



The Perceptions of Students Who Dropped Out of their Doctoral Studies from Three Universities in Zimbabwe and their Implications for Practice

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Author's contribution

The sole author designed, analysed, interpreted and prepared the manuscript.

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of the study was to investigate the perception of students who dropped out of their Doctoral studies in three Zimbabwean universities. A qualitative research design was adopted. The data was collected from social net work groups and telephone interviews with 25 doctoral students who dropped out from their studies. The researcher held follow up open ended interviews with doctoral students who had dropped out. The qualitative data was analyzed thematically. The study established students who dropped out of their studies perceived that failure by institutions to address student-supervisor relationships, inadequate funding, addressing needs of underprepared students, lack of emotional support, lack of experience among supervisors and use of traditional approaches were main causes of students drop out. This study is the first of its kind in Zimbabwe to collect evidence from students who dropped out of their studies to inform doctoral training. The study recommended continuous professional development among supervisors, holding of constant workshops focusing on roles, guidelines on good practices on doctoral training, ensuring that supervisors are accessible; they provide timely feedback in a constructive way. The study further recommended fair and just approaches to handling of problems or grievances related to doctoral research supervision and provision of research grants to assist underprivileged students to complete their studies.

Keywords: *Mentoring; supervision; attrition; underprepared; interpersonal relationship.*

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1. INTRODUCTION

The Zimbabwe government has introduced three new focus areas for Higher and Tertiary education which are technology and innovation in addition to teaching, research and community service. The transformation is anticipated to promote industrialization and production of goods and services locally. The success of this vision is dependent on ability by Higher and Tertiary education institutions in Zimbabwe to sustain the growth of knowledge generation through research. Unfortunately, the vision to innovate and industrialize cannot be achieved unless the rate of attrition among doctoral students is reduced.

2. BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

Studies have established that 50% of the doctoral students who registered to study for doctoral studies do not complete their studies in most Southern African Universities [1]. The dropout rate has been attributed to failure by institutions to attend to the circumstances surrounding the dynamics of doctoral research supervision process [2] (Roberts, 2021). Studies have cited the environment [3], attitude [4], lack of experienced supervisors [5], ineffective and inappropriate supervision (Roberts, 2021), unhealthy supervisor- student relationships and aptitude of doctoral students [6], experience and training of supervisors [2]. Studies have, however, indicated that the completion of doctoral studies on time was a great achievement for both students and lecturers as it helped to build the reputation of the universities that hosted the doctoral students [4,7] and their ranking [8]. Therefore, there was a need to find ways of arresting the dropout rate so that more doctoral students would graduate and lift the rating of Zimbabwean universities.

An analysis of self- reports from supervisors [9], doctoral students who completed their studies and doctoral students who were delayed in completing their studies indicated that unhealthy supervisor- student relationships forced most doctoral students to opt out of their doctoral programmes (Roberts, 2021). Yet, very little is known on what caused most of the doctoral students to drop out of their doctoral studies prematurely because there is insufficient scientific research evidence collected from those students to inform doctoral student training from

the perspective of the students who dropped out [3].

3. STATEMENT OF PROBLEM

The back ground of the study highlighted that the environment [3], attitude [4], lack of experienced supervisors [5], ineffective and inappropriate supervision (Roberts, 2021), unhealthy supervisor- student relationships and aptitude of doctoral students [6], experience and training of supervisors [2] was attributed to attrition of doctoral students. The studies were based on feedback from research supervisors, students who were delayed to complete their studies on time and those who completed [3]. Yet, very little is known on what caused most of the doctoral students to drop out of their doctoral studies prematurely because there is insufficient scientific research evidence collected from those students to inform doctoral student training from the perspective of the students who dropped out. Therefore, the current study seeks to investigate the perceptions of doctoral students who dropped out of their doctoral studies to fill the gap.

4. AIM OF THE STUDY

The aim of the study is to investigate the perceptions of doctoral students who dropped out of their doctoral studies from three universities in Zimbabwe

5. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

- Assess student attitudes towards the research process
- Identify the challenges faced by doctoral students who dropped out of their studies
- Examine how challenges could be addressed

6. MAIN RESEARCH QUESTION

What were the perceptions of doctoral students who dropped out of their studies during doctoral research training supervision period in three Universities in Zimbabwe.

6.1 Sub -Research Questions

How do doctoral students who drop out from their respective programs articulate their experiences with their supervisors?

How did the experiences affect their perception of doctoral training?

How do students feel the supervisor –supervisee relationship can be improved?

7. THEORETICAL AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

There is no single theoretical framework that can explain student research supervision holistically. Student research supervision is based on a number of theoretical underpinnings. Although, most supervision relationships are known to be stressful, with persistent encouragement, support guidance, most students who succeeded give credit to their supervisors helping them to achieve their goals. Roberts and Ferro-Almeida (2019)'s tough love theory is driven by the principle that supervisors should set high standards to motivate doctoral to think critically and be more creative. Tough can work effectively if it is based on the assessment of the student 's ability and potential. If the standard set is pitched beyond the potential and ability of the doctoral students, most students would simply drop out. Therefore, it can be inferred from this principle that doctoral students need to be gradually weaned off after going through effective mentoring process to capacitate and inspire them to generate knowledge [1].

Previous studies [1] established that most supervisors felt it their duty to set out high standards to excite and inspire students intellectual so that they could stretch their student's cognitive abilities to produce quality work. Unfortunately, if this was not handled well, students would totally be discouraged by such, especially from mechanical supervisors. In support of this view, Malcolm Knowles (1980) propounded that Doctoral students are adults who should take responsibility for their own leaning and are motivated by setting their own performance standards.

8. LITERATURE REVIEW

In the developed world, the pace of economic development, industrialization and innovation are consistent with the number of researchers produced by universities. The World Bank Group [10] reported that in countries such as Malaysia, the university system produces 1,643 researchers per million people whilst Japan produces 5,158 researchers per million people. However, the situation in developing countries is

rather different as only 50% of the registered doctoral students graduate per period of four years [1]. The high number of drop outs and failure by doctoral students to complete their studies on time is attributed to lack of good and effective doctoral supervisors [2]. This study was based on a survey among mentors for doctoral students, it was not based on the perceptions of the doctoral students themselves. This study therefore focuses on both negative and positive feedback from doctoral students who dropped out. It is envisaged that improving success rate can be achieved if the views from disgruntled students are analyzed and given due attention. Therefore, the current study seeks to investigate the perceptions of doctoral students who dropped out of their doctoral studies.

According to Masek and Alias [2], most doctoral students failed to withstand a hostile supervisor-supervisee relationship. In extreme cases, a hostile supervisor-supervisee relationship can lead to stress and in severe cases, it can result in loss of life [11]. For instance, psychosocial ills can cause students to withdraw from studies; it affects their mental wellbeing, negatively affects level of confidence; leads to attrition, suicide and abuse of substances among affected students [12].

In low income countries, such as Zimbabwe almost all doctoral students pay very high fees to acquire doctoral degrees [13]. Thus, having a doctoral qualification is not optional but it is an important step in creating opportunities for making individuals more competitive in the job market [2]. Hence, any challenges encountered by students when they commit to study are regarded as drawbacks in people 's attempts towards self -growth and economic emancipation [1].

Studies carried out by Choi (2020) show that the success of any supervision relationship was hinged on degree of self-motivation of the mentee and ability by the supervisor to create successful interpersonal and inspiring relationship [14]. Both the mentee and the supervisor had a critical role to play in the success of such a relationship [15]. As has been alluded to earlier, most of studies have focused on effective research supervision [2] and how to produce quality research output [1]. Yet, very little attention has been paid on what students who dropped out saw as the cause of failure to complete their studies.

The discourse on E-learning shows that very few universities were offering online degree programmes in the region (Chinangure & Mapaire, 2017). Meaning that the traditional approaches, where supervision of students was conducted using face-to-face methods were still the norm. The use of face-to-face mentoring in higher education was very popular in countries such as Zimbabwe due to challenges of power outages and network connectivity problems (Chinangure & Mapaire, 2017). Yet, in that context the supervisor has to ensure that the student is provided with the necessary research and academic writing skills as well as psychosocial support. The differences between the two is that research and academic writing skills foster enrichment and provision of the necessary resources while psychosocial support consists of creation of interpersonal relationships to enhance a mentee's sense of proficiency, identity, and role effectiveness [16].

Most Scholars concur that of the students who qualify for doctoral studies and university education in general need additional support to enhance their chances of success [11]. It is assumed that if given the necessary assistance and support no student will drop out or fail to finish their studies on time [11]. Hence, to produce quality research output, the supervision process should focus on competencies that make doctoral students' independent researchers in the future [2].

Research findings indicated that 50% of the students who dropped out of their studies experienced insufficient supervision [2]. Studies by Masek & Alias [2] found that fit in personality of the student and supervision style of the supervisor were critical for the success of a supervision relationship. Students who completed their doctoral studies largely complained of challenges between them and their supervisors [17]. Most of the challenges were attributed to a mismatch between the supervision style and student personality [2]. It was important to ensure that supervisor's mentoring style and student learning style were matched appropriately by facilitating a health relationship between the two.

Doctoral training in many developing countries, particularly in Africa, has been described as a discourse of crisis and scarcity [18]. Based on this claim, it is evident that most doctoral students dropped out or were delayed to complete studies due to inexperienced

supervisors, ineffective and inappropriate supervision [5]. Effective doctoral training should transform a doctoral student from a dependent to an independent researcher (Choi,2020). An independent researcher is that individual who is a self-directed student and an independent thinker (Choi, 2020). In countries such as Zimbabwe, most university programmes are exam driven (Chinangure & Chindanya, 2019). It follows therefore that doctoral students from this country face a mammoth task in managing the transition from being a dependent scholar to an independent scholar.

9. METHODOLOGY

The aim of the study was to investigate the perceptions of 25 doctoral students who dropped out of their doctoral studies from three universities in Zimbabwe. A qualitative research design was seen appropriate for the study. According to Tetnowski (2015) a qualitative research design makes it possible to gain an insight into real-life and natural conditions that affect a group of people. Therefore, this study focused on students who dropped out from their doctoral studies in order to gain an insight into why they dropped. As such, the students were asked to reflect on their doctoral supervision experiences and why they decided to pull out through in-depth telephone interviews. Targeting students would avail useful feedback from the perspectives of students who dropped out to inform doctoral training processes.

The students who dropped out in the last two years from the date of this study made up the sample. The names and contact details of the students were obtained from the student records of each of the three universities after obtaining permission from the institutions. The data was collected through open ended online interviews with the students and it was analysed through the thematic approach. This process was carried out after the researcher was given permission by the relevant ministry and the university authorities.

10. RESULTS

It is important to note that the data was obtained through responses to the following questions that guided the conversation: Describe your experiences during your doctoral training? What caused you to drop out of your studies? How did the experiences affect your perception of doctoral training? If you were asked to run the programme what would you do better?

The perceptions were drawn from the experiences the students went through. The descriptions were developed into themes that were based on views about the 1.insitutions, 2.the supervisors, 3.student-supervisor relationships,4. preparedness 5. students, 6.funding, 7.communication and 8.feelings. Almost every participant indicated that at some point they experienced some unpleasant experience that affected them psychologically. The themes are supported by what the participants pointed out.

Theme 1 Funding

Most doctoral students' self- fund for their doctoral studies. Unnecessary delays naturally push doctoral students out of their studies. Some supervisors went out of the country and came back after several semesters forcing students to re-register. This practice created unnecessary financial burden on the students. To corroborate this view students had this to say:

I was told by my supervisor that he would not be back any soon.I had to wait for feed back until I had to concentrate on selling goods on the flee market.When he came back and asked to see me, registration fees were needed .The fees had gone up three fold and it became difficult for me to re-register.Idecided to pull out and joined when lhad raised enough fees (Student Participant 23).

Theme 2 Underprepared students

In another interview, the doctoral students who dropped out showed that they enrolled for doctoral studies when they were under prepared to study. They needed a lot of training on how to argue and present their ideas logically. Some of the students had to incur costs of hiring some people to write the dissertations for them. The supervisors were not patient enough to address the students' knowledge and skills gap. To corroborate the views students had to say:

This issue of academic writing was a serious challenge. I was not invited to any workshops to develop my reading and presentation skills (Participant 17).

My supervisor complained a lot about the poor quality of my work. Each time she said my language was atrocious. I had to hire someone to write the dissertation for me until

I could not keep up with payments for extra assistance. (Participant 10).

My supervisor indicated that I lacked basic research skills when lasked him to assist as much as he could he indicated that he suspected that I had hired people to write my masters dessetation (Participant 13).

The culture of treating students like people who do not think destroys student's initiative and creativity and they end up reproducing their supervisor's work. I am sorry to say this but I think my freedom of expression and rights as a student were compromised (Participant 14).

Theme 3 Communication

The participants revealed that personal characteristics of the supervisors were critical in the success of the doctoral training process. The nature of communication reflected either friendly or hostile attitude. One participant quoted the feedback that came from the supervisor which said:

The spellings and sentence construction are atrocious. If you continue submitting unrevised work, I will ask you to stop. You are not doctoral material (Participant 1).

How did you qualify for this programme? This my first time to supervise such a useless student. To avoid distress, I simply pulled out (Participant 3).

Many a time the comments that he used to pass orally when I went to his office with my work were meant to destroy my ego. This feeling is still haunting me and it is like students owe it to their supervisors in order to pass when they do not deserve (Participant 14).

Theme 4 Abusive supervisor -student relationship

The participants complained about emotional, verbal and physical abuse by their supervisors. The abuse destroyed students' ego and self-confidence. The students simply pulled out as they felt they were unsuitable and incapable of achieving what was expected of them. The following statements help to demonstrate what the students felt.

Many a time the comments that he used to pass orally when I went to his office with my work were meant to destroy my ego. This feeling is still haunting me and it is like students owe it to their supervisors in order to pass when they do not deserve (Participant 14).

The culture of treating students like people who do not think destroys student's initiative and creativity and they end up reproducing their supervisor's work. I am sorry to say this but I think my freedom of expression and rights as a student were compromised (Participant 54).

Theme 5 Student lecturer personality fit

The interviews participants showed that supervisors did not respond to their preferred learning styles. Instead, the supervisors' mentoring style did not create opportunities for independent learning that support the individual learning styles of doctoral students. Most supervisors were not tolerant to the different views and approaches from their supervisees. The supervisors should be prepared to share students' views and appreciate that students can view issues differently. Consider the statement given by participants.

My supervisor was not happy with me, or my work or my personality. I have decided to attach the communication and send it to you. Why I am I subjected to this kind of treatment? (Participant 4).

He might have failed to separate his personal feelings and beliefs about me, my topic and his professional duties (Participant 3).

My supervisor realized my topic had to do with same sex relationships and he insisted I should change because it was not consistent with his beliefs (Participant 5).

Theme 6 Mentoring challenges

Some supervisors were not efficiently trained on how to generate and handle productive conversations. The students felt that they were not being supported and guided adequately. Some were not given opportunities to develop autonomy and creativity. Any new ideas were not acceptable and were regarded as an "I know all attitude". The students were also not given an

opportunity to discuss mentoring challenges they faced with supervisors and report any abuse.

I am a student who need to contribute effectively in a discussion. I prefer methods of mentoring that to allow me present ideas in my own unique way and gets a supervisor who supports and complements my unique approach. (Participant 7).

I was told by my supervisor that if I wanted to pass I had to do what he wanted. Doing what he wanted was not easy so I simply pulled out I will join another institution (Participant 6).

Theme7 Delayed feedback

The study revealed that supervisor simply delayed meeting students for supervisions for months without communicating with the students. Time frames are important to students. The students do not want to spend their entire life studying for a doctoral qualification. Studying for higher qualifications was expensive because students were self -funding. One of the participants had to say:

I have my own frustrations with my promoter but I am not the right person to bring them to the institution. We have to work with acceptable time frames to finish our studies and move on without lives. (Student Participant 25).

Theme 8 Academic dishonesty

Academic dishonesty practices affected progress of some of the doctoral students who dropped out. The students had acquired their previous qualification that had not adequately developed their academic writing skills. As a result, some of the students were hiring people to write the thesis for them. Because they were not involved in developing the ideas they presented, the students could not defend or justify their claims. The following is what the participants said:

I made a full of myself many times because the supervisor could easily see that the work I often submitted was not mine. I could hardly defend or justify what I wrote. In some cases, I could not substantiate my arguments because I was not the one who developed them (Participant 7).

I sometimes copied full texts verbatim and converted them to Chinese and back to

English submitted for supervision. The lecturer discovered that I used to commit plagiarism and asked me to change my topic. Then I pulled out (**Participant 4**).

Theme 9 Hustling mentality

Due to economic challenges students spend most of their time hustling to raise money for fees and upkeep of their families. As a result, they did not concentrate. The work submitted to supervisors was done hurriedly with out paying attention to the feedback. Such students felt it was a waste of time so they simply pulled out. One of the students who dropped had this to say:

*I was not prepared adequately to handle self-directed learning. I had too much pressure to raise money. Due to the current economic challenges, I spend most of my time at the flea market hustling to make money (**Participant 2**).*

Theme 10 Lack of psychosocial support and confidentiality

The interview shows that the student felt supervisor were unfairly treating them. In some cases, supervisors used their work and weakness in discussions with other students. Students are sensitive to any of their weaknesses being made public without their consent. This practice was demeaning to students. The lack of confidentiality left the student unsettled and impacted on their ego and confidence to continue. One of the participants stated that:

*My supervisor works with my wife in the same institution, was my colleague at some point and is my former lecturer. Any issues that may develop from our mentoring relationship may end up not being confidential. (**Student Participant 24**).*

Theme 11 Tone and culture created by the supervisor

The kind of tone and culture that is created by the supervisor has a lot to do with the values students attach to their work. If supervisors show laxity in the way they do their work and do not encourage and insist on pace and quality students lose interest in their work and they eventually produce shoddy work. Consider the statement.

*Sometimes I go to his office I find him busy. I end up being absent from work while waiting to see him for days. Is this how he treats all his students considering that X is an open distance learning institution. (**Student Participant 42**).*

Theme 12 E learning challenges

They interview revealed that supervisors were not comfortable to use online platforms to interact with students but they preferred the traditional methods that were expensive and costly to students. The supervisors expected their doctoral students to travel and hold physical discussions with them. This proved to be costly to students. In corroborating the above one of the participants presented feedback that showed that supervisors were not trained in use of online approaches to provide feedback and guidance to students:

*I am working in Kimberly and it was proving very expensive to move up and down with hard copies. This is what my supervisor told me: I am surprised that you are sending this work electronically. We agreed in my office that you were to bring a hard copy together with the marked two hard copies. This we agreed would make it easy for me to go over the work checking whether the corrections had been done (**Participant 14**).*

11. DISCUSSION

The aim of the study was to investigate the perceptions of doctoral students who dropped out of their studies during doctoral research training supervision period in three Universities in Zimbabwe. The study was guided by how doctoral students who dropped out from their respective programs articulated their experiences with their supervisors, how their experiences affected their perception of doctoral training and how they felt the supervisor –supervisee relationship could be improved.

With regards to the first research question, the study found evidence that the doctoral students withdrew from their studies due funding challenges, failure to cope with the demands of the doctoral studies, poor supervisor -student relationships, unnecessary delays and lack of psychosocial support.

According to Masek and Alias [2] the dropping out of doctoral students from their studies was

attributed to lack of good and effective supervision process. Similarly, this study identified abusive supervisor student relationship, delayed feedback, mentoring challenges and poor communication. All these factors point towards poor and ineffective doctoral supervision practices. Concurring with the above scholarly views, Choi [3]; Roberts, [1] conclude that unhealthy conflicts between doctoral students and their supervisor was a result of mismatch in expectations, in thinking, in personality and in learning styles were critical factors that undermined the success of doctoral training.

The above factors that were found to cause attrition among doctoral studies seem to suggest lack of training and experience among supervisors of doctoral studies. Evidence found in this study such as inability by supervisors to spell out their expectations clearly to students, failure to generate and handle productive conversations, use of abusive language and failure to capacitate underprepared students point towards performance discrepancies that can be corrected through training and continuous professional development. In view of this, scholars concur that supervisors and students were supposed to discuss and agree on the expectations [2,15,16], actively involve students in creation of knowledge, helping them to develop a sense of ownership of knowledge and ability to self-evaluate themselves [19], open up and share ideas and insights with students [12]. The observations made in the current study are consistent with what was established in previous studies that supportive relationships led to success while destructive relationships led to attrition [2].

Concerning the second research question, this study found that most students who dropped out hubber self-blame, bitterness with supervisors and failure by institutions to support students who were under prepared for doctoral studies. The findings of the current study are in line with evidence from previous studies which point out that underprepared students need psychosocial support to develop self-confidence [12] and exposure [15].

Evidence generated in the current study shows that supervisors set standards that were far beyond the reach of their students and they also seemed to worry about perfect language among second language speakers of English. Statement such as “*your language is atrocious*”, without proposing how the student could overcome the weakness was enough to scarce the student to

drop out or hire other people to write dissertations for them. It argued from the evidence that if doctoral students have grammatical and academic writing skills they cannot be good researchers. Contrasting evidence from this study disagrees with tough love approach (Roberts ,2020), was blamed for pitching the standards at a level beyond the ability of most students who had no option but to drop out. The findings of the study lead to the realisation that exposure to combined works, conferences and research symposiums for both supervisors and students has the capacity to unlock the potential for successful research processes.

Given the foregoing suggestions, the supervisors should refrain from using face to face approaches and adopt blended approach to reduce travelling costs incurred by students. The students who self -fund highlighted that hidden costs were a barrier in addition to limited e-learning competence. It was ideal if students were also be reached through virtual meetings, video -tapes and online video conferences. However, in the words of Chinangure and Mapaire (2017) the use of face -to- face mentoring in higher education was very popular in countries such as Zimbabwe due to challenges of power outages and network connectivity problems.

In response to the third research question, the study also discovered that supervisee – supervisor relationships could be improved by holding rigorous orientation for the students, training of supervisors, provision of funding to doctoral students through doctoral student employment, fellowship programmes and hot line for reporting abuse. Funding to facilitate attendance and participation in conferences for doctoral students to gain exposure. In concurrence with the about findings scholars highlighted that in Zimbabwe, statistics confirm that over 75% of the doctoral students were self-funded (Draft Green Paper, 2021). This claim justifies why participants in the study singled out funding as the major cause for attrition. The students had no time to focus on their studies as they spend most of their time hustling to raise fees.

The current study seems to suggest that for doctoral supervision to be effective in most universities in Zimbabwe, there should be paradigm shift to state funding of all doctoral students. Previous studies agree that the

reputation of the universities [4,7] and their ranking [8] were based on successful doctoral students. To gain a better ranking and reputation doctoral studies should be funded adequately to ensure that most students who enroll for doctoral studies are not forced to drop out because of failure to pay fees. If more doctoral students are employed as fellows they can plough back to universities through research and teaching undergraduate programmes [20-23].

12. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The study recommends continuous professional development on supervision through workshops on roles, guidelines on good practices and creation of good supervision. The guidelines supervisors should be accessible, provide timely feedback in a constructive way and communicate the progress regularly to the student.

The study recommended that institutions should have clear policies on how problems or disagreements were addressed.

Meetings and seminars on research supervision should be compulsory and they should focus on policies and the supervision process.

The study recommended universities and other stakeholders to set aside grants to assist students complete their studies. The success of 5.0 curriculum and innovation thrust for Zimbabwean economy was dependent on research and knowledge production.

There was a need for student who dropped out to attend exist interviews to provide a student perspective on the mentoring relationship that may led to accumulation of important feedback to address challenges.

Some bridging course should be given to doctoral students who are under prepared.

COMPETING INTERESTS

Author has declared that no competing interests exist.

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