

IMPROVING SUPERVISORS' SUPPORT FOR COMPLETION OF RESEARCH DISSERTATIONS

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INTRODUCTION

The number of students enrolled in postgraduate programmes in Universities worldwide has improved substantially in the recent past, with the increasing social demand for higher education and the incorporation of Open and Distance learning methods. Many graduate students are adult learners with diverse characteristics and have family commitments, work commitments, financial problems, health matters etc. As an essential component of the postgraduate programmes, students are required to complete a research dissertation under a supervisor that could project discipline values such as conceptual innovation, methodological rigor, and substantive content.

Philips and Pugh (1994, 93) stressed that "the relationship between supervisor and student is so crucial that student cannot afford to leave it to chance, it must be managed". The issue of power relationships between the supervisor and student (Gattfield, 2005) also relates with the supervision process. According to Leasing and Leasing (2004), part-time students struggle to cope with their simultaneous academic and professional workloads and experience a lack of support and understanding from their supervisors, inflexible programme organization and structures and a feeling of isolation. Further, some research studies revealed a tendency for PG students to take a longer time for completion of their research dissertations or to completely abandon the programme due to numerous challenges confronted with them (Abbidin & Ismail, 2011). Having experienced a similar situation with regard to the research dissertation component of the Master of Education (M. Ed) programme of the Faculty of Education, Open University of Sri Lanka, a survey was carried out to explore the possible root causes and subsequently, an intervention programme was developed and implemented with the purpose of improving the completion rate of the research dissertation.

This paper analyses the results of the survey and the success of the strategies applied to improve the supervisors' support through an action research programme. The specific research questions related to this paper are as follows:

What are the perceptions of students on the support received from their supervisors for the completion of research dissertations?

What is the opinion of supervisors regarding the strategies adopted for supervising research dissertations?

What are the problems faced by students and supervisors in the supervision of dissertations?
How successful are the strategies adopted for improving the quality of supervisors' support through the intervention programme?

METHODOLOGY

Survey and Action research designs have been incorporated in this study. Questionnaires for students and supervisors and in-depth interviews with supervisors and students were the main methods used for the survey. The planning of the action research took the form of a

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participatory approach and actions included workshops, presentations, focus group discussions, brainstorming sessions and meetings which were followed by observations and reflections as necessary. The sample comprised with 50 active students enrolled in the M. Ed Programme on or before 2008/2009 academic year and 10 internal supervisors who have been allocated the responsibility of supervising research dissertations.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Findings of the survey

The survey results revealed that the majority of students were Sinhalese (70%), within the age range of 36-60 (92%), married (78%), having children between 1-3 (72%) and enrolled in the programme for more than 5 years (40%). The qualifications of superiors were varied from Ph.D /Ed.D (60%) to M.Ed degree (10%) and only a very few (30%) had more than 15 years of experience in supervising research students. By the time that the survey was carried out, these supervisors had contributed for the satisfactory completion of 28 dissertations since the inception of the programme. Only 1/3 of students had admitted that they could not finalize their research proposals, which was more than 55% according to supervisors' responses.

The student meetings with supervisors varied from 2-5 times during the past three years (15%), to 10-15 times within the past six months (33%). Surprisingly, 10% had never met their supervisors for the past three years. The supervisors were of the view that some students were overloaded with other work, not committed, not interested and not even bothered to contact them for guidance and support. As revealed by both students and supervisors, face to face contact (86%) was the main method applied for their meetings and a substantial number (62%) maintained contact through telephone too. Library books (86%) and dissertations (86%) were their main sources of information. Nearly 73% of students admitted that they received necessary support from their supervisors, though 8% said 'never' and 19% remained silent for the relevant question. Around 60% of students agreed that their supervisors were "motivating and encouraging", "providing constructive feedback" and "maintaining a friendly environment". However, only half of the students (51%) mentioned that their supervisors had been providing friendly feedback. The open ended answers in the student questionnaire and interviews with students had revealed detailed information regarding the supervisors' support. There were negative comments such as: "Support is very low", "Supervisor was very busy", "Lazy to guide me" "Supervisor should be friendly", "I am very scared to meet my supervisor", "and Always criticized" and "sometime insult my work". The most needed support as they mentioned was related to frequent guidance, opportunity to contact by phone/email, immediate feedback, effective communication and friendly support. Some supervisors admitted that they were very busy and had many other commitments which delayed responding to student queries and giving timely feedback. This situation led the research team to consider supervisors' support as a major aspect of the action research.

Among the problems encountered by the students, leave (70%) and health (43%) were prominent, while supervisors had pointed to heavy administrative and other responsibilities and lack of experience as their problems (only juniors). Both students and supervisors pointed out the need for giving hands on experience on academic writing, internet search, proposal writing and analysis of data, to facilitate the completion of the dissertation. The findings of the survey provided the foundation for the action research which was conducted using a participatory and collaborative approach to improve supervisors' support.

Intervention Programme to Improve Supervisor's Support

Planning: The suggestions made by students and supervisors in their questionnaires and at interviews to improve supervisors' support had been discussed at length at research team

meetings, staff meetings of the Department of STE and programme team meetings (M. Ed) to identify their usefulness, relevance, viability and effectiveness. Having finalized the changes to be implemented, the research team had prepared a detailed work plan with a number of cycles geared towards improving supervisor's support. However, the time plan had to be changed to suit the students and supervisors and a number of adjustments to the preliminary plan had also to be made in order to accommodate unforeseen requirements.

Action: The actions implemented in line with improving the support of the supervisors are illustrated in the following Table with possible outcomes:

Table 1- Actions and expected outcomes

| Cycle | Actions | Expected Outcomes |
|-------------|---|--|
| Cycle one | A workshop for supervisors to discuss problems/issues and possible solutions | A list of problems and solutions |
| | A workshop for all supervisors to prepare manuals for supervisors and students with the support of an expert | Draft student manual and supervisors' manual |
| | A meeting to finalize the manuals with the supervisors | Finalized manuals |
| Cycle Two | To appoint teams of supervisors for students under the leadership of a senior supervisor | Participatory decisions on proposals, Variations in guidance and counseling |
| | To conduct 7 work shops on different themes by internal and external experts coupled with supervisors' meetings | Improved knowledge and skills in students and supervisors and close interaction among them |
| | Continuous meetings of research team members with supervisors to motivate and encourage them for supervision | Improved motivation and commitment of supervisors |
| | Setting targets for supervisors and students | Motivation, commitment to meet targets |
| | Letters to students and supervisors commenting on their work and reminding the forth-coming activities | Improved self confidence, interest and keenness of both parties |
| | Monitoring progress of students through supervisors | Progress report on each student by the supervisor |
| Cycle three | Letters to students continued | High self confidence, interest keenness |
| | Monitoring progress of students through supervisors continued | Progress report on each student by the supervisor |

Observations and reflections: The preparation of the manuals for supervisors and students had streamlined the supervision process up to a certain extent by providing clear directions to both parties. The research team had difficulties in assembling all the supervisors and students on planned dates. Thus, rescheduling of meetings was necessary to accommodate their requirements. A substantial variation existed among supervisors in relation to their standards and procedures maintained for supervision. However, the junior supervisors admitted that the workshops had contributed immensely for development of new knowledge and skills and to change their attitudes and working as a team member with senior supervisors expanded their horizons.

As the students were at different stages of their dissertations, discussions and activities in workshops were limited to common issues. This situation resulted in having a few additional meetings with students on one to one basis using internal experts in order to attend to specific issues of these students. The majority of students highly appreciated the letters and reminders sent by the Department and requested to continue that until they complete their dissertations.

Student-supervisor interaction had improved up to the extent that some supervisors had to call students to find out their progress if they did not turn up in subsequent intervals. It was further observed that a close congruent relationship was maintained with students only by some supervisors and some supervisors had exercised “position power” (Drummond, 2000) and “expert power” or “information power” (Greenberg and Baron, 2003) in their supervision process which may have acted as a barrier for strengthening the interaction between the two groups. This situation may have arisen due to the reasons that one supervisor was a Dean, three were Heads and two were the programme co-ordinators.

One clear positive outcome was that a significant change was observed in relation to the attitudes of some supervisors which in turn resulted in improving the motivation, self confidence and commitment of students. According to the progress reports of supervisors, nearly 30 (66%) students have made a substantial progress and hopefully, they would be in a position to complete their dissertations in a very satisfactory manner within the stipulated time. The progress made by the Tamil medium students was not that encouraging which needed further investigation and probably a new cycle to cater to the specific problems of students and supervisors. It was evident from supervisors’ and students’ comments that there were personal, family and work place problems that were above the control of the institution and affected negatively on the completion of research dissertations of students. Overall, the action research had paved the way to improve the quality of the supervision process by changing knowledge, skills and attitudes of both students and supervisors. The collaborative and participatory approach made the action research process transparent to staff members and indirectly it had improved the trust, unity and cooperation among all staff members. Finally, the managerial positions held by some research team members facilitated the action research process by involving others collaboratively in the research process and inviting them to explore their practices, and by working in a wider institutional context.

CONCLUSIONS

Based on the findings of the survey, it could be concluded that M. Ed students in the Faculty of Education encountered both personal, work place as well as supervisor related problems which hindered satisfactory completion of their research dissertations. Both students and supervisors emphasized the need for improving the supervision process as one important mechanism for facilitating their success. The intervention programme was seen to have a positive impact on all parties involved. From the students’ point of view, their motivation, commitment and self confidence have been improved which had improved the status of their research dissertations. It has further contributed for enhancing knowledge and skills and changing attitudes of supervisors and strengthening collaboration, team work and partnership among all staff members. The action research is still continuing and the Department has already introduced the intervention programme to the next batch also with high expectations.

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