Research Article

Attitude Towards Research Among Masters Students in Makerere University Business School (MUBS), Uganda

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Abstract:

This study set out to examine the Masters students' attitudes towards research component of their programme. It was conducted in Makerere University Business School (MUBS) in Uganda. A phenomenological qualitative study approach was employed. The respondents were able to narrate their stories on their own experience when undertaking research. The selection of the 17 respondents who participated in this study was done using purposive technique. To be selected as a respondent in this study, one had to be a student of MUBS pursuing an MBA programme and had to have completed the coursework component of their work but had delayed in the programme due to failure to complete their research component in time. The student had to still being engaged in research without having sought a "dead period", an official period of withdrawal before resumption, or having internally decided to give the course a break. The findings revealed that the students' attitudes towards research was mainly influenced by supervision, the students' own abilities and their new environment at times causing anxiety and discomfort. Considering the results, it is recommended that the Business school be flexible in terms of selection of supervisors and also come up with adequate orientation programme on research.

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INTRODUCTION

People undergo a process of interpreting their encounters with their environment which forms an attitude. In so doing, they form different perspectives which may enhance or reduce their progress. This takes the cognitive, affective and behavioural perspectives, to produce an attitude towards objects, people, or events (Robbins & Guest, 2017). Positive attitudes are an indicator that a person in question, believes that what they are engaged in is worthwhile. Such an attitude thus, serves to emit positive energies and motivation to pursue a given (Pickens, 2005).

A review of completion rates among students in graduate schools, strongly suggests that an inquest on the attitude of students towards research would be vital in informing the possible interventions to better the rates. Notably, worldwide there is concern over a large number of students that fail to complete the research component of their graduate studies in time, leading to delayed graduation or attrition (Rakes, Dunn & Rakes, 2013). Surprisingly, the said delay have been found to affect students from both the developed and developing world. In the developed world, a study conducted in US for instance found that students pursuing a master's spent an average of four years instead of the 2.5 (Anguino, 2010). Another study in Canada also revealed that in one university, by the year 2003 only 54% of the students pursuing a master's programme completed after 10 years.

In sub-Saharan Africa, statistics show that students undertaking a master's programme scheduled for duration of two years take an average of between three to four years, while those pursuing a three year PhD take an average of nine years (Omanga, 2017). In the Ugandan, the context of interest for this study, an earlier study conducted in Makerere University Business School (MUBS) found that the students who had enrolled for MBA between the years 2001-2006, 87% had failed to complete their studies in the minimum expected time of two years (Eyangu, Bagire and Kibrai, 2014). More recent results further showed that in MBA, which is the major programme in MUBS, the students that had not graduated in time were 95% in 2015, 95% in 2016 and 94% in 2017 (Makerere University, 2018). Surprisingly, majority of these students had successfully completed their course work component of their programme and thus the research component which is compulsory, largely explained the delay.

Delayed completion by students in graduate programmes has a serious impact on the effectiveness of African universities. A university like MUBS for example, increases annual intake for students in its master's programme without an equally proportionate increase of resources (Eyangu et al., 2014). With such an increase added to the backlog of students who fail to complete their studies in time, the universities suffer a strain on its service provider personnel like the supervisors and the key infrastructure like libraries and information technology which are vital for research. It is therefore not surprising that, if the situation is not reversed, then the trend would worsen.

Interventions aimed at improving completion among graduate students would partly entail understanding, the students' attitude towards about the whole research component. This is so since the available literature indicates that when students demonstrate negative attitude towards research, they demonstrate negative energies, keep on procrastinating, and eventually fail to complete their studies in time (Ahern & Manathunga, 2004). The interest of this study was therefore to conduct a scholarly work through an in-depth study to assess the attitude of students undertaking graduate studies in the Ugandan context with a view to shedding more light to the key stakeholders since it may help them initiate strategies that may improve performance.

Students' Attitude towards research

Attitude is a terminology that has been defined as judgmental phrases that a person has over an object, person or event under review (Robbins & Judge, 2017). Overall, a person may have a positive or negative attitude towards something. Students undertaking research as part of an examinable course unit may have positive attitude which implies that they judge the process as exciting, energising, and rewarding affair (Choy, Cheung & Li, 2006). The motivation to undertake the current study however, arose from the concern of a large number of graduate students who delay in their research work suggesting that their attitude tends towards negative.

Given the fact that attitude is build, it is worthwhile to identify its building blocks since interventions to positively influence attitude would largely rely on the same. Notably, a number of studies have consistently shown that students' attitude towards research has been instrumental in determining their success. In one of earlier studies for instance, Rothblum, Solomon and Murakami (1986) observed many graduate students that had delayed their studies demonstrated strange behaviours that involved anxiety which led to academic procrastination. Similarly, Bills (2004) found that the graduate students from University of Southern Australia, who either delayed or dropped out of their studies, advanced issues relating to supervision and conceptualisation of the topic as areas of concern. In respect to supervisors, it emerged that the students who easily progressed in their research indicated that they had a positive relationship with the earlier. However, most of the students who failed to complete their work in time had a challenge with the supervisors to the extent that, some had irreconcilable differences which necessitated a change of a supervisor a situation that took some more time. In terms of the conceptualisation of a topic, the students that who had delayed to complete their studies, had a hard time making several changes, a situation that led to giving up by some of them. In general, the said victims ended up demonstrating a generally negative attitude towards research process.

Equally, students' personal competences have also been found to influence their attitude towards research. In this respect, students who lack previous exposure in research are likely to experience challenges on conceptualisations and also articulating researchable

issues (Segawa & Rwelamila, 2009). This was for instance to be so in a review of the delayed completion of graduate studies in Sub Saharan Africa that found that academic writing skills was a major limitation of students' progress (Omanga, 2017). Given the fact that such students have to constantly revise their work, some of them may end up having a negative attitude towards research.

Further, the research environment has been found to influence the student's attitude where positive results have been registered. For instance, in a study on students pursuing post graduate studies in the University of Oxford, over 70% of students agreed they were satisfied with the quality of their research experience (Trigwell & Dunbar-Goddet, 2006). In particular, supervision was viewed as being supportive and the department as having an intellectual climate which entailed the adequacy of reference material and supportive staff. This was in support of an earlier study that had that had advanced the view that the supervision style, the perceived competence of supervisors and the intellectual climate of an environment affected the students' attitude towards research (Buttery, Richter & Filho, 2005). Again, in a related study conducted in the US, positive social environment under which a student operates during the research period yielded positive attitude (Gardner, 2008). In the study, it was revealed that where the students interacted with each other and a strong bond with the faculty community, positive affect and also positive energy outcomes were realised. On the contrary the students, who were working on their own, reportedly experienced social isolation which at times negatively impacted on their vigour to complete research.

It has also been found that the potential benefit associated with research, other than academic grade, have a share in influencing students attitude. In a study conducted in US, a group of undergraduate students were enthusiastic about research since they believed that they stood a better chance to add to their experience that would enhance their chances of getting jobs and also working with a mentor (Tykot et al., 2014).

In the university that formed the context of this study, a recent study suggests that there exists a high level of negative energy among the graduate students explaining a condition that majority of students in the school fail to complete their study in time and the main reason is their failure to complete the research component (Eyangu et al., 2014). The study examined completion rates of students pursuing MBA programme between 2001 and 2006, 82.6% of the student were found to have failed to complete their studies within time. Among the issues that were raised to explain the aforementioned state of affairs, was the dissatisfaction with supervision and inadequate support from the institution and also their work places which indicate a negative experience of the whole process. Unfortunately, despite the said observation, the performance has not improved in the subsequent years. Particularly, a review of the available data showed that in 2015, MBA students that had not graduated in time were 95%, 95% in 2016 and 94% in 2017 (Makerere University, 2018). While the said study had not taken the attitude as a tool of evaluation, there is an indication

that some students appear resigned and have posted negative attitude which would require to be changed if positive results are to be expected.

Conclusively, there have been a world-wide concern over the delay in completion of graduate studies. In many studies, students have been found to have had spent more than the minimum time in the research component of their programme. As a result, scholars have attempted to understand why the students delay in research and the possible interventions. A critical assessment of the widely shared factors suggest in accumulation, the factors build an attitude which then influence the success rates. However, not many studies specifically examined the graduate students' attitude towards research. More so, this scarcity is well pronounced African continent and Uganda in particular hence the need to undertake this study.

METHOD

In this study, qualitative phenomenological approach was deemed appropriate and was thus adopted. Such an approach helps to understand a phenomenon in question from the respondent's perspective. It also provides an in-depth account of life experiences and gives meaning (Burns & Grove, 2009). This approach was suitable for this study since the aim was to understand the students' lived experiences, feelings, and judgement about their research journey which is a compulsory component of their graduate studies.

The data was collected using a semi-structured interviews. This entailed some common shared open ended questions that was posed to all participants, and at the same time providing an allowance pose other questions where clarity was needed (Creswell, 2014). The method also gave the respondents a chance to add more information that they deemed appropriate. In order to enhance the validity of the questions in the interview guide, three experts who are members of National Council for Higher Education in Uganda were provided with the initial protocol for review. Their major proposal to frame the questions a way that avoids possible feelings of guilt since the respondents to this study were students who had taken longer than the set period for completion of their studies. Their observations were incorporated and the final interview guide was as follows.

Interview protocol

In this interview, we request you to share your experiences in your research journey this far.
May you please share with me your research experience so far..............................
What are some of the key issues that you feel have had a significant impact on your progress so far?....
What are some experiences that your friends may have shared with you about their experiences in research?.....
What other important thing would you want to share about your research so far?...............

Participants

This study focused on the students taking MBA graduate programme at MUBS Uganda who had successfully completed their course work component of their study but had delayed in the research component which is compulsory in the institution. In total, 17 respondents participated who were selected using purposive technique. Purposive technique involves choosing a particular group of people that satisfy a given criteria (Creswell, 2014). An inclusion criteria was employed to ensure that the each participant was a student enrolled on an MBA, had successfully completed the coursework component of their study, but had delayed on their research component. Again the student had to have commenced their research component and was thus not on the official and unofficial academic deferral. The principle of point of data saturation was employed to determine the actual number of the participants. This was achieved after the 17th respondent given that no new information gained.

Instruments

An interview guide was prepared to help in data collection. The guide contained a set of predetermined questions that mainly aimed at assessing the students' experiences and their judgements towards the same. It also provided room for further probing.

Procedure

The study involved conducting face to face interview with each respondent at their specific time. All the interviews were conducted within the university MUBS. The average time spent with each interviewee was one and a half hours. Upon request, all the respondents accepted to have the interviews recorded was done using smart phones. One of the two interviewers would take short notes mainly on the respondents' non-verbal cues that could not be captured by the smart phone.

Ethical considerations

Research ethics principles demand that a researcher upholds values and moral standards, act in a professional manner, protect and respect the participants' welfare (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). In a qualitative research, the respondents share their experience, which may sometimes include sensitive information and thus an extra care, is required (Creswell, 2014). In this study, the respondents were to share some critical information that needed to be treated with utmost confidentiality.

To ensure that the said principles are followed the researchers clearly introduced themselves to the respondents. Official invitation was made to potential respondents. All the respondents that agreed to participate were requested to sign an informed consent forms. They were informed that participation was voluntary. During the interviews time, a verbal introduction was also made to explain the purpose of the study. They were also informed of their right to withdraw at any time of the study without necessarily giving

reason. A requested to have an audio record of the interviews was made. Again a promise and commitment to keep their identities anonymous was made and kept.

Data Analysis

A content analysis (Hseih & Shannon, 2005) for this study. This analysis was very popular for analysing hymns, newspaper and magazine articles, advertisements and political speeches in the 19th century (Harwood & Garry, 2003) but its use has now been expanded to cover research areas in communication, journalism, sociology, psychology and business.

The recorded work was transcribed verbatim. This formed the content that was then reviewed and analysed according to emerging themes. A theme that was advanced over 7 respondents was highlighted.

Researchers' Role

When conducting a qualitative study, a researcher is part of the instrument and actively participates in attempting to understand what the respondents mean (Creswell, 2012). Such participation is therefore likely to introduce bias, and therefore a deliberate effort to reduce such bias is called for (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). The researchers for this study had prior knowledge of the challenges that the students undertaking graduate research in MUBS were going through. In order not to seek to confirm such views, a commitment to remain neutral and avoid any sort of guiding questions was made and followed through. The respondents to narrate their own story and avoided making comparison of the previous narratives that the researchers had come across.

Trustworthiness of the Results

It is expected that trustworthiness in a qualitative study, which is equivalent to validity and reliability in a quantitative study, is obtained if the results are to be reliable (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). To ensure this was achieved, the guidelines advanced by Guba and Lincoln(1994) were followed. This included ensuring a prolonged engagement with the respondents, keeping an audit trail of all the information collected including notes, asking probing questions, and comparing the data with the available written records in the MUBS library.

RESULTS

A number of issues were advanced as important factors that influenced the students' attitude as elaborated under the following subheadings:

Generating a Research Topic

According to the respondents, nervousness dominates the period of coming up with a topic. Majority of the respondents argued that they barely had an idea of an appropriate research topic. Indeed, many of them had over three research topic ideas but upon scrutiny they later learnt that few would pass for a researchable topic. At a certain point some students would get frustrated after all the topics they had in mind were rejected by their supervisors. To some this took them over a period of two months.

In one narration a student said,*"….. in the beginning, I had about five topics in mind. However, upon sharing each of them with my supervisor, none of the ideas would translate into a researchable topic that would fit within my scheduled time. Therefore I had to start all over again. After this I took two months before my topic was accepted. I have some colleagues who faced a similar challenge…."*

Another student narrated,*"…… I selected my topic but when I shared it with my supervisor, he flatly rejected my topic without giving an explanation. Instead he told me that if I wanted to research on the topic, I would have to request for another supervisor. I felt discouraged because the supervisor forced a research topic on me which was not my choice. However, I had to do it since I had limited options…….."*

Another one had this to say *", There are students from Netherlands who visit our university annually to undertake research in Uganda…When these students visit our country, students from MUBS are selected to act as interpreters when need be.. I was among the MUBS students that were selected to help them. As part of the package, we were encouraged to develop our research proposals and we conduct the research together which we would then use for our research component. I thus prepared my topic and joined them. This was done before our official research component course commenced. However, when I later presented the same topic to my official supervisor, he rubbished the whole work and I had to start afresh. This took me over a month……."*

In yet another response a participant narrated. *"……I developed a topic which my supervisor agreed. However, after I had worked a great deal on my literature review, the lead supervisor suggestively said, 'can you examine this topic……. It sounds good and not many people have researched on it'. Since our supervisors' suggestions are like a command, this amounted to an indirectly imposed topic and I had to start afresh after three months.''*

Supervision

Relationship with Supervisors

Majority of the respondents indicated that dealing with supervisors was a delicate and one needs to be careful not to fall into problems. They elaborated that to a large extent, supervisors expects a patriarch treatment and any deviation from this norm would be detrimental to the students' progress. Again, availability of the supervisors, mode of

supervision and the time that the supervisors would be available was an issue of concern to many students.

In responding to this one student said, "….*We respect our supervisors very much and this is necessary if you are to make progress… However, some of them go overboard. I in particular fell into trouble, when my supervisor had approved a section of my work and went ahead with another chapter. However, in my next meeting with the supervisor after two weeks, he re-read my work and completely altered the part he had previously approved. When I brought this to his attention and attempted to protest, he became angry and arrogant and then told me that he can still rubbish the same work next time…..I apologised but then I decided to rest for a month after that before I met him again…''*

Another respondent pointed out that,*"…… It is just simple. Understand your supervisor and treat them accordingly. I learnt this late after I had lost too much time. At times I meet my supervisor in a hotel and buy refreshments. I have now made progress. He now helps me align my work. Although it may sound unethical, I need to complete my studies and leave ….. "*

Being Assigned Two Supervisors

Each student is assigned two supervisors and majority of students felt this was a source of stress. Majority of the respondents argued that two supervisors appear to create more confusion rather than add value. This is so since each supervisor needs to be regarded for who they are and also want to have their impact felt. They sometimes contradict each other making it hard for a student to decide what to do or even to strike a balance. The student also at tomes fails to know whether the supervisor should guide and advice or command the student.

One respondent narrated, *'' I have these two supervisors and both are PhD holders. It is rare to be assigned two supervisors who are at the same academic level but it sometimes happens….In a normal occasion, the lead supervisor has a bigger say and the junior supervisor normally helps to identify a few flaws in students work. Whichever the case, you have to adhere to each supervisor's requirement. .. the challenge I face now is that both of my supervisors always appear to contradict each other…. I have so far failed to reconcile each the supervisor's requirement. For instance, I am stuck with my background and the statement of problem. While the first one was okay with what I did in my background, after about three weeks, my second supervisor recommended I completely change the background and restate the problem statement. At this point I got stuck……..I mean, students get stuck when they have two irreconcilable demand from two supervisors who hold similar qualifications because each want you to follow what they say….."*

Another one noted, *".....I believe having two supervisors wastes a lot of my time. While my first supervisor is accessible and good, my second supervisor doesn't have time for me and keeps on changing the appointment time. I have tried to reach her on several occasions but it appears she is too busy. ...... If it was within my choice, I wouldn't wish to have two supervisors.''*

Further, another respondent noted, ".... *It appears that I got a combination of supervisors who do not work together harmoniously. Whenever I meet one supervisor first, the other one tries to identify errors and instead of helping me she just wonders how the other supervisor would allow me does that. This is what has been happening to me….".*

The Faculty of Graduate Studies and Rresearch (GRC) Choosing the Supervisors on Behalf of Students

The respondents raised an issue of the faculty choosing the supervisors on behalf of the students. This at times leads to students being assigned supervisors that they don't get along with leading to a stressful relationship.

On this, one respondent felt that the supervisors were imposed on them and they did not like the way GRC accords supervisors. ''..... *I unofficially had approached a supervisor and shared with her my topic. I expected that she would be subsequently be assigned to me. I had selected her as my first choice since we propose up to four supervisors. However, she was not among the supervisors that I was assigned. My lead supervisor was not among the one that I had selected….I tried to protest but the response I received from the office is that for as long as the supervisors I was assigned were competent, there was no way they would be changed. I was disappointed with this..*"

Another one noted, "…..*In this campus, there are some lecturers whom students fear and given a choice, majority of the students would not select them. There are many reasons for that….. so when one is assigned them as their supervisors and since there is no option of appeal, one has to suffer…..*".

Research as a Lonely Journey

Majority of the respondents viewed the whole process as one dominated by loneliness and that requires commitment and sacrifice. Although they agreed that the presence of supervisors make the journey more bearable, the sudden break from the life they have been used to of working in groups and teams during the course work component of their study leaves them isolated. The respondents argued that it takes time to get used to the new reality. Thus, given the fact that students break away from their usual study methods and now embark on a largely individual struggle, they find it difficult to get used.

One respondents observed, '' ... *When you are working as a group, you have a chance to brain storm and build up ideas. .. In research, you are alone... It makes the whole exercise challenging...*''

Another one said, "*I used to be with my friends but after some time we parted ways. I now no longer call them also..........It's a lonely affair.*''

In yet another response a participant said, " ...*Since the moment I started my research, I have had little time for my family, religious services, friends….*"

DISCUSSION

Generating a Research Topic

The students admitted that due to lack of previous exposure of research, they found it difficult to come up with a researchable topic and challenging. The findings indicate that the students normally have general ideas of topics without knowing whether they researchable or not. Students' own weaknesses in academic writing was also found to frustrate their effort when undertaking research leading to numerous rejection of their piece of work. The findings support what Segawa and Rwelamila (2009) had identified as a key cause of negative attitude towards research by Makerere University students. Many of the students experience difficulties in key conceptualisation which makes them fail to progress fast a fact that leads to demoralisation. Challenges with academic writing has widely been recorded as a major challenge among graduate students especially when they use a language other than their mother tongue. Numerous studies have found international students pursuing graduate studies in countries like USA (Cennetkuşu, 2014; Holmes et al., 2018), Pakistan (Yasmin, Saeed & Ahmad, 2018) and Malaysia (Sigh, 2014), among others experienced difficulties in academic writing using a second language which delayed their progress. In Africa, academic writing is a challenge to many since students normally use a second language for instruction and writing and are rarely involved in a rigorous academic writing until they enrol for graduate studies. It is thus not a surprise that students would develop a negative attitude when their weakness is continuously exposed and are thus forced to make changes in their work.

Supervision

The issue of supervision was found to be a serious one. The students appear to squarely lay their progress or lack of it on their supervisors. This finding suggests that supervisors are key players to the students' research and are thus instrumental in determining the latters' progress. The respondents in particular cited a more of top-bottom relationship that exist in their relationship with their supervisors and an aspect of submissiveness. This offers a more context-specific result which unsurprisingly can be said to apply in Uganda where traditional norms and patriarch form of custom exist. There is a presumed norm that as long as one is in a position of authority, they expect and deserve unqualified submission (Quinn, 2014). Regardless of the context differences however, the findings support previous scholarly works that have found student-supervisor relationship is vital for progress in research among graduate students. For instance, Trigwell and Dunbar-Goddet (2006) observed that the students who reported satisfaction with their research experience mentioned the quality, competence and ability to work along well with their supervisors as being important to their experience. Similarly, Bills (2004) found that

the students who had a challenge with the supervisors were among the category of students who took long to finish their studies.

Further, the findings indicate that the students felt burdened to have more than one supervisor some of who contradict each other making the students research experience challenging. The student felt that balancing the demands of two supervisors whose ideas are contrasting complicates their research experience. Such findings were observed by Enyangu et al. (2014) who observed that students felt pressurised by the demand to have two supervisors. Further, given the findings that suggests that students in the context under review are under the top-bottom relationship, the supervisors appear to be supervisors in the conventional work then, the principle of unit of command ought to have been observed. Unity of command requires that a subordinate reports to only one supervisor (Marume & Jubenkanda, 2016).It is thus not surprising that the students reported dissatisfaction with two supervisors who seem to wield substantial amount of power and some have conflicting expectations.

Again, the findings indicated that the Faculty's decision to choose supervisors on behalf of students is sometimes confusing. Imposing supervisors on students was identified as stressing and the attempt to change has been rejected. When the students discover that some of the supervisors they were given is not committed and their attempt to have them changed rejected, such students gets confused. The findings support the observations made by Bills (2004) that the failure to work well with supervisors contributed largely to negative evaluations of research experience by students.

Research Being a Lonely Journey

It also emerged that the respondents felt lonely in the process of carrying their research component. This was so since as it emerged, the students have to adjust from the immediate former study style that largely demanded them to work as teams and in groups. This finding were also noted to provide a contrast in the work of Trigwell and Dunbar-Goddet (2006) who found the students that reported to have a satisfying research experience as ones who had a supportive department and environment which ensured that the students were not lonely in their journey.

LIMITATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study only attracted 17 respondents. This size only gives an insight of the situation but cannot allow generalisation of the results. The study only applied a qualitative approach. Such an approach rarely provides the results that are generalisable.

There is therefore an opportunity of conducting a similar study using a mixed method. This is likely to give generalisable results. There is also an opportunity of conducting a

similar study in other institutions that has students pursuing graduate studies. This would enable comparison of results.

Given the above findings, the faculty of graduate studies need to consider the student's preferences of supervisors rather than merely and matching student with a supervisor that is competent in the topic of choice. There are possible gains in flexing the requirement for a change of supervisor in case a relationship breakdown occurs. It also emerges that the Faculty should ensure that the students are prepared well enough to ensure that they are ready to carry on individual research. Finally, if it was possible to allow students to work in teams and be examined jointly in addition to the current individual research would possible solve some of the attitude challenges.

CONCLUSION

This study set out to examine the attitude of the research component of the students pursuing graduates studies at MUBS. The 17 selected respondents gave an insight of how they felt and noted that anxiety, feelings of loneliness and being stressed by either the supervisors or the decisions made by the faculty of graduate studies make them have low morale and not enjoy the whole process of research.

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