Factors Affecting Completion of Research Projects by Students: A Study of Three Zimbabwe Open University Regions

Saiden Thondhlana, Daniel Mawere & Zenzele Weda
Zimbabwe Open University

ABSTRACT
The study sought to find out undergraduate students and research supervisors’ views on factors affecting the completion of research projects by Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU) students. Student, supervisor and institutional related factors were the focus of the study. Descriptive survey method was used in the study due to the normative nature of the data collected. Questionnaires and interviews were used to collect data. The sample of the study comprised 50 students who had failed to complete their research projects on schedule as well as 24 research project supervisors. Convenience sampling was used in selection of the students. Supervisors available at the time of the study formed part of the sample. Findings were that the time given to students to do their research project was inadequate. Lack of library, Internet and typing facilities as well as finance for travelling to and from the supervisor hampered students’ research progress. The study concluded that student and institutional factors contributed to failure by students to complete their research projects on schedule. The study recommends that the university should allow students more time to do research projects; over three semesters.

Background
Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU) undergraduates do research work in partial fulfilment of their degree programmes. Failure to submit a research project by a given due date means that the aspiring graduates cannot be awarded the degree qualification. Given that, ZOU students are mature, experienced and highly motivated as compared to those in conventional universities, they are expected to complete their research projects on schedule (Rudestam & Newton, 1992; Sharp & Howard, 1996). Furthermore chances are that ZOU students can access data for their research more easily than conventional students, particularly if they do projects in their work places.

To the student, completion of research projects means fulfilling the requirements for the attainment of a degree programme on schedule. Acquiring a degree enhances a student’s chances for promotion at the work place. Above all, the student attains self-actualisation.

In Bulawayo, Matebeleland North and Midlands, the three regions in which the study was done, it has been noted that quite a number of undergraduate students across all the departments had failed to meet the research projects submission deadlines. Table 1, below shows the percentages of students who failed to submit projects on time. A study of a similar nature carried out by Majoni and Chidakwa in 2004, focused on Mashonaland Central Region only and found out that students had difficulty in selecting a research topic and lacked a sound theoretical base to carry out the study among other findings. This study, therefore, covered a wider area and specifically sought to establish from undergraduate students and research supervisors, factors contributing to students’ failure to complete their research projects as scheduled by ZOU.
Statement of the Problem
A number of students are failing to complete their research projects on time in all degree programmes in the Zimbabwe Open University. A multiplicity of factors contributes to failure by students to complete their research projects as scheduled. The study was a survey of factors militating against timely submission of research projects by ZOU undergraduate students.

The study was therefore guided by the following questions:
1. What student related factors contribute to students’ failure to complete research projects on time?
2. What institution related factors militate against students’ timely completion of research projects?
3. What supervisor related factors lead to students’ failure to complete research projects as scheduled?

Review of Literature
Numerous factors militate against the timely completion of research projects by students (Cone and Foster, 1993; Mouton, 2001). The factors are generally grouped into student, institutional and supervisor related.

Student Related Factors
Poor time management is one of the student related factors that contribute to failure to submit research projects on time. Cone and Foster (1993) recommend that students should spend at least 20 hours per week on their research projects. Other factors, which attribute to failure by students to complete their projects on time, include inability to write well-organized, logical and coherent papers, lack of personal drive to complete the project and failure to consult supervisors regularly (Cone and Foster, 1993; Mouton, 2001; Majoni and Chidakwa, 2004). Lack of finance, physical space to do uninterrupted writing as well as failure to secure leave to do research are other militating factors (Cone and Foster, 1993; Brown, 1997, and Phillips and Pugh, 2000; Majoni and Chidakwa, 2004).

Institution Related Factors
Cone and Foster (1993) list the following as critical institution related factors impacting negatively on completion of research projects by students:
1. Not having two or more graduate level statistics courses,
2. Not doing a course in test construction or measurement theory,
3. Lack of exposure to critiquing empirical research literature,
4. Not doing a course in research design,
5. Lack of exposure to at least three other persons to talk to about one’s research project experience,
6. Lack of access to bibliographical resources and
7. Lack of exposure to computers and guidelines pertaining to formal rules governing research project.

Added to these institutional factors, Sharp (1996) identified imposing research topics on the student and giving students three to six months within which to submit their research projects as factors militating against timely submission of research projects by students.

The bottom line is that a student who is about to embark on a research project should have had sufficient exposure to the entire research process. This process is inclusive of topic choice, stating the research problem and research sub-problems. Other research processes taken for granted at this point in time include the research design, population, sampling and sampling procedure, instrumentation as well as data collection, and analysis and interpretation procedures.
Students’ superficial understanding of these critical stages could impede timely completion of projects.

**Supervisor Related Factors**

Supervision is a critical element, which contributes immensely to the successful and timely completion of research projects. A research project supervisor advises the student in management of the project [quality control], guides the student through the research process [guidance], and provides the required emotional and psychological support when needed [pastoral role] (Mouton, 2001).

Research supervisors should of necessity discuss with students issues of research conduct and ethics, suggest effective use of time, avail time for close and regular contact, assist in selection of topic and guiding on relevant literature, help in deciding the theoretical framework of the study, and monitor progress according to an agreed schedule and provide constructive criticism (Cone and Foster, 1993). An effective and efficient project supervisor’s characteristics include a good track record as a scholar, experience in supervisory practices, interest in the research topic, availing time for supervision and treating the student as a peer and an equal (Mouton, 2001). Research supervisors, therefore, have a vital role to play in timely submission of research projects by undergraduate students.

**Research Methodology**

The study employed the descriptive survey method. The survey method was used in this study because it was seen to be the most appropriate approach in obtaining views from a wide range of students who had failed to submit their research projects on scheduled time and their supervisors. A structured questionnaire was used to collect data from all sampled students and supervisors. Some students and supervisors were interviewed. Interviews were chosen in order to unearth the experiences of undergraduate students and supervisors and the meaning they made of their experiences (Seidman, 1988). Students and research supervisors were also interviewed to clarify issues that respondents had raised in their responses to questionnaires. The one to one research interviews therefore were intended for giving authoritative backing of the data yielded from questionnaires.

Convenience sampling was employed in the study. The sample consisted of 50 out of 105 students in intakes 13 and 14 of B.Ed (EAPPS) (Bachelor of Education in Educational Administration Planning and Policy Studies) respectively who had not submitted their research projects by stipulated date. The students were chosen because they had the potential to help the researchers understand the phenomena under study given that they had failed to submit their research projects on time. Thirty-three male and seventeen female students aged between 30 and 50 years responded to the questionnaire. Thirty-six students were collecting data whilst fourteen were writing conclusions at the time of the deadline for submission. Other respondents to the study were 24 research project supervisors.

Questionnaires were given to supervisees when they came to see the regional co-ordinators during registration. Supervisees were issued with self-addressed envelopes, for them to post questionnaires back to the researchers. Completed questionnaires from supervisors were collected by the researchers when the supervisors came to the regional centres to do other ZOU business. There was a 100% rate of return of questionnaires.

Researchers carried out follow up interviews on some students and supervisors who came to the region on other ZOU business.

**Findings**

**Student related factors**

The time students spent doing research related work per given week ranged from 2 hours to 10 hours. This seems to be inadequate considering Cone and Foster (1993)’s recommendation of 20 hours per week. On time given to students for doing research projects, students’ responses varied from 3 months (8%), one semester (24%), two semesters (28%) to three or more semesters (nine students or 18%). Eleven students (22%) did not respond to the question. Only fourteen students (28%) knew that the research project was done over two semesters as per course regulations. Students can give due attention to research projects when they are aware of the time they are supposed to take doing the project.

Twenty students (40%) claimed to have computer keyboard skills. However, these respondents pointed out that they did not have access to
computers when they want to word process their research work. Thirty students (60%) indicated a lack of computer skills.

Most students (52%) did not consult their supervisors adequately because this is a very low frequency of consultation indeed. They were resident in places very far away from the regional centres for example, Gokwe and Mberengwa in the Midlands region and Binga in the Matebeleland North region. The observation by supervisors, on this issue however, was that students visited them on or just after their monthly paydays only. Students, therefore, ended up not adequately consulting their supervisors.

On grammar and spelling competence, students’ own rating ranged from average 74% (n=37) to good (26%) (n=13). None of the students rated their grammar and spelling competence as poor. On the other hand, none of them rated it as very good. It is interesting to note that the supervisors also rated the students as mainly average on the same issue. Sixty-four percent of the supervisors (n=15) thought the students were average and 26% (n=6) thought they were good. The students were slightly more positive about their grammar and spelling than the supervisors were.

Some of the research project supervisors’ observations captured during interviews were:

- Students had very demanding jobs that ate into their time for doing research.
- Student adult responsibilities coupled with their jobs made it difficult for them to complete their research projects on time.
- The students simply had poor time management skills as most left research until late.
- Laxity followed by last minute rush to complete the projects tended to characterise students’ research efforts.
- Students are not serious about the research project and tend to adopt a casual approach to the activity.
- Lack of commitment and or discipline on the part of students is noted.
- Low student motivational level contributes to delays in completion of research projects by undergraduate students.
- Lack of students’ preparedness is evidenced by fear of doing research projects.

What emerges from the above statements is that supervisors thought students were not ready to do a self-initiated and self-driven project. The students did not have sufficient time to do the projects because of lack of time management skills as well a heavy load of responsibilities as adults and fully employed workers. Furthermore some students waited for paydays to access library, internet and computer typing services and resources.

Table 2 Students’ rating of institutional related factors regarding late submission of research projects

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factor</th>
<th>Very Satisfactory</th>
<th>Satisfactory</th>
<th>Not Satisfactory</th>
<th>Not at all</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Statistics Course</td>
<td>2 (4%)</td>
<td>42 (84%)</td>
<td>6 (12%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
<td>50 (100%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Measurement and Test Course</td>
<td>5 (10%)</td>
<td>41 (82%)</td>
<td>3 (6%)</td>
<td>1 (2%)</td>
<td>50 (100%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exposure to Critiquing Research</td>
<td>7 (14%)</td>
<td>19 (38%)</td>
<td>21 (42%)</td>
<td>3 (6%)</td>
<td>50 (100%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Availability of Literature for Research Study Area</td>
<td>2 (4%)</td>
<td>9 (18%)</td>
<td>35 (70%)</td>
<td>4 (8%)</td>
<td>50 (100%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Availability of Research Journals</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
<td>1 (2%)</td>
<td>47 (94%)</td>
<td>2 (4%)</td>
<td>50 (100%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Availability of Books on Research Area</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
<td>15 (30%)</td>
<td>33 (66%)</td>
<td>2 (4%)</td>
<td>50 (100%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Access to Internet</td>
<td>2 (4%)</td>
<td>18 (36%)</td>
<td>26 (52%)</td>
<td>4 (8%)</td>
<td>50 (100%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exposure to ZOU rules for Research Projects</td>
<td>7 (14%)</td>
<td>43 (86%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
<td>50 (100%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
It is clear that the supervisors and students perceive the main problems leading to poor completion rates differently. For the students the main problem is time vis-à-vis work and other commitments. On the other hand, supervisors perceive the students as not taking their research work seriously and as failing to effectively manage their time.

**Institution Related Factors**

Table 2 on the previous page, shows that lack of access to journals (98%) (n=49), unavailability of literature for research study area (78%) (n=39) and unavailability of books for research area (68%) (n=35) were rated by students as critical institutional related factors militating against timely submission of research projects. Lack of access to Internet facilities (60%) (n=30) and lack of exposure to critiquing research literature (48%) (n=24) were also viewed as institutional factors militating against timely submission of research projects.

| Table 3: Supervisors’ views on courses intended to prepare students for research (n =24) |
|-----------------------------------------------|---------------|----------------|-----------------|----------------|
|                                           | Satisfactory | Quite Satisfactory | Not Satisfactory | Total          |
| Course                                     |               |                  |                 |               |
| Statistics                                 | 2 (8%)        | 20 (84%)         | 2 (8%)          | 24 (100%)     |
| Measurement and Evaluation                 | 3 (12.5%)     | 17 (70.8%)       | 4 (16.7%)       | 24 (100%)     |
| Research                                   | 8 (33.3%)     | 16 (66.7%)       | 0 (0%)          | 24 (100%)     |

From the responses by the 24 supervisors, students had been sufficiently exposed to the research fundamentals. Supervisors are apparently satisfied with the courses intended to prepare their supervisees for the research project. Forty-six students (92%) showed satisfaction with the statistics course; about 88% (n=44) showed satisfaction with the Measurement and Evaluation course and none expressed dissatisfaction with the Research course. What emerges is that students and the supervisors agree that the courses are splendid.

| Table 4: Supervisors’ views on availability of resources for students doing research n = 24 |
|---------------------------------------------------------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|
| Resource Material                                           | Readily Available | Available | Hard to come by | Total |
| Literature on research topic                                | 4 (16.7%) | 7 (29.15%) | 13 (54.15%) | 24 (100%) |
| Journals                                                    | 0 (0%)    | 4 (16.7%) | 20 (83.3%) | 24 (100%) |
| Internet material on research topics                        | 0 (0%)    | 7 (29.15%) | 17 (70.85%) | 24 (100%) |

Table 4 shows an acute shortage of journals and Internet material on students’ research topics. On institution related factors, interviewed supervisors expressed the following sentiments:

There is need for ZOU to beef-up on facilities and materials such as library materials and services, CD-ROMS and Internet as some students who fail to submit their projects on time, work very far away from the ZOU library.

There is need for students to have exposure to the Internet and to computers to enable them to access information and services.

There is reluctance on the part of institutions (especially public institutions) to give ZOU students access to information which is key to their research.

The bottom line of the supervisors’ views is that resource material for students’ research projects is hard to come by. It should be noted that there is, by and large, concurrence between students and supervisors that institutional factors militate against timely submission of research projects by undergraduate students.

**Supervisor Related Factors**

Supervisor related factors militating against the timely completion of the students’ research projects are summarised on the next page.

Table 5 shows the key factors that most students (68%) (n=34) viewed as militating against timely completion of research projects as the distance between the student and the supervisor. Poor communication with the supervisor and unavaili-
availability of the supervisor were also perceived as significant factors militating against meeting the deadline for submission. A supervisor’s response during an interview was:

There is poor decentralisation of ZOU to district centres. Decentralisation could mean that the distance between student and supervisor is reduced, consultation could be more frequent, and library could be nearer.

What is reflected in this statement is that there is a problem of distance which one feels could be reduced by use of district-based supervisors for students in the area.

**Discussion**

The study sought to find out the reasons why Bachelor of Educational Administration, Planning and Policy Studies students submitted projects late. The findings are discussed in relation to student related factors, institutional related factors, and supervisor related factors.

**Student Related Factors**

Students who failed to submit their research projects on time took very little time per week doing their research as compared to the 20 hours per week recommended by Cone and Foster (1993). In general, students and supervisors agreed that the students’ grammar and spelling competence was above average. Most students in the sample had no computer skills. Lack of finance for travelling and buying research related materials; work commitments and scarcity of library resources affected students’ research project progress. Most students consulted supervisors once a month due to lack of finance for travelling.

**Institutional Related Factors**

The ZOU has satisfactory courses in Statistics, Measurement and Evaluation and Research. Students are, however, not exposed to critiquing of research, and literature in the area of research is hard to come by. Journals, books on research with material on area of study, and Internet facilities are also hard to come by. Students confirm exposure to ZOU rules for research projects and they are made to choose their own topics. However, most of them are not aware of how long they will do their research project. A supervisor is allocated to students in time and the supervisors assist the students in shaping their research topics.

**Supervisor Related Factors**

Most of the students who failed to submit research projects on time did not attribute the failure to do so to their supervisors. Most indicated that the supervisors were available when they visited them. Students were guided in their research work and communication from supervisors was good. However, whilst supervisors were more than willing to assist them, the students’ frequency in this regard was constrained by other factors other than the supervisors.

**Conclusion and Recommendations**

The time of two semesters given to students by the university to do research work is inadequate. Cone and Foster (1993) recommend three semesters. Students’ work commitments have not been factored into this period. The work commitments that students have eat into their research time. Students have poor time-management. They leave a lot of work undone until the end of the research period and only rush to try and complete it at the last minute. Financial constraints also militate against students’ timely submission of research projects by limiting the frequency of travel to see the supervisor, by curtailing key services like the Internet, computer typing, printing and
photocopying. Students are not consulting their supervisors adequately. This is mainly because of the distance between them and their supervisors and because of the cost involved. Furthermore, students have limited access to library facilities in their vicinities. They do not have access to journals and books with material relevant to their research topics. Good Research, Statistics and Measurement and Evaluation courses are given to students. However, students are not adequately exposed to critiquing of research.

In view of the findings and conclusions above the following recommendations are made.

- Given that quite a number of undergraduate students are not completing their research projects within the two semesters as prescribed in the regulations, it would be prudent on the part of the university to consider three semesters as the time frame for doing research projects.
- Students should be exposed to time management skills prior to embarking on their research projects. This will help them to manage time correctly as they carry out research projects.
- The ZOU should speed up the establishment of district learning centres where library facilities are availed to students doing research projects. Photocopying services should also be put in place in the district centres for students at a fee.
- Internet facilities, if availed to students at district level, would reduce costs incurred by students in travelling to their supervisors. Students could e-mail their supervisors chapters they will have completed prior to the face-to-face interactions.
- The ZOU should factor into the introductory research methods course, a component on critiquing of research articles. This gives students a sound base prior to embarking on research projects.
- The ZOU should allocate supervisors who reside in the district, where possible. Part-time research tutors, if appointed by districts, could reduce financial and time costs incurred by students as they visit supervisors at regional centres. Alternatively supervisors would meet research students at district centres on scheduled dates.
- Those researchers interested in extending the study could explore these factors as they impact on different gender and possibly compare the effects of the factors regionally.
References


