Graduate Student Advisement in Addis Ababa University: Perceived Level of Advising and Advisor Credibility in the College of Education and Behavioral Studies

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Abstract: Graduate education is a postgraduate program characterized by a learning environment that is less structured, more individualized, and independent. Ingrained in this program are opportunities for students to pass through mentoring and supervision experiences that are developmentally organized to uplift them from a state of dependency to autonomy. However, the way these opportunities are organized is far from uniform across universities. The purpose of this study was to investigate the core component of graduate education (graduate student advisement) that appeared to significantly impact on quality in higher education. It specifically attempted to examine perceived level of advising and advisor credibility (competence, character, and caring) with a sample of 77 graduate students in the College of Education and Behavioral Studies, Addis Ababa University. Eight additional participants were also drawn from all relevant stakeholders (students, advisors/ internal examiners, an external examiner, and department chair) to secure more recent data for triangulation. Data were collected using McCroskey and Teven's (1999) Credibility Measure; Wrench and Punyanunt's (2004) 'Graduate Student's Mentoring Scale and Berk and colleagues' (2005) Mentorship Effectiveness Scale. Qualitative data were also collected through interviewing eight concerned individuals. Findings indicated that graduate advisees had negative perception of their advisors' credibility (i.e. competence, caring and character) and reported a low level advising from their thesis or dissertation advisors. A strong and positive correlation was found between advisees' perception of advisor credibility and level of advising obtained. It was also found that the combined predictive efficacy of all the three dimensions of credibility (competence, caring and character) measures was significant. However, the independent contribution of only two of the credibility dimensions (competence and caring) was significant. Finally, implications of the findings were discussed.

Key words: quality of higher education; graduate education; graduate advisement; adviser credibility.

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Introduction

The introduction of modern higher education in Ethiopia is an experience dating back to the mid-20th century with the inauguration of the University College of Addis Ababa in 1950 (Addis Ababa University Senate Legislation, 1987) with its 9 faculties and 71 students (Wakshum in Wossenu & Zenebe, 2000, p. 219). It has since then gone through remarkable qualitative and quantitative developments ultimately making significant contributions to the national work force, nation building, and development of the country at large.

From the outset, higher education has been organized in one way to, among others, impart on existing knowledge through teaching and in another way to advance the frontiers of human thinking through research and scientific inquiry (see the Proclamation No. of 284/1953 E.C. in Addis Ababa University Senate Legislation, 1987). Thus, teaching and research are amongst the core mandates that give essence and direction to the function of higher education institutions. At the hub of this integration is what is known as 'graduate education program'.

In the Ethiopian case, 'graduate education' unfolded itself with strong government presence. At the time the Commission for Higher Education was established to oversee the functions of all the institutions of higher education in Ethiopia during the Communist Regime, it issued a proclamation declaring establishment of the School of Graduate Studies, The Commission for Higher Education hereby establishes a School to be known as the School of Graduates Studies (Commission for Higher Education, Proclamation No. 109/1969 E.C.). According to this proclamation, the School shall offer programs of study and research leading to Master of Science, Master of Arts, Master of Education, LL.M., and similar other degrees and post MD certificates and diplomas. In recognition of this substantive term of operation of a higher educational system, Addis Ababa University (AAU) was able to launch the School of Graduate Studies (SGS) nearly three decades

after the beginning of modern higher education in the country in 1978 (AAU, 1980; Tsigie, 2010) to conduct, coordinate, and administer postgraduate programs (AAU SGS Catalogue, 1994, P.6). Its primary plan was to produce qualified teaching staff to institutions of higher education, to train researchers in various fields as well as to make higher education relevant to the needs of the country by educating the youth within the socioeconomic context of Ethiopia. Addis Ababa University opened the School of Graduate Studies by accepting forty students under seven programs (Literature, Teaching English as a Foreign Language, Anatomy, Biology, Chemistry, History, and Animal Production) in October 1978. The first batch of 23 graduates received their masters' degrees two years later in August 1980 (AAU, 1980; Tsigie, 2010).

Because of the substantial demand for graduate education in the subsequent decades, the development of graduate studies continued at a relatively rapid pace. This can be observed from the growth of graduate programs at the Addis Ababa University both in terms of student enrollment and program expansion. In student population, for example, Addis Ababa University has shown progress from forty in 1978 to two hundred in 1979 (Tsigie, 2010) and reaching more than twelve thousand (over 10,000 master and 1,200 PhD) student population in 2010 (AAU, 2011). In terms of program diversification, the University has also shown improvement from seven in 1978 (AAU, 1980; Tsigie, 2010) to twenty in 1979 (Tsigie, 2010) and reaching more than one hundred twenty-five in 2010 (AAU, 2011). In fact, Addis Ababa University has, in most recent years, grown to the extent of running over 250 MA/MSc and several PhD programs and is envisioning to become a preeminent research and graduate university in the continent.

Despite all these achievements in the growth of student population, expansion of graduate academic programs and its visionary pursuits, there appears to be a concern if Addis Ababa University is indeed able to effectively deliver its fundamental duties and responsibilities in the

first place. Some evidences are suggestive of the fact that higher education institutions in general and Addis Ababa University in particular is suffering from multifaceted problems of access, quality, efficiency and relevance (Habtamu, 2004; Tesfaye 2006; Teshome, 2004). Based on the findings of these studies, one may raise a number of critical questions such as 'what is specifically wrong in the system? What aspect of the teaching and research component is compromised? Why? And how?'

The Research Question

In as much as lecturing takes a significant portion in the undergraduate teaching, student advisement is indicated as one of the most essential part of a graduate education process and also the most complex and delicate relationship to be closely examined in this program. As indicated above, graduate level advising, in addition to its immense potential in affecting advisees' (personal, professional and career) future, influences the overall quality of graduate education. However, while critique is heavily waged against the quality and relevance of graduate education in Ethiopia, such central component of quality and relevance as advisee-advisor relationship is not adequately addressed as a research issue in Addis Ababa University. This study is intended to investigate this issue by specifically raising the following issues: the way students generally perceive the MA thesis advisement received; the graduate students' perception of their thesis or dissertation advisors level of advising; the graduate students' perception of their thesis or dissertation advisors' credibility (competence, character, and caring); the relationship between advisees' perception of their advisors' credibility (competence, character, and caring) and the level of advising they receive; and, the relationship between the three dimensions of credibility (competence, character, and caring) and the advisees' level of perceived advising.

As indicated above, despite general concerns and related other claims, there is little empirical studies to explicate the various dimensions of graduate education (e.g. teaching-learning, research, advising etc). In fact, several studies have been conducted so far on higher education in Ethiopia: history (e.g. Amare, 2005), access and disparity (e.g. Ashcroft, 2004; Habtamu, 2004; Tesfaye, 2006), quality and efficiency (e.g. Daniel, 2004; Mekasha, 2005), financing and cost sharing (e.g. Shimelis, 2004; Wanna, 2004), and challenges and prospects (e.g. Saint, 2004; Teshome, 2004). However, in its over thirty years of existence, the different dimensions of graduate programs have remained relatively unexamined except for very few recent efforts (e.g. Desalegn, 2009; Tsigie 2010; Wossenu, 2009).

In fact, some of the existing limited research indicate that research in institutions of higher learning and faculty involvement are, on the one hand, very limited and this limited research are, on the other hand, not even linked to the core components of the teaching and learning process (Adane, 2000; Berhanu, 2006; Derebssa, 2000; Desalegn, 2006; Tsegaye, 2000). Other investigations that focused on students' research work in the postgraduate programs (Befekadu, 2000; Desalegn, 2000; Wossenu & Zenebe, 2000) indicate that there are methodological problems (i.e. exclusive reliance on quantitative methods). There was also a mismatch between the research topics studied by students and what the regional states really desired to be studied (Befekadu, 2000), and that graduate student research fund allocation practices of the School of Graduate Studies were characterized by different kinds of problems that would affect the quality of student research (Wossenu & Zenebe, 2000). Taming student research in a manner that they would retain methodological rigor, contextualizing them to have practical relevance to the setting they are done, and ensuring their resource feasibility undoubtedly require closer guidance and supervision from faculty advisors. It may be then of critical concern to examine the advisor-advisee mentoring relationship as this is an important pillar for the desirable functioning of the education.

Review of Related Literature

Nature and importance of graduate advising

Several studies indicate the importance of advisor-advisee relationship in graduate education (e.g. Luna & Cullen, 1998; Schlosseret et al., 2010; Wrench & Punyanun, 2004). Some argue that the effect of graduate advisors on their advisees can be life changing (Wrench & Punyanunt-Carter, 2008) depending on the extent of involvement of advisors in the life of advisees. In fact, the extent of advisor's involvement in the life of a particular advisee can vary from minimal to maximum. For example, an advisor might only help the student with course selection and limit his or her communications to this purpose; or, he/she may be highly involved and his or her roles may encompass guiding the student through all the requirements of graduate education (e.g., coursework, comprehensive examinations, research processes), and helping advisees on other pertinent professional and career matters (Schlosser *et al*., 2010). Burgeoning studies on advisor-advisee relationships in graduate contexts indicate the multidimensional (personal, professional and career related) benefits of involved/good advising for both advisors and advisees. In relation to advisee's benefits, for instance, general positive outcomes such as satisfaction and motivation, professional development and socialization, increment in research self-efficacy and interest in science and practice, and increased positive attitudes toward research are among the benefits reported (Schlosser *et al*., 2010; Waldeck, Orrego, Plax, & Kearny, 1997).

Other studies uncover that working with good advisors helps students in producing more publications, more conference papers, more first-authored papers (Coran-Hillix, et al., 1986), that well mentored graduate students have lower levels of communication apprehension, higher levels of perceived support, and moderate levels of perceived information acquisition (Hill et al., 1989), and that there are significant correlations between qualities of graduate advising and advisees'

progress on their dissertation projects (Faghihi, 1998) and the timely completion of the dissertation (Peacok, 1996).

Studies have also been conducted to examine graduate students' perception of the advising relationship they experienced and their satisfaction in graduate programs. In a national (US) study, an attempt was made to examine mentoring relationships between advisors and advisees (Clark, Harden, & Johnson cited in Wrench & Punyanunt, 2004). It was found that 91% of the sampled graduates evaluated their relationship with their advisors as positive, and that the more an advisee felt mentored by her or his graduate advisor, the more satisfied the advisee was with his or her graduate program. In another study, it was also found that doctoral students satisfied with their advising relationships described their advising experience as positive in which they felt respected, supported, and encouraged and perceived their advisor as a positive role model while students dissatisfied with their advising relationships described their advising experiences as harmful in which they often felt ignored, unimportant, and neglected (Schlosser et al., 2003). These group of students felt a lowered self-efficacy for professional activities and a lack of guidance for progressing through their graduate program.

As a whole, it can be stated that graduate advisors could have a huge and long lasting impact on their advisees' personal, professional and career life in general and the advisees' perception of the quality of graduate experience in particular. Against this reality, it really feels that this phenomenon would click on our curiosity to learn about Ethiopian practices particularly in the context of the Addis Ababa University. Experience in Addis Ababa University seems to show that advisees are assigned into a supervision characterized by a large number of advisees-advisor ratio which in reality is likely to deprive advisees of the opportunities to get the required level of mentorship; thus unduly jeopardizing advisee-advisor relationship in many ways including advisor credibility as an important source of support.

Advisor credibility

Source credibility is generally conceptualized as an attitude a receiver (i.e. an advisee) has regarding the believability of the source (i.e. the advisor) (McCroskey, 1998). A number of studies indicate the importance of source credibility in the teaching-learning process in general and graduate advisor-advisee relationship in particular (Myers, 2004; McCroskey & Teven, 1999; Punyanut-Carter & Wrench, 2008; Thweatt & McCroskey, 1998). Advisor credibility, as one of the most important attributes in the advising process, is understood as the attitude of an advisee towards an advisor regarding the advisor's perceived believability in three dimensions: competence, character, and caring (McCroskey, 1998; McCroskey & Teven, 1999). Competence refers to the advisor's perceived knowledge or expertise in a subject matter; character, on the other hand, refers to the perceived goodness of the advisor (e.g., honesty, trustworthiness), and caring focuses on the perceived concern of the advisor about advisees' welfare (e.g., goodwill and understanding) (McCroskey, 1998; McCroskey & Teven, 1999). Although an advisor may exhibit one dimension more so than the other two dimensions, a highly credible advisor exhibits all three dimensions (McCroskey, 1998). Studies have examined the importance of advisor credibility in graduate advisor-advisee context. Punyanut-Carter & Wrench (2008) report a significant relationship between the three dimensions of advisor credibility (competence, character, and caring) and advisees' positive perception of their advisors' mentoring. Similarly, Wrench and Punyanunt (2004) find a positive correlation between advisor credibility and amount of mentoring.

Taken together, findings from previous studies uphold the role of advisor credibility in influencing quality of graduate advising in general and advisees' perception of level of advising in particular. Improving the quality of student supervision, therefore, needs to closely examine the specific ingredients of the advisement profile that has gone astray in the whole process of the student research supervision in a certain

graduate program. This exercise definitely lends support to re-engineering the whole process of advisee-advisor relationship towards better outcomes for the advisees, the advisors, and the program at large.

Methodology

Participants

Two groups of graduate students participated in filling out the questionnaire. The first group included 61 proportionally selected MA/MED students from each of the five departments (Curriculum and Teachers' Professional Development, Educational Planning and Management or EdPM, Psychology, Mathematics and Science Education, and Special Needs Education) of the College of Education and Behavioral Studies.

There were about 296 MA/MED students in the 2010/11 academic year in the regular program of the five departments. A total of 61 students were generally drawn as research participants based on Drapper and Smith's (cited in Tefera, 2011) formula ($\mathrm{n} = 10\sum_{\mathrm{i}=1}^{\mathrm{n}} \mathrm{F_i C_k} + .035N$) in which sample size (n) is defined in terms of the number of categories of a factor (Fi) involved in a research such that a minimum of 10 observations is required for each category of a factor with an additional 3.5% allowance for small-sized population (N) like the present one. Accordingly, there are 5 categories (departments) of factor 1 (department type) X 10 observations for each category (=50 participants) plus a contingency of 3.5% of the population (i.e. 10.35~11 students) for non-response rate. This sample size (i.e. 61) is almost 20% of the population. The sampling involved a stratified probability sampling with proportionate allocation as shown on Table 1. The stipulated number of cases in Table 1 was randomly drawn from each stratum.

Table 1: Population and sample by departments

Department	Population	Proportionate sample
Curriculum and Teachers' Professional Development	*43*	*9*
Educational Planning and Management	*116*	*24*
Special Needs Education	*18*	*4*
Science and Mathematics Education	*40*	*8*
Psychology	*79*	*16*
Total	***296***	***61***

The second group of participants was 16 PhD students sampled from different departments of the College of Education and Behavioral Studies. Those doctoral students who had defended their proposal and were accessible because they were staying in campus were considered to constitute the sample. It is unusual to find doctoral students who finish course work and defend their dissertation proposal in campus.

In general, the sample for the questionnaire consisted of 77 (i.e., 61 MA/MED and 16 PhD) graduate students, of whom 69 (89.6%) were male and 6 (7.8%) female; 2 (2.6%) participants did not fill in their response to the gender-identifying item.

Finally, a third group of participants consisted of a total of eight interviewees purposively selected from all stakeholders participating in the 2014 defense programs: four students who defended their MA thesis, 2 internal examiners (also served as advisors), 1 external examiner, and 1 department chair. The purpose of the interview was to collect qualitative data for triangulation. The second purpose of this interview was to collect more recent information that would support the 2011 data. The interview was aimed at exploring issues related to student advising either directly or indirectly.

Measures

General Characteristics- this section requires respondents to write about their age, gender, program and field of study, and duration of stay with their respective advisors. To ensure anonymity, participants were not required to identify their advisors.

General measure of advisement experience- this measure consists of a 30-items three points rating scale (agree, disagree, and undecided) assessing the process, methods, and outcomes/ benefits of the advisement as well as some extra support provided by advisors.

Measure of Graduate Students' Advising- advisees' perception of their thesis or dissertation advisors level of advising was measured by a 15 item five points scale ranging from 1= Strongly Disagree to 5= Strongly Agree. Five of the items were adapted from the Graduate Student Mentoring Scale developed by Wrench and Punyanunt (2004) and the remaining 10 items from the Mentorship Effectiveness Scale Developed by the Ad Hoc Faculty Mentoring Committee, Johns Hopkins University School of Nursing (Berk, Berg, Mortimer,Walton-Moss, Yeo 2005). The Cronbach Alpha reliability of the scale was found to be $r = 0.857$.

Credibility Measure

McCroskey and Teven's (1999) 18 items Credibility Measure was used to examine participants' perceptions of their thesis or dissertation advisors' credibility (competence, character/ trustworthiness, and caring/goodwill). Each dimension of credibility was measured by six items. Originally item measures were bi-polar, but for simplicity, the items were presented in a statement form so that respondents can indicate their level of agreement on a seven points scale ranging from 1 to 7 whereby: Numbers 1 and 7 indicate a very strong negative and positive feelings respectively; Numbers 2 and 6 indicate a strong negative and positive feelings respectively; Numbers 3 and 5 indicate a

fairly weak negative and positive feelings respectively, and Number 4 indicates undecided.

Cronbach alpha reliability coefficients were determined for the total as well as for the sub-scales: r = 0.941for competence; r = 0.894 for character, and r = 0.74 for caring and r =0.947for the overall credibility measure.

Method and Procedure of Data Analysis

First, having presented a summary table of the general nature of graduate students' advisement experience, descriptive statistics was determined to give a pictorial account of data on each of the other four specific measures of advisement. Second, this is followed by a one-sample *t*-test to determine the significance of the mean statistics on these measures. Third, attempts were made to check on the bivariate correlations among these measures to lay the foundation for the next advanced analysis. That is, when the bivariate correlations yielded significant relationship with the criterion measure (perceived level of advising), then attempts were made to check first and foremost the combined effects using the multiple linear regression model. Then finally, further scrutiny of the independent contribution of the predictors was examined through partial regression employing the forward variant of the stepwise regression model. Data analysis was carried out with the help of SPSS version 17.00 software.

Results

This part presents the findings of the study in line with the research questions listed in the first part of this paper. We begin with the general advisement scenario and then pick up the next two research questions relating to graduate students'/advisees perceptions of their thesis or dissertation advisors' level of advising and credibility. This is followed by examining the relationship between measures.

Graduate students' perceptions of the advisement work

Advisees' general perceptions of the advisement experiences they went through are summarized on Table 2. As per Table 2, the advisement experience was rated neither to promote a sense of independence and responsibility (78.9%) nor educative and enlightening (79.3%) for the advisees. This is possibly because it was perceived to be less motivating to the advisors (63%), less friendly, cold, and unrewarding to the advisees (72.8 %), and non- continuous or limited only to few contacts (60.9 %) that hardly allow getting adequate and timely feedback (79%). This, in turn, is mainly because advisors were unavailable during consultation hours (80.4%) and yet hardly arranged for any compensatory schemes to fill in the gaps including consultation out of the consultation hours (70.7%) and communications other than face-to-face (48.9%) like, for example, advisement through e-mail or telephone (42.4%). In the face of this experience, one would hardly expect advisors to be rated to go extra miles to share their resources (books, journal articles, equipment…) with advisees (40.2%), arrange additional technical support from other experts for their advisees when, in fact, this was needed (55.4%), support advisees in different ways so that they can get willingness and cooperation of officials during data collection (46.7%), or take any initiative to communicate with the advisees when this was necessary (68.5%).Under these circumstances, advisees are unlikely to be comfortably working with their advisors in the future (71.7%), though it is a customary academic practice for these two parties to continue associating one another even after graduation.

Table 2: Students' ratings of the MA Thesis Advisement received

How do you rate the advisement you have received and your advisor?		Responses in %		
		Agree	**Disagree**	**Undecided**
1.	Advisement was a more satisfying experience to the advisor than a burden	24.0	63.0	13.0
2.	Advisement has promoted a sense of independence and responsibility in the advisee	13.0	78.9	7.6
3.	Advisement was educative, enlightening	10.9	79.3	7.6
4.	Advisement was friendly, warm, and rewarding	14.1	72.8	12.0
5.	Advisement involved provision of timely feedback	13.0	79.3	6.5
6.	Advisement was continuous.	32.0	60.9	7.1
7.	Advisor was available during consultation hours	10.9	80.4	8.7
8.	Advisement was possible through e-mail, telephone or other non-face-to-face communication, when needed	35.6	42.4	21.8
Extra support of advisor:	9. Providing the advisee with one's books, journals, materials, equipment…	38.2	40.2	21.6
	10. Encouraging, referring, or arranging additional support for advisees from other experts, when needed	32.7	55.4	11.9
	11. Supporting advisees in getting willingness and cooperation of officials during data collection	27.2	46.7	26.1
	12. Willingness for consultation out of consultation hours	11.9	70.7	17.4
	13. Personal initiatives to contact the advisee	18.5	68.5	13.0
	14. Communication other than face-to-face	31.6	48.9	19.5
15.	You are willing to work with your advisors in the future	16.4	71.7	11.9

Another set of 15 more specific items were employed to generate a more differentiated perception of advisees' level of advising with a five-point rating scale. The summary of responses to these items is presented on Table 3.

Table 3: Graduate students' perceptions of their advisors' level of advising: item-based presentation of responses

	My advisor was……	Responses in %				
		SD =1	**D =2**	**UD =3**	**A =4**	**SA =5**
1.	accessible/easy to get	29.9	33.8	7.8	23.4	5.2
2.	devoting extra time and consideration to me	28.6	39.0	15.6	13.0	3.9
3.	supportive and encouraging	32.5	16.9	15.6	24.7	10.4
4.	giving me special attention	31.2	36.4	10.4	18.2	3.9
5.	teaching me the informal rules of my discipline	33.8	36.4	15.6	10.4	3.9
6.	thinking highly of my ability	31.2	22.1	22.1	16.9	7.8
7.	motivating me to do better projects	27.3	31.2	9.1	23.4	9.1
8.	demonstrating content expertise to me	50.6	26.0	7.8	11.7	3.9
9.	approachable	20.8	13.0	11.7	35.1	19.5
10.	providing constructive and useful critiques	49.4	20.8	10.4	16.9	2.6
11.	helpful in providing direction and guidance	51.9	15.6	14.3	13.0	5.2
12.	responding to my questions satisfactorily	49.4	33.8	10.4	5.2	1.3
13.	acknowledging my research contributions	39.0	32.5	14.3	10.4	3.9
14.	suggesting me appropriate resources	50.6	19.5	20.8	6.5	2.5
15.	challenging me to extend my abilities	46.8	26.0	14.3	10.4	2.6

NB: SD=Strongly Disagree; D=Disagree; UD=Undecided; A=Agree; SA=Strongly Agree

As it can be noted on Table 3, more than half of the respondents do not seem to get proper advisement from the advisors. The mean rating on advisee's perception of their advisors' level of advising was compared against the expected mean value which was 45. Table 4 below shows statistical results on advisees' perceptions of their advisors' level of advising.

As shown in Table 4 below, the mean for advisees' perceptions of their advisors' level of advising *(M= 33.62, SD= 10.60)* was remarkably lower than the expected mean of 45. A further One-Sample *t* test analysis has revealed a negative and statistically significant mean difference, *t (76) = -9.422, p<0.01*.

Table 4: One sample mean test of graduate students' perceptions of their advisors level of advising

	Responses in %				
	N	**Mean**	**SD**	**Df**	**T**
Advising	77	33.62	10.60	76	-9.422*

**p< 0.01*

The findings presented so far generally suggest that advisees' perceived level of advising they received was significantly lower. With the need to triangulate this analysis preferably with recent and qualitative data, attempts were also made to generate a new set of data through an interview held with four graduate students (who defended their MA theses), two internal and one external examiners (all involved in the 2014 MA oral defense in College of Education and Behavioral Studies), and one department chair all. In order to give students the liberty to freely talk about their experiences, questions were presented in a broader sense without making reference to advisors. It was felt more meaningful to extract implications from such discussions rather than discomforting interviewees by asking specific questions about their advisors whom they still rely on for

recommendation letters while applying for further studies or employment. Hence, they were asked, first and foremost, to tell how they went through selecting, and executing the research topic to learn the extent of advisors' involvement. That is, they were asked to tell the factors that determined choice of their thesis topic. Below are their replies. In the interest of space, the interview responses were selectively presented here under.

…I selected a topic that allowed me to:

- get assigned to an advisor whom I wanted to work with;
- get literature in the area;
- fit in the tools of data collection I already have in my hand;
- work in a place where there were persons well known to me to facilitate data collection; and
- use a method of data analysis better known to me.

These replies indicate that students were primed by external factors that, in principle, were supposed to be peripheral considerations while selecting and refining their thesis titles. It seems that this could be because of the advisors' lesser involvement surprisingly at a time they are most needed. Advisors would have done a great job appropriating and shaping these kinds of attitudes that, otherwise, would lead towards picking up research topics that are not only intellectually non-stimulating but also preempt the remaining activities of the research work towards inappropriate directions. Hence, the next question was phrased to explore what happened thereafter particularly during implementation of the research plan. Particular reference was made to ethical observance during the research. They were asked to tell what they heard or saw this year about violations of ethics in conducting the MA thesis of, to make it less confrontational, other students. They provided the following replies:

…I have heard/seen that a student was:

- Giving an exaggerated report in the paper of the actual sample size of the research;
- Reporting in their paper as if pilot-test was done without doing it;
- Fabricating one's own data partially or in fully;
- Copying the works of others in part or fully without acknowledgement; and
- Acknowledging their advisors in their report while heard complaining about their advisors during thesis work.

These confusing violations could actually be put at a minimum again had the advisors exercised the necessary supervision (e.g. keeping an eye on the data collection process and analysis).

The last question was about the evaluation process. Interviewees were asked to share their interesting or worrisome experiences about the oral defense. Because grades are always important in the life of students, the issues they raised revolved around this grading idea:

> My grade was 'Good' in the thesis. This grade is not bad for me compared with the personal problems I faced, my advisor's poor interest to help me; and the subject matter itself was my first experience. In general, from my title selection up to the end of my work, I did not get any help from my advisor. I have also many complex personal and family issues that disturbed me in many aspects (Student Interviewee 1).

> What I was advised to do by my advisor was taken as unnecessary and wrong by my examiner. Such kinds of individual difference create difficulties for students (Student Interviewee 2).

> I saw the evaluation as positive and constructive except for… my advisor. He must have informed something bad about me to the external examiner and might have influenced (biased) the evaluation (Student Interviewee 3).

Although advisors were not supposed to be involved in grading as per the regulation of the University, interviewees mentioned that they took part in bearing a negative influence in their grades. In fact, the fourth student did not mention anything relevant that impacted the advisement process.

The two internal examiners (note that internal examiners are also advisors) were asked to share their notable experiences of this year's MA thesis advisement:

> While acting as an internal examiner, I have seen many instances in which the quality of thesis was substandard. I believe there is no one party to blame for this. But, the advisee and advisor need to take much of the blame in as much as they are the ones to take the credit for quality. Because I was asked to talk about the advisor, let me limit myself to him/her. It has been my conviction for long to say that the role of the advisor can be noted particularly from the quality of the design of the research and its implementation. If there are serious (substantive) problems in the tittle, research questions, methods, analysis, discussion, and conclusion, then I can safely conclude that the involvement of the advisor in the thesis work must be extremely minimal. However, if substantive problems are missing from the design as well as its implementation, but the paper still overflows with flaws of nitty-gritties either in the research plan (data collection, analysis and discussion), its implementation (e.g. formatting, writing, organization) or both, then the advisee must be the one to be reckoned with. This being the case, I have to openly speak up examining many theses having the following advisor-related problems:

- research gap not established convincingly;
- titles being very broad in scope eventually compelling, first and foremost, the need for delimitation of the scope to make them feasible in terms of resources and, furthermore, use of a variety of instruments but mistakenly explained for the purpose of triangulation;
- review of the literature being a goal in itself than used as a means to identify research gaps, sharpen the research design and methods, and expedite the discussion. It is commonly written as if he/she is writing a textbook in the area; and
- pilot study not conducted; or when it did, it was merely to calculate Cronbach alpha

When I say that these problems are advisor-related, I just don't want to be misquoted in any way as if I am soliciting excuses for the advisees but I just want to emphasize here lack of guidance to bring advisees back on track, tame their ambitions when sought necessary, and help them clearly envision the remaining journey. Furthermore, when I relate problems of the above sort to the advisors, I am in no way critiquing their intellectual, academic, or research competencies and skills but simply their commitment to take the advising responsibility a little more seriously than treating it as a second or third responsibility in which they are to contend with only when they have spare time. Last, I am not discrediting a large share of those advisors who work hard mentoring their advisees throughout the year.

The second internal examiner also raised the following:

> In fact, I have personally observed an extreme case of advisor-absence in the thesis supervision work. This observation occurred during the conduct of an MA oral defense. An advisor was wrongly assigned to serve as an internal examiner of his own advisee for the oral defense. It was surprisingly noted that this person was not even aware that he was going to be an internal examiner for his own advisee only after the coordinator noticed his absence just an hour before the oral defense session, and this assignment was cancelled; and then, I was assigned to substitute him, for a new session that was arranged days later. This failure of the advisor even to recognize the title of the thesis of his own advisee surprised me and I was curious to read this paper a bit more carefully. When I read the paper, I was very sad to learn not only that the paper was with a poorly coined title and contents lacking in total relevance to the title but also that a different version of the title was written at different points of the manuscript. I also wanted to learn about this happening and contacted the candidate days after the oral defense. The advisee told me that he had never secured any feedback from the advisor and avoided contacting him until the last day of submitting the thesis in which he had to meet the advisor and collect his signature; and, the advisor signed without hesitation.

The external examiner, on the other hand, expressed:

> Compared to theses of two decades back, the quality of most of the theses written in most recent years is very low. It seems that students are taking an attitude … that we should write something to graduate. The theses are not seriously written starting from the topic. Topics lack clarity, most of the literature parts are not directly related to the topics, and methodology parts are not complete in most cases. Some papers appear that they were not read by advisors.

Finally, the Chair of a department selected for this purpose confirmed this:

> Once students learn about the assignment of advisors for thesis supervision, a good number of them request for change complaining that the area of specialization of the advisor is far from one's title. If the change is not made at the time application was made, then some of them persist with their appeals but with a changed (or what they say "genuine") justification this time around: this advisor is unfriendly to me, s/he had some grudge about me during course work, she/ he is unavailable in office for consultation, he/ she is not giving me any substantive comments …

He also mentioned that his observation is equally shared by some faculty in the department:

> In a general staff assembly called for discussing different agenda items including discussion and endorsement of an already distributed draft soft copy of a new MA thesis writing guideline, some participants (who were advisors themselves) unequivocally brought to the surface that this advisement issue was a critical problem (far more than the guideline itself) and, therefore, needed to be seriously discussed in a separate meeting. It was said that there were instances in which thesis papers submitted for oral defense without being read by advisors even once.

These were some of the experiences of interviews captured during the interview and they all corroborated the views mentioned in the questionnaire. It needs to be noted here, however, that despite all the concerns raised, there are a number of faculty supervisors who, as indicated by one of the interviewees above, are working with full momentum not only to build research

competencies of their advisees but also uplift their integrity as researchers and scholars. In the same way, many of the advisor-related problems would understandably emanate from desperation of working with advisees who may not even properly attend to the comments given.

Graduate students' perceptions of their advisors' level of credibility

Another major goal of this study was to examine graduate students perceptions of their advisors credibility. Table 5 presents the frequency distribution of responses along each of the 18 items.

Table 5: Perceived level of advisors' credibility: item-based presentation of responses

Sub scale	Items	Responses in %							Mean
	My advisor is:	**1**	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**	**6**	**7**	
Competence	1.Intelligent	7.8	20.8	15.6	7.8	11.7	24.7	11.7	4.16
	2.Trained	6.5	15.6	22.1	2.6	20.8	18.2	14.3	4.27
	3. Expert	11.7	19.5	18.2	5.2	16.9	15.6	13.0	3.95
	4. Informed	11.7	16.9	20.8	15.6	13.0	14.3	7.3	3.75
	5. Competent	11.7	22.1	16.9	6.5	18.2	14.3	10.4	3.83
	6. Bright	11.7	18.2	19.5	9.1	19.5	11.7	10.4	3.82
Caring	7. Cares about me	22.1	28.6	24.7	11.7	6.5	6.5	0.00	2.71
	8. Attends my interest	15.6	32.5	18.2	16.9	7.8	6.5	2.6	2.99
	9. Not self-centered	6.5	10.4	9.1	18.2	20.8	23.4	11.7	4.53
	10. Concerned about me	20.8	26.0	15.6	13.0	11.7	7.8	5.2	3.13
	11. Sensitive	18.2	32.5	14.3	11.7	10.4	3.9	9.1	3.12
	12. Understanding	15.6	16.9	13.0	9.1	13.0	16.9	15.6	4.00
Character	13. Honest	11.7	15.6	20.8	16.9	20.8	5.2	9.1	3.71
	14. Trustworthy	13.0	13.0	13.0	15.6	24.7	14.3	6.5	3.95
	15. Honorable	9.1	23.4	14.3	20.8	14.3	10.4	7.8	3.70
	16. Moral	22.1	1.3	20.8	13.0	19.5	11.7	11.7	3.88
	17. Ethical	14.3	10.4	20.8	16.9	15.6	10.4	11.7	3.87
	18. Genuine	9.1	11.7	18.2	19.5	18.2	11.7	11.7	4.08

The mean scores of sampled participants were compared against the expected mean or test value. The test value for each dimension of credibility (competence, character, and caring) and the overall credibility scores were 24 and 72 respectively.

Table 6: Means and SD of scores on perceived advisors credibility

Dimensions of credibility	No. of items	Mean	SD
Competence	6	23.78	10.16
Caring	6	20.48	6.99
Character	6	23.19	8.90
Overall credibility	18	67.45	24.11

As shown on the table above, the mean for competence (M=23.78, SD=10.16), and character (M=23.19, SD=8.90) were slightly lower than the expected mean (M= 24). However, the mean for caring (M=20.48, SD=6.99) was markedly lower than the expected mean of 24. In addition, the overall credibility mean (M=67.45, SD=24.11) was lower than the expected mean of 72.

To test whether these sample means were significantly lower than the expected means; One-Sample *t* test was computed. As shown in Table 6 below, though the sample means for competence (*M=23.78, SD=10.16*), and character (*M=23.19, SD=8.90*) were lower than the expected mean of 24, the difference was not statistically significant, *t (76) = -0.19, p=0.85*, and *t (76) = -0.79, p=0.43* for competence and character respectively. However, the two means undoubtedly show lower and negative perceptions of advisees about their advisors' competence and character. On the other hand, advisees' perception of their advisors caring *(M=20.48, SD=6.99)* was found to be highly negative and statistically significant, *t (76) = -4.42, p = .000*.

A closer look into advisees' perceptions of their advisors overall credibility on Table 7 indicated that though the mean (*M = 67.45,*

SD=24.11) was lower than the expected mean of 72, the difference was not statistically significant, t (76) = -1.65, p > .05.

Table 7: One-Sample t test on graduate students' perceptions of their advisors credibility

Dimensions of credibility:	t	df	Sig.
Competence	-0.191	76	0.85
Caring	-4.419*	76	0.00
Character	-0.794	76	0.43
Overall credibility	-1.65	76	0.10

**p< 0.01*

The relationship between advisees' perception of advisors' credibility and advising

The third major goal of the study was to examine the extent to which perceived level of advising (criterion measure) is related to the perceived level of credibility of advising (predictors). As a matter of procedure, it is necessary to inspect the relationship among the criterion and predictor measures. Accordingly, the bivariate correlations were computed and the result is presented on Table 8.

Table 8 shows all the study variables have statistically significant correlations. Actually, the main purpose of this section was to see the relationship between perceived advisors' credibility with perceived level of advising. Thus, all the dimensions of credibility revealed a strong and significant correlation with level of perceived advising; r (77) = 0.77; p< 0.01 with competence; r (77) = 0.74; p< 0.01 with caring, and r (77) = 0.72; p<0.01 with character respectively. In the same way, a very strong association was observed between advisees' perceptions of their advisors' overall credibility and the level of advising they received r (77) = 0.80; p< 0.01.

Table 8: Variable relationships as determined by Pearson product-moment correlation

Variables	caring	Character	Credibility	Advising
1. Competence	0.77*	0.83*	0.95*	0.77*
2. Caring	-	0.73*	0.88*	0.74*
3. Character	-	-	0.93*	0.72*
4. Overall credibility	-	-	-	0.80*

**p< 0.01*

Predicting perceived level of advising from perceived credibility dimensions

Another purpose of the study was to see the predictive efficacy of perceived advisor credibility on the level of perceived advising. Multiple regression analysis was carried out. The results are presented in Tables 9 and 10.

Table 9 indicates the linear combination of competence, character, and caring significantly predicted the level of perceived advising, F (3, 73) = 45.068, p< 0.01. The multiple correlation coefficient (R) was 0.806, which indicates that approximately 65% (R^2= 0.649) of the variance in advisees' perception of level of advising was accounted for by the linear combination of the dimensions of credibility (competence, character, and caring).

Table 9: ANOVA for multiple regression of predicting level of perceived advising from credibility dimensions

Source	SS	Df	MS	F	R	R^2
Regression	*5540.566*	*3*	*1846.855*			
Residual	*2991.512*	*73*	*40.980*			
Total	*8532.078*	*76*		*45.068*	*0.806**	*0.649*

**p< 0.01*

When we look into the independent contribution of the three dimensions of credibility (Table 9), competence t (76) = 2.770, p<, 0.01**, *β*** = 0.380, and caring t (76) = 2.790, p<, 0.01**, *β*** = 0.313, significantly contributed to the overall variance of advisees' perceptions of the level of advising they received. However, character t (76) = 1.373, p<, 0.01**, *β*** = 0.177, did not significantly contribute to the variation of level of perceived advising.

Table 10: Regression coefficients for predicting level of perceived advising from credibility dimensions

Variables	B	B	Standard Error	t
Competence	0.396	0.380	0.143	2.770*
Caring	0.475	0.313	0.170	2.790*
Character	0.211	0.177	0.154	1.373

**p< 0.01*

Discussion

Graduate education is a stage of learning in which students are expected to engage in a fundamentally self-directed and independent learning. It is argued that the quality of this kind of graduate education is significantly impacted on by the kind and level of professional mentoring by advisors. This self-directed learning needs to be professionally guided to short circuit trial-and-error learning. Graduate advisees need to be shown direction particularly in their research projects. In fact, the meaning of advisement, its purposes and practices, and the roles and responsibilities of the parties involved is far from uniform. Based on this, this study examined the level of advising and credibility of advisors as sources of support in Addis Ababa University.

The findings revealed that the graduate advisement process was replete with many problems as perceived by a significant proportion of advisees. Extra support for advisees was even difficult to expect under these circumstances. In more specific terms, advisees were found witnessing a significantly lower level of advising from their advisors. Qualitative data obtained through interview with relevant stakeholders also corroborated the finding that advisors' involvement was minimal. This was entirely antithetical to the practice portrayed in the national survey where almost nine out of ten graduate students in the sampled US universities were found reporting that advisors' involvement in their academic learning was satisfying (Schlosser et al., 2003). There is no intention here to compare advisement in two basically different settings. But, it is essential to hint at some of the specific but fundamental issues that would compromise the quality of graduate education in Addis Ababa University as it was also noted from the responses of participants presented in the analysis section. For instance, some advisees indicated that the advisement was not satisfying; it had of little importance for the advisees in helping them assume independence and responsibility, and it was less educative and uninspiring.

Why was it that advisors' involvement not as expected? A number of reasons could be mentioned relating to the advisees themselves, the advisors and the advisement process at large. Notwithstanding the vicious circle explanation, it could be that advisees' involvement in the research may be superficial, extrinsically motivated (only to secure degrees) ("**የትም ፍጪው ዱቄቱን አምጪው**" type of attitude), and lacking in the required commitment usually terminating, in due course, in mutual withdrawal of the two parties from the process. It could also be a skill-related problem as commonly noted among graduate students today in which many advisees lack in the requisite research and report writing skills and the lack of endurance the research rigors require. This undoubtedly makes the advising responsibility more of a burden than stimulating - eventually causing a sense of desperation in advisors.

Focusing on advisor-related problems would rather help a lot re-engineering the process of the thesis work. First and foremost, advisors' overload with a number of other competing (teaching, administrative, committee, and research) responsibilities in the university would unduly consume the time and energy that would have been mobilized for advisement. In fact, engagements outside the university (mainly in consultancy, training and part-time teaching) could not be ruled out as possible explanations in the face of the rising standard of living which may force advisors wrestle with other income generating commitments. Advisors may also be benefiting marginally from the advisement in academic terms, such as for example, in terms of making publications as coauthors with their advisees. Few, if any, publications exist in scientific journals co-authored by advisors.

Understanding advisement in the conventional sense of a one-to-one and face-to-face relationship for feedback giving and receiving can make advisors run away from the responsibility at it naturally becomes unbearable in the face of a large number of advisees usually assigned to a few number of advisors today. Experience shows that only few advisors employ promising and innovative strategies (for example, group-based advising) under such circumstances.

In sum, the argument that advisors' involvement was lower because their credibility as sources of support, empowerment, and encouragement was not satisfactory. In a manner to get rid of the causal relationship implied in this question, we can also reverse the direction; how far was level of advising impacting on advisors' credibility? Series of analysis were made to shed light on the former question. First and foremost, attempts were made to check on the level of credibility. The findings revealed that graduate advisees did not generally perceive that their thesis or dissertation advisors as credible. Specifically, the study showed that there was negative perception of graduate advisees about their thesis or dissertation advisors' competence, character, and caring (McCroskey, 1998; McCroskey & Teven, 1999).

Contrasting the three dimensions of advisor credibility, it was noted that graduate students' perception of their advisors' caring behavior was negative and statistically significant compared to advisees' perceptions of advisors' competence and character. It was expected that this caring attitude may even be a precursor for other dimensions of credibility because if advisors portrayed a repulsive or indifferent attitude, then this might prematurely foreclose opportunities for advisor competence and character to unfold themselves in the relationship (see also McCroskey, 1998).

Advisees' negative perceptions of advisors' credibility and level of advising might be attributable to various reasons. For instance, it could be attributed to shortage of qualified staff for the graduate program, i.e. high advisee-advisor ratio. In more recent years, it has become common to notice more than 10 advisees would be assigned to an advisor in many departments that run evening extension and summer MA programs besides the several regular undergraduate and post graduate programs involving a significant number of MA/MSc and PhD MA programs (e.g. Office of the Graduate Program, July 2014)[3].

As indicated earlier, available staff members might be over burdened by teaching and other non-academic activities. Consequently, graduate advisors might be unable to provide sufficient time and quality advising to their advisees which in turn influences advisees' perceptions of their advisors' credibility.

Having assessed level of advising and advisor credibility, this research also attempted to examine if credibility would jeopardize level of advising, or vice versa. Interestingly, bivariate correlation results

[3] *Readers are advised to refer to the book containing annual list of MA/MSC, PhD, specialty and sub-specialty graduates of 2013/14 issued by the Office of the Graduate Program, Academic Vice President Office. Readers are also advised to make reference to the 2014 MA Oral Defense Schedules prepared in each of the five departments to check the exact figures. Office of the Associate Dean of the CEBS can also be contacted for such statistical data.*

revealed positive significant associations among all the study variables. This is to mean, for example, that a graduate advisee who perceives his/her thesis or dissertation advisor as competent tend to perceive his/her advisor as caring and trustworthy and vice versa, which corresponds with previous studies (e.g. Punyanut-Carter & Wrench, 2008).

In addition, bivariate correlation results demonstrated strong positive associations between the three dimensions of credibility and level of perceived advising; and between overall advisor credibility and level of perceived advising. Based on these correlation results, it can be said that graduate advisees who perceive their advisors as credible (competent, caring, and trustworthy) tend to perceive high level of advising from their respective graduate advisors. This finding is consistent with several other previous studies (e.g., McCroskey&Teven, 1999; Punyanut-Carter & Wrench, 2008; Thweatt & McCroskey, 1998).

We may need to determine here the combined contribution of the three measures in predicting level of advising. Of course, the regression analysis yielded that the overall contribution was strong. In fact, it was observed that only with these three measures alone it was possible to explain nearly 65% of the variance in level of advising. This would mean that by trying to improve advisor credibility alone, we can significantly improve advisor involvement in the relationship. But, given that the credibility measures overlap among themselves, it is quite useful to partial out this overlap and then check the independent contribution of the credibility measures. Accordingly, when we look into the independent contribution of the three dimensions of credibility, only competence and caring were found to have statistically significant independent contribution to the overall variation of advisees' perceptions of the level of advising they received. Character did not show statistically significant separate contribution. Wrench and Punyanunt (2004) corroborate this finding. According to Wrench and Punyanunt, graduate students want their mentors to care for them and

to be competent, but are not too concerned with their mentor's character/trustworthiness. In fact, this is a blessing in disguise because improving level of advising by intervening with character is a difficult exercise because it takes long to build character compared to others. Hence, this last finding even promises the possibility for more cost-effective intervention to significantly improve level of advising if we intervene only with the two dimensions of credibility.

Conclusions and Implications

This study attempted to investigate one of the most important components of graduate education. Though it was not comprehensive in addressing many variables involved in advisor-advisee relationship (such as internal and external advisee-advisor characteristics, the perspective of advisors…), only limited to one College, involved a small sample, and largely depended on data generated nearly 3 years ago, it is believed that it can provide an insight into graduate advisor-advisee relationship in general and advisees' perceptions of their advisors credibility and advising in particular.

Overall, it could be concluded that

- Graduate advisees witnessed low level advising and support from their thesis or dissertation advisors;
- The advisement process was found to make little contribution for a significant number of the participants;
- Graduate advisees were found to have a negative perception of their advisors' credibility (i.e. competence, caring and character);
- There was a strong and positive correlation between perceived advisor credibility and level of advising;
- The combined predictive efficacy of the three dimensions of credibility was strong; and

- Perceived advisors' competence and caring were found to make a significant independent contribution in predicting perceived level of advising received.

These findings seem to have implications for improving graduate education. They suggest that the existing low level of advisor involvement is worrisome although there are cost effective ways of fixing the system. In other words, there are means of improving the caring attitude of the advisors and also building some competence skills in graduate advisement. Encouraging advisors to plan during the early stages of the advisement work for publishing the thesis would also help in improving advisors' involvement in the thesis. Employing group-based advising rather than the conventional one-to-one approach would give, on top of other benefits, extra time for advisors to get ample time to implement this plan. Furthermore, mechanisms need to be created to evaluate the advisement processing the same way that students conduct course evaluations. Finally, it is suggested that there is a need for further line of inquiry to explore the relationship the various types of advisees' and advisors'' characteristics (e.g. gender, GPA, academic achievement motivation, optimism ...) relate with perception of the MA advisement process. Extending the line of future inquiry to examining the advisors' perspective (i.e. the other side of the coin) is also appreciated to get a complete understanding of the advisement process.

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