



EXPERIENCES OF UNDERGRADUATE RESEARCH AND SUPERVISION AT NUL

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Outline

- Introduction/problem statement
- Literature: students' experiences of undergraduate research & supervision
- Research methodology
- Findings and discussion
- Conclusion and recommendation

Introduction

- Writing research dissertation has been described as the most advanced level of learning
- Research supervision has equally been described as the most advanced level of teaching (Connell, cited in Murthy et al., 2007)
 - Also described as the 'more complex and subtle form of teaching' (Brown & Atkins, 1988)
- In spite of intrinsic value of research and its supervision, there is little research documenting the experiences of undergraduate students in research dissertation
- This is despite the fact that many undergraduate students undertake research in partial fulfilment of their degrees in many universities.

Introduction (cont.)

- Existing studies focus on postgraduate programmes and assessment, and are dominated by opinions of academic staff (Todd et al., 2004)

Aim of study

- To explicate undergraduate students' lived experiences of business research at NUL
- To use an interpretivist qualitative research and give 'voice' to students

Justification

- Two universities in Lesotho predominantly offer undergraduate degrees
- Knowledge of expectations of students as clients improves supervisory performance (Woolhouse, 2002)
- In-depth understanding of students' experiences

Students' experiences of undergraduate research & supervision

- Many students perceive dissertation as imp part of their learning
 - improves skills – e.g. independent inquiry, literature review, communication, critical thinking, networking, time mgt, confidence
- Research methodology imp, but difficult to translate theory into practice (Todd et al., 2004)
- Selection of topic, and formulating researchable questions challenging
- Prefer supervisors who are available, approachable and empathetic, & who provide timely helpful feedback on time

Students' experiences of undergraduate research & supervision (cont.)

- Some students prefer lecturers who provide guidance/advice rather than direction, while others prefer more directive supervisors
- Some students prefer more analytic and less intuitive supervisors (Armstrong et al., 2004)
 - Analytic supervisor – takes logical, structured, step-by-step approach – decide on a problem after reflection
 - Intuitive supervisor – nonconformist, takes a broader view on problem, get overall 'feel' and conclude rapidly
- Some students perceive dissertation as overload – underestimate work involved

Methodology

- Qualitative, interpretivist perspective adopted to get a rich understanding of students' experiences of dissertation module

Research Context

- Study conducted in the Dept of Business Admin (DBA) at NUL
- Unlike other departments within NUL, DBA only started offering research module to students in the past 5 years as part of final year learning
- Challenges: inexperienced lecturers, different approaches to grading, and student-supervisor relationship (departmental minutes, various)

Methodology (cont.)

Participants and data collection procedures

- Students asked to share their experiences of research and its supervision using unstructured, open-ended interview format
- Focus group interviews – fourth cohort of students (17) and fifth cohort of students (11) year later
- Interviews took between 60 and 120 minutes per group (3-4 students)
- Interview notes sent to participants for comments
- Triangulation: Reviewed departmental minutes and used observation to triangulate primary data gathering

Ethical considerations

- Participants were informed of the voluntary nature of the study, and that it would not affect their results (study done after submission)
- Participants informed that they could withdraw from study at any time without notice
- Confidentiality and anonymity guaranteed
- On the request of participants, interviews were not recorded

Data analysis

- We independently read and reread data collected from interviews, observation and review of documents to identify patterns and common themes
- We then met to compare findings and resolve disputes
- After discussion, we identified and agreed on 9 common themes
- Interpretivist approach to qualitative research has been termed a variant of 'factor analysis' because it reduces large amounts of qualitative data collected from interviews, observation, etc. into meaningful 'factors' or 'themes' (Bluhm et al., 2010, p.1868)

Results and discussion

- We identified 9 common themes
- 1. **Importance of research dissertation**
- All students indicated that research dissertation was imp for future wk and study (Todd et al., 2004; 2006)
 - *'research broadened my knowledge'...* *'research gave me opportunity to read widely and make decisions alone'...*
'research gave opportunity to interact with businesses'
- 2. **Research methodology v. research project**
- Many students suggested that research methodology course was imp, but did not cover all elements of dissertation, and it was not easy to translate it into actually writing (Todd et al.2004)
 - *'There was no link at all'*

Results and discussion (cont.)

3. **Challenging/easy phases of research dissertation**

- No consistent pattern of phases that were reported as challenging or easy
 - Most found difficulty in identifying researchable topics (cf. Todd et al, 2004; Malcolm, 2012)
 - Literature review challenging for new topics
 - Generally: topics covered in research methodology course found relatively easy

4. **Topic selection and supervisor allocation**

- Some students felt that there was no optimal match between research topics and supervisor allocation (currently supervisor allocation done randomly)

Results and discussion (cont.)

5. Availability of supervisors

- Some students were satisfied with, while others were not satisfied with availability of supervisors
 - *‘My supervisor did not create time for meetings...Even when I had an appointment with her, she didn’t concentrate... her phone kept ringing...I ended not receiving guidance at the end of the session’*
 - *‘While my supervisor was a bit strict, he was always available for consultation’*
- Availability of supervisors and its negative impact on performance and planning of dissertation appears in prior studies (Heinze&Heinze, 2009; Morrison et al., 2007)

Results and discussion (cont.)

6. **Timely feedback and use of different com channels** (Todd et al., 2004; Heinze & Heinze, 2009)
 - The time and manner in which feedback was given was imp to many participants
 - Timely and positive feedback
 - Feedback through variety of com channels (emails, phones, face-to-face, written)
7. **Guidance v. Directing of research**
 - Some students preferred guidance *'I did not have freedom to do what I wanted to do...my supervisor told me what topic to research on, and what sentences to write in a report... I ended up pursuing her research interest'*

Results and discussion (cont.)

- Some students preferred more directive supervision (cf. Heinze & Heinze, 2009)
- Future research can tease out characteristics of students that prefer either guidance or direction
- 8. Structure in research supervision**
- All students preferred a more formal structure to assist them achieve goals
 - Clear timelines, regular meetings
 - Research guide document
 - Following up on late students
- Importance of formality, structure and clear timetables reported in prior studies (Armstrong et al, 2004; Todd et al., 2004; 2006; Woolhouse, 2002)

Results and discussion (cont.)

9. Student-Supervisor relationship

- Most students preferred empathising, nurturing and friendly collaboration (Armstrong et al., 2007; Todd et al., 2004)

Written comments

- ‘The comments of my supervisor made me feel like I was stupid’

Conduct during consultations

- ‘We are not asking to be friends with our supervisor, we are simply asking for accommodating and friendly behaviour’

Conclusion and recommendations

- Understanding experiences & expectations of students in research module is imp for improving performance of students & supervisors
- Paucity of research on exp of undergraduate students in writing and supervision of research

Recommendations

- Identify expectations of students
- Improve research methodology and make it more practical than theoretical
- Train supervisors on research supervision

Conclusion and recommendations

- Supervisors:
 - learn about student learning process
 - develop subject knowledge and repertoire of research methodologies
 - be able to navigate electronic resources (e.g. e-journals)
- Use of more electronic resources for feedback
- Develop written guide and place it on intranet as first port of call & self-help for students

Thank you for your kind attention !!