Re-thinking the Research-Based Higher Degrees Programme in Open and Distant Learning (ODL).

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--**ABSTRACT**--
World over, ODL universities offer research based Master of Philosophy and Doctor of Philosophy Degrees. One wonders the extent to which these universities produce graduates that are grounded in research as well as having the desired research skills. This nagging question motivated us to embark on this investigation. The investigation adopted a qualitative methodology. A case study design informed data generation, analysis and the reporting of the findings. The purposively sampled participants consisted of ten research supervisors, who were also involved in Theses marking. In order to corroborate data from research supervisors, we also analysed twenty evaluations of proposals, chapter three presentations and theses examination reports. We concluded that most candidates pursuing research based Master of Philosophy and Doctor of Philosophy Degree programmes experience challenges with the whole research process from working title formulation to the reporting of research findings, and that the challenges are not homogeneous. We recommend that upon admission, candidates should undergo an online structured research skills training course. The proposed training should cover issues like how to choose a research working title, proposal writing, theoretical and conceptual frameworks, review of related literature, research methodology, inter alia.

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I.   Background to the problem.

The only two ODL institutions in Southern Africa, University of South Africa (UNISA) and Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU) offer Higher Degrees (Masters and Doctorates) which are research based, devoid of tutorials, written assignments and written examinations. Needless to point out that most of the candidates enrolled at these two institutions will have done their junior degrees elsewhere, in some cases at some universities having weak research traditions. Implicitly, new entrants in the higher degrees' programmes may not be at the same level in terms of research orientation, knowledge and skills. This observation triggers a lot of questions in a discerning mind. Some of the questions could be: *What research skills do candidates have at enrolment? What research skills do candidates graduate with? What research skills should candidates graduate with? Does the ODL approach presently in use promote the development of such skills? If not, what is the way forward?*

ZOU introduced Higher Degrees Programmes (MPhil) and DPhil) in 2009. The admission requirements are a Lower Second Class pass in the first degree from ZOU or any other recognised university for the MPhil Degree and a pass in the Master's Degree for admission into the DPhil Degree programme (Higher Degrees Handbook, 2013).

Prospective candidates attach a proposal onto their application forms and send these to the Higher Degrees' Directorate for consideration. Successful candidates are advised to enroll for the programme at any of ZOU's regional centres. Once candidates forward proof of registration and payment to the Higher Degrees' Directorate, they are allocated research supervisors. The Higher Degrees Directorate circulates among its pool of supervisors names of newly admitted candidates for them to select candidates they may want to work with. Against each candidate's name, will be the candidate's working title. Depending on the number of candidates in that cohort, supervisors are encouraged to select up to FIVE candidates in order of preference and forward their choices to the Higher Degrees Directorate. Armed with this information, the Director of Higher Degrees then assigns candidates to supervisors and notifies both parties of the allocation. The candidate then starts working on his/her Thesis. The Higher Degrees Directorate's view is that distance is not an issue hence candidates may be allocated supervisors who are based far away from them. There have been instances where candidates worked with supervisors in neighbouring countries such as Botswana, Namibia and South Africa. Supervisors in Zimbabwe have also supervised candidates based in neighbouring countries and beyond.

Under the supervision and guidance of the supervisors, the candidates refine their proposals. The University's Higher Degree regulations require candidates to make a minimum of two presentations to a panel of supervisors. The first presentation is at the proposal stage and the second is when candidates will have done their chapter three.

These presentations are mandatory. In some cases, candidates may be invited to defend their completed Theses. It is against this background that this study revisits this research based approach, with the aim of establishing the extent to which it produces quality MPhil and DPhil graduates.

II.   Review of Related Literature

Literature is awash with challenges encountered by candidates when conducting research. These challenges span the whole breath of the thesis – from working title to appendices, Thomas (2009) states that at times the thesis does not match the title. Thomas suggests that the best plan is to have a working title – something that captures what the candidate originally wanted to do, which the candidate can then change once he/she has completed the thesis. Hart (2012:34) corroborates this view by arguing that: "The main problems some of our students seem to have in identifying potential topics are that they have misconceptions about what a masters' research topic is".

Some candidates have problems formulating suitable research questions. Two common problems associated with research questions are - questions that are too broad or too narrow and candidates not taking into account issues of ethics and access to research cites when formulating questions (Thomas, 2009). Machi and McEvoy (2012) cite review of related literature as another area of concern in candidates' theses. Their observation is that candidates limit their review of related literature to the basic level instead of pitching it to the advanced level where the purpose should be to question the current state of knowledge about a topic in order to define an area of new research. Some challenges could be associated to candidates finding too much literature, finding too little literature, plagiarism, and listing what other authors say without analysing or synthesising the information (Hart, 2012). The Student Services Department of The University of Queensland – Australia aptly summed common problems experienced by candidates as: list-like writing that lacks synthesis; not being sufficiently critical; not discriminating between relevant and irrelevant materials; lack of clear organizational structure; exclusion of landmark studies; relying on material that is likely out-of-date; and adopting a parochial perspective.

Mafa and Mapolisa (2012) also point that a number of candidates display limitations in choosing the appropriate research methodology, competently explain the research process, how data will be analysed as well as discussion and interpretation of findings. One wonders the extent to which ODL research based higher degree programmes can address these challenges, so as to produce graduates that are competent and grounded in research.

III.   Criteria for assessing MPhil and DPhil Theses.

Different institutions may come up with their own assessment criteria. However, by and large most institutions assessment criteria fall within the criteria outlined by Hart (2005), refer to Table 1.1 below.

Table 1.1: Assessment criteria for MPhil and DPhil Theses

Criteria	Expectation in question form
Prior understanding	Has a demonstration been given of an understanding of thesis? Is this expressed in the soundness of the work, especially arguments, data collection/generation and handling?
Perseverance and diligence	Have relevant databases for the literature search been identified? Have print as well as electronic sources been searched? Has the search been expanded and narrowed accordingly? Have clear and consistent records been made of the search? Is there an evaluation of the search?
Review of related Literature	Have key concepts, ideas, theories, arguments and data been identified in the literature? Is the review comprehensive, covering both topic and methodological literatures? Have all necessary elements been categorized, compared and synthesized from the literature in a scholarly way? Are the citations clear, consistent and detailed? Has the literature been critically evaluated? Have all ideas and statements been fully attributed? *Is the reviewed literature recent?* (emphasis mine)
Coherence and thoroughness	Are the aims and objectives clearly stated and logically linked? Is the research design justified and capable of actualizing the aims and objectives? Does the justification amplify the aims and show use of argumentation and the literature? Have the data collection instruments been tested and evaluated? Are they a reliable and valid means to appropriate data?

	Are the data presented clearly and in full? Are anomalies in the fully explained? Is the discussion of the data closely linked to the data? And are conclusions linked and related to the literature? Have clear links been made between the conclusions, data, literature and objectives?
Justification and argumentation	Is clear justification (rationale) given for the project? Are definitions used properly? Is the problem clearly stated and justified, including the recognition of unstated assumptions? Are sound arguments used in the justification, evaluation of the literature and conclusions? Are different kinds of argumentation analysis used appropriately? Is the difference shown between informative and relational statements? Are the differences between inductive and deductive reasoning understood?
Scholarly standards	Have sources been correctly and fully cited and all proper attribution of ideas given? Is the bibliography as expected, containing all seminal works? Is there sound use of research design to show understanding of internal and external and issue to deal with trustworthiness in the case of qualitative research, difference between description and explanation and different kinds of statements? Is this an ethical piece of research that conforms to the ethical standards of the university or profession? Are any moral statements justified and balanced with open discussion of alternative positions?
Methodological understanding	Are the origins, nature and consequences of different methodological traditions understood? Is sound justification given for the use of specific methodological assumptions? Is understanding shown of the relationship between methodology and data? Is there an overall research design incorporating methodological assumptions, data collection techniques and understanding of validity, reliability, trustworthiness and limits on generalizability?
Discussion, conclusions and recommendations	Is the discussion related to the review of the literature? Are statements and arguments clearly justified by the data or the analysis of arguments? Do conclusions follow from the evidence and argument presented? How do the conclusions relate to the aims and objectives set for the research? Are the recommendations properly arranged – recommendation, benefits, consequence and costs? Are they realistic, appropriate and based on the data or analysis?
Reflective practitioner	Are observations made which show ability to reflect and evaluate on what has been done? Is the evaluation related to the aims, objectives and management of the research? Are problems and gaps identified? Have areas for further research been suggested? Has the significance the research might have for practice been indicated?
Presentation	Is the thesis well written in terms of proper grammar, including spelling and punctuation? Is the style and format consistent with the University's house style? Is the arrangement logical? Has editing been done to make it clear and coherent and of the right length? Are appendices appropriate? Is this thesis as good as any other from a comparable university? Can this thesis be released into the public domain for other researcher to use?

Adapted from Hart (2005:15-17).

IV.   Problem Statement

Basing on the above, the statement under consideration in this investigation is: How effective is the research based approach in producing graduates who are knowledgeable in both theoretical and practical aspects of research.

Research Questions

This investigation was guided by the following questions:

- To what extent does the research based degree programme adequately ground candidates in research?
- If there are research knowledge gaps, what can ODL institutions do to ensure that their candidates graduate with the requisite research knowledge, attitudes and skills?

In this study, we proceeded with the following assumptions:

- All other things being equal, ODL institutions can produce higher degree candidates with the requisite knowledge and skills in research. However, the ability to achieve this is dependent on a number of factors.
- We also assumed that we were going to have access to the documents that we wanted to analyse in order to address our research questions.

The following limitation was of concern at the onset of our investigation:

- OUR own biases - I was studying operations of my own institution. I am also one of the higher degrees supervisors. Secondly, my co-author was pursuing a research based DPhil with UNISA. We addressed the bias issue through reflexivity as suggested by Johnson and Christensen (2014). We achieved this by continuously reminding ourselves of the need to present, discuss and interpret findings as honestly and humanly possible.

V.   Delimitations of the Study

This investigation was delimited to re-thinking the research based higher degree programmes offered at ZOU. This was achieved through examining the proposal and chapter presentation reports for the years 2012 – 2014 as well as interviewing research supervisors.

The significance of this study lies in that it has the potential to influence the structure of the ODL research based degrees programme. For example, if the proposal and chapter presentations reports show that certain issues continuously recur as weaknesses on candidates' part, and these issues are corroborated by supervisors, it will be prudent for the Higher Degrees Directorate to give such issues careful consideration.

VI.   Research design and methodology

The investigation was informed by the Constructivist philosophy, because the purpose was to get the lived experiences of the participants (the emic perspective) and create meaning from it (Creswell, 2009). The investigation adopted a qualitative case study design. Participants were purposively sampled so as to identify data-rich sources. The sample consisted of ten research supervisors and twenty evaluations of proposals, chapter three presentations and theses examination reports. The two co-authors were the major instruments for data generation. Data were generated through document analysis and interviews with research supervisors. We took measures to ensure trustworthiness of findings, through triangulation of data sources as well as data gathering techniques, recording of interview proceedings verbatim, transcribing interview proceedings and sending the transcripts to participants for member checking before data analysis (Creswell, 2007). Data were analysed through the thematic content analysis approach which was preceded by segmenting and coding (Punch, 2009).

VII.   Findings and discussions

Major issues which emerged from the document analysis and interviews were enumerated and are presented in Table 1.1.

Table 1.1: Major areas of concern in Higher Degree Candidates' Proposals and Theses.

Areas of concern
Research Methodology
Working title
Objectives of the Study and Research Questions
Statement of the Problem
Review of Related Literature
Theoretical Framework and Conceptual Framework
Language editing and Technical issues
Data Analysis, Discussion and Presentation
Summary, Conclusion and Recommendations

Working title
Working title was identified as an issue of concern in most of the proposal and theses examiners' reports that were reviewed. Comments such as: *…the clarity of the research has a problem; the title does not tally well with the statement of the problem; the title was not problematised; the title of the study contained double-barrelled verbs; …the title did not offer a promissory note on the type of knew knowledge the study would produce,* were prevalent in the reports. These views were also echoed by an appreciable number of research supervisors who were interviewed. Candidates' struggles in coming up with researchable working titles are corroborated by Thomas (2009) and Hart (2012). We are of the view that, an unclear working title triggers a chain reaction of a number of aspects – weak background to the study, unclear statement of the problem, unclear purpose, objectives and research questions, among others. The ultimate result could be a weak thesis which does not generate new knowledge, defeating the purpose of research and MPhil and DPhil levels. Regarding the background, one examiner in 2014 commented that:

> …it is remarkable that the dissertation lacks a general background to the study section. The scholar directly delves into the narrower problem issue, i.e. of production IS, without giving readers the crucial with-in country context. In other words, the manuscript does not take the time to share with the reader the 'lie of the land', i.e. , the social structure, or the general state of affairs in the country.

VIII. Research Methodology

Findings indicate that this could be the Achilles heel of many higher degrees candidates since all most all reviewed reports singled it as an area of concern. Interestingly, all the interviewed research supervisors concurred that most candidates under their supervision displayed a lot of limitations in this area. Some of the concerns are captured in the following quotations from different reports:

> The choice of the research methodology is not adequately justified. The research problem is not defined. The sample is not adequately defined as well.
>
> The researcher must clearly discuss how data analysis was done. The researcher is completely silent on how the data elicited through questionnaires were analysed. It's not enough to tell us what is involved in qualitative data analysis. The researcher is not clear on how research rigour was assured. How was trustworthiness assured? It's not enough to tell us what validity, reliability and trustworthiness are.
>
> Unlike what is expected to be found in a qualitative design – and indeed of phenomenology, of all people candidate claims to have talked to as part of the research, he does not directly quote the observations, feelings, or opinions of even a single source. . . . Identifying sources is the hallmark of replicability and of confirming one's evidence so as to reassure the reader that fieldwork was done and the findings are indeed based on real and factual encounters that took place.
>
> There are so many chances for improvement required. The candidate spent excessive time defining words and concepts. Most sections sound like notes than a research method section. . . . There is a lot of repetition and failure to connect everything to this study.

In some instances, candidatess could not distinguish between research methodology and research method as evidenced by the following quotations from supervisors during proposal and chapter defense workshops: *"Candidate should draw a distinction between research methodology and research methods"; "Methodology was not the same as paradigm"; "The candidate should appreciate the difference between research methodology and research approach"*. The above observations are consistent with findings by Hart (2012) and Mafa and Mapholisa (2012) on candidates' challenges with identifying suitable research methodologies. Yet as argued by Creswell (2009), Silverman (2010) and Johnson and Christensen (2014), research methodology is pivotal to the success of any research activity, since findings, interpretations, conclusions and recommendations are products of research methodology (Mafa and Mapolisa, 2012).

In our view, research methodology is central to the successful completion of any research endevour. A flawed methodology could lead to incorrect sampling procedures, incorrect data collection instruments, collection of wrong data and inappropriate data analysis techniques, leading to incorrect interpretations, incorrect conclusions as well as incorrect recommendations. Where such conclusions and recommendations are to inform practice, one can only imagine the overall effects, needless to say they could be too ghastly to contemplate. Concerning the link between research methodology and data presentation and discussion, one thesis examiner commented:

> The problems noted with regard to the methodology chapter spill into this chapter. The two chapters need to be reorganized so that chapter three concentrates on explaining how the candidate interacted with each and every case and then this chapter draws inferences from the data provided in chapter three.

Tied to the issue of Research Methodology is the problem of Limitations of the Study. Comments from supervisors and examiners point to the fact that students normally include time and money under Limitations of the Study. Most comments encourage students to focus on methodological limitations. The tendency by most candidates was to proffer time and finance as limitations. In few cases where candidates advanced methodological limitations, they failed to explain how they tried to circumvent the mentioned limitations.

IX. Objectives and research questions

Most supervisors intimated that a good number of candidates had challenges coming up with suitable Objectives and Research Questions. More often than not, these may not be linked to the Purpose of the Study as well as to the Statement of the Problem. The sentiments of the supervisors during interviews were corroborated by examiners' comments and comments by supervisors during presentation and defense of proposals and chapters. Some of the most prevalent comments are captured below:

'Does' was a poor word to use when writing research questions. The question could be answered using single word answers.

Research questions could have been based on Bloom's Taxonomy to make them appropriate and of a higher order.

The research questions should be in harmony with objectives.

The objectives needed to be re-phrased and the candidate needed to read them and understand them.

Hart (2005) underscores the need for clear objectives and research questions. In our view, objectives of the study and research questions contribute significantly to the final quality of the thesis – they guide the investigation. Therefore, if students fail or struggle to formulate appropriate objectives and research questions, there are high chances that their studies will do very little in the extension of the knowledge frontiers, which is a hallmark of higher degrees research.

Statement of the Problem

If examiners' and supervisors comments are anything to go by, The Statement of the Problem is the Achilles heel of most candidates. This is illuminated in the following comments extracted from examiners' and supervisors' comments:

- The problem is not the same as the statement of the problem;
- The problem was not clearly stated, the title was not problematised;
- There is no relationship between the statement of the problem and the working title;
- It is notable that the problem statement which must be given in a theoretical manner, is given in only two sentences; and
- The Statement of the Problem should be improved by removing part of the information in this section as it appeared more appropriate in the background to the study.

In our view, The Statement of the Problem is central to any research pursuit. Therefore, if candidates fail to come up with a plausible Statement of the Problem, there are high chances that their purpose of the study, research objectives, research questions and review of related literature may be efforts in vain.

X.   Findings and Discussions

From our document analysis, the above areas of concern were an issue in every presentation and examination reports despite the fact that the Higher Degrees Directorate communicates these reports to all registered candidates and their supervisors. One reason for the recurrence of these errors could be that candidates never concern themselves with reports that do not refer to their own work. It could also be that supervisors never draw their candidates' attention to reports on other candidates' work, so that their own candidates learn from other's mistakes and weaknesses. In the absence of such encouragement from supervisors, the need for a research skills training for new candidates need to be given serious consideration. Research supervisors also concurred that a number of candidates display a lot of deficiencies in research skills. Mafa and Mapolisa (2012) also arrived at similar conclusions in their study on perceptions of research supervisors on the candidates they supervised.

Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

Some candidates think that theoretical and conceptual are one and the same thing as evidenced by how they present this sub-heading. They normally write Theoretical or Conceptual Framework. Apart from this confusion, most have challenges identifying appropriate theoretical frameworks or coming up with meaningful conceptual framework which show how the key concepts and variables of the studies are linked. Tied to these two concepts is the question of review of related literature. Most examiner's reports and proposal and chapters defense reports

allude to candidates weaknesses in reviewing related literature. The following extract from an examiner's report aptly captures the general sentiments:

> As a drawback, it can be pointed out that although the review of the literature seems exhaustive candidate does not clearly identify theoretically significant gaps to fill. Another limitation is the weak narrative in his/her brief case analysis. A detailed analysis of his/her cases would have greatly increased the relevance and confirmed, even further, the applicability of the approach.

Scholars including Hart (2012), Machi and McEvoy (2012) and Mafa and Mapolisa (2012) concur that most candidates display a lot of limitations in reviewing related literature. Some candidates reduce review of related literature chapter to a list of what different authors say, without critiquing, interrogating, analysing and synthesizing the literature (Mafa and Mapolisa, 2012; Student Services, 2015).

Data Analysis, Presentation and Discussion

Supervisors mentioned that it was common to come across statements like – "I used SPSS (if the research was quantitative) or NVivo (if this research was qualitative) to analyse data". Candidates hardly explain the analysis approach used. In one of the examiners' reports, an examiner made the following comment: "The mere mention of NVivo software for analysing qualitative data should not be taken as substitute for giving thick description of how data were handled". As correctly commented by another examiner in his report, when data are not presented clearly it becomes difficult for the reader to establish causal chains or to follow the logical outcome of the research and for other researchers to weigh the evidence in order to replicate the study. When presenting data, most candidates have the tendency to layout their findings without discussing and inferring the possible implications of their findings. In addition, the link between their findings and the reviewed related literature will not be there, as suggested by Hart (2012). At times, consistent with Thomas's (2009) findings, candidates' limitations spill to the final chapter where some of the conclusions do not flow from findings and recommendations are not informed by conclusions.

Language editing and technical issues

Our assumption is that at this level of education, examiners should not be burned by attending to language and other technical skills. Yet examiners' reports capture these aspects as prevalent in a good number of these sent for examination. Some candidates are not sure of the tenses to use in their thesis. It is not uncommon to come across the following errors: usage of future tense in the first chapter or a mixture of present and past tense; incorrectly constructed sentences; sentences that are too long and times meaningless; incorrect singular – plural combinations and incomplete sentences. Technical challenges exhibited by some students include: not sure when to indent direct quotations; failure to present direct quotations which begin in the middle of the sentence; failure to punctuate bulleted points; presentation of headings and sub-headings and incorrect in text and reference section referencing. We assume that students having weaknesses in these two areas hardly consult publication manuals as they work on their theses. In most of the reviewed proposal and defense reports, supervisors lament the candidates' lack of knowledge of the appropriate writing and presentation style, yet they are all provided with the research handbook where these issues are explicitly discussed.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Findings indicate that a good number of higher degree candidates experience research knowledge gaps. While in the end they may come up with plausible theses which extend the frontiers of knowledge, this could be at a great expense in terms of man-hours and resources ploughed in the generation of such theses. In one of the proposals and chapters defense workshops in Harare in 2014, one of the supervisors raised the question: *"Could the Directorate come up with a Research Manual to ground candidates on methodological issues of the study?"* We are of the opinion that the concerned supervisor raised the question after realizing the gulf in research between what students were supposed to produce (the ideal) and what they were producing (the actual). Basing on submissions from higher degrees supervisors, proposal and chapter presentations reports and theses examiners' reports, we suggest that upon admission, higher degree students undergo an online structured research skills training course. The tangible output of the training could be an acceptable research proposal. The training could cover the following areas:

- Requirements of the MPhil and DPhil degrees and expectations for the Thesis;
- Identifying and formulating working titles;
- Finding and reviewing related literature, identifying gaps in literature and coming up with Theoretical Framework and Conceptual Framework;
- Formulating and refining research questions;
- Research Ethics;
- Academic writing;

- Research Paradigms;
- Quantitative research and analysis;
- Qualitative research and analysis; and
- Use of computers in research; and Proposal writing.

It is important to reiterate Mafa and Mapolisa's (2012) findings that there is no homogeneity in the challenges faced by postgraduate students. In other words, it does not mean that candidates face similar challenges in the same aspects of research. However, the bottom line is candidates have challenges. Therefore in our view, the recommended initial training will ensure that entrants to the higher degrees research programme from diverse academic backgrounds are brought to approximately the same starting point in terms of research prerequisite knowledge. However, this is not to suggest that currently all the research based higher degree graduates exhibit a lot of knowledge gaps. Many have produced outstanding theses – but at what cost in terms of man-hours and other resources? Basing on the recommended initial research training, our assumption is that the research training will in the long run produce high quality higher degrees graduates at less man-hours and related resources than is currently the case.

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