

Practices and Challenges Postgraduate Students Face in Conducting Research in the Selected Colleges of Arsi University

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to assess practices and challenges postgraduate students face in conducting research in the selected colleges of Arsi University. The study used descriptive design. The data collection tools were questionnaire, interview, document analysis and observation. The sampling techniques were purposive, availability and systematic. Findings showed thesis supervision to have lacked supervision policies and research guidelines, supervisory practice was characterized by mismatching in the area of specialization and topic of supervision, mismatch of numbers of thesis supervisors and postgraduate students (PGS). Challenges related to postgraduate students comprised lack of academic background, lack of research knowledge and skills, postgraduate students overlapped office with thesis work. Challenges related to supervisor were lack of attention, workload compounded inadequate supervision, supervisors did not give research guideline for postgraduate students, supervisors provided a delayed feedback, and supervisors were inaccessible to postgraduate students in times of needs. Challenges related to supervisor- supervisee relationship comprised un/friendly relationship, occurrence of disagreements and lack of clear communication, not making pre- discussion with postgraduate students. Institutional related challenges comprised lack of coordination among colleges, departments and supervisors; institutions did not make continuous follow up of advisor's progress and delay in thesis supervision of students. The study highly recommends that it is worthy to emphasis on the strict implementation of supervision policies and guidelines, postgraduate students academic background, supervisors supervision policies and practices, supervisee-supervisor relationship and institutional related challenges.

Keywords: *Practices, challenges, master thesis, postgraduate students, policies, guidelines*

1. INTRODUCTION

Research, teaching and community services are the most important functions of any university in order to plant and produce students and researchers who are capable of pragmatic research across the spectrum in education, research and development contexts (Siddle, 2001). Universities all over the world are recognized as institutions established for the advancement of knowledge, research and innovation (Guri-Rosenblit & Waast, 2006) and serve as a centre of excellence in prioritized areas of research by attracting the best brains for teaching and research in producing high caliber graduates (Abiddin, 2012).

Having finished the courses successfully, postgraduate students are also required to carry out research undertakings as partial fulfillment of the requirement for their respective degrees at both under and postgraduate levels. Accordingly, among the different kinds of research carried out in the universities, postgraduate research or research for the requirement of partial fulfillment of master degree carried out by postgraduate students as a formal area of study is one that is recognized in universities (Jenkins, Nyquist, & Rose, 2009, 2002, 2005). Studies about postgraduate research have received considerable attention in many developed countries such as in UK, Australia and New Zealand whereas studies from developing countries have received little attention in which postgraduate students had been challenged (Son & Park, Hirsh & Woodrow, & Phakiti & Li, 2014, 2013, 2011).

In Africa, the expansion of higher education system has led to the expansion of postgraduate enrolments and postgraduate research has become a very topical issue largely due to the rapid expansion of higher educations and the increase in number of students joining a program every year.

Given the context of higher education institutions in Ethiopia, research is one of the major components of the duties of a university that take research as a requirement (MoE, 2003). (Tesfaye, 2004) argues that the complex administrative bottlenecks of universities make it difficult for universities of Ethiopia to function flexibly and effectively in research for the problems seem very diversified and deep-rooted despite an increase interest in the

number of students joining the program. Like in other universities, researches conducted for different requirements in the Ethiopian universities have also different nomenclatures in which research conducted for the partial fulfillment of undergraduate level is called ‘senior essay or project’ whereas research conducted at postgraduate degree level (two years for regular and above for extension programs) for the partial fulfillment of master degree is called a ‘thesis’.

Arsi University, which is part of this study, was established with the mission to ‘produce competent graduates, carry out problem solving research and provide need driven community services through practical teaching and research for the sustainable development of the country’. Nevertheless, postgraduate students were facing varied challenges every year even to the extent that in the same department, considerable number of postgraduate students struggle with thesis work but faced delays and academic problems in which the selected departments of Arsi University are not an exception.

With this in mind, the motive behind conducting this study was to assess on practices and challenges of postgraduate students in conducting research for the completion of master thesis in the study area in general and in the above selected departments in particular. The study was guided by the following research questions.

2. Research Questions

- 1) To what extent thesis supervision policies and guidelines are implemented in the selected departments of Arsi University?
- 3) What are the major challenges that postgraduate students face in conducting research for the completion of master thesis in the selected colleges of Arsi University?
 - a) Challenges related to postgraduate students in the completion of master thesis in the selected departments of Arsi University
 - b) Challenges related to supervisor and supervisor- supervisee relationship in the completion of master thesis in the selected departments of Arsi University

c) Challenges related to selected departments in the completion of master thesis in Arsi University

3. MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study used descriptive research design and qualitative and quantitative research methods. In this study, postgraduate students that completed their master program in the mid year of 2012 were selected by using systematic random sampling technique whereas purposive and availability sampling techniques were used in the selections of samples from college deans, and department heads. Likewise, the selections of supervisors, research methodology course instructors, and postgraduate students with difference in number who graduated in the year 2011 were carried out by using availability sampling technique.

The sample size for collecting quantitative data for this research was determined by using Yamane's (Yamane, 1967) guided in selecting the appropriate sample size for the study in which postgraduate students that completed their program in the mid year of 2012 from the two colleges of its departments were 62. Thus, the sample size selected as per the above formula was 57.

In conducting this study, the instruments for data collection consists of observation, interview, questionnaire and document review/analysis.

4. Results and Discussions

4.1. RESULTS

4.1.1. Implementations of Thesis Supervision Policies and Research Guidelines

With regard to the extent of implementation of supervision policies and guidelines in the department, there were no such clearly written practices of supervision policies and research guidelines. A study in this regard showed as there should be clear institutional policies that guide PG from the very beginning and provides an early warning of emerging problems (Baffour and Vambe, 2008).

4.1.2. Postgraduate Related Challenges

Challenges related to postgraduate students were coming from different disciplinary backgrounds, lack of academic background, lack of research knowledge and skills, overlap of office work with thesis work, geographical barrier, lack of commitment, English language skill problem, duplication of previous work, research course is not supported by practical classes. Literature sources state that some of the PGS' potential challenges include lack of commitment, lack of effort and lack of organization (Kearns, Gardiner, & Marshall, 2008).

4.1.3. Advisor/Supervisor Related Challenges

The challenges were lack of enough time to support to PGS in thesis supervision (being strict to consultation hour), overload work, advisors and research instructors did not capacitate PGS in doing research, lack of advisor in the discipline, unavailable in times of need by PGS, lack of commitment of advisors and lack of provisions of guidelines. In the context of postgraduate studies, a supervisor that guides students in the course of thesis work is responsible for providing guideline and support them in line with the research guidelines and expectations of the university has paramount contribution (Mutula, 2009).

The availability of a supervisor to postgraduate students need is another important element of good supervision for a student undertaking thesis work needs a supervisor who will be not only academically competent in a particular area but also willing to act as the student's advocate when necessary (School of Graduate Studies, 2002). Given that thesis work is a guided learning process, the finalization of the timely thesis is a function of both a supervisee and the supervisor. However, according to (Wakeford, 2006) stated as many students find their supervisors too busy or unavailable because of different reasons.

4.1.4. Challenges Pertinent to Supervisor – Supervisee Relationship Related

Supervisor –supervisee relationship related challenges comprised unfriendly relationship, lack of clear communication and discussion ahead of time, lack of clear supervision policies and guidelines.

With regard to making of pre- discussion with students on how to proceed with thesis work, there was no any such practice of making pre- discussion with students on how to proceed with thesis work. As a result, most postgraduate students carry out their thesis work under great pressure without making any prior discussions or pre-conferencing with assigned advisor/supervisor even without knowing who he or she is and the role of advisor to discharge responsibilities become minimal and students are urged to conduct their own way and face challenges in completing their thesis work at a framed time. (Macdonald, 2004). Maintains collegiality as the spirit of power sharing that can open an opportunity of entering into important discussions and more learning. Such pre-discussion could promote postgraduate student satisfaction with thesis supervision, make good progress and more likely to produce better thesis work (Ives and Rowley , 2005).

Thus, thesis supervision is shared and coordinated in which supervisors and postgraduate students embark on at the onset of a research study (Zambo, 2005)and an academic supervisor is responsible to advise postgraduate student whether or not the research appears to be feasible and the possible risks that may be involved, to assist postgraduate students at the outset in finding useful and relevant reading material and appropriate academic framework within which to place the topic, to advice on the choice of suitable methodological approach (Zambo, 2005). At the end of the day, such relationships have also been found to prevent slow thesis work and delay (Kyvik and Smeby, 1994; Cullen, Pearson, Saha and Spear, 1994; Hamilton, 1993; Goulden, 1991). Thus, working together cooperatively with a supervisor is the best way for the supervisee to move into the next level of development which is required to complete the thesis.

However, the absence of a clear supervisor-supervisee relationship guideline in the program is creating uncertainty on both parties regarding what roles they should play in the process of thesis supervision. (Yu and Wright, 2016) argue that the supervisee-supervisor relationship is one of the major barriers that lead students' academic to failure and dissatisfaction.

4.1.5. Institutional/Department Related Challenges

Institutional challenges comprised lack of coordination among college, department and supervisors, lack of clarity of institutional functions, lack of assignment of advisors based on their research interest area/specialization and mismatch between numbers of students and advisors; lack of supervision policies and research guidelines, lack of institutional responsibilities and lack of existence of continuous follow up of advisors progress and delay or failure of PGS, lack of due attention of departments and the lack of practice of teaching of advanced research methodology course supported by practice of statistical packages (SPSS), lack of continuous follow ups and support to PGS, lack of dealing with unavailable/absentee advisor and replacing him/her soon, lack of making continuous contact with advisors and students on thesis work and lack of clear criteria/guideline at department level in which advisors are assigned.

(Gardner, 2008a) points out that a college and/department that establishes a positive relationship between a staff and students plays a more significant role in the postgraduate student development as compared to the one that plays a passive role in the students' education. Lessing and Schulze (2002) argue that the supervisory responsibilities involve balancing various factors such as skills in the area of research, support for students, providing constructive criticism and creativity.

In addition, (Sidhu, Kaur, Fook, and Yunus , 2014) surveyed postgraduate students from Malaysia and the United Kingdom about their expectations of the supervisory practices, roles and responsibilities of their supervisors. Respondents from both countries had similar views regarding supervisory practices and agreed that supervisors must provide guidance during the research process and must be experts in their field of study. This is also in agreement with the works of (Ives and Rowley , 2005) that stressed the importance of matching postgraduate students to supervisors in terms of area of research and compatibility. However, the supervisors participating in the current study also indicated that the way thesis supervisors assigned did not usually consider the research interest areas

of the supervisors due to lack of supervisors in the department. In this regard, different studies stated about the match between supervisor's expertise and the student's topic as should be an important basis for the allocation of a supervisor if postgraduate research is to be attained and as much as possible, students should get supervisors who are sufficiently close to their research area. A study conducted by (Ives and Rowley , 2005) found that students whose research topic match with their supervisor's expertise are more likely to make good progress, satisfied with their supervision and completed their work on time.

4.2. DISCUSSIONS

With regard to the extent of implementation of supervision policies and guidelines in the department, findings showed as there were no such clearly written practices of supervision policies and research guidelines.

Results about challenges related to postgraduate students showed as PGS coming from different disciplinary backgrounds, lack of academic background, lack of research knowledge and experience, overlap of office work with thesis work, lack of interest, geographic barrier, plagiarism; lack of commitment, lack of uniformity of PGS to complete their thesis work on time, lack of ample time, redundancy of topics, English language skill problem, duplication of previous work, lack of time management, lack of every steps of research in thesis work, lack of research skill in proposal preparation, late start of preparing thesis work, lack of using maximum effort to do research, lack of research motivation, relatively low research performance and lack of selecting appropriate titles and research methodology.

Results about challenges related to supervisors showed as advisors do not give enough support to PGS advisory service, thesis work time limitation, overload work such as teaching, research and advising, supervisors and research instructors did not capacitate PGS in practicing proposal before coming to research, lack of advisor in the discipline, supervisors lack of sharing their knowledge, supervisors lack of attention and motivation,

have too many students or be away from the university too often, assigned supervisors do not advice PGS properly, there are irresponsible supervisors, unavailable supervisors in times of need by PGS and lack of commitment of supervisors.

With regard to the clarity of comments given and giving timely feedbacks by thesis supervisors, findings showed as comments given by supervisors were unclear and time taking for further correction or measures to be taken. The fact that many of the supervisees participating in this study complained that they did not frequently receive clear comments that can be alarming which meant that supervisors did not discuss the work of their supervisees with them or advisors did not write extended comments on the papers of their supervisees.

Thus, thesis supervision without regular contact hour became a tedious duties for both PGS and supervisors in which one could not read the schedule of others regularly in their work place. Thus, it could be taken as part of not discharging supervision responsibilities on how to communicate with their supervisees by taking their both schedules into account. Especially, for PGS coming from distance, it is an extra challenge besides academic challenges.

In the issue of giving research guideline for postgraduate students, findings showed as there was no such practice. Results from questionnaire showed that (46%) of advisors did not give research guideline for postgraduate students.

With regard to inaccessibility of advisor in times of need by students, findings showed as most advisors were unavailable to their postgraduate students for there was geographic barrier in which candidates were urged to go to Adama to get supervisors. Results from questionnaire also showed as (50%) of supervisors were inaccessible to postgraduate students in times of supervision needs. Therefore, it is possible to conclude that availability of a supervisor to postgraduate students in times of need is an important element of good supervision for a student undertaking thesis work needs a supervisor for

further advice to fill their research skill gaps. This is due to the fact that since thesis work needs nearest guidance and support, the need for a thesis supervisor to be avail when necessary is a good supervision practice as communal advantage.

As far as the issue of overlaps of supervisors' thesis supervision with other work, findings showed as there was overlap in teaching, supervision, research and administrative or office work.

Thus, it could be possible to deduce that thesis work is a tremendous academic duty that needs due attention from thesis supervisors. If thesis supervisors are busy and overloaded, it is difficult to see through the in depth works of postgraduates and help them achieve their timely completion with better quality.

As far as the question about the immediate response of advisor to postgraduate students' submission of hard copies or email, findings showed as lack of immediate response from supervisors. Thus, it is possible to conclude that lack of getting immediate response from supervisors, has its own influence on the timely completion and discouragement of postgraduate students to be alert at early stage.

With regard to the commitment of supervisors in delivering supervisory service, findings showed as supervisors have lack of commitment in delivering their supervisory services. With regard to making of pre- discussion with students on how to proceed with thesis work, findings showed as there was no any such practice of making pre- discussion with students on how to proceed with thesis work. Results from questionnaire also showed as (52%) of supervisor-supervisee relationship did not make pre- discussion with postgraduate students.

As far as institutional related challenges about coordination among colleges, departments and supervisors in facilitating more collegial environments for thesis work was concerned, findings indicated as there was lack of coordination among the above institutions. Findings from questionnaire also showed as (38%) of the institutions lacked coordination for the timely completion of thesis work.

Thus, from the above findings, it could be concluded that there was no institutionally established conducive environment between the two institutions (colleges and departments) on the one hand and the actors (supervisors) on the other hand in order to play their common supervision roles.

With regard to the questions that read about miss/matching between advisors/supervisors area of specialization and title of supervision, findings indicated as there were no such strict implementation practices in the selected departments. Results from questionnaire also showed as (34%) of thesis supervision was characterized by mismatch between advisors/supervisor's area of specialization and title of supervision.

On the other hand, some supervisees stated that their supervisors were assigned not because of their familiarity with the topics on which the supervisees were doing their thesis rather because of other less logical reasons. This could be the reason why some supervisees distrusted the knowledge that their supervisors had or the advice given to them by their supervisors. This can be a cause of conflict or dissatisfaction on the part of the relationship between the supervisor and supervisees.

As far as the question about the miss/matching between the number of supervisors and the number of PGS supervised, findings showed as there was no such practices in the selected departments and results from the questionnaire also indicated as(42%) of thesis supervision practice was characterized by the lack of matching of number of thesis supervisors and PGS.

With regard to the clarity of institutional functions of department in conducting research for the completion of master thesis, findings showed as the above institutions did not have transparency on the functions of institution and carried out discrimination between staff and non-staff postgraduate students. From this, it is possible to conclude that lack of clarity on the institutional functions led to lack of transparency that in turn created a discrimination between staffs and non-staff PGS in getting some privileges.

With regard to the issue of clear criteria/guidelines at department level in which advisors are assigned, findings showed as there were no such clearly designed criteria/guidelines that delineate about the assignment of supervisors. Results from the questionnaire also showed as (46%) of the institutions did not have clear criteria/guidelines at department level in which advisors are assigned.

5. Conclusions and Recommendations

5.1. CONCLUSIONS

5.1.1. Implementations of Thesis Supervision Policies and Research Guidelines

Results showed that assignment of thesis supervisors was not based on supervision policies for it lacked clear criteria/guideline at department level. Thus, it could be concluded that the practices of supervision policies and guidelines in the selected departments has paramount significance for the departments and postgraduate students, and thus needs due attention.

5.1.2. Postgraduate Related Challenges

Challenges related to postgraduate students were many and varied that could be taken as the prior factors for the challenges they face in their academic journey. Unless and otherwise, due attention is given from PGS, they could face further challenges on time completion and with quality.

5.1.3. Advisor/Supervisor Related Challenges

PGS is a challenging issue for it makes supervisors to become busy and unable to give the necessary professional support for PGS as needed accordingly. Thus, it could be concluded that since the roles of supervisors in thesis supervision contributes unreserved academic purposes in guiding, supervising and capacitating of PGS, such challenges affect the overall efforts of both the supervisee and supervisor on the one hand and the completion of master thesis on the other hand.

5.1.4. Challenges Pertinent to Supervisor – Supervisee Relationship Related

The absence of a clear supervisor-supervisee relationship guideline in the program is creating uncertainty on both parties regarding what roles they should play in the process of thesis supervision. From this, it is possible to conclude that the practice of making pre-discussion before the start of any step is very prominent in thesis supervision in the relationship between the two parties. That means, it has the power to minimize disagreement in thesis supervision and promote is a shared and coordinated responsibilities between the two parties.

5.1.5. Institutional/Department Related Challenges

Results showed that thesis supervision policies were not strictly implemented due to different reasons in the selected institutions. Thus, it could be concluded that such lack of coordination had its own impact on the postgraduate student thesis completion time and its quality too.

5.2. Recommendations

5.2.1. Recommendations to Postgraduate Students

Results about challenges related to postgraduate students showed many and varied. Thus, it is recommended that PGS related challenges could be overcome if their academic backgrounds, research knowledge, skills and experiences, workload (office work with thesis work) are taken into account from the first day of admission. Hence, due to the above problems, they need further treatment and due attention in order to be successful in the completion of their master thesis.

5.2.2. Recommendations to Advisors/Thesis Supervisors and Research Instructors

It is possible to recommend that the existence of regular contact schedule for PGS and supervisors is very crucial for thesis supervision and better communication between the

two parties, and thus, thesis supervision needs nearest and accessible service for its successful completion.

In addition to the above points, the issue of the commitment of supervisors on thesis work should be given due attention than others.

Additional recommendations also state that making formal discussion from the start and revising every new step clearly and cordially can solve the problem, both the department and research methodology course instructor should give due attention to time management in which PGS should practice term paper by selecting titles, prepare proposal and get feedback for future direction. This is because when the ideas of students come up with and the professional expertise of supervisors were put together, discussed and negotiated in a way that they add to the quality of research as well as students' learning to ultimately become independent.

Later on, after class course coverage, practical classes of practicing statistical packages of descriptive and inferential should be given due attention for it is one of the biggest challenges in data analysis, research methodology course instructors and thesis supervisors should give due attention to them through filling knowledge gaps of each components and by giving extra time to practice deeply and tell them in written ways and then giving them feedbacks to learn from them.

By the same token, as practices, every thesis supervisor should follow supervision policies such as be an expert in the area of supervision, being available, have clear consultation hour, being professional in approach, the provision of common research guideline developed at department level and common to all supervisors should be there in which it clearly delineates the roles and responsibilities of each participants, the availability of clear guideline/criteria about assignment of supervisors as practices should be there at department.

5.2.3. Recommendations to Arsi University Selected Colleges and Departments

The selected colleges and departments along with their academic staffs and officials have the lion share roles and responsibilities in promoting the practices and mitigating the academic challenges of postgraduate students. To that end, what matters most is the issue of following strict admission policies/criteria in attracting competent candidates to the postgraduate studies with additional requirements such as experience in the subject of application and English language skills competence.

From the above findings, it is possible to recommend that the existence of academic calendar is one of the most important parameters of an institution whereas what matters most is the strict implementation of the calendar to be stick to it by all for the timely completion of thesis work.

With regard to giving timely solution to disagreements between students and advisors during thesis work, findings showed as there is no such practice of solving disagreements on time. Results from questionnaire also showed as (36%) of the institutions did not give timely solution to disagreements between students and advisors during thesis work.

From the above findings, it could be recommended that since timely problems need timely solutions, departments should give immediate or timely solutions to the disagreements occurred and solve the problems soon as much as possible. To that end, they should have a clearly set disagreement handling procedures or guidelines that are institutionally developed and functional.

In the case of making continuous contact with advisors and students on thesis work, findings showed as there was no such practice of making continuous contact between supervisor and supervisee as far as thesis supervision is concerned. Results from the questionnaire also showed as (38%) of the institutions (college and/or department) did not make continuous contact with advisors and students on thesis work.

The issue of making continuous contact between the two parties should be guided by a clearly set guideline in which they agreed up on for the smooth functioning of thesis work.

As far as dealing with unavailable/absentee advisor and replacing him/her soon is concerned, findings showed as there was no such practices of dealing with such trends of supervisors than tolerating one another. Results from questionnaire also showed as (42%) of the institutions or department did not deal with unavailable/absentee advisor and replacing him/her soon. As part of higher institutions, academic staffs could be occupied by different workloads that range from teaching to research, office work and supervising. In all cases, their availability or unavailability should be clear for both and institution and individual.

This is due to the fact that, on the one hand, it is making transparency for an institution and on the other hand, it is saving the time, energy and resources of PGS who might come from distance and back without getting his/her supervisor in times of need.

In the case of mechanisms to control advisors in discharging their advisory service in the institution, it could be possible to recommend that there should be a clearly written format of progress checklist in which the status of thesis work is to be registered and followed.

In the document analysis about ArU senate Legislation and RPG, there should be strict implementations of university legislations and guidelines on the assignments of supervisors for strong research culture.

With regard to the visibility of advisor's consultation hour and their availability as per the schedule, it is recommended that there should be a clearly written consultation hour which is visible to all parties in their thesis work. This is due to the fact that its availability supports institutional practices on the one hand and both supervisors and supervisees to be stick to it and guided in it to save all their cost-benefits.

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