resource effective and offers the best peer and supervisor support to research students without any detrimental effects on individual outcomes. In their study, students appreciated the diversity of opinions from the "multiple brains" as well as the encouragement and support.

3.1.2 Engagement of Supervisors in Other Activities Within and Outside the University

The findings revealed that he quality of supervision was compromised by the busy schedules of supervisors who are also responsible for teaching, setting and marking of coursework and examinations; research activities, scholarly publications, administrative work as well as community and university service. The same supervisors may also have other commitments outside the university (e.g. part-time employment), can go on leave or have to attend to personal commitments. Some universities engage supervisors from other universities or from the private sector. In many cases, such supervisors lack the time, exposure and motivation to guide students in the rigours of research. Abiddin et al. (2011) indicates that only novice supervisors blame teaching and other professional responsibilities as reasons for sloppy

supervision. This is so because they will still be finding their feet and still unable to balance professional demands for productivity and performance in academia with personal life (Acker & Armenti, 2004). However, in academia although it is widely acknowledged that research output and not teaching prowess, will lead to a successful career (McMahon, 2001), academics are still required to teach and supervise students. Saroyan et al. (2004) admits that inexperienced supervisors require socialisation into the academic community of practice to help them understand that supervision is a teaching responsibility and that research feeds into teaching and supervision. Unfortunately, these studies fail to give an indication as to the optimum number of students that are expected to be supervised by one lecturer as well as the acceptable teaching loads.

Respondents proffered that universities' efforts to recruit more appropriately qualified academics are frustrated by financial constraints, scarcity of PhD holders and uncompetitive employment packages. Universities in Zimbabwe have gone a long way in encouraging, coercing, motivating and providing support for their academic staff members to pursue doctoral studies. However, respondents found this to be one of the major factors leading to poor quality supervision. This stems from the fact that some of the supervisors are themselves also pursuing doctoral studies and were away from the university too often. Students complained of rare or erratic interaction with such supervisors.

4. Conclusion

The study found out that although some aspects of the research supervision process were satisfactory, some of the expectations of students were not met. These related to the unavailability and inaccessibility of supervisors mainly due to large numbers of supervisors allocated per supervisor, busy schedules as well as other professional and personal commitments. The study urges universities should come up with strategies to improve on the availability and commitment of supervisors. Recommendations include providing monetary and non-monetary incentives to supervisors for the number of students supervised successfully, research activities and publications. Non-monetary incentives include promotion on the basis of the number of students successfully supervised and publications resulting from the supervised research. The study also recommend that universities should step up their staff development efforts and produce more PhDs in order to improve the supervisory capacity of academic staff members.

Acknowledgements

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