



RESEARCH ARTICLE

A GLIMPSE INTO POSTGRADUATE STUDENTS' RESEARCH UNDERTAKINGS

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ABSTRACT

The paper has sought to cover a panorama of issues related to postgraduate students' challenges in writing research proposals and reports. It used experience survey and insight-stimulating design and therefore, it falls under the category of exploratory research (formulative research study). The data of the research was obtained from 32 postgraduate students and 18 thesis supervisors who were selected using convenience sampling technique. Semi-structured interview and focus group discussion were used to gather data. The findings of the study indicated that among others, lack of relationship between the theoretically acquired knowledge and its application, course delivery technique, English language proficiency level, rapport between supervisors and advisees, and students' intellectual and psychological readiness were the most prevalent threats posed to postgraduate research undertakings. This paper concluded that post graduate students' selection criteria should consider test results of applicants' language proficiency and knowledge in the field to which the students apply as key criteria. In addition, the course delivery techniques should be molded towards applicability of the acquired knowledge.

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INTRODUCTION

Research in its simplest term is understood as a logical inquiry into the lives and activities of human beings. Besides, research is defined as a methodical investigation into a subject in order to discover facts, to establish or revise a theory, or to develop a plan of action based on the facts discovered. It is believed that researches pose fundamental questions to unravel the mysteries in the lives and activities of human beings and suggest solutions to the multifaceted problems the world is grappling with. Marczyk *et al.* (2005) claimed that progress in almost every field of science depends on the contributions made by systematic research. Thus, research is often viewed as the cornerstone of scientific progress. The rationale of research is to answer questions and add new knowledge to a given field of study. More to the point, research is the most important instrument used in almost all areas of science to enlarge the frontiers of knowledge. According to Mutula (2009) universities inherently assure research-based teaching, which is in contrast with other types of higher education institutions devoted to the provision of training and skills. However given the drastic increase in the demand for tertiary education over the past decade, many universities have been obliged to pursue these two missions with equal vigor – even when funding and other resources have been extremely limited. Like many other higher education institutes, Mekelle University provides opportunity to graduating class students to conduct researches. These researches are meant to let prospective graduate students

bring the theoretically acquired knowledge into practice. Although the very intention of engaging graduating class students in research activities in the areas of their specialization is to familiarize them with the research knowhow, they are seen facing stiff challenges precluding them from attaining their targets. The challenges they face are becoming apparent to students and instructors in the university. These challenges should aptly be investigated and resolved before they get pervasive.

In order to precisely detect and diagnose the works in progress, the current research team deduced that surveying the challenges postgraduate students face in writing research proposals and reports is a timely move forward since the prevalence of this problem at postgraduate level is more attention seeking than it is in the undergraduate studies. The studies conducted in the undergraduate program are designed to serve as a runway for students to prepare themselves for further studies that are research based. Nevertheless, conducting researches in the post graduate program is a career oriented as compared to undergraduate program. Moreover, Kearney (2008), states that the current landscape of advanced degrees is increasingly varied. This has resulted from the many changes and developments in recent years within the Higher Education sector where supply must adapt to more diverse demand. On one hand, research degrees continue to denote advanced study in a chosen discipline with a view to the pursuit of an academic career; in this respect expertise in research methodology and investigative skills are required. Though post graduate students are expected to demonstrate clear understanding of research and their capability of

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conducting researches, they are seen facing challenges to execute several research based activities. Similarly, postgraduate students of the colleges of business and economics and colleges of social sciences and languages at Mekelle University, Ethiopia were found out to be part of the aforementioned group of students and thus it has been conceived that it is pivotal to carry out a study on this topic. Scholars revealed that novice researchers face a number of challenges to get started with their research; even they have a problem in choosing topics that would let them understand their potential and deliver the best out of them to their target audience. As novice researchers, some people are quite likely to encounter some difficulties and feel that they are stumbled on something which deters their intellectual progress. In connection with this, Blaxter, Hughes and Tight (2006) reveal that the most common problems novice researchers encounter stem out from raising numerous issues like presupposing that nothing has been written on their research topic, too much has been done on their area of interest, how many references to include, and grappling with how to get started with their first move and progress forth to manage further challenges they encounter.

In addition, novice researchers capitulate to a number of manageable challenges due to the psychological defeat they concede to the job ahead because they feel that it is very difficult to plough a little-known furrow as a novice, and to get much support or help. In this respect, university students who conduct their theses to fulfill a degree requirement face the aforementioned stumbling blocks and many others. Therefore, it is a common development in academic arena to come across ground breaking inquiries and discoveries through research studies. That is why universities, colleges, research institutes and various training centers are expected to play fundamental role in promoting and accelerating research based knowledge. More specifically, Mekelle University as a higher education institution involves its students in both the undergraduate and post graduate programs in conducting research studies. It has established a tradition of conducting researches on diverse thematic areas and disseminating the outputs to the concerned beneficiaries and different stakeholders. The researches carried out by graduating class students in both the undergraduate and postgraduate studies are financed by the university with a belief that they help to meet Mekelle University's short and long term strategic plans. This is because the University incorporated providing quality education, conducting problem solving researches and making Mekelle University center of excellence in its mission and vision. In spite of all the efforts being exerted, it has long been observed that graduating class students, especially in postgraduate program at Mekelle University, find themselves in the middle of the deadlock to produce researches up to the required quality. This problem is a universal one though its magnitude is higher in developing countries like Ethiopia.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

A. Design of the Study

The study used experience survey and insight-stimulating design and therefore, it falls under the category of exploratory research which is also termed as formulative research study.

Bordens and Abbott (2011), Kothari (2004) explain that the main purpose of such studies is that of formulating a problem for more precise investigation or of developing the working hypotheses from an operational point of view. As it has mainly been emphasized by Kothari (2004), the experience survey is concerned with the survey of people who have had practical experience with the problem to be studied and the analysis of 'insight-stimulating' is described as suitable particularly in areas where there is little experience to serve as a guide.

B. Sample and Sampling Techniques

The data of the study was obtained from 18 supervisors and 32 post graduate students from College of Social Sciences and Languages, and College of Business and Economics. They were selected using convenience sampling technique. To select the subjects, the research team contacted the ones who were most convenient in terms of proximity of the work place. According to Cohen *et al.* (2000), convenience sampling involves choosing the nearest individuals to serve as respondents and continuing that process until the required sample size was obtained. Thus, the researchers decided to employ this sampling technique because some departments within the selected colleges did not have postgraduate students in their regular programs. With regard to the departments that enrolled postgraduate students in their regular programs, the number of candidates they host had varied; this did not allow us to employ another sampling technique than convenience sampling. Consequently, this forced the researchers to include all available students and supervisors within the College of Social Sciences and Languages, and College of business and Economics in order to have representative sample size.

C. Data gathering instruments

The study employed two types of data gathering instruments. These were semi-structured interview and focus group discussion. Semi-structured interview was used to gather information from the prospective graduates of the two colleges. The focus group discussion was held with supervisors. This gave every participant an opportunity to reflect their views. Also it adds any missing idea in addition to the initiating questions posed by the researchers.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In this section, the data obtained from advisees and supervisors using semi-structured interview and focus group discussion are presented.

1. The Prevailing Problems Advisees Face

It has been indicated that the prevailing problems postgraduate students face range from inability to decide and chose a topic which is up to their interest to the entire knowledge to undertake research. This finding goes hand in hand with the revelation of Abiddin *et al.* (2011) whereby among others, students want guidance with regard to the overall planning of the research in terms of the approach to follow (theoretical, quantitative or qualitative) and to complete the study. Most

students, especially at the Master's level, want supervisors to help them decide on due dates for chapters to be submitted. Master's students also desire that supervisors refer them to other students or informed people in their research fields and to contact them frequently to alleviate feelings of isolation. Similarly, this study came across claims and complaints that students demand their supervisors to travel extra miles beyond supervision on the drafts they submitted. Students themselves confessed that they wanted their thesis supervisors to refine their thesis topics and give them maximum support to realize the accomplishment of their work. In the course of the study, some students showed their conviction that the role of supervisors was not only commenting on the works they delivered but also participating in the making of their theses which shows misconception regarding the role of the supervisor. Meanwhile, the supervisors insisted that prospective graduates didn't even know what research is when it came to their field of specialization, and how to apply the knowledge they theoretically acquired in the classroom. The supervisors pleaded for immediate intervention that would help postgraduate students become familiar with how to conduct research in their respective field of specialization. An assertion made by Bloom (1981) supplements the finding of this study. Apart from misconceptions about the form and scope of proposal writing, misapprehensions about proposal topics also plague anxious graduate students. The pursuit of the right topic can occupy anxious or uncertain students for years. And failure to find it can inhibit or totally halt the progress of their research (Bloom, 1981). Moreover, it was reported that English language proficiency was one of the foremost challenges hindering postgraduate students' research undertakings. This in its turn, according to the supervisors led the students to an inability to state the problem of their research and set clear objectives. Furthermore, with regard to developing the review of related literature section of the research, the result showed that postgraduate students usually came up with a mere report of what scholars have said on a given area of focus without incorporating their own voice as researchers. Nevertheless, students argued that the failure shouldn't solely be attributed to their skills of research but to the nature of the job they were engaged in. They said that after they graduate their Master's degree most of them would take job where they would not be required to conduct researches than doing bureaucratic routines in banks and other organizations. Thus, they asserted that worrying about research and contemplating about the procedures of research were considered unnecessary and not sensible. The current study still has connection with Bordens and Abbott (2011) finding which fortifies the finding of this study in which they explained that students sometimes express the sentiment that learning about research is a waste of time because they do not plan on a career that will engage them in research activities.

2. The Intellectual and Psychological Readiness to Put the Feedback into Effect

A number of factors may affect the quality of postgraduate education in general and postgraduate research in particular. Among others, age, livelihood, and enrolment type are the significant ones. According to the obtained data researchers above the age of fifty are less active in both classes and

research activities. So there should be age limit; youngsters are highly enthusiastic about their research but they have language and methodological limitations. The second factor that affected the quality of the thesis was livelihood of postgraduate students. Though a significant number of postgraduate students had strong readiness, they had shortage of time and lack of concentration since most of them were fulltime employees in different organizations. Students presuppose that since they finance their study by themselves, they shouldn't be supposed to seriously adhere to the principles given to them. This perception has been demonized by supervisors. Supervisors reiterated that self-sponsored postgraduate students believe that they are buying postgraduate degree with their money like any commercial commodity. The supervisors earnestly argued that if this perception was not deterred and reversed by employing different quality assurance mechanisms, postgraduate program would be compromised. Furthermore, supervisors reckoned that the enrolment type itself gave them a clear view into the differences they are entertained in their career. They argued that postgraduate students who pursued their education in the summer and extension program substantially lagged behind those counter parts who studied in the regular program. This remains intact with what Abiddin *et al.* (2011) upholds. They say that students undertaking graduate study at universities are under increasing pressure to complete their candidature within a particular timeframe. According to them research students represent a significant range of diversity like age, cultures, experience and ability. Similarly, they claim that their enrolment type (part-time, full-time, internal, or external) also casts its shadow on their academic career (Abiddin *et al.*, 2011). As to the result of the interview and focus group discussion, most of the advisees revealed that they did a good job in incorporating the feedbacks from their supervisors into their work to the best of their ability. Yet, according to the data obtained from the focus group discussion, most of them had intellectual limitations in getting the whole idea within the span of the research activities. Besides, most of them did not have interest and thus they considered research activity as a burden laden on their shoulder. As a result, they sought shortcut to escape the activity from which they were required to benefit a lot. Though Mutula (2009) states that the emphasis of postgraduate research is on developing systematic skills of investigation during the research process a number of postgraduate students and supervisors suppose that postgraduate research aims at introducing ground-breaking innovations. This assumption is subtly hampering the advancement of postgraduate research activity at Mekelle University. Its aim is, therefore, not necessarily to produce ground-breaking innovations or extend knowledge. Besides, thesis supervisors argued that postgraduate students lacked candidness and commitment while receiving feedbacks and improving the quality of their works. This can be seen along with few of the multiple challenges they faced. Besides, Abiddin *et al.* (2011), maintain that students undertaking graduate study at universities are under increasing pressure to complete their candidature within a particular timeframe. In the case of this study, as a result of negligence and many other difficulties, they sometimes submitted final drafts with similar errors which consequently become subject to high criticism and rejection or adjournment.

From the students' response it is possible to conclude that the support they received from their supervisors was not to their satisfaction. They affirmed that most of their supervisors did not avail themselves according to the consultation hours they posted. Some of them did not even give them valuable comments which would upgrade the quality of their theses. They said that this had its adverse effect on their overall research activity. Blaxter et al. (2006) stated that students expect their supervisors to be supervised, to read their work well in advance, to be available when needed, to be friendly, open and supportive, to be constructively critical, to have a good knowledge of their research area, to structure the tutorial so that it is relatively easy to exchange ideas, to have sufficient interest in their research to put more information in the student's path and to be sufficiently involved in their success to help them get a good job at the end of it all. This assertion consolidates the significance of the rapport between the student and the supervisor to the betterment of the theses the students produce. In addition, the rapport between thesis or dissertation supervisors and students is the main actor in the process of producing quality research. To substantiate this, in their study Wadesango and Machingambi (2011) identified that up to half of the students who begin post graduate studies do not complete their studies at all. This is because there are a wide variety of problems that students face top of the range being supervisor-supervisee relationship. They found out that students are not getting enough time with their supervisors because the supervisors are overworked. As a rule of thumb, an overloaded supervisor, even though well-intentioned, is unlikely to be an effective supervisor.

3. Postgraduate Students' Research Knowledge and Ability in Harnessing Their Ideas Using English

The supervisors described their postgraduate students' research knowledge as a utopia. They added that postgraduate students would tell every single element of a research in theory. If reciting what every section of a research report or proposal is in place for them, almost all of them would tell the definition of every necessary component of a research report or proposal. Nonetheless, in practice, they hardly stick to minor research principles which need to be adhered to. Most of all, their language skill is found out to be the major barrier that concealed the practical applicability of the theory they accurately narrate as much needed as possible. During a series of feedback deliveries, the supervisors said they told their advisees to seriously work on their English throughout their research proposals and reports. In addition to this, the supervisors said that postgraduate students were found to explain their ideas in local languages in exam rooms while English was the medium of instruction. During defense sessions, some examiners fail to comprehend the theme of the examinees' speech because of the ungrammaticality of their sentences/ utterances which remained same or worse in their written works. The major barrier they often faced includes insufficient language skills, incoherence, failure to support their arguments, unifying their ideas, spelling, grammar. On top of that, a considerable number of students who were instructed by their second language spend much of their time dealing with the appropriateness of the words instead of the

content the words convey. Biggs' study on Chinese students share similar concern:

The majority of schools use English as the medium of instruction although most students are not sufficiently proficient in the language they are trying to learn; they are compelled by this weakness to spend much of their time memorizing the English words to fulfill their study objectives to the extent they fail to grasp neither the English nor the Chinese language well. (Biggs 1990, p. 18)

4. Suggested Interventions to Curve the Problem Postgraduate Students Face in Writing Research Proposals and Reports

A number of possible interventions were indicated by the interviewees in order to curb the challenges of post graduate students in writing research proposals and reports. Many of them said a detailed coursework on research methodology and analytical skills/tools should be given. In addition, they reported that instructors who teach graduate seminar and research methodology courses should deliver the courses in a way that it was more familiarized and localized to the students' background and field of specialization rather than giving a multitude of foreign and unfamiliar examples. On top of that, they insisted that there must be strict entrance requirements and exams to check if the students have good English language skills and research knowledge. If this is done the ones who lag behind after qualifying for their departments could improve through wide reading of literature and supervision they obtain. Meanwhile, some more preliminary research works are necessary. Research works particularly that focus on how to write research proposals and reports in their field of specialization along with language trainings that would improve their writing and presentation skills would amply contribute to the betterment of the postgraduate programs. There are also interviewees that beseeched the establishment of research and language help center for postgraduate students that renders continuous and extensive training on language of research. As well, research training should be given with appropriate and experienced academic staff. The students claimed that inexperienced staff members who were engaged in the teaching and supervising activities posed a considerable threat to the quality and environment of postgraduate research and education. They laid several load upon the shoulders of their advisees beginning from topic selection to the general procedural course of action a student should follow. Therefore, advisees summoned for an effective and sustainable training and expertise sharing tradition at Mekelle University. This concern goes concurrently with Bloom's reflection (1981) whereby it was said that at the other extreme are graduate supervisors who exacerbate rather than reduce their graduate students' anxiety by imposing uncongenial topics upon them. Or so it appears to the students, whether or not the supervisors really had this intention. Regarding topic imposition by supervisors, Bloom (1981) clearly states, it takes tough-minded and unusually mature students to refuse to write topics of the supervisors' choice rather than their own. Yet if the students who succumb to the teachers' choice were not anxious writers before, the assignment of a distasteful (or in other ways unmanageable) topic can make them into proficient procrastinators overnight. Hence, it was revealed that

providing students with some previously conducted researches and creating conducive atmosphere for research and academics would be among the remedies. Furthermore, ensuring access to published researches and articles and journals would certainly elevate the quality of the graduate programs Mekelle University provides.

5. Students' Thoroughness whilst Citing Authorities

Many of the supervisors wondered why citation challenged their advisees to that extreme degree. In connection to this, the interviewees affirmed that most postgraduate students substantially lacked understanding of how to incorporate others' work into their own which could be done through the three simple techniques called paraphrasing, summarizing, and quoting. Due to this, a considerable number of students breached some ethical considerations which can in this case be termed as unintentional plagiarism. A number of literatures on writing proposals and reports argue that there is a huge problem in the overall aspects. For instance, the study of Kikula and Qorro (2007) shows the following: The results show that 72% of the introductions to the proposals in the study sample were unsatisfactorily written. Most of them (49%) lacked clarity and focus. Some of them were muddled and used poor language. It is interesting to note that a few of them even included irrelevant information. Some of them used old and out of date data and references. There were cases where facts were misrepresented. Casual writing was also a problem. One reviewer remarked that an introduction had been written 'like a story'. Concerning the language of the proposal and the report particularly for Ethiopian students, i.e. the subjects of this study, the case is quite different. Ethiopian students in higher institutions are expected to use English language for communication in learning, while there is no context to develop the language very well. As a result, the language proficiency of majority of postgraduate and undergraduate students is substantially limited. As the growing evidences in the educational sectors reveals, using the learners' second language as a medium of instruction creates serious troubles on their performance, especially, when learners are exposed to the language beyond their late childhood period. On top of this, inconsistency in citing sources is also among the major problems postgraduate students encounter in writing their research proposals or reports. They used APA, MLA, Harvard and many other mixed referencing styles that made their research proposals and reports awkward and unlawful.

6. The Role of Linguistic Intervention in Scaling up the Quality of the Researches

Most of them unequivocally said that all is done because of language and therefore, linguistic intervention is indispensable. They said programs that augment linguistic proficiency and technical skills surely play a pivotal role in producing quality researches if made part of the portfolio in postgraduate curriculum.

7. On the Establishment of a Center which Provides Research Consultancy and Editorial Services

With regard to this question, the interviewees responded that such a center should be established since the university has resourceful staff that can give vital services for the university

community and any organization that come from outside of the university. And they also said that this is not an issue to be presented for discussion but it has to be constituted by experts from all departments so that the center can give full-fledged services for the beneficiaries. In addition, the center should keep detailed record of the completed researches and of the undergoing researches in order to avoid plagiarism and ease of access. In writing a research proposal one aspect of the task is to find out related previous research works. In connection to this, Fitzsimons and Corcoran (2008), point out that, depending on the level of previous research carried out in one's area, it can sometimes be difficult to know where to begin looking for relevant information. Identifying key books, journals and trade magazines early on makes life much easier. Therefore, if such a center which keeps good record of the already finalized researches and the researches being carried out students will not toil so much to get on their right track to execute any task they are assigned to do.

8. General Reflections

Post graduate program should set standards. One of the ways of setting standards is providing quality education and producing quality graduates that can fulfill any requirements up on their graduation. To achieve this, entrance exams must be mandatory to all applicants. The entrance exams should be up to the quality requirements of the programs. After the entrance exams have been administered, they have to be marked or evaluated strictly to screen and enroll potential and competent candidates who can demonstrate their appropriateness to be offered place in the post graduate program. University can set any regulation that supplement the quality of education and research under the rights and virtues bestowed on them by their boards and other authorities. As a result of this and other premises, Mekelle University should try to stabilize the wavering quality of postgraduate research by assigning qualified and experienced supervisors and professors that deliver courses. Fitzsimons and Corcoran (2008) also state that universities set regulations on academic activities including clearly defining the role of supervisors, postgraduate students and many others. Postgraduate students are responsible for the success of their research project. Besides, the supervisors' role has a huge effect on the project outcome. An interested supervisor can make a research project immensely more rewarding and enjoyable (Fitzsimons and Corcoran, 2008). As has been stated, if supervisors are entitled to a position in which they are not fully interested owing to different factors, it surely impacts their advisees' work. In addition, it also helps if pertinent language test is given. On the other hand, the time which is given to graduating class students to select their topic, develop research proposals and produce their final research report should be seriously dealt with.

Conclusions and Recommendation

The aspects discussed in this paper have sought to cover a wide range of issues related to postgraduate students' challenges in writing research proposals and reports. Research capacity cannot develop without thorough scrutiny of the challenges that postgraduate students face in the course of

proposal preparation and research report production. If the problems are not weeded out at the right time for the right purpose attaining the mission and vision of the university in general and making Mekelle University center of academic excellence, in particular, remain futile. In order to flourish good academic atmosphere, Mekelle University needs to train and retain an adequate cohort of highly skilled experts. This is true for all Ethiopian Universities, whatever their establishment history is. Ensuring quality of postgraduate research is a challenge which, unless adequately addressed, will certainly pose serious risk for the further advancement of the knowledge society. This challenge concerns government policy essentially but also relates directly to the social responsibility of universities as key actors in modern research and knowledge systems. Universities need to regularly be informed of emerging trends (especially of success stories in dealing with these) in order to formulate appropriate and innovative policies which will help assure their place in the evolving global socio-economic order. Therefore, apart from the general overview of what universities are and what postgraduate research needs, this study came across some fundamental challenges that postgraduate students are facing. Among the challenges, lack of relationship between the theoretically acquired knowledge and the actual research they are expected to conduct in their field of specialization seek due attention. In addition, course delivery technique at postgraduate level should be postulated towards practicality and applicability of the knowledge students acquire in the classroom which is really the focal point of postgraduate study. Moreover, as long as students' language proficiency is found out to be below average and students themselves called for immediate intervention, the university needs to act on this indicated problem area. In line with, since postgraduate program research is more career oriented than the ones conducted in the undergraduate study, it will be of overriding importance, for the university community to establish a center which renders continuous training on language use in research and research writing skills at postgraduate level. As has been echoed by both the supervisors and the advisees, establishment of research and editorial guidance/help center for the university community and any other beneficiaries who come from outside the university need to be thought about.

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