

Original Research Article

Students' experiences of undergraduate business research and supervision at the National University of Lesotho

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Abstract

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The research dissertation and its supervision have been described by researchers as the most advanced levels of learning and teaching respectively. In spite of the intrinsic value of research and its supervision, there are few studies that document the lived experiences of undergraduate students in these areas. Existing studies are dominated by the opinions and experiences of academic staff, and are primarily limited to the issues of research assessment. To our knowledge, there is paucity of research on the lived experiences of undergraduate students in Lesotho. The aim of this paper is to explicate the students' lived experiences of undergraduate dissertation and its supervision at the National University of Lesotho (NUL). We used interpretive qualitative research to give 'voice' to the participants, and identified and interpreted key themes from interviews conducted over a period of two academic years. We specifically used data collected from 17 interviewees in six focus groups, 11 interviewees a year later, documentary analysis and observation over a period of two academic years. The interviews were unstructured, and took between 60 and 120 minutes. We ended the interviews once we realised that no new experiences were related by participants. The analysis of data resulted in nine themes. In general, students expressed positive views about dissertation as an important mode of learning and assessment; acknowledged the important role of research methodology course in undertaking research; found challenges in undertaking some parts of dissertation; and complained about supervisors who were not available, approachable, nurturing, organised, and did not communicate constructive feedback on timely basis using modern communication channels. While qualitative research findings cannot be generalised, we submit that understanding learner experiences can respectively benefit and inform undergraduate learning and supervision at universities.

Keywords: Dissertation, experiences, Lesotho, research, students, supervision.

INTRODUCTION

As part of their final year learning, undergraduate students in many universities around the world engage in an independent, self-initiated and learner-focused

research project. The perceived pedagogical value of this work includes its ability to encourage deep learning, experiential learning, independent work, time manage-

ment, report writing, interpersonal communication, analysis and synthesis of literature (Ramsden, 1992; Todd, Bannister and Clegg, 2004; Todd, Smith and Bannister, 2006). Even though research is carried out on an individual basis, it is often carried out under the supervision of one or more experienced tutors or supervisors (Todd et al., 2004). Some researchers have aptly referred to supervision as a teaching activity, with Connell (as cited in Murthy, Bain and Conrad, 2007, p.210) arguing that it 'is the most advanced level of teaching ...' and Brown and Atkins (as cited in Hammick and Acker, 1998, p.336) noting that it is 'a more complex and subtle form of teaching'.

In spite of the intrinsic value of research and supervision of dissertation as important modes of learning and teaching respectively, there are few studies that document the lived experiences of learners in these areas, especially among undergraduate students (Hammick and Acker, 1998; Todd et al., 2004; Todd et al., 2006). Thus though some studies have focused on undergraduate dissertation, they were primarily limited to the issues of assessment, and dominated by the opinions and experiences of academic staff (Heinze and Heinze, 2009; Todd et al., 2004; Todd et al., 2006). According to Todd et al. (2006, p.164), 'research into undergraduate dissertation supervision is patchy', and to our knowledge, there is similar paucity of research on the lived experiences of undergraduate students in Lesotho. This is regrettable because the only two universities in Lesotho predominantly offer undergraduate education.

The aim of this paper is to explicate the students' lived experiences of business studies undergraduate dissertation and its supervision at the National University of Lesotho (NUL). We use interpretive qualitative research to give 'voice' to the participants (Bluhm, Harman, Lee and Mitchell, 2010), and identify and 'interpret' key 'themes' from the interviews conducted over a period of two academic years. We specifically use data collected from focus groups, documentary analysis and observation over a period of two academic years. The research questions that initially guided this study were as follows.

Q1: What are the students' perceptions and impressions of the business undergraduate dissertation?

Q2: What are the students' experiences of the supervision of business undergraduate dissertation?

Q3: What recommendations can be made to improve the supervision of business undergraduate dissertation?

We believe that supervisory performance can improve if lecturers understand the expectations of students as clients (Woolhouse, 2002). Since backgrounds and cultural orientation of students differ from one environment to another, we contribute to existing knowledge by replicating past studies and extending theory to unexplored settings. Even though qualitative

research is generally not generalisable, we believe these experiences can be learned and applied in other institutions of higher education.

The rest of the paper is outlined as follows. We first review the relevant literature on the lived experiences of students undertaking research dissertation, followed by research methodology, findings and their discussion. Finally we draw conclusions, and suggest prospects for future research and recommendations.

Students' experiences of undergraduate research and supervision

The literature generally suggests that most undergraduate students perceive dissertation as an important part of their learning. The study by Todd et al. (2004, p.339) on undergraduate students in the UK indicates that for students, 'the significance of the dissertation derived from their sense of the work being independent and self-directed'. According to these authors, compared to other modules, the students perceived dissertation as the most 'authentic' approach towards student learning and assessment. Lopatto (2010) found that experiences gained from research enhance students' intellectual skills such as inquiry, analysis, understanding literature, communication and teamwork. The other study that portrays positive experiences by students is that of Morrison et al. (2007). Even though Stefani et al. (1997) illustrated some unfavourable students' responses to the purpose of research, most of the above benefits of dissertation were cited by undergraduate students in their study.

The importance of research methodology in undertaking undergraduate dissertation has also been explored in previous studies. Even though undergraduate students may find it challenging to translate theory into practice, they generally find research methodology course helpful (Morrison et al., 2007; Todd et al., 2004).

Undergraduate students may find the selection of a topic, research question or other areas of study challenging. The undergraduate students in the study by Todd et al. (2004) found the production of researchable questions uncertain and challenging. They commented that supervisors described their research topics or questions as vague, too broad or not feasible. They also found data gathering and information search difficult.

The lived experiences of supervision by undergraduate students, and the preferred styles of supervision have been consolidated in the number of previous studies. Among other things, most students prefer supervisors who are available, approachable, flexible, helpful, give timely and constructive feedback, and provide formal times for meetings (Heinze and Heinze, 2009; Morrison et al., 2007; Stefani et al., 1997; Todd et al., 2004). While some students prefer supervisors who provide guidance or advice and not direction of work

(Stefani et al., 1997; Todd et al., 2004), others prefer more proactive supervisors (Heinze and Heinze, 2009). Armstrong, Allinson and Hayes (2004) found that analytic supervisors were perceived by undergraduate students to be more nurturing and less dominant than their intuitive counterparts, and this resulted in closer relationships between the supervisor and the student; increased liking; and higher performance of the student.

In summary, the literature suggests that most undergraduate students express positive views about dissertation as an important approach for learning and assessment; acknowledge the important role of research methodology course in undertaking research; find challenges in undertaking some parts of dissertation; and prefer supervisors who are approachable, nurturing, organised, and communicate constructive feedback on timely basis using different communication channels. The current paper explicates the lived experiences of undergraduate students in Lesotho.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

We deployed a qualitative, interpretivist perspective to get a rich understanding of students' lived experiences of undergraduate research dissertation module and its supervision.

The context of study

The study was conducted in the Department of Business Administration at NUL. Unlike many departments at the university which have a tradition of offering undergraduate research project or dissertation as part of students' final year learning, the Department of Business Administration only started offering this module to students in one of its three programmes in the past five years. Furthermore, the department currently offers this module to B.Com Marketing students, and not to students in B.Com Accounting and B.Com Management.

Some of the challenges that partly motivated this study included observed supervision by some inexperienced lecturers, different approaches to supervision and grading, and different student-supervisor relationships. Though some of these challenges have been dealt with through exchange of ideas in various special departmental meetings, the members of the department felt that a comprehensive study was needed to shed more light on the expectations and lived experiences of students.

Participants and procedures

The primary data collection entailed focus group interviews with the fourth cohort of students in the

module, followed a year later by another set of focus groups with the fifth cohort of students. The focus groups made up of between two and three students from different supervisors were invited to share their experiences relating to the module and its supervision using an unstructured, open interview format. 17 and 11 students participated in the first and second years, constituting six and three groups per year respectively. In year one there were 10 females and 7 males, and in year two there were 8 females and 3 males. The interviews took between 60 and 120 minutes per group. We ended the interviews when we realised that the respondents were not adding any new experiences. The interview notes were sent to participants for comments, and those that responded indicated that the notes represented their views. We also reviewed departmental minutes and used observation to triangulate our primary data gathering approach. The findings were also presented to colleagues for views and comments.

As is customary in qualitative research, our particular biases and power relationship between us and the participants have to be presented (Bluhm et al., 2010). All of us are lecturers in the Department of Business Administration at NUL, and power asymmetries between the first author as an interviewer and students were inevitable. The second author was also a research module coordinator who frequently listened to students' complaints, and was responsible for organising the interviews and disseminating the information to other supervisors.

Ethical considerations

To encourage participation, the third author met the students before the interviews and explained to them the rationale, purpose, voluntary and confidential nature of the study. The students were also informed that they can withdraw from the study at any point in time without prior notice. On the request of students, the interviews were not recorded. We also do not provide their names in this paper to protect their individual identities.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

We independently read and re-read the data from interviews to identify patterns and common themes, and then came together to compare findings and resolve disagreements. After discussion we identified nine common themes underlying our interviews. These themes are discussed next.

Importance of a research project

All students indicated that research dissertation was imp-

important for their future work and further study. In line with prior studies (e.g. Lopatto, 2007; Stefani et al., 1997; Todd et al., 2004; Todd et al., 2006), the students pointed out that research provided them with an opportunity of improving their communication skills, independent inquiry, problem-solving skills, critical thinking, networking, time management and confidence. In their view, these are important competencies required in the field of work and for further studies. This is illustrated by one student in group 3 (year 1) who commented as follows.

Research broadened my knowledge and helped me to make evidence-based decisions that I believe are required in marketing research.

One student in group 4 (year 1) explained the importance of research as follows:

Research (MKT490) gave me the opportunity to read widely and to make decisions alone...in the process improving my confidence to further my studies.

Some participants claimed that they developed good working relationships with businesses and people on which their studies were based. A student in group 2 (year 2) commented:

We always complain that our studies do not expose us to practice...this course gave me a little opportunity to interact with bank management; of course they were busy but helpful.

Research methodology course and research project

Many students pointed out that, even though research methodology course was important, it did not cover all elements of the research dissertation. Many areas that the interviewees perceived were not adequately covered included statistical analysis, report writing, data presentation and analysis, and discussion. Some students argued that theory taught in research methodology course was not easy to implement in research dissertation. In line with the opinions expressed by students interviewed by Todd et al. (2004:341), all students we interviewed in year 2 did not see any link between methodology course and research project. A student in group 1 (year 2) commented that *'there was no link at all...'*

To facilitate implementation, participants in group 6 (year 1) suggested that students should be given practical exercises throughout the research methodology course. One student in group 1 (year 1) felt strongly that the statistical package for social sciences (SPSS) was introduced too late, and that it could be important to introduce students to other statistical software

programmes than SPSS.

Despite many reservations, in support of the findings of Morrison et al. (2007), students found research methodology course important.

Challenging/easy phases of a research project

There was in general no consistent pattern of phases that students reported as either difficult or easy. For instance, whereas students in group 1 (year 1) agreed that the design of questionnaires, data collection, data presentation and analysis were challenging, two students in groups 4 (year 1) and 6 (year 1) independently reported that the most enriching and exciting time was during data collection because they enjoyed interacting with their research respondents. While some students found literature review easy and exciting, some found it challenging because it was difficult to find data for their relatively new topics. Most students interviewed in year 2 found the selection of researchable topics the most challenging area of the research process. Inability of undergraduate students to select researchable topics was also indicated in the studies by Todd et al. (2004) and Malcolm (2012).

In general, many students found the few areas related to topics covered in research methodology course relatively easy to undertake in research projects, somewhat supporting the importance of a well-presented research methodology course.

Topic selection and supervisor allocation

While many respondents did not doubt the expertise of their supervisors in understanding research, participants in year 1 groups complained that there was no optimal match between supervisors and topics selected by students. For instance, a student in group 1 (year 1) was vocal against supervisors from Accounting and Human Resources Management in the supervision of marketing projects. *'What do people in Accounting or Human Resource Management know about Marketing?'* she asked. The majority of participants in year 1 groups submitted that it was necessary for students to present their topics first, and for the selection of supervisors to be based on the topics selected by students. Students interviewed in year 2 did not however express any interest on how their supervisors were identified and allocated.

Time of, attention paid by, and availability of supervisors

All focus groups were either satisfied with, or complained about the availability or unavailability of their supervisors

respectively. While the majority of students were satisfied with the availability of their supervisors and the time they allocated to supervision, some students complained bitterly about the unavailability and lack of attention paid by their supervisors. One student in group 2 (year 1) reported:

My supervisor did not create time for meetings... Even when I had an appointment with her, she didn't concentrate; her phone kept ringing ... in most cases I ended up not receiving any guidance till the end of the session. She was just too busy to pay attention to me!

One interviewee in group 2 (year 2) complained:

My supervisor told me she was busy...when I asked about the submission date she vaguely answered that it will be very soon. I still can't say how soon is very soon!

One student in group 4 (year 1) who was apparently satisfied with the availability of her supervisor commented:

While my supervisor was a bit strict, he was always available for consultation. You could turn up during any time of the day and ask questions, even during unscheduled times, and he would give you 100 percent attention.

The availability of supervisors and how it affects performance on dissertation planning also appears as a major theme in prior studies (e.g. Heinze and Heinze, 2009; Morrison et al., 2007).

Timely feedback and use of different communication channels

Feedback and how it was given was also important to many students. Students in groups 1 (year 1 and year 2) and 5 (year 2) were satisfied with timely feedback from their supervisors. Some interviewees were especially satisfied with positive feedback, indicating that negative feedback impacted negatively on their morale. The majority of students commented that feedback provided through other communication channels (e.g. electronic mail accounts and mobile phones) than face-to-face made supervision more effective. According to one student in group 3 (year 1), his supervisor gave them her cell number, and they could call her at any time about their research problems, and that made collaboration easy and more effective.

One student in group 2 (year 2) commented: *'I liked submitting by means of email...I could not afford printing hard copies given how many times I had to resubmit.'*

Commenting on written feedback, the student in group 3

(year 1) complained:

You submit and no remarks or corrections are made on some sections, but when you submit again, the sentences you thought were correct are corrected in the previously uncorrected sections. You end up doing the same thing over and over again.

As was the case in prior studies, students demanded timely and helpful feedback (Todd et al., 2004). The other best practice that stands out prominently from this study is allowing students to submit through electronic means, and using different modern communication channels to give feedback (Heinze and Heinze, 2009).

Guidance versus directing of research

The majority of interviewees in year 1 were against too much involvement of supervisors in the selection of topics and the direction their research should take. Though the majority appreciated the role played by their supervisors, they wanted them to be more 'guiding' than 'directing' in their approach. One member of group 2 (year 1) commented:

I did not have freedom to do what I wanted to do...my supervisor was telling me what topic to research on, and what sentences to write in a report. I ended up researching and writing what she wanted, and not what I wanted to do. This reduced my motivation because I ended pursuing her research interests and not my research interests.

A few students were satisfied with the guidance they got from their supervisors, including how to identify researchable topics and which papers to download and read.

A different picture emerged when interviewing participants in year 2. Most interviewees preferred supervisors who were task-oriented, directing and strict. As shown under theme 3 above, this cohort of researchers found identifying research areas and topics quite more challenging than the other cohort; somewhat suggesting why this group preferred directive supervisors. Future studies can tease out the characteristics of students who prefer each of the two approaches to supervision.

It is worth noting that different preferences by students towards supervision approach are evident in the literature. For instance, while the preferred emphasis in the study by Todd et al. (2004) and Todd et al. (2006) is on facilitation of research, the students in the study by Heinze and Heinze (2009, p.300) 'felt that the supervisor should take a more proactive role...'. The former and the latter support the views of the first and second cohort of researchers respectively.

Structure in research supervision

Interestingly, while some students did not prefer too much direction from their supervisors, they all preferred a formal structure in the supervision process to assist them achieve their goals. They were satisfied with regular meetings with their supervisors; setting of timelines; availability of research guide document; following up on late students; introduction letters to businesses; and the availability of past research topics that gave students ideas of relevant and innovative topics. Some interviewees encouraged the culture of consulting in groups at the beginning of the supervision process because it allowed them to learn from each other. Complaining about lack of structure, a student in group 3 (year 1) claimed:

Some lecturers refuse to follow the research guide. It is as if they do not approve of it; or as if it was not suggested by them after all. Can't you guys follow the same supervision style?

The minutes of the department also show instances in the past where there has not been uniformity in marking and submission of reports, which have since been mitigated by the availability of the research guide.

The importance of formality, structure and clear timetables in assisting students achieve their research goals is supported by many studies, including Armstrong et al. (2004), Morrison et al. (2007), Todd et al. (2004), Todd et al. (2006), and Woolhouse (2002).

Student-supervisor relationship: empathising, nurturing and friendly collaboration

In accord with prior studies (Armstrong et al., 2004; Hammick and Acker, 1998; Heinze and Heinze, 2009; Morrison et al., 2007; Stefani et al., 1997; Todd et al. 2004), respondents in this study aspired to have supervisors with good interpersonal skills, and who could establish friendly and nurturing relationships. Many were vocal against supervisors who provided hurting comments that were directed at the person and not at the paper. One student from focus group 3 (year 1) claimed:

The comments of my supervisor made me feel like I was stupid. It was as if he did not accept that people are different and have different learning abilities.

Some female students perceived that their supervisors were even rude and intimidating. One student in group 2 (year 1) reported that they were once unable to come to a meeting with their supervisor, and when they came later to apologise, the supervisor 'slammed the door at their faces'. The student pleaded:

We are not asking to be friends with our supervisor; we are simply asking for an accommodating and friendly behaviour towards us.

Two students in groups 1 and 2 (year 2) who were appreciative of the strict nature of their supervisors still lamented the impolite written comments made by their respective supervisors.

One student in group 5 (year 1) did not however find anything wrong with the task-oriented and strict approach of her supervisor. She conceded:

'If my supervisor did not reprimand me when I did not submit and attend meetings, I would have probably not finished. I also did not find anything wrong with my supervisor when he was firm with poorly constructed sentences... At the beginning I was sad, but now I am happy he was not lenient.'

The views emerging from this theme suggest that while students prefer a friendly and respectful supervisor-student relationship, they do not prefer the *laissez-faire* approach to supervision.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Understanding experiences and expectations of students in research is important for improving the performance of students and supervisors (Woolhouse, 2002). However, few prior studies document the lived experiences of undergraduate students in research and its supervision. This paucity of research is surprising in African countries such as Lesotho where universities predominantly offer undergraduate degrees. The study reported here sought to close that gap by exploring the students' lived experiences of undergraduate business research and its supervision at NUL. This was achieved through qualitative, interpretivist research design paradigm using unstructured, open-ended interview focus group format.

The results suggest that participants felt that the undergraduate research was important for learning, but that it should be linked better to research methodology course. Students also found identifying researchable topics demanding and stressful. In terms of supervision, students preferred supervisors who were available, dependable, organised and provided constructive feedback on time using modern communication channels.

A clear and sensible path for the Department of Business Administration at NUL is to continue identifying the expectations of students, and alerting supervisors of these expectations. It is only when expectations of students as customers are known that supervision performance can improve (Woolhouse, 2002).

Research methodology course should be more practical than theoretical, and should assist students in identifying researchable areas and topics of their interest

earlier on in their studies. Inability of students to identify researchable questions has been identified as a major problem in prior studies (e.g. Todd et al., 2004; Todd et al., 2006).

None of the supervisors of research in this study received formal training in supervision, and save only two, none of the supervisors received any training in teaching and learning. While students did not complain about lack of training of their supervisors, we submit that formal training on supervision responsibilities and how to conduct supervision properly can go a long way towards improving performance of students in research and dissertation writing. Rowley and Slack (2004) recommends, and we support their view, that among others, supervisors should continually learn about student learning process, develop their own subject knowledge, networks for access, ability to navigate electronic sources and repertoire of research methodologies.

In the absence of formal training, we recommend, following Todd et al. (2006), a network of experienced and inexperienced supervisors who can share experiences, problems and successes. These informal networks have improved supervision performance in the Department of Business Administration at NUL. Furthermore, on-the-job informal training can be effective because it reduces the problems of transfer of learning.

While many lecturers allow students to submit on-line, there are lecturers who still resist this mode of submission. We recommend that on-line submission be taken as formal submission.

While supervisors should tolerate ambiguity and provide different forms of support based on each student's ability, the role of students in research should also be clarified. The existing written guide should be strengthened as an independent self-help resource that can even be uploaded on an intranet as a first port of call for students.

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