FACTORS THAT AFFECT STUDENTS' PROGRESS AND THE COMPLETION RATE IN THE RESEARCH PROJECT: A CASE STUDY OF RESEARCH STUDENTS AND THEIR SUPERVISORS AT THE ZIMBABWE OPEN UNIVERSITY

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ABSTRACT

The question of why some distance education students in the Department of Education at the Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU) successfully complete their studies while others do not is becoming increasingly important as distance education moves from a marginal to an integral role in the provision of higher education. In order to unravel this issue and initiate some academic debate, the Department of Education at the ZOU mounted a national survey between June 2008 and July 2010 aimed at ascertaining the reasons for low completion rate among research students studying for the Bachelor of Education in Educational Management (B.Ed.-Educational Management). A survey of 100 research students was undertaken. Respondents were asked to identify and explain institutional and student- related factors that affected their progress and success in research projects. Major factors found to impact negatively on students' progress included financial problems, lack of books and journals, poor communication and poor supervision by some tutors. Personal and domestic factors found to impact negatively on students successfulness included the following: financial problems, distance between the student and the Regional Centre and lack of technology. The present study recommended that ZOU needs to decentralize its operations to district centres so as to reduce distance between students and supervisors. Project Supervisors need thorough training for them to effectively assist students to throughout the project. The Library should offer inter-net facilities, relevant and recent book and journals.

Key words: Open University, distance education, Zimbabwe

INTRODUCTION

Distance education institutions, the world over, are coming under increasing public and governmental scrutiny with respect to what they do, how well they do it, and at what cost. The extraordinary growth of distance education in Zimbabwe and particularly at the ZOU has generated a lot of interest in the issues of quality and effectiveness. One of the major challenges facing the Department of Education at the ZOU is the low completion rate amongst undergraduate research students. The question that motivated the present study is why only forty percent (40%) of B.Ed (Educational Management) students successfully complete their research projects while others sixty percent do not. This article discusses findings of a two-year investigation into factors that affect students' progress and completion rate in the research project. It is hoped findings of the present study will help to inform ODL policy and best practices in the supervision of students, research projects.

Background of the Study

The B.Ed (Educational Management) degree offered by the ZOU, is a four-year degree programme. To be admitted into the programme, the applicants are required to have;

- at least 5 Ordinary Level passes including English Language and Mathematics.
- a professional teachers certificate, diploma or degree approved by the university
- at least one year work experience in a public or private educational institution either as a teacher or administrator.

The BEd (Educational Management) programme is aimed at equipping practising educational administrators and teachers with administrative knowledge and skills in handling educational management, supervision, educational planning and policy issues. The degree is also useful to administrators, managers and leaders in other organizations outside the education system.

The Bachelor of Education Degree Structure

The B.Ed (Educational Management) Degree Programme consists of twenty-four courses including the research project. The degree programme is divided into four academic years of two semesters each (semester 1 to semester 8).

The Research Project

The research project is an important part of the B.Ed (Educational Management) Degree designed by the student in consultation with a tutor (supervisor) under the overall guidance of the Regional Programme Coordinator (co-supervisor. Basically, there are two types of research projects-structured and unstructured. For a structured project, Students are given topics to work on, what to look for and guidelines to follow. The Department of Education, at the ZOU, requires students to undertake unstructured projects. Unstructured research projects are self-directed and should be organized into five chapters involving a number of activities

Table 1: The Research Project Process

Chapter	Activities
1	specifying the research problem formulating the research topic or title presenting background of the study presenting statement of the problem formulating hypotheses or research questions discussing the significance of the study stating delimitations and limitations stating assumptions defining key terms outlining organization of the study
2	- reviewing literature
3	designing the research: creating, adopting or adapting a research design and data collection methods describing the population, sample and sampling techniques collecting data
4	analyzing and presenting data discussing research findings
5	summarizing major findings of the study drawing conclusions making recommendations compiling references compiling appendices

Students begin working on their research projects in the seventh semester. The student is expected to work with the supervisor throughout the research project and submit a typed project report of approximately 10 000 - 12 000 words to the Department of Education by the end of the eighth semester.

One of the dimensions of the project is its size approximately 10 000 words and the weight it carries in course assessment (8 credit points). A normal course carries a maximum of 4 credit points). Another important aspect is the amount of guidance and support students receive from the project supervisors. The research project is also a collaborative effort between the student and the supervisor. The question to ask is why only forty percent of the B.Ed (Educational Management) students each semester complete research projects. This low completion rate of research projects has a negative impact on the quality and effectiveness of the B.Ed (Educational Management) Degree.

Statement of the Problem

Unlike conventional classroom learning, it is recognized that in a distance learning system, a large number of students fail to complete their studies due to its inherent factors. Some reasons are obvious and common. Others may be unique and relevant only to a particular group of students or programme. In the implementation of a distance education programme, there are unique problems that stand against achieving programme goals. These problems may be student-related and/or institutional-related. The purpose of the present study was to identify and describe factors that negatively impact on B.Ed (Educational Management) students' progress and completion rate in the research project at the ZOU.

Research Questions

In order to address fully the main research problem, the study was guided by the following four sub-questions questions;

1. Who is a ZOU student? What are his or her characteristics?
2. What are the student-related factors that affect B. Ed (Educational Management) students' completion rate on the research projects?
3. What are the institution-related factors that negatively affect B. Ed (Educational Management) students' completion rate in the research projects?
4. How can the Department of Education at the ZOU improve the completion rate of B.Ed (Educational Management) research projects?

Importance of the Study

Research projects undertaken for the B. Ed (Educational Management) Degree are widely regarded by both staff and students as an important component of the curriculum. A student who fails to submit a completed research project is failed or deferred. A study on factors that affect students' research work is, therefore, of theoretical and practical importance since it focuses on issues of educational quality and effectiveness. Thus, findings of the present study are of interest to distance educators and researchers in general and to project supervisors and their students in particular.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Openness and accessibility, the hallmarks of many distance teaching institutions, all too often seem to be associated with significantly lower rates of successful completion of courses and programs of study than campus-based institutions (Woodley and Parlett, 1983). In most conventional institutions students have access to their lecturers or tutors or to fellow students for help, advice or information. In a distance learning system, the student is more likely to experience isolation, even alienation from the institution. He or she may be geographically remote from the central or its local center, and either living at some distance from fellow students or unaware of their existence even if they do live nearby. Thus, students in distance- learning systems

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face not only the problems of conventional students, but also those generated by the system itself (Robinson in Kaye and Rumble (Eds), 1981). In this review of literature we categorise these problems as students'- related and institution - related.

A number of studies have been undertaken on factors that affect the success and progress of research students in distance education. Robinson, in Kaye and Rumble (Eds), (1981) argues that all distance education students at some time experience problems in managing their own learning effectively, for example, in scheduling and using time efficiently, in expressing their thoughts in written work, and in developing adequate reading and comprehension skills to enable them to make use of what they read and to cope with the volume of the reading required. Most students seem to experience difficulty, at some point in their studies, in understanding particular concepts or texts. Bogdan, (1992) noted that right at the initial stage, quite often, students fail to define a research problem from either a conventional or technical meaning. This breeds frustration. Kratwohl (1985) identified lack of training and experience in research methods as an obstacle to students' progress in research. Taschian, (1997) indicated that students fail to prepare a clear and precise research proposal thereby failing to communicate, to the supervisor, exactly what information will be obtained and how it will be obtained. This leads the supervisor to demand that the student spends more time on the research proposal and clarify issues before proceeding to the next stage. In agreement with Taschian (1997), Nyawaranda, (2005) says some students fail to distinguish between writing a research proposal and a research report, thereby, wasting valuable time on developing the research proposal before they could undertake the intended study.

RESEARCH DESIGN

Researchers have come up with various research designs the major ones being the surveys, experiments, case studies, historical and correlation research designs. The present study adopted the survey research design. The survey design was preferred because it is the most appropriate design where perceptions of participants are sought (Punch, 2004). The survey design is one of the most effective ways of conducting research. It is effective in gathering information that describes the nature and extent of specified data, providing a systematic attempt to collect information, describe it and explain perceptions, beliefs, values, views and behaviour (Thomas and Nelson, 2001).

METHODS AND PROCEDURES

The population of the present study consisted of all B. Ed students in their final year, who had completed or not completed their research projects. Data was collected through the use of a questionnaire distributed to a purposive sample of 100 students. The study was qualitative in that it collected students' perceptions on factors that affected their progress and successfulness on the research project.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The first objective of the study was to identify student-related factors that negatively affected the progress of B. Ed (Educational Management) students towards the successful completion of the research project at the ZOU. We first identified key characteristics of the ZOU student. The question who is a ZOU student was unpacked according to a number of dimensions which are age, gender, educational background, marital status, number of children, geographical distance, income, access to information and communication and technology. We collected this information from the Registry Records and constructed a consolidated profile of a typical ZOU student.

Information about the age of B. Ed (Educational Management) students showed that the age range of the students is 35-60.The studied students were relatively old. In distance education, the age of the student is very important. Whilst, Coggins (1988) has argued that younger students are more likely a distance education

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course, Holmberg(1899)argues that older, mature students are self-directed and are more likely to have the strong motivation that is necessary to succeed at a distance. However, older students usually experience personal problems as they try to balance their studies with work and family responsibilities. Therefore, it may be argued that their age other coupled with other factors could negatively affect their completion rate of the research project.

The marital status of the respondents showed that 90% were married, 6% were single and 4% were widowed. The number of own children per student was between 3-4 children. By implication, most B.Ed (Educational Management) students had some family responsibilities which could affect their research project work.

Sixty-four percent of the respondents were employed as educational administrators and 36% were classroom teachers. The major source of income for almost all respondents was the salary from their employment. Forty-four percent of the respondents indicated that their spouses were gainfully employed as teachers whilst (56%) said their spouses were either doing peasant farming in the rural areas or living with them at their workstations. In view of the economic meltdown that characterized Zimbabwe year 2005 to date, it may be common knowledge that ZOU students' salaries were inadequate for them to fend their families and finance their research projects.

The majority of students (86%) lived far away from the Regional center and had to travel an average distance of 100 kilometres to visit the Regional Centre or the project supervisor at his or her place. This student information enabled us to describe a typical B. Ed (Educational Management) student at the ZOU.(See Table 2 below).

Table 2:Profile of a ZOU B. Ed (Educational Management) Student

1.Age	35-60years
2.Gender	Male (60%) female (40%)
3.Educational level	Ordinary Level
4.Marrital status	Married
5.Average number of own children	3 children
6.Employment status	Employed
7.Income-salary	Less than USD2 400 p.a
8.Mean distance travelled to Regional Centre	100km

We then used these characteristics as the basis for studying student – related factors that negatively affected research students. The study identified ten common factors (See Table 3 below).

Table 3: Student-related factors affecting B. Ed (Educational Management) students' progress and successfulness on the research project in decreasing order of frequency

Factor	Students affected
1.College fees	83%
2.Typing and binding the research project	82%
3.Home and work pressure	80%
4.Distance travelled to see the supervisor	78%
5.Training and experience in research	78%
6.Demands of other courses	73%
7.Students health	22%
8.Marriage	17%

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9.Children	13%
10.Friends	10%
11.Age of student	10%

Financial Problems

Knapper, (1988) argues that distance learners are more likely to have insecurities about learning more than traditional students. These insecurities are founded in personal - related issues such as financing of study. Although distance education is driven by the philosophy of affordability and cost effectiveness, findings of the present study show that 83% of the research students considered the cost of registering for the research project too inhibitive. The research project is a double major. A research student has to pay a total of United States (USD182.50) per semester for two semesters. And usually the research project is taken together with two other courses. The total cost per semester would then climb to USD 310.00. Besides their college fees, students have other financial commitments to meet (food, clothes, children's school fees and the cost of travelling to meet the supervisor).

Distance

Cropley and Kahl (1983) argue that the most unique feature of distance education, not surprisingly is distance. This has a myriad of implications for the distant learner. Among these implications are the isolation of the learner from resources, support, and peers; the lack of face-to-face interaction with tutors and delayed feedback. In the present study, 78% of the students saw the cost of travelling to see the research supervisor as a major factor that hindered their progress and successfulness on the project. One of the roles of the research supervisor at the ZOU is to maintain contact with the student through regular personal supervision meetings. On average, a student has to make about 10 visits to see the project supervisor. The frequency and nature of these sessions will vary depending on the nature of the research and the progress the student is making. A good number of students (58%) said they sometimes failed to visit their supervisors for advice because of high travelling costs.

Home and Work Demands

Distance learners operate in an environment meant primarily for other purposes such as the home, or the work place. Learners, therefore, often face household duties or have full time or part time jobs. In the present study 73% of the research students said their progress on the research project was negatively affected by their jobs. This was true since all B. Ed. (Educational Management) students were educational administrators (64%) and teachers (36%). Whilst male students (80%) said home demands did not affect their research work, female students (60%) said home duties as wives and mothers negatively affected their progress on the research project. Single, divorced or widowed women students did not mention their marital status as a negative factor in their research work. This is not surprising given that in rural Zimbabwe, tradition expects married women to perform almost 90% of the household duties (cooking, laundry and taking care of the children) even if they hold fulltime jobs elsewhere. Even if they have maids, it is still their responsibility to see to it that the maid performs these duties well. In this finding we agree with Cropley and Kahl (1986), who argue that often, the distance learner is in a setting meant primarily for other purposes such as the home, or the workplace and often face household duties or have full or part-time jobs. Hardy and Boaz (1997) found out that distance learning requires students to be more focused, better time managers and to be able to work independently. This means the successful distance student needs to have a number of characteristics such as tolerance for ambiguity, a need for autonomy and an ability to be flexible. (Thekeld & Brzoska, 1994).

Demands of other Courses

B.Ed (Educational Management) students are required to start working on their research project in the 7th semester and submit the completed project in the 8th semester. The research project is taken concurrently with two other courses. Data collected reveals that the progress of 73% research students was negatively affected

by the demands of other courses. The following factors were found not to negatively affect students progress in research work: student health (22%), children (13%), friends (10%) and age of the student (6%).

Institution - related Problems

The second objective of the present study was to identify and describe institutional factors that negatively affected research students studying for the B. Ed (Educational Management) degree. We first examined the role played by the research supervisor and the Department of Education in the supervision of students' research projects.

Responsibility of the Research Supervisor
Supervision of the research project is a relationship requiring mutual trust and respect between the supervisor and the student. The research supervisor's roles include the following;

- To give students guidance about the nature of the research and the standard expected, the planning of the research programme, relevant literature and sources, research methods and instrumental techniques and to direct students.
- To make the student aware of the relevant regulations and legal issues and any ethical issues that might rise in the course of research.
- To maintain contact through regular personal supervision and meetings in accordance with Departmental policy and in the light of any agreement reached with the student. The frequency and nature of these sessions will vary depending on the nature of the research and the progress the student is making. Both student and supervisor sign a form detailing student- supervisor contact meetings. The supervisor is responsible for maintaining a record of all supervision with the student
- To give detailed advice on the necessary completion dates of successive stages of research in order to ensure that a project report is submitted within the time allowed by the regulations.
- To request written work as appropriate and return such work with constructive feedback within an agreed period of time. During the writing-up of the research project, the supervisor is expected to keep in contact with the student and respond to reasonable requests for assistance. The supervisor also provides guidance on the writing and preparation of the research project. Ultimately, the student is responsible for his or her work and the supervisor's responsibility is to give guidance
- To ensure that the student is prepared for the oral examination and understands its role in the overall examination process.
- To advise the student subsequently of the implications of any recommendations from the examiners and to assist in the preparation of any re-submission.

Responsibility of the Department of Education

The responsibility of the Department of Education lies with the Regional Programme Coordinator. The Regional Programme Coordinator is a fulltime lecturer based in any one of the university's Regional Centres, who is responsible for managing and coordinating all academic activities of a particular programme. The roles of the Regional Programme Coordinator include the following;

- To approve research topics for research students.
- To ensure that the student has appropriate supervision throughout their time as a student of the university.
- To provide information and guidance on the Department, Faculty and University Regulations and codes of practice.
- To endeavour to ensure research students have access to sufficient library provision.
- To coordinate the pastoral care of research students and to ensure that they are informed of sources on independent advice should the student/supervisor relationship break down.
- To record the progress of research students and submit reports to the National Programme Leader as required.

- To maintain files which include written progress reports from the supervisors.
- To ensure that students' research projects are marked, moderated and marks submitted to the National Programme Leader (at the National Centre) in time.

A number of studies have examined institution – related factors that affect students' progress in research projects. According to Nunan and Calvert (1992), some supervisors lack relevant training and experience to supervise research students. Pearce (2005) found out that some supervisors are rigid and teach research the way they were taught thereby frustrating the student in the process. In a paper delivered at a workshop in Mashonaland Central, Nyawaranda (2005) highlighted some of the common criticisms usually leveled against research supervisors at the ZOU. Chief among them were that some supervisors lack relevant experience; lack relevant knowledge and skills required for the supervision of research projects; have little guidance and direction; hold few meetings with the research students.

Theorists (e.g., Coldeway, 1982, 1986; Calvert, 1986; and Garrison, 1987) stress the need for a comprehensive approach that takes into account all the experiences of distance learners as well as the unique aspects of the distance- learning environment. In order to ensure that research student have the adequate training and the necessary experiences in undertaking research, B. Ed (EAPPS) students are required to pass a prerequisite course EA3DC101, Introduction to Research Methods (see B. Ed(EAPPS) course structure, Table2) before they can embark on the research project. The Department of Education has also produced a Handbook on Guidelines to Educational Research for use by research students. Despite all these efforts and provisions and the actual supervision students receive, the progress of research students and their completion rate have remained unacceptably low. The question "why the Department of Education at the ZOU" continues to experience low completion rates amongst B. Ed (EAPPS) research students inspired the two researchers in this study to investigate into factors that retard B. Ed (EAPPS) students' progress and successfulness on the research project. The study also gave students the opportunity to describe their experiences and what they perceived as major factors affecting their progress and success on the research project.

INSTITUTION – RELATED FACTORS

Lack of Journals and Books
Findings of the present study show that 85% of B. Ed (EAPPS) research students considered lack of books and journals as some of the major factors affecting their progress and success. Research shows that successful research students tend to be comprehensive and up to date in reviewing the literature (Kangai and Mapolisa, 2008). However, Zimbabwe is a developing country and academic libraries are only found in the urban centers. This, therefore, means that distance students in the rural areas have to travel to their local center library to read. Students have also complained that ZOU library rules and regulations place some restrictions on access to reading materials. Materials that are heavily demanded, and there are so few of these, are placed on closed access and they are available for use within the library only. Books on short- term loan can be borrowed out for three days and books on long- term loan can be borrowed out for only seven days. The fine for not returning a book in time is US$20.00 per day delayed. These stringent library measures compounded by lack of relevant books and journals was seen by students as a serious hindrance to their progress and success on the research project.

Training and Experience in the Research Project
One of the critical factors affecting the progress and success of research students is the lack of training and experience in the research project. Most of the students would be undertaking research for the first time. In order to prepare students for the research project, all students are required to study and pass a pre-requisite course "Introduction to Research Methods" in their third year. This course is meant to equip students with the knowledge and skills required in the research project. The major focus of the course is to give students a conceptual and theoretical understanding of ten key stages of the research process; The present study sought

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to unravel this problem and asked students to rate 10 key processes of the research project according to level of difficulty based on their experiences. The data we collected is presented in Table 4 below.

Table 4: Percentage of Students finding the project difficulty at each stage.

	Item	Easy		Difficulty	
		NO	%	NO	%
1	Selecting the research topic	11	22	39	78
2	Writing the background of the study	29	58	21	42
3	Reviewing Related	19	38	31	62
4	Describing the research design and methods	23	46	27	54
5	Preparing the research instruments	20	40	30	60
6	Collecting data	20	40	30	60
7	Analysing data	15	30	35	70
8	Presenting, discussing research findings	14	28	36	72
9	Writingconclusions and recommendations	36	72	14	28
10	Writing the references	38	76	12	24

Results in Table 4 indicate that research students experienced difficulty at all stages of the research project except writing the background of the study, writing conclusions and recommendations and compiling the references. The most difficult stages were selecting the research topic, analyzing data and presenting and discussing the research findings. According to Nyawaranda (2005), research students usually complain that their supervisors sometimes lack relevant experience; lack relevant knowledge and skills required for the supervision of research projects; give too little guidance and direction; and allow too few meetings with the students. Lack of clear guidelines for research argues Nyawaranda (2005) has been one of the major factors contributing to students' low completion rate. (Keegan, 1986) has also pointed out that lack of frequent contact with teachers, presents students with problems in undertaking research. According to Beaudoin (1990), lack of instantaneous communication in distance education causes the delivery system to be formal and rigid. Although face-to-face tutorials remain optional for distance learners, the research project shifts a considerable amount of responsibility to the student to make personal contacts with the project supervisor for guidance and advice. Beaudoin (1990) notes that distance learners are at varying degrees of readiness to undertake research at their own. Each research student thus needs some degree of personalization or individualization of instruction to suit his or her particular situation.

Typing and binding the research project was also considered by 82% of the students as a major factor that negatively affected their submission of the completed project as most students did not have their own computers and had to contract someone for the typing. Such students were stationed in rural areas where electricity facilities, computer and binding services are scarce. This could be expensive on the part of the students as they had to travel long distances to town centres where they could access such services.

The factors that were said to be impacting negatively on the progress and success of B.Ed (Educational Management) research students include both student- related and institutional related-factors. Major student related factors indicated were financial problems that included the cost of traveling to see the supervisor and the cost of typing and binding the research project. Major institutional- related factors that were said to adversely affect research students included lack of books and journals, lack of clear guidelines and in some cases lack of experience in research on the part of the supervisors. Poor communication between the institution and research students was also considered as a major factor that negatively affected the progress and success of research students.

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Recommendations

In light of the above findings and conclusions, the researchers made the following recommendations:

- ZOU needs to decentralize its activities to district centres so as to cut down on traveling costs incurred by the students. Setting up district centres would be in line with the strategic mission of the institution to bring affordable university education to the learners wherever they are.
- There is need to review the Departmental policy on the typing of research projects particularly at undergraduate level. The Department of Education and Regional Centres may need to identify centres in the Regions and Districts where students may have their research projects typed and bound.
- Students should be trained in the use of computers so that they could type their own research projects.
- ZOU should ensure that supervisors and markers of research projects are well. trained and qualified in order to effectively and efficiently supervise and evaluate students' research projects.
- ZOU should endeavour to equip the National and Regional centre libraries with adequate and relevant books and journals for research. Internet facilities should also be made available in all ZOU libraries so that research students can access current knowledge and information.
- There is need for ZOU to improve communication with its research students through tutorial letters so as to keep them informed of Departmental expectations, important dates, and the progress the student is making in his / her research.
- Resources need to be collectively mobilised by the Corporate World, politicians, ZOU and the community at large with the intent to source or purchase computers for the ZOU Regional Centres where students can learn to type their research projects.
- In the wake of e-learning there is no harm in persuading and encouraging prospective ZOU students to purchase laptops or desktops as they enroll at the ZOU.
- ZOU Regional Programme Coordinators need to attach B.Ed (EAPPS) research students to part time tutors (supervisors) who reside in the same Districts with students. This might help in cutting down travel costs and communication challenges, thereby, increasing students' chances to successfully complete and submit quality research projects.

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