

## **CHALLENGES RELATING TO UNDERTAKING ACADEMIC RESEARCH IN TERTIARY INSTITUTIONS OF AFRICA**

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### ***ABSTRACT***

Research in tertiary institutions of Africa, especially postgraduate research, is expected to guide educational institutions, government and policy makers, and the society as whole, in taking decisions as new facts and knowledge are discovered through the activity. However, the research process is bedeviled by an enormous amount of challenges, which have lowered its tempo of execution. These challenges have been grouped into institution-, supervisor-, and student-related challenges. Generally however, poor research funding, poor research culture, poor time management, and supervisors' lackadaisical attitude towards research supervision, arising from lack of interest in students, poor remuneration system, as well as poor research skills and knowledge, have been discussed. Relying heavily on literature, it is generally accepted that these challenges need an attitude change. The paper has therefore, recommended among others, that there is need for training and retraining of researchers and supervisors, research guidelines need to be provided to both undergraduate and postgraduate students whose provisions must be adhered to by students so as to reduce the burden of supervision, and for newly qualified supervisors, there is need for conscientious mentoring by old and experienced researchers.

***Key words: Challenges, Culture, Problem, Research, Knowledge, Skill***

### **INTRODUCTION**

Research endeavours in tertiary institutions of Africa have faced a lot of criticisms. The criticisms range from poor supervision skills, poor funding and blatant disregard to research findings, as well as poor policy framework. If new knowledge is discovered through research, and the findings thrown to the dogs, why the effort? And for developing countries of Africa where the English Language forms the national language, the criticism has been widely felt when the research language becomes somewhat difficult to properly articulate into the main research framework. For instance, the study by Alsied and Ibrahim (2017) just demonstrates how dire this criticism is. The authors' work explored Libyan teachers' attitudes towards their students' research, and discovered that Libyan EFL learners had difficulty developing a research project and reporting the findings, especially as they pertain to identifying their area of interest, choosing a topic and formulating a researchable problem, as well as writing the literature review. The study discovered that students found academic writing quite frustrating in view of their background and poor knowledge of research.

It is on this basis that this paper identifies the common challenges in undertaking research. It looks at what research is and discusses the institution-based, student-based and supervisor-based challenges. It also identifies and discusses other inherent challenges

like self-reported data and ethical issues. Based on the identified challenges, a number of suggestions have been offered.

### **What Research Is**

Research is the search for knowledge, truth, similarities and relationships. It is the process of finding solutions to problems through the systematic collection, analysis and interpretation of data (Ajoku, 2006). It is the process of arriving at dependable solutions through the planned and systematic collection, analysis and interpretation of data (Chikwe, Ogidi & Nwachukwu, 2015). An educational research involves the systematic application of scientific method to the study of educational problems (Ubogu, 2008). It encompasses many different studies geared towards better understanding and improvement of learning and the educational process (Orluwene & Opara, 2006). According to Bandele in Rind (2020), educational research is undertaken to increase human knowledge to solve contemporary problems and establish decision-making basis.

From the above definitions, it is clear that research is the process of finding solutions to problems. The process is quite a complex and tedious one, and must be conscientiously followed all the way. Equally, a problem must exist to warrant an investigation. A research problem demonstrates a felt need, an unsatisfactory state of affairs, a gap, or a teething issue. It becomes a problem when its frequency of occurrence is high, the spread is wide, the number of people affected by it is huge, and finally it has grave consequences on the generality of the people. These three conditions justify the choice of a research problem. In other words, research topics are not selected just for the sake of it. The factors must come into play, and they dictate the choice of a research topic.

Beginner-researchers find themselves in a dilemma when trying to choose a topic for their research. But of course searching for a research topic could be a depressing exercise. Be that as it may, if one realizes that a research problem demonstrates a felt need, an unsatisfactory state of affairs, or a teething issue which has surfaced and resurfaced, again and again, huge number of people are affected by it, and as well there are grave consequences on the population, then the process of making a choice of a research topic becomes more clear.

### **Challenges in the Conduct of Research**

Because research is a complex activity, there are many challenges encountered by researchers, especially novices. Studies have shown the various aspects and dimensions of these challenges. For instance, the study by Ubogu (2019) found managerial and methodological factors inhibiting the conduct and update of research in Nigeria, bordering on absence of a clear national philosophy and adequate funding for research, and gaps in methodological competence and research integrity on the part of researchers. What these findings imply is that although research results are expected to solve problems, in developing countries of Africa, such results do not find cover with government policies for effective governance and development. In many cases, the research works are left to rot away in corners of government offices and academic institutions. In the words of Kumwenda et al. (2017), in developing countries of Africa, there is less investment in research. However, should research be funded and findings utilized, the problems bedeviling developing countries, for instance, will have been surmounted.

A study by Manchishu, Ndhlovu and Mwanza (2015) investigated the challenges faced by postgraduate students of education. The study found that students' challenges

in writing research was numerous, which included broad and unclear topics, failure in methodology, poor knowledge of research terminologies, and difficulty in reporting literature. Another study by Al-Qaderi (2016) found that weak academic level of students, lack of a well-equipped library with e-resources, and students' difficult circumstances and attitude towards research were common challenges postgraduate students faced. The study by Qasem and Zayid (2019) buttressed this when it found that students had challenges in undertaking research in areas of selecting right research topic, and selecting the right methodology. Students had poor knowledge in their fields of specialization, and poorly allotted time to research due to other demanding academic engagements. Other challenges were supervisor-related challenges.

Research on challenges faced by students of the open and distance education was undertaken by Mapolisa and Mafa (2012). It covered undergraduate students of the Open and Distance Learning of Zimbabwe Open University. The study found institution, student and tutor-related challenges faced by students in the conduct of their projects. Institution-related challenges dealt with the dearth of internet facilities, library resources, workshops, computer training and research-related courses. Tutor-related challenges were those associated with lack of research interest, lack of experience, tutor absence from work, and failure to promptly return to work. Student-related challenges bothered on money, time, library resources, and family problems.

Buttressing these research findings, Rind (2020) identified researcher problems as the research topic problem, supervisor-related problem, unavailability of research literature, lack of research funding, lack of or poor research knowledge and skills, data collection difficulty, linguistic and time management difficulties, especially for beginner-researchers. Speaking on time management difficulties, Wells-Moran and Dombeck (2006) said that time management skills deal with cultivating consciousness, organization and commitment. This means that, especially for educational programmes that are time bound, student-researchers need to do all within their ability to keep to time schedules. If at the end of a particular academic calendar, one is expected to submit one's bound thesis after examinations are taken, then one must plan one's academic work, including time to get enmeshed in one's project work. Due to lack of proper planning and fixing of time schedules, many student-researchers have unnecessarily extended their tenancy in colleges and universities. It must be added that research topics reflect the problems of the time to which solution is being sought through the research process. If a research unduly delays completion, then the finding which demonstrates solution to the research problem is belated

### **Supervisor Challenges in Research**

Literature abounds which finger supervisors as constituting serious challenge to the conduct of research in tertiary institutions. Shumba (2004), Pearce (2005), Nyawaranda (2005), and Chabaya, Chime and Chabaya (2009) identified supervisor-related problems in research to include little or lack of a clear-cut direction, lack of interest in the research topics, and lack of experience. Others are few meetings with project students, absence from work, too little provision of practical help, and lack of interest in students. Where a supervisor shows little interest in students' research work, he is likely not to devote attention to his assigned duty of supervision. This situation can unduly extend students' stay on their programmes.

Lamenting on supervisor-related difficulties, Rind (2020) opined that in certain cases, supervisors are found to be “misleading/misguiding students in the process of research because they do not have much training. Supervisors are found with ambiguous concepts. They cannot supervise in a real way”. Although in many cases, as Taskeen and others (2014) contended, it is assumed that supervisors have been exposed to the same research techniques, in certain instances however, supervisors fall short of this requirement, implying that supervisors mislead and misguide students. This situation arises to demonstrate the cogency of the dictum “Garbage in garbage out”. In other words, if a researcher was not properly and adequately supervised or guided, and little attention was paid to research guidelines and techniques before graduation, then that researcher cannot properly and aptly supervise future student-researchers. A conscious mistake, as I perceive, is often perpetrated when student-researchers do not subsume and enmesh themselves in and pass through the rigours of the research process. Research is a tedious activity that requires one’s total commitment. To stay away from the rigorous path of research and assign this role to a proxy only ends in producing weak calibre of the academia who cannot handle effectively the task of postgraduate project supervision.

The above argument explains why Rashid and Rind (2020) contended that research culture at the university is weak. This is common with certain disciplines. For instance, a postgraduate management student who is the head of consultancy unit or accounting unit of his waged employment, is in a hurry to wrap-up things and report back to office. In this situation, it is difficult for such a one to properly “key into” and adopt the research culture. He would rather prefer to engage the services of a proxy to undertake the research on his behalf.

Understanding the type of research one is carrying out, identification of the research problem and appropriately delineating it, as well as designing the research instrument, collecting and analyzing data and drawing inferences and conclusions, require research knowledge and skills. The study by Rind (2002) revealed that in many instances, students face difficulties with their research endeavours due to the absence of these essential skills. To acquire these skills would require intending researchers to devote time to the study of research and to the research works of others.

### **Stating the Research Problem**

In my years of supervising students’ postgraduate theses, one fundamental problem I have often battled with students has to do with the manner in which the research problem is perceived and stated. What I am particularly concerned about here is the final remark of the statement of the problem. By the way, research literature shows that the problem of the study can be stated in declarative or interrogative manner. In many cases, student-researcher nail that section by simply stating the aim of the study. Let us give one very clear example: “Therefore the fundamental problem of the study is (to investigate) the poor performance of students in mathematics”. This is not correct. The problem of the study is not that students perform poorly in mathematics. The problem of the study must be perceived from the perspective of the consequence (the repercussion, the painful outcome) arising from the poor performance of the students in the subject. On the part of parents, for instance, the consequence will be the worry the parents will have in respect of their wards’ future, should they continue to fail or perform poorly. If their wards’ performance does not improve, definitely that would impede their future educational advancement. And then if their wards’ education is impeded what would these

children be in future? All of that demonstrates the pain and worry of the parents regarding their children's poor performance in mathematics. Therefore, the bleak future for the wards which the poor performance presents is the problem of the study.

Uzoagulu (2011) aptly articulated the problem of the study when the author cited the incidence of drought. It has not rained for some time in the cropping season. If a researcher is undertaking a study on the drought situation, the problem of the study would not be that there is drought in the cropping season. The problem of the study will be the consequence (the worry, painful outcome) of the drought, and that is hunger. Farmers who practise subsistence agriculture will be worried that there will be hunger the following year, and that is the problem of the study.

Ethical considerations have become a serious problem in research. Ethical issues if not properly handled can affect research results, and engender legal battles as well. A vital issue here is the one that deals with the confidentiality and protection of research participants. According to Felzmann (2009), confidentiality would require a researcher not to disclose information about the research activity without the express permission of participants. This is usually apparent where a research is conducted in a school setting. There are likely to be psychological and social risks which may entail confrontation with emotionally evocative material, confrontation with sensitive topics, triggering of traumatic memories and embarrassment, and change of image within peer group (Thompson, 1990; Felzmann, 2009). Because of these issues, the consent of participants must be sought and their confidentiality and safety in participating in the research activity guaranteed.

### **Literature Review Difficulties**

Hart (2001), and Terry and Terry (2013) posited that literature review refers to the method used to search, find and critically read and analyze scholarly information. This is done with a view to gain new insights by synthesizing previously unconnected ideas which provide methods for collection of data, and suggest solutions that have been tried in similar situations. Terry and Terry added that literature review assists a researcher to understand how others before him have approached their research problems, by providing useful information that will lead to making analysis about the research findings, as well as making generalization and drawing conclusion.

Literature review has several other advantages. Besides helping to gain more understanding into the nature of the problem under investigation, it guides a researcher towards avoiding duplication as he discovers what has already been investigated (Hart, 2001). Literature review helps a researcher to know what research design, research instrument and theory to use for his study (Chuchill & Sanders, 2007). Literature review provides convincing evidence about the relevance of research (Phelps, Fisher & Ellis, 2007).

Just like Manchishu, Ndhlovu and Mwanza (2015) reported, students undertaking research often find difficulty reporting literature. The difficulty lies in finding and reviewing what is required. Not all literature, it must be stressed, is necessary for review for a particular research problem. In a great many cases, students spend a lot of time reviewing those items of literature that have no direct link with the research problem or purpose. Delving into this is only a waste of valuable time and resources. Therefore, literature review needs to focus attention on those issues that will help explain or add value to the research.

Speaking of literature review, Haddaway and others (2010) identified lack of relevance (i.e. limited stakeholder management), lack of transparency/replicability, selection bias, lack of comprehensiveness (i.e. inappropriate search methods and strategy), lack of appropriate critical analysis (i.e. treating all evidence as valid), and lack of consistency, as well as error checking as some of the problems bedeviling literature review. What this entails is that any literature that is consulted for a particular study must take into consideration the people (stakeholders) who are affected by the study. That demonstrates the beauty of research. The stakeholders who the research may affect will need be broadly considered. Again, certain research reviews may not be replicated. This is likely due to the insincerity of the researcher or researchers. When a research review is undertaken with manipulation of evidence, there will be no transparency. This gives rise to difficulty in repeating the same study.

To review literature, it must generally be searched. The searching must be comprehensive and must adopt appropriate methods and strategy. If this is not done, there is the tendency for the literature review to be shallow in scope and haphazardly carried out. In the end, the researcher is likely to assume that all evidence examined in a review can be treated as valid. This should not be the case. Equally, to undertake good literature, Rind (2020) posited that a good knowledge of the key concepts in the related field of study is required.

### **Difficulties in Finding a Close Synergy between Chapter One and Chapter Three**

It must be stressed in strongest terms that the introductory section of a research, presented in Chapter One is very crucial to the entire research. This section or chapter must be straightened out and well-articulated as other sections or chapters of the research are hinged on it. Chapter One also has strong bearing and link with the methodology chapter which, for some institutions, is mostly presented in Chapter Three. While Chapter One identifies and delineates the research problem, pointing out and explaining the nature of the problem, and providing the basis and need for investigation, and as well outlining ways to handle it, Chapter Three sets in motion the mechanism for handling the problem. In other words, while Chapter One deals with the "what" of the research (i.e. what the researcher will do to solve the problem), the methodology chapter deals with the "how" of the research. What this means is that the researcher says, "After identifying and defining the problem, this is *what* I am going to do to solve it" (Chapter One). Again the researcher says, "I have outlined what I am going to do to solve the research problem. Now this is *how* I am going to solve it" (Chapter Three).

Because of the glaring link between Chapter One and Chapter Three, researchers must make conscious effort to create a synergy between the two and maintain that synergy throughout the research process. In doing this, student-researchers must pay attention to how they formulate the objectives and research questions, as well as state the hypotheses of their study. While this is going on, they must cast their minds to the methodology chapter (Chapter Three) regarding how they intend to answer the research questions and test the hypotheses. Right from when research questions and hypotheses are being formulated and stated, the researcher should not wait until he gets to Chapter Three before he can contemplate what type of research he is conducting and what research design to engage. I encounter situations even with postgraduate students who, during their proposal defence, have no idea at all what type of research they are conducting and what research design to engage. I see situations where a student's

research, based on the formulation of the research questions and hypotheses, the study is a descriptive survey research, which requires a survey design. However, in Chapter Three, the student states that he is engaging quasi-experimental design for his study. Cases of this nature abound, which are a clear demonstration of the fact that students' exposure to the techniques of conducting research (research methodology) has serious limitations.

Research questions and hypotheses must be stated in an unambiguous way. They must be clear enough to indicate what the researcher is investigating. Where research questions and hypotheses are ambiguous, that creates problems in selecting the research design, assembling the instrument for data collection, and selecting appropriate statistical tools for data analysis. Again, to inject more clarity into the work, and for convenience of investigation and testing, the objectives, research questions and hypotheses of the study should connect to each other. In other words, they three things need to rhyme. By serialization, an objective of the study stated in number one should also be seen in number one under the research questions and hypotheses respectively. It makes it easier for a supervisor as well as the external examiner to assess the researcher. The external examiner, particularly, should not be left to wander about looking for where objective number one is located in the research questions and hypotheses. Objective number one goes with research question one and hypothesis one; objective number two goes with research question two and hypothesis two; and so, on and so forth.

### **Errors of Syntax**

As the study of Rind (2020) indicates, students' one major problem in conducting research bothers on linguistics. When the rules of grammar are breached, that leads to syntax error. Many students in tertiary institutions, especially in developing countries where the English Language, a foreign language, becomes the lingua franca, perpetrate various forms of syntax error. Because the lingua franca is a foreign one, it becomes quite easy for such student-researchers to pay less attention to good grammar. They write as if they are with friends discussing under a tree or are at home with friends and families, sometimes carrying grapevine from one place to the other.

The language of research, it must be stressed, is a formal one. It is a well thought out language, constructive and clear, devoid of ambiguity and verbosity. It is generally used to express and link ideas (Birchener & Basturkmen, 2006). Consequently, the research language does not make assumptions regarding its meaning and clarity. It must be conspicuously plain. Literature dealing with figures of speech which, in many cases, hides meanings away, as well as journalistic language posturing, find no place in quality research in many academic fields. Unfortunately, many student-researchers find pleasure in imbibing this culture while carrying out research. This needs to be dealt away with in the immediate possible way.

### **Other Challenges**

Data collection and recruitment of ad hoc staff to assist in the conduct of the research are other challenges students face in conducting the research, as the work of Sarkar (2014) has shown. The familiarity of the researcher or lack of familiarity of the researcher with his subjects or participants, the cooperation of the subjects to respond to the research instrument, earning the confidence of both the subjects and the authority of the area of study, may sometimes prove difficult (Hoskins & White in Rind, 2001). This

concern also borders on the time needed to retrieve copies of the research instrument responded to, and the various sources where data are to be collected. All this boils down to the issue of ethics argued by Felzmann (2009). Subjects and the ruling authority in the study area may be unwilling to back the conduct of the study for some legal considerations or even for the image of the target subject of the study. A concerted effort from the researcher will be required to surmount this difficulty. In essence, collaboration in research poses a serious issue to the success of the research, as the work of Bocar (2013) found. Often, interpersonal difficulties are associated with other difficulties (Locke in Rind (2020).

DETA (2016) identified reliance on self-reported data as a challenge in conducting educational research. This is apparent when we know that the data we collect indicate the opinions of respondents, particularly students. The problem arises when we are, in many cases, not in position to cross-check the opinions. Consequently, DETA argues that "The accuracy of self-reported data, without the availability of data for cross-checking, is unknown".

## **CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

Conducting research especially for an advanced degree is a Herculean task. It is often depressing when the idea of embarking of such an enterprise comes up. However, for the continuity and discovery of new knowledge, advanced researches are pertinent. Difficulties associated with such researches are often glaring. In developing countries such as Nigeria, what may seem simple as to obtain permission from say, a local government headquarters, to conduct a study on say, financial management, which requires recruiting of participants to partake in the study, may prove difficult (Sarkar, 2014). Again, for individuals wishing to succeed in their career endeavours, research challenges relating to sustainability of research ambition, and support in terms of the environment to undertake the research, including funding, are eminent (Kumwenda et al., 2017).

What all this entails is that challenges faced by students conducting research in tertiary institutions bother on three factors, namely, institutional factors, student-related factors and supervisor-related factors. This implies that training institutions have failed in providing the required environment for research activities to thrive. Supervisors, probably for lack of interest in a low-paying job, have less interest in supervising their students. On the part of the students, for failing to plan and provide effectual time schedules, they devote less time to their research work. To surmount these challenges, the following recommendations are hereby made:

1. There is need for training and retraining of researchers and supervisors. The training could be in the form of regular workshops on research writing and supervision. This should be organized for both lecturers and students.
2. There is need for legislation and policy formulation to back research findings towards their ultimate utilization.
3. Collaborative research work between students and supervisors needs to be encouraged.
4. To improve research supervision, especially by newly qualified supervisors, there is need for conscientious mentoring. Old and experienced researchers need to give their time to mentoring and training of young researchers.
5. Research guidelines need to be provided to both undergraduate and postgraduate students. Strict adherence to the guidelines must be emphasized and upheld. This will go a long way in reducing the burden on supervision.

6. There is need to support young researchers to do well by providing funding, laboratory facilities, and research materials.

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