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CONDUCTING RESEARCH IN EDUCATIONAL MANAGEMENT: EXAMINING RESEARCH AREAS AND RESEARCH DESIGNS IN OPEN AND DISTANCE LEARNING (ODL) RESEARCH.

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Abstract

There have been concerns about the low submission rate for research projects and dissertations in the Bachelor of Education in Educational Management and Master of Education in Educational Management at the Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU) in the department of Educational Studies at the Harare Region. Whilst most students in both degree programmes complete the taught component of their degrees within the stipulated minimum duration, the same cannot be said about their performance in research. Most students are taking more than the stipulated duration of study and in some cases running the danger of being timed-out in their studies because of their failure to complete research within the stipulated time frames. This paper examines some of the challenges students face in their presentation of research and dissertation. It examines the research methodologies, research areas and research designs in educational management. The paper qualitatively analysed twenty research projects and dissertations submitted at the ZOU Harare region between 2008 and 2013. The analysis assisted in identifying the research areas, research methodologies and research design common in Educational Management. It was observed that there is a mix-up between research methodology and research design. The paper also observed that the topic areas whilst varied, they tended to be of one category, the meso level. The topic areas did not demonstrate the multi-disciplinary nature of education as a discipline. The focus on the descriptive research design tended to affect the depth and nature of the research findings. The paper concludes that if research in educational management is to make a positive contribution to development in education, there is need to revisit the research designs and topic areas at postgraduate level, as there should be a difference between undergraduate research and postgraduate research.

Key words: Research methodology; Research design; Educational management; Topic area; Open and Distance Learning.

1. INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

The Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU), General Information and Regulations (2007), state that the study duration for the Masters of Education in Educational Management degree programme "shall be a minimum of five semesters and the maximum shall be sixteen semesters" (p.56). The semesters translate to two and a half years and eight years respectively. Recent advertisements for the degree programme have shown that one can complete the degree in two years. However, records show that out of the five students who registered with the ZOU, Harare region in 2011 only one student managed to submit the Masters dissertation for marking by the end of the two and a half years. This was at the end of the first semester in 2013. Similarly, quite a number of students who had registered with the university in the years 2005, 2006, 2007 and 2008 failed to submit their research projects and dissertations by the end of the two and half years and fours for the Masters of Education in Educational Management and Bachelor of Education in Educational Management degrees respectively. Some of these students were still registering for their research projects and dissertation in 2013. Furthermore, out of a collective total of thirteen students who had registered for the dissertation at Masters of Education in Educational Management only two students submitted their dissertations for final assessment.

 The same regulations noted above state that "the duration for the degree programme shall be a minimum of eight semesters and a maximum of sixteen semesters" (p.49) for the Bachelor of Education in Educational Management degree. The minimum of eight semesters translates to a minimum of four years and the maximum of sixteen semesters translates to eight years of study. Out of the twenty seven students who had registered specifically for the research project only seven students managed to submit their research projects at the end of the first semester in   2013.

Using the figures presented above as a guide, we can calculate the submission rate for the Masters of Education in Educational Management and Bachelor of Education in Educational Management. These could give us an estimate of about 15.4 percent submission rate for the Master of Education in Educational Management and 26 percent for the Bachelor of Education in Educational Management. It should be noted that these are students from different groups registering specifically for the dissertations and research projects who had already missed the minimum duration of completion, thus demonstrating a very low submission rate.

This raises a number of concerns about the handling of research by students studying for the degrees of Bachelor of Education in Educational Management and Master of Education in Educational Management. There are also a number of issues that may be confusing to students of research. These range from the problems of identifying the problem for research. There are so many problems in the world, but not all of them are research problems. The research as a matter of fact and practice should contain a problem. In other words, if there is no problem there cannot be any research. Apart from the problem of identifying research problems, other problems might be related to coming up with appropriate methodologies, research designs and areas of research.

At the same time one of the confusing issues in research has much to do with the views of different scholars. There are divergent views on what direction research in education should take. Creswell (2009) refers to qualitative, quantitative and mixed methods as research designs. Creswell (2009) appears to use the terms designs, methods and approaches interchangeably or synonymously. Furthermore Creswell (2009) identifies three types of research designs. These are qualitative, quantitative and mixed methods. This is another problem in research. In an attempt to explain the three research designs, Creswell (2009) uses the term method to refer to research design. He further identifies three components that are involved in a research design. These are the philosophical overview of the study, research methods and selected strategies of inquiry. Such strategies of inquiry include ethnography, experiments and sequential strategies. These strategies are related to the following research designs: qualitative, quantitative and mixed respectively.

Thomas (2009) explains methodology as the stage in the dissertation where the researcher is concerned with how to answer research questions and the approach to inquiry. Like Creswell (2009), Thomas (2009) notes that "methodology" may be called "Research Design".

On the contrary, Silverman (2006) makes a clear distinction between research methodology, method and research design. For Silverman (2006:15) research methodology refers to the   "choices we make about cases to study, methods of data gathering, forms of data analysis etc. in planning and executing a research study". Silverman (2006) gives examples of research methodologies as qualitative or quantitative in the broader sense and also include grounded theory or conversation analysis in the narrow sense. On methods, Silverman (2006) uses the term to refer to specific research techniques. They are mostly relevant in the collection of data in the study. The methods are determined by the selected research methodology. Such research methods include questionnaires, autobiography and interviews among others. Within this context, methods are very different from research methodology as they are tools for collecting primary data.

Similarly, Hofstee (2006) makes an attempt to explain the terms method, research design, and methodology. Hofstee (2006) explains the term method in two ways. He notes that the term method is commonly used to refer to "your way of considering your thesis statement"(p.108) and secondly as "the general technique/s that you employ to examine your thesis statement, for example, interviews, a case study, content analysis or analysis or an experiment, etc"(p. 108). He explains research design as the way a researcher chooses to design a study up to the conclusion and also considers research design as the general techniques for example, interviews, a case study, content analysis or an experiment, whereas methodology focuses on how to apply the selected research (ibid).

The explanation by Hofstee (2006) appears not to clarify the arguments surrounding the three terms; method, research design and methodology. The examples that he gives for method and research designs are the same. However, it is the intention of this paper to argue that they do not necessarily mean the same. Such different views, whilst welcome in academia, they appear to have contributed to the problems that students are facing in research.

2.   STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

The Masters of Education in Educational Management and Bachelor of Education in Educational Management degrees at the Zimbabwe Open University have both the taught component and the research component. For a student to be deemed to have met the requirements of the Masters of Education in Educational Management degree, the student is expected to accumulate a minimum of 70 credit points. For the Bachelor of Education in Educational Management degree a student is expected to accumulate a minimum of 90 credit points (ZOU, General Information and Regulations, 2007). The research project is a compulsory component of the degree programme. It is done over a minimum of two semesters in both programmes. To demonstrate the importance of research in Open and Distance Learning, the research projects carry the highest credit points in both degree programmes. Whilst most of the students complete the taught component within the stipulated minimum time, the same cannot be said for the research projects and dissertations. This therefore suggests that students are having problems with research, of which coming up with an appropriate research design and topics could be some of them.. The statement of the problem can therefore be expressed in question form: **What challenges are students encountering in conducting research in educational management?**

3.   PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of the study is to examine research areas and research designs used by students in the Department of Educational Studies, in an endeavour to establish challenges students were facing in their research projects and dissertations.

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4. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

To find answers to the main research question on challenges students were facing in coming up with the appropriate research designs and research topics for the Bachelor of Education in Educational Management and Masters of Education in Educational Management, the paper raised three research questions which are as follows:

➢ What are the major impediments to students submitting research projects and dissertations within the minimum possible time frame?

➢ What are the research designs commonly used by students in the Department of Educational Studies?

➢ What are the common topic areas studied by students doing research in Educational Management?

➢ To what extent has the lack of understanding of research design contributed to students' performance in research?

5. REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

According to Bassey (1999) educational research is a critical enquiry which aims at informing educational judgements and decisions. Such enquiry is done for a purpose. This could be to come up with new policies or to improve practice in education. Heck and Hallinger (2005) made a number of observations on research in educational management. They made the following observations:

➢ They noted that there is less agreement on the scope of the problems that researchers should tackle;

➢ Researchers in Educational Management have tended to approach the area more as a humanistic and moral responsibility than a scientific endeavour;

➢ Despite the existence of a variety of methodological tools, there is a dearth in sustained empirical research;

➢ There is a reluctance to evaluate the relevance of contrasting methodological approaches;

➢ There is lack of empirical rigour in the study of educational management.

In addition to the points noted above, they note that instead of a common understanding on research in the field of educational management, the diversity in approaches has created contestations within the field. For example, there has been an emergence of different approaches to conducting research in educational management.

To demonstrate the importance of research in educational management, some universities have established centres for educational management research. The main thrust of such centres is to create new knowledge on educational leadership, and develop competencies in decision making for effective and efficient management of institutions such as universities, colleges and schools. Research in educational management is meant to improve the quality of leadership and educational policy making. The development of educational managers requires "a range of strategies, including high quality courses and tuition, mentoring by experienced and successful principals, opportunities to practise management at appropriate stages in professional careers, and appreciation of research methods" (Coleman and Briggs,2002:ix). It is also presumed that research in educational management contributes to professional development and improvement. Such changes contribute to personal development, at the same time contributing to institutional change and policy as noted earlier.

Research in educational management has to achieve at least two goals. These are firstly, the desire to develop knowledge and secondly, the need to seek solutions to the problems bedevilling education and its management. Despite the presumed focus of educational research, there have been concerns about the published results and design used in educational research. Clipson-Boyles (2000) notes that research in educational management has tended to be positively skewed towards academic elitism and as such, has been found lacking in relevance to real issues of education. Furthermore, findings have had limited accessibility to educationists and other intended beneficiaries. On a similar note Hargreaves (1996) has criticised educational research in the United Kingdom. The basis of such criticism was that educational research was divorced from educational practice and the realities on the ground. As such, it served little relevance.

6.   RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND RESEARCH DESIGN

 The study used the qualitative research methodology. Data was collected through document analysis. The documents analysed were research projects and dissertations submitted by Bachelor of Education in Educational Management and Masters of Education in Educational Management students at the Zimbabwe Open University, Harare Region. The study focused on twenty research projects and dissertations submitted between the years 2008 and 2013. The study is guided by the assumption that the low submission rate is attributable to the problems of research methodology, research design and research topics.

7.   DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

Table 1: Research areas and research designs used

No	TOPIC AREA	RESEARCH DESIGN
1	Decentralization of Education	Qualitative research design
2	Teacher involvement in decision making.	Descriptive survey design
3	Potentials of E-Learning in improving O' level.	Descriptive survey design
4	Implementation of strategic management plans.	Descriptive survey design
5	Contribution of private colleges to quality education	Questionnaire design
6	The impact of inadequate teachers and learning resources in institutions of higher learning	Case study design
7	Analysis of organisational development interventions and their impact on secondary schools	Descriptive survey design
8	Appraisal interview on staff relations between primary school heads and teachers	Descriptive survey design
9	HIV/AIDS	Descriptive survey design

10	Disaster response training programme of the Red Cross and Red Crescent societies in Southern Africa	Descriptive survey design
11	Effectiveness of communication in promoting school efficiency	Descriptive survey design
12	Implementation of the Basic Education Assistance module	Descriptive survey design
13	Impact of school based supervisory strategies	Descriptive survey design
14	Conflict between SDCs and school heads	Descriptive survey design
15	Teacher involvement in decision making	Descriptive survey design
16	The applicability and usefulness of performance appraisal in Education	Normative survey design
17	The effectiveness of remuneration as a factor to increase/decrease production in schools	Descriptive survey design
18	The problems faced by females in management positions in schools.	Descriptive survey design
19	Girls academic under-achievement in science	Descriptive survey design
20	Causes of indiscipline among grade seven pupils after final grade seven examinations	Descriptive survey design

The table above shows the different research topics by twenty former students of the Zimbabwe Open University. These submitted dissertations between the years 2008 and 2013. The table also shows the research designs used by the twenty students in the Bachelor of Education in Educational Management and Masters of Education in Educational Management research projects and dissertations. From the table it can be observed that the topic areas studied by the students were quite varied. The issues investigated in the studies included: decentralization in education; decision making in education, E-learning in education, strategic management, quality education, learning resources, organisational development interventions in education, conflict management, effectiveness of communication, school based supervision and gender issues in educational management among others.

In line with research areas in distance education, by Zawacki-Richter (2009) identified three broad meta-levels which are macro-level focusing on distance education systems and theories; meso level focusing on management, organization and technology and lastly micro level focusing on teaching and distance education. Some of the research areas that emerged from these areas included issues of access, equity and ethics; globalization of education and cross-cultural aspects; distance teaching systems and institutions; theories and models; research methods in distance education and knowledge

transfer which all come under the macro level. Research areas under the meso level included management and organization; costs and benefits; educational technology; innovation and change; professional development and faculty support; learner support services; and quality assurance. Lastly, Zawacki-Ritcher (2009) noted that the micro level focused on teaching and learning in distance education. This was concerned with issues of instructional design; interaction and communication in learning communities and learner characteristics.

Whilst the topic areas above are quite varied in nature, they tended to fall into the category of the meso level. This level, as noted by Zawacki-Ritcher (2009) focuses on professional development, management, educational technology and quality assurance issues. There is not much on the other two levels; the macro level and the micro level which focus on teaching and learning.

These have been identified as priority areas in educational management and distance education. The research areas that are covered by the dissertations for the period 2008 to 2013 fall within the priority areas of research in educational management and distance education. In terms of relevance, it could be observed that the areas studied by the students were contemporary issues that are pertinent to education in general and educational management in particular. The relevance of the topic areas is supported by the rigorous process that students go through before a topic is approved by the programme co-ordinator. They fall within Zawacki-Ritcher (2009)'s categories of research areas noted above.

The table also shows the research designs commonly used by students in the Bachelor of Education in Educational Management and Masters of Education in Educational Management programmes for the period 2008 and 2013 at Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU), Harare region. The common research design is the descriptive research design. Out of the twenty research projects and dissertations analysed, eighteen (90%) indicated that they had used the descriptive survey design, one (5%) used the qualitative research design and the other one (5%) used the normative research design. This concurs with a study by Kangai, Bukaliya, Musika and Mapuranga (2011) who conducted a study on the undergraduate research projects submitted between the years 2000 to 2009. They observed that the descriptive survey design was the most common design used in the Faculties of Arts and Education and the Faculty of Social Sciences. This appears to suggest that students tended to continue employing the descriptive survey design even at postgraduate level. Most of the dissertations may be affected by the weaknesses of the descriptive survey design. Such weaknesses include research bias and subjectivity as the researcher has the latitude to choose what to focus on in relation to the research questions and hypothesis.

The reference to qualitative research design shows the discourse on what constitutes research design. It is common to find different scholars referring to quantitative research design and qualitative research design. On the same note, the treatment of research designs by students shows that there are divergent views as to what constitutes a research design. Similarly, it could be noted that whilst some scholars treat qualitative research, quantitative research and mixed methodology as research designs (Creswell, 2009); these are methodologies that have their own research designs. It is the aim of this paper to show the distinction between research methodology and research design. The research designs that fall under either of the research methodologies include survey-based research, case studies, correlation-based research, comparative analysis, trend analysis, content analysis, ethnographic research, experimental design and action research (Hofstee, 2006). These are some of the commonly used research designs. From the dissertations analysed it could be observed that the research designs used tended to be limited to the descriptive survey research design. As such, the research projects and dissertations suffer from the limitations imposed by the use of the descriptive research design. Such limitations include the following:

➢ Possibilities of subjectivity and error are very high as the researcher may demonstrate bias right from the selection of the questions to be asked. In that respect internal validity is threatened.

➢ In the case of interviews, the possibility of selective recording and reporting is very high as the researcher may record what he/she thinks conforms to his/her selected hypothesis.

➢ Confidentiality is compromised as the presence of the researcher during interviews can negatively impact on what the respondents say. They may also withhold certain information. It is difficult at times for the researcher to be able to motivate respondents to answer all questions.

➢ Questions may be poorly worded and difficult to comprehend.

➢ Descriptive survey design focuses on finding answers to the "what" question and fails to address the "why" aspect of research. As such, it cannot be used to make inferences and establishing cause-effect relationship.

➢ The results cannot be statistically analyzed as there are no variables manipulated and the design is regarded as unreliable (Explorable.com, 2013).

➢ Data is affected by the observer paradox. Participants are most likely to change their behaviour if they are aware that they are being observed.

The above observations concur with Leedy (1989) who noted that the descriptive research design lacks depth in what is being studied, and some of the instruments such as face-to-face interviews have their own biases that compromise reliability and validity. In most of the cases, the studies lacked generalizability, because of the nature of the questions and research designs used. In that respect they all qualified as case studies.

8. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

From the analysis of the different research projects and dissertations a number of conclusions could be made. The arguments and disagreements around what constitutes a research design have tended to affect the way research students present their research designs in educational management. Apart from the mix-up between research methodology and research design, the research questions used in the research studies tended to be limited in scope thereby affecting the quality of the research. Lack of clarity on the research design has negatively impacted on the research methods used by most students. The commonly used research design is the descriptive design, and its limitations have also affected the depth and nature of the researches presented by students. Furthermore, most of the research findings lacked generalizability. This tended to support the claim by Hargreaves (1996) that educational research was divorced from educational practice and reality. Furthermore, despite the fact that education is a multi-dimensional discipline, the research topics tended to lack a multi-dimensional approach.

It may be concluded that whilst the research areas and topic could be described as relevant to educational management research, they tended to focus on what is described by Zawacki-Ritcher (2009) as the meso level in his classification of research areas in distance education.

If research in educational management is to make a positive contribution to development in education there is need to revisit the research designs used in educational research and the relevance of the topic areas that are covered. There should be a balance between the different levels of research areas in distance education. These levels are the macro level, meso level and micro-level as noted earlier. Research should contribute new knowledge, at the same time should come up with new views and new explanations to a problem.

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