

“Investigating the Quality of Postgraduate Research in African Universities Today: A Qualitative Analysis of External Examination Reports”

Munya M. Mulinge (PhD)*

United States International University (USIU),

P. O. Box 14634-00800

Nairobi - Kenya

Tel: +254-20-3606516/ +254-716641619

E-mail Address: mmulinge@usiu.ac.ke/ mulingemm@yahoo.co.uk

&

Josephine N. Arasa (PhD)

United States International University (USIU),

P. O. Box 14634-00800

Nairobi - Kenya

Tel: +254-20-3606181 / +254-714453315

E-mail Address: jarasa@usiu.ac.ke

*Corresponding Author

Abstract

*Utilizing examination reports of the external moderation of 92 masters and 8 doctoral dissertations and theses drawn from 10 universities spread across the Eastern, Western and Southern African regions, we analyzed the quality of postgraduate research produced by universities in Africa today. A content analysis of the various reports was conducted to assess overall quality and to identify the specific weaknesses and flaws that characterized the dissertations and theses. To provide a summative measure of quality, we attached a rating to each of the recommendations made with respect to the various research reports as follows: ‘Accept as submitted’ = **excellent**, ‘accept with minor corrections’ = **good**, ‘accept (award degree) after major corrections and/or revisions’ = **satisfactory**, ‘revise and resubmit for further examination’ = **poor**, and ‘not to be accepted for the degree’ = **very poor**. For ease of reference the rating was reduced to a dichotomous scheme of high and low in which reports rated as excellent and good were considered to have been of high quality while those in the other ratings were of low quality. The results showed that the bulk (63.0 percent) of the dissertations examined were of low quality; only 37.0 percent rated as ‘excellent’ or ‘good’. These tended to be plagued by a variety of weaknesses, including the inability to adequately contribute original and valuable knowledge, poor packaging and presentation that left many of them reading like raw drafts that required the attention of a supervisor more than the services of an examiner, and contents that left a lot to be desired in terms of depth, clarity, sequencing and coherence, among others. It was concluded that the quality of the bulk of dissertations and theses produced in African universities has been declining. As such, there is an urgent need for universities to create environments that are supportive of research achievements/ are suitable for the production of quality postgraduate research.*

KEY WORDS: Quality of Postgraduate Research, Qualitative Analysis, External Examination Reports, High Quality, Low Quality, Dissertations, Theses

INTRODUCTION

Education is one of the priority investment and growth areas in Africa (African Union Commission, 2006). Many governments allocate disproportionate shares of their annual budgets to the education sector with the goal to not only increase access to education and training but also to improve the quality of learning (training) at all levels of education; from the basic (primary) school level to the secondary and tertiary levels. However, as the number of entrants at all levels of education has continued to grow without a corresponding growth in facilities and other important resources (such as finance and qualified human resources) that are central to the maintenance of a quality, the quality of education in most African countries has been on the decline. At the tertiary level, for example, the massification of higher education in some countries, such as Kenya and Uganda, has occasioned the mushrooming of public and private universities and colleges that lack the infrastructural facilities (e.g. lecture theaters, laboratories, libraries, and faculty offices) essential for quality learning and training. The institutions are also characterized by inadequate and poorly trained (unskilled) faculty.

Pertinent to the attainment of quality education and training the world over is the quality of postgraduate training. As Maslen (2010) indicated, improving and advancing the quality in postgraduate training has remained a global objective. Quality postgraduate training programs are the seedbeds for future knowledge growers, policy shapers, and academics. An important feature of postgraduate training is postgraduate research, in the forms of projects, dissertations and theses. For such research to perform its role effectively, its quality must remain under constant monitoring (or surveillance). This view is supported by Maslen (2010) who pointed out that the assessment of quality in postgraduate dissertations and theses is critical to the success of masters and doctoral students and to the future of global research both within and outside academia.

Despite the importance of quality in postgraduate research, not much investigation has been conducted in the written assessments of such research the world over (Bourke, Hattie, and Anderson, 2004) or in Africa in particular. Although a growing literature exists on doctoral examination utilizing interviews with experienced examiners (Mullins and Kiley, 2002) or questionnaires completed by examiners (Winter, Griffiths and Green, 2000), globally, there are a few studies of theses assessment based on examiner reports (see e.g., Ballard 1996 Bourke and Holbrook 2008; Johnston, 1997; Pitkethly and Prosser, 1995). Concerning the African context in particular, no research that we aware of has been conducted covering this subject matter.

The broad purpose of this paper is to analyze the status of postgraduate research in institutions of higher learning in Africa today. It assesses the quality of postgraduate research in African universities today and examines the dominant challenges that universities must confront to guarantee quality. The specific objectives of the paper are to:

- Assess the quality of dissertations and theses produced by African universities today.
- Identify the major weaknesses plaguing postgraduate research in African universities today.
- Discuss the possible factors that undermine the quality of postgraduate dissertations and theses in African universities.

Assessing the quality of postgraduate research in African universities is important for a number of reasons. First, quality research is essential not just for the generation of theoretical knowledge but is also a fundamental driver of long-term economic and social progress (Ståhl, and Hall, 2003). Second, the assessment of quality is an integral part of quality control measures in higher education. It ensures improvements in quality of training in postgraduate programs and professional development. As Maslen (2010) reiterated, the quality in postgraduate research is critical to the success of master's and doctoral programs and to the future of global research both within and outside academia. Furthermore, the quality of postgraduate research has serious implications for the future and quality of scholarship and academic productivity in African universities. Specifically, low quality of dissertations and theses suggest that universities are training future generations of academics, scholars, and/or researchers who are not equipped adequately to discharge the important responsibilities of growing (or increasing the stock of available) theoretical knowledge, developing new knowledge to drive policy, and to mentor subsequent generations of researchers, academics and policy drivers. Finally, debating and acting on quality will renew the faith of our external stakeholders in postgraduate research training programs in our institutions of higher learning.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Although expectations in terms of standards and quality may vary across countries, institutions and disciplines, there are certain minimum standards that apply in every case (Tinkler and Jackson, 2004). Broadly speaking, quality postgraduate research reports, especially those at the Ph.D. level dissertations, should make original contribution to knowledge (Wisker, 2005; Tinkler and Jackson, 2004; Delamont, Atkinson, and Parry, 2000). Second, the documents should be well packaged, structured into logically sequenced chapters, well formatted and clearly presented. The third broad indicator of quality of a postgraduate dissertation/ thesis resides in the inclusiveness and strength of its contents. A more elaborate profiling of the three attributes is presented in the results section of this paper, where they constitute the bases for the qualitative analysis of the quality of the master's and doctoral dissertations and theses produced by African universities today. However, before delving into the results of this study, the paper first reviews some of the factors that may impact on the quality of postgraduate research the world over.

Factors Impacting on Quality Postgraduate Research

A review of the literature suggested that the factors influencing the quality of postgraduate research can be organized into three broad categories, namely institutional and/or program policies and Practices, learner centered challenges, and quality of supervisions provided.

1. Institution and/or Program Policies and Practices

No doubt, institutional policy as well as discipline expectations have an important role to play in the attainment of quality postgraduate research (Tinkler and Jackson, 2004). Policies, codes, structures, and practices have a bearing on the quality of the training environment within which postgraduate research takes place. Included under policies, codes, structures, and practices are admission policies; supervision policies; policies, codes and structures for frequent review of postgraduate research; policies and structures for quality control (e.g., formal framework to guide the structuring/ organization and contents of dissertations and theses and clear policies on unethical academic conduct); and examination policies and practices. A formal admissions policy has a bearing on the quality of students entering postgraduate training. To illustrate, some universities' admission policies require not just a good undergraduate training but also a working experience to be considered for graduate training. On the other hand, a clear supervision policy is central to the timely completion and to the quality of postgraduate research. The policy should spell out in detail the responsibilities of both the student and the supervisor and delineate the consequences for not

meeting one's responsibilities. Furthermore, it should regulate the nature and extent of consultations, including the opportunity to seek assistance from persons other than one's supervisor without the supervisor feeling like s/he is being undermined. As Pearson (1996) underlined, this practice is a sign of enterprise and independence as opposed to the student being dependent or difficult. It could supplement the formal supervision arrangements in ways that improve completion time as well as the quality of the final research report. The policy should be available to both parties from the very beginning of supervision.

The existence of a formal and well structured review instrument coupled with clear policies on progression are likely to improve both quality and completion rates. Existing evidence suggests that continuous monitoring, review and assessment are central to the successful and timely completion of postgraduate research (Quan-Baffour and Vambe, 2008; Tinkler and Jasckson, 2004). On-going monitoring, for example, provides a yardstick against which students (and their supervisors) can benchmark their work. As Quan-Baffour and Vambe (2008) suggested, the existence of an instrument for continuous review allows the student to constantly subject himself/herself to self-evaluation throughout the dissertation/ thesis writing process. Continuous review also provides students and supervisors with early warning of emerging problems thus making it possible to take mediative action before it is too late (Quan-Baffour and Vambe, 2008). Policies and structures for monitoring progress work very well when they are backed by formal structures for quality control. This should spell out matters related to standards as well as to ethical academic practices.

The examiner's perspective (expectations) is central to what emerges as a good thesis or dissertation (Tinkler and Jasckson, 2004). Upon assessing the submission (theses or dissertation) the examiner will prepare and submit a report that, in some cases forms the basis for an oral defence (viva) as well as for revision, if necessary, of the dissertation or thesis. This way the examiner's report serves as a guide in the determination of quality of the thesis. For the examination process to play its role in the maintenance of quality effectively, the examiner should be competent and s/he should be selected on the basis of qualifications, skill, and experience in research in the general area of the dissertation or thesis and, where possible, in the topic to be examined (Tinkler and Jackson (2004). Tinkler and Jackson (2004) further stipulate that an examiner should have experience as a supervisor of postgraduate research, as well as an extensive record of consistent research and publications in referred journals and other appropriate academic outlets. In addition, as much as possible the examiner should 'be a user of the same broad theory and methods of data collection and analysis as the candidate' and 'should have an interest in the empirical subject matter, or be broad minded enough to appreciate the merits of approaches other than his/her own' (Tinkler and Jackson, 2004: 71).

Despite the requirements discussed above, in some cases it is not uncommon for friendship networks to become the main guiding principle in the selection of an examiner. We are referring to situations of mutual examining arrangements (or the I'll examine yours if you examine mine) or where acquaintances are selected as examiners (Tinkler and Jackson (2004). This can sometimes lead to 'an uncomfortable compromise of their intellectual independence' (Tinkler and Jackson (2004: 76). For instance, examiners, particularly where the examiner's relationship with the candidate's supervisor leads to a sense of obligation to pass the candidate, may feel obliged to pass postgraduate research even when the quality is suspect, thereby disregarding rigor, impartiality and objectivity. In other cases, the role of the examination process in the maintenance of quality is undermined by the practice of allowing supervisors to act as internal examiners. According to Tinkler and Jackson (2004: 68), 'Few institutions unambiguously state that the supervisor cannot act as examiner' Utilizing the supervisor as an examiner is tantamount to one

assessing their own work. In this case one is likely to sacrifice rigor and to embrace a more subjective approach to the moderation process.

2. Learner Centered Challenges

The major learner centered challenges to the quality of postgraduate research include the quality of entrants, student work ethics, and unrealistic expectations by learners. No doubt, the quality of students admitted for postgraduate studies has a bearing on the quality of postgraduate research. For instance, students whose undergraduate background is poor are more likely to struggle through postgraduate training. In a study focusing on the relationship between program size, the quality of entrants and of faculty, the faculty's published research output, and the average quality of PhDs trained by some of US top graduate programs in Economics, Hogan (1981) found that the quality of entering students was significantly related to the quality of PhDs produced by that program. The quality of postgraduate research is also likely to suffer adversely where students lack a core work culture and a belief in quality work. Existing evidence also tends to suggest that in some cases postgraduate students tend to have unrealistic expectations (Lee 2007). These include unrealistic completion datelines that do not take into consideration the amount of time and effort required to produce a good dissertation or thesis. As Lee (2007) pointed out, the push to finish timeously causes conflicting pressures; the pressure to produce quality original research versus the pressure to complete.

3. Quality of Supervision Provided

Another factor that may influence the quality of postgraduate research is the quality of supervision provided. According to Pearson and Kayrooz (2004), research supervision is a facilitative process requiring support and challenge. The two primary goals of supervision are developing research students to become capable researchers (Down, Martin, and Bricknell, 2000) and the achievement of quality completion (Zhao, 2003). Among others, supervisors are responsible for providing satisfactory guidance to the student in defining the research topic, designing the project, gathering material, writing and working through drafts and disseminating their work (Leder, 1995). The process should entail advising the student; monitoring the student's progress; establishing and maintaining regular contact with students; providing timely, constructive and effective feedback to the student; ensuring that the student adheres to ethical standard and academic practices; and ensuring that the student adheres to the institution's and/or program codes on quality and standards (Leder, 2005; Zuber-Skerrit and Roche, 2004). Jacobi (1991) viewed the supervisor as taking a mentoring role; facilitating access to resources and opportunities; providing information, protection and sponsorship; stimulating the acquisition of knowledge; and serving as a role model.

The quality of supervision provided to the student is a function of multiple factors. These include the system for allocation of supervisors, availability of qualified and experienced faculty, research involvement by supervisors, the match between student research area and supervisor's expertise, availability of supervisor, and the relationship the student develops with their supervisor (see e.g., Ives and Rowley, 2005; Zuber-Skerrit, 2004; Ståhl, and Hall, 2003; Zhao, 2003; Phillips and Pugh, 2000). The system for allocation of supervisors will impact on the quality of supervision received by influencing the way the student and the supervisor view supervision as well as the quality of the relationship between the student and the supervisor (Ives and Rowley, 2005). As such, the first step in the allocation of a supervisor should be allowing all students to find their own supervisors. This way supervisors and students will be made to feel that they have choices or at least the ability to say 'no' to suggested arrangements. Most important, supervision will be based on a mutual understanding between the student and supervisor. This is likely to improve student satisfaction with supervision, the progress made by the student, completion time and possibly the quality of the final product (Ives and Rowley, 2005).

Availability of qualified and experienced faculty is essential in the attainment of quality postgraduate research (Zuber-Skerrit, 2004; Zhao, 2003). A study conducted by Ives and Rowley (2005) suggested that students supervised by lower cadre faculty (e.g. Lecturers) and by those with limited supervision experience were more likely to abandon Ph.D. studies. Ives and Rowley (2005) also found that more senior academic staff and experienced supervisors can make supervision a more satisfying experience.

Another determinant of the quality of supervision is the supervisor's involvement in research. As much as possible, research students should get supervisors who are involved in research and publications in a sustainable fashion (Ives and Rowley, 2005; Phillips and Pugh, 2000). The need for supervisors who are themselves active researchers has also been demonstrated by Hogan (1981) who found that, in some of US top graduate programs in Economics, the quality of faculty research activity contributed positively to quality of graduate programs. Unfortunately, in many African universities the shortage of faculty with Ph.D. qualifications and a good track record of research and publications have relegated this consideration to a subsidiary status. While many African universities had a reputable tradition of research in the 1960s and 1970s (Ståhl, and Hall, 2003), in the 1980s quality began to decline due to the impact of declining research funds and migration of experienced faculty in search of better pay. The situation has been compounded by the permeation of a consultancy culture as poorly remunerated faculty struggle to pay their bills/ make ends meet. Recently African universities have tried to rekindle research training (Ståhl, and Hall, 2003), but not much progress has been made and the lack of experienced supervisors continues to undermine the quality of postgraduate research in most universities.

The match between supervisor's expertise and the student's topic should be an important basis for the allocation of a supervisor if quality research is to be attained (Ives and Rowley, 2005). As much as possible, students should get supervisors who are sufficiently close to their research area. A study conducted by Ives and Rowley (2005) found that students whose research topic matched with their supervisor's expertise were more likely to make good progress, to be satisfied with their supervision, and to complete the work timeously. Similar findings had been realized earlier by other researchers such as Donald, Saroyan, and Denison (1995), Holdaway, Deblois, and Winchester (1995) and Powles (1993).

The availability of the supervisor to attend to the student's needs is another important element of good supervision. Given that dissertation/thesis writing is a guided learning process, the quality of the final product is a function of both the supervisee and the supervisor. The good supervisor should always be available, committed to the student, directed by student's needs, as well as willing to support, encourage and monitor the student's research progress effectively (Zuber-Skerrit and Roche, 2004; Zhao, 2003). The relationship students develop with their supervisors is another indicator of the quality of supervision. Students who develop good interpersonal relationships with their supervisors have been shown to be more likely to be satisfied with their supervision, to be satisfied with the dissertation and/or thesis writing process, to make good progress, and to be more likely to produce quality work (Ives and Rowley, 2005; Phillips and Pugh, 2000; Fraser and Mathews, 1999; Heinrich 1991; Goulden, 1991; Hockey 1991). Such relationships have also been found to prevent slow progress and to decrease drop outs (Kyvik and Smeby, 1994; Cullen, Pearson, Saha and Spear, 1994; Hamilton, 1993; Goulden, 1991).

DATA AND METHODS

This data utilized for this paper were derived from examination reports for 92 masters and eight (8) doctoral (Ph.D.) dissertations and theses moderated by one of the author acting as external examiner over a period of

nine (9) years. Of the 92 master's level research reports examined, 54 had been submitted as partial fulfillment for the Master of Arts (MA) degree while the remaining 38 were in fulfillment of the Master of Philosophy (M-Phil) degree. On the other hand, six (6) of the doctoral dissertations were in the discipline of Sociology, one (1) in Education and one (1) in Peace Studies. The dissertations and theses were drawn from nine (9) universities spread across the Eastern, Western and Southern African regions as follows: Eastern Africa – 43 (43.0 percent), Western Africa - 40 (40.0 percent) and Southern Africa – 17 (17.0 percent). Most of the universities are well established institutions that at one time or another were of reputable standing in the African continent.

A content analysis of the various reports was undertaken to assess the overall quality of postgraduate dissertations and theses. Because the study mainly involved the content analysis of reports, the results presented are mainly of a qualitative nature. To provide a summative measure of quality, we attached a rating to each of the recommendations made by the examiner with respect to the various research reports as follows: 'Accept as submitted' = **excellent**, 'accept with minor corrections' = **good**, 'accept (award degree) after major corrections and/or revisions' = **satisfactory**, 'revise and resubmit for further examination' = **poor**, and 'not to be accepted for the degree' = **very poor**. For ease of reference the ratings were reduced to a dichotomous scheme of high and low in which reports rated as excellent and good were considered to have been of high quality while those in the other ratings were of low quality. As evident from Table 1, the results showed that only 37.0 percent of the dissertations and theses examined were of high quality. These included 39.2 percent of the master's level research projects and 12.5 percent of the Ph.D. dissertations. The remaining 63 percent (i.e., 60.0 percent of masters and 87.5 percent of doctoral) reports were of low quality.

Table 1: Distribution of Research Reports Examined by Examiner's Recommendations

Recommendations/ Rating	Type of Research Project				Total	
	Masters		PhD		Number	Percent
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent		
Accept as submitted (Excellent)	2	2.2	0	0.0	2	2.0
Accept with minor corrections (Good)	34	37.0	1	12.5	35	35.0
Accept (award degree) after major corrections/ revisions have been made (Satisfactory)	31	33.7	5	62.5	36	36.0
Revise and resubmit for further examination (Poor)	23	25.0	2	25.0	25	25.0
Not to be accepted for the degree (Very Poor)	2	2.2	0	0.0	2	2.0
Total	92	100.00	8	100.00	100	100.0

Weaknesses Plaguing Dissertations and Theses Examined

To elaborate on the low quality of the bulk of the dissertations and theses produced by African universities today, emphasis was placed on the major weaknesses that characterized them. These were considered under three categories matching the three broad attributes - that is, contribution of original knowledge, overall packaging and presentation, and the dissertation/ thesis contents - that earlier in this paper were said to be central to the quality of postgraduate research. As a preamble to the identification of weaknesses under each

category, a descriptive presentation of each attribute is provided. This is imperative because the three attributes constitute the bases for the more elaborate analysis of the status of the postgraduate research focused on by this study.

1. Original and Valuable Contribution to Knowledge

The first attribute of quality postgraduate research is making original and valuable contribution to knowledge (Wisker, 2005; Tinkler and Jackson, 2004; Delamont, Atkinson, and Parry, 2000) and is especially applicable to Ph.D. level research. This could take forms such as finding a solution to an immediate problem; application, testing and generation of theories; contribution to research methodology; and replication of others' research (Tinkler and Jackson, 2004; Thomas 2003; Underwood, 1999). By contributing original knowledge, the dissertations and theses move the discipline forward. For postgraduate research to make contributions to theoretical knowledge, it must have the potential to lead to a publishable research (journal) article. That is, it should afford the supervisor and the supervisee the opportunity to collaborate in the publication of at least one journal article.

A closer scrutiny of the dissertations and theses examined suggested that many of them had the potential to make original contribution to (theoretical) knowledge. Though not always clearly stated, most dissertations and theses were anchored on a problem of study that manifested a knowledge gap. Furthermore, in most cases, the problems of study had been translated into measurable objectives and/or research questions. Such studies, if properly executed and developed, therefore, had the potential to increase the reader's understanding of the subject matters they focused on. Nevertheless, the ability of most dissertations and theses to effectively contribute original knowledge tended to be impaired considerably by structural, content, and presentation flaws that tended to undermine their quality quite considerably. To illustrate, in many cases, poorly presented and inadequately interrogated results adversely impacted on the quality of new knowledge realized. However, such a situation could easily be overcome through the revision of the results and discussion aspects of such reports with the view to ensuring that results are correctly presented and structurally sound as well as attract appropriate interpretations, conclusions and recommendations. It should be noted that very few of the research reports examined, including those for Ph.D., conducted a rigorous testing of hypotheses with the view to establishing association or causal relationship that could result in the generation of new theories. Other studies focused on more applied subject matters or topical issues such as health, social conflict, poverty, rural development and other social problems affecting communities. These had the potential to contribute valuable information to drive policy or interventions by governments and communities for the resolution of immediate problems. It is also instructive to point out that none of the dissertations and theses examined was found to make contribution to research methodology.

2. Overall Packaging and Presentation

The second attribute of a quality dissertation and/or thesis is its overall packaging. The document contents and page layout should be well formatted, with the author providing adequate margin space on both sides of the page and employing consistent line spacing and font type and size. In addition, the presentation should be very well written, utilizing carefully thought out and well sequenced, direct and concise paragraphs with proper transitions. It should adhere to an appropriate writing format along with correct usage of grammar and spellings, with the research avoiding verbiage and lyrical digressions that could make the report unnecessarily long and boring to read, among others. Also, the contents of a quality postgraduate dissertation/ thesis should be organized into carefully selected headings and sub-headings whose ordering (e.g., first order, second order, and third order subheadings) is distinctive and does not undermine the coherent and flow of information.

Generally speaking, most dissertations and theses examined were poorly packaged and presented. This left many of them reading like raw drafts that required the attention of a supervisor more than they required the services of an examiner. In many cases they suffered from poor formatting of report and page layout. Specifically, some reports were characterized by inadequate (and in some cases inconsistent) margin space on both sides of each page, inconsistent use of font types and sizes, inconsistent line spacing, and inconsistent (poor) paragraphing. Concerning paragraphing, most researchers appeared not to have been guided by any specific logic while organizing their work into paragraphs; normally the logic of paragraphing is to separate different ideas. Also, in many research reports the paragraphing styles employed made it hard for the reader to tell where distinctive paragraphs commenced and ended. The quality of presentation was undermined further by the poor use of subheadings. In some cases, researchers tended to use far too many subheadings with the effect that the work ended up being incoherent and lacking flow. In other cases, even when it was obvious that researchers employed different orders of subheadings (e.g., first order, second order and third order subheadings), these were used in such a way that the reader could not easily distinguish the ordering.

Further indicator of low overall quality of presentation of the dissertations and theses were the grammatically flawed and poorly structured sentences. These characterized the bulk of reports examined and betrayed the researchers' writing (communication) skills and command of the English language. Most important, they undermined the quality of arguments and reduced coherence and flow of ideas. A few cases of researchers engaging in verbiage and lyrical digressions were also recorded. Dissertations and theses characterized by structurally and grammatically flawed sentences tended to become boring and uninteresting to read. Those characterized by unnecessary verbiage tended to become unnecessarily long, in addition to being boring to read.

3. *Dissertation/Thesis Contents*

The third attribute of a good postgraduate research report resides with its outline and contents. Normally, a good dissertation/ thesis is completed according to generally accepted standards of dissertation structure or outline. Although the standards may vary across institutions, disciplines and programs, there are certain features that are required of all dissertations and theses that comply with the standards of academic quality. Overall, the document should be carefully and clearly presented with the reader's needs in mind, broken down into chapters with each chapter being coherent in itself and contributing to an integrated whole. It should open with a preliminary section which includes a cover page containing the title of the study, the names of the author, the purpose of the report, and the institution of affiliation. The title should be informative, covering the content of the study and indicating the area where the study was conducted. This is normally followed by an approval page, which is then proceeded by the table of contents, the list of tables and figures, an abstract, and, where necessary, a list of abbreviations (or acronyms). The table of contents should provide the reader a quick overview of the major sections of the report, with page references. All entries should be replicas of what exists in the body of the report and page numbers must be exact. Whereas tables and/or figures should be listed in a 'table of contents' type format with page numbers, the abstract, whose purpose is to provide a bird's eye view of the whole report, should present a complete but concise description of the work, spanning the problem of the study, its main objectives, the research design and methods used to collect and analyze data, the major findings, conclusions drawn, and the key recommendations offered, if any. The list of acronyms should be exhaustive and presented in a strictly alphabetical ordering to facilitate ease of reference.

Overall, the bulk of the dissertations and theses whose examination reports are the locus of this study incorporated all the elements required of preliminary pages. However, major weaknesses were observed in terms of the quality of the presentations. In particular, in some cases tables of content were poorly formatted and, contrary to expectations, some listed headings and subheadings that did not replicate what existed in the body of the report. In some instances, pages indicated in the table of contents did not reflect the exact location of some of the headings and/or subheadings in the body of the report. Similar errors were also identified with the presentation of lists of tables and figures. Another weakness identified from the preliminary pages of some of the research reports related to the presentation of abstracts. While in some cases researchers presented incomplete abstracts that failed to capture all the elements specified earlier, in other cases the abstracts were too detailed, presenting unnecessary background information and delving too much into the results of the study. This meant that they did not serve the important marketing function of convincing the reader to read the work in full. Finally, some lists of acronyms tended not to be all inclusive (omitted some abbreviations used in the text) while, contrary to expectations, others were not ordered alphabetically.

The preliminary section of a good study is normally followed by an introduction (which forms the first chapter of the report). It provides a background to the study, the research problem, broad and specific research objectives and/or questions, and a rationale or justification of the study. In this regard, quality is manifested in the researcher's ability to develop a suitable background to the study, present a clearly stated research problem (or the knowledge gap the study wishes to fill), translate the problem into measurable objectives/ research questions and to provide adequate justification for the study. All dissertations and theses examined included such a chapter. However, in some cases the quality of such chapters tended to be undermined by the presentation of unnecessarily long backgrounds to the study. This meant that the reader had to wait for too long before confronting the gist of the study; its problem statement. This despite the fact that the study problem is the backbone of the study and allows the reader/examiner to form an opinion as to whether there is a need for the study or not. It is imperative that one encounters the study problem by the third page for a master's thesis and by the fifth page of a PhD. dissertation. In some cases researchers presented backgrounds that did not offer a solid base for the problem of the study. Normally, a good background should provide a broad preamble to the subject matter of the study spanning both the macro to the micro contexts without turning it into a literature review.

Weaknesses were also observed with respect to problem statements and objectives of the study. Concerning problem statements, some researcher failed to state the problems of their studies clearly. In this regard, researchers tended to get bogged down with unnecessary details while others completely failed to explicate the gap in knowledge that was targeted by their studies. Although most studies translated the problem of study into measurable/ quantifiable objectives, in some cases the objectives tended to be poorly formulated and required recasting to ensure that they captured the problem of study comprehensively as well as provided a logical and systematic scheme for the sequencing of findings, discussions, conclusions and recommendations. The greatest weaknesses observed with respect to the bulk of the dissertations and theses examined pertained to the justification of the study. This element of the introductory chapter tended to be very weak sometimes poorly targeted (irrelevant) or simply incomplete. To meet expected standards, the justification of the study should, among others, span the two major contributions that most studies are designed to make. That is, contribute to the stock of available theoretical knowledge in the subject area of the study and the applied utility of the information generated by the study (or its capacity to inform policy formulation and implementation). Concerning the former, the researcher must confirm to the reader that a

knowledge gap indeed exists and, in a few words, show how his/her study differs from or builds on what has been done in the past.

A quality postgraduate dissertation and/or thesis should also incorporate a succinct, penetrating, well-integrated, challenging and critical review of the relevant literature. In the review, which normally forms the second chapter of the report, the researcher should demonstrate a deep understanding and mastery of the empirical literature and hence the subject matter as well as point out the unresolved questions. As a rule of thumb, the review should make extensive use of current journal articles since these are the best sources of empirical literature. Consistent with expectations, every dissertation and/or thesis examined presented a literature review chapter. However, in many cases the depth of coverage, the style of presentation, and the referencing style impaired the quality of such chapters. A major weakness of some dissertations and theses was the presentation of incomplete literature reviews. The situation in some cases was compounded by a failure to draw adequately from current journal sources.

Concerning the style of presentation, some researchers offered incoherent reviews requiring a total overhaul. Paragraphs were not threaded together in a fashion that guaranteed the build-up to a desired climax. Some researchers mixed levels of analysis in no particular order, failed to utilize suitable subheadings to organize the review, or did not critically interrogate the literature as expected so as to identify areas of contestation and the necessary gaps and problem areas that required the attention of their studies. Still in other cases, paragraphs grouped distinctive statements that were not related at all. The situation was often compounded by poor sentence structure, inappropriate use of words, and the abuse of punctuation marks and conjunctions. A final object of concern in many literature review chapters was the referencing. In some cases researchers provided factual and/or statistical information without acknowledging sources, which amounts to plagiarism. In other cases no systematic referencing style was adhered to; in some cases researchers cited the title of the source consulted instead of the author's surname as is normally the practice. Also, it was not uncommon for researchers to offer inconsistent information (e.g., spelling of surnames and years of publication) with respect to a single source, to use *et al* inappropriately, and to cite sources with common authors and years of publication without distinguishing them by labeling them a, b, c etc.

A good dissertation or thesis must also offer an adequate and coherent profiling of the research design and methodology utilized for the study. Here quality resides in the researcher's ability to demonstrate a good understanding of the research process by selecting an appropriate (suitable) research design (or a triangulation of designs) and related methods and techniques of sampling, data collection and data analysis; rationalizing the research design and methods; and successfully executing the design(s) and methods. It was observed that all dissertations and theses incorporated some form of profiling of the research design and methods utilized. However, this tended to be the weakest chapter in many reports, raising multiple concerns. First, some researchers relegated this important element of a research report to a low status by presenting it as a short component section of the introduction chapter. Where this was the case, the description sometimes overlooked essential elements and/or tended to lack the expected substance. In some cases, the presentation told the story of a researcher whose understanding (grasp) of research methods remained suspect. To illustrate, the description of the sampling techniques utilized for the study by some researchers tended to suggest that the researcher did not know the distinction between probability and non probability sampling and the attendant methods.

Another weakness of design and methodology chapters was incompleteness. Some researchers especially did not incorporate sections focused on methods (techniques) of data analysis, ethical considerations and limitations of or the challenges the study had to contend with. By so doing, researchers presented design and methodology chapters that did not meet the expected quality for a master's or Ph.D. research project. Other common omissions included the failure to rationalize the design(s) elected for the study, profile the sampling techniques and procedures in systematic and elaborate fashion, and to offer a well focused and detailed profiling of the data collection methods and processes. Not to forget matters related to the sequencing of subheadings and the usual concerns about sentence structure, grammar and paragraphing.

The results chapter of any dissertation or thesis is one of its most important elements. Herein lies the formative stages of the researcher's contribution to knowledge. The quality of the results chapter is best captured through the adequacy of the information gathered for the study and the presentation style adopted. The data are either qualitative, quantitative or a blend of both qualitative and quantitative information. To be able to answer the research questions effectively and to draw appropriate conclusions, rich data, possibly from multiple sources, are compulsory. The results should be presented in a well structured fashion, in which tables, figures and diagrams used to summarize data are properly numbered, titled and referred to in the text. To be convincing and systematic, the presentation should not only be comprehensive and complete but also anchored on the specific objectives of the study.

Evidently, virtually all dissertations and theses were informed by huge data sets that provided the researchers with the opportunity to cover each study objective and/or research question comprehensively. However, in some cases the researchers were unable to manage the data effectively. This was manifested through the weaknesses that characterized the reports, thereby undermining their quality considerably. For instance, in some extreme cases, what were shaping up to be fairly well written and good dissertations or theses had their quality completely decimated by the results chapters that were not just overloaded with information but were also poorly structured. With specific reference to structuring, other than the descriptive profiling of the socio-economic and demographic characteristics of respondents, the presentation of results should key on the objectives of the study. This means that for the presentation to be systematic, coherent and easy to follow, the results should be structured utilizing subheadings fashioned along the objectives of the study. Another weakness plaguing results chapters in many of the dissertations and theses was the unsystematic, confusing, disorganized, and directionless presentation of information. In such cases contents lacked flow and appropriate sequencing, thereby leaving the reader with the arduous task of trying to make sense of them. Other more specific weaknesses of results chapters included the failure to present a descriptive profiling of the study sample, inadequate coverage of all study objectives, poor integration of quantitative and qualitative data, and being too wordy and overly repetitious. Concerning the integration of quantitative and qualitative data, there were extreme cases in which they were presented separately creating the impression of two studies in one.

With specific reference to the presentation of quantitative results, in some extreme cases dissertations and theses were characterized by misleading and incorrect findings consequent from the use of wrong n-values during the computation of descriptive statistics (especially frequencies) reported by the study. This was more likely to occur in situations where respondents provided multiple responses to a single question, and tended to occasion wrong conclusions and recommendations. In some cases quality was compromised by the over reliance on tables to summarize data that resulted in inadequate descriptive profiling of findings, and the presentation of poorly formatted tables and/or figures. Staying with tables and figures, some researchers

crowded their reports with tables, figures and diagrams that did not add much value to them. We are referring to the presentation of simple tables whose contents could have been covered exhaustively descriptively without causing undue confusion. Others failed to number tables properly, give them suitable titles or both. Also, contrary to conventional expectations, it was not uncommon for researchers not to introduce tables and/ or figures to the reader, thereby leaving him/her to confront them abruptly. Furthermore, many reports were characterized by the inappropriate use of the statistical terms of 'majority' and 'significance'. While a majority comprises of 50 percent plus of the units being analyzed, the term significant best fits a situation where a statistical test of the same was conducted. There were also cases of dissertations and theses presenting hypotheses without testing them or relying on inappropriate statistical tools to test them. Finally, the usual language and paragraphing problems also affected the quality of most results chapters.

No dissertation or thesis is complete without offering a comprehensive and well reasoned evaluation (interpretation) of the key findings, as much as possible anchored on the objectives of the study. During that presentation the researcher shares his/ her opinion about the findings as well as provides a critical analysis of empirical observations. The interrogation of findings should demonstrate the researcher's analytical thinking and ability to unleash his/her 'Sociological Imagination'. The discussion should also make extensive reference to the existing empirical knowledge. The centrality of the discussion of findings to a quality dissertation/thesis tends to be diminished when the reporting of findings occurs simultaneously with the interpretation of the same.

The discussion of findings constituted a major source of weakness in virtually all dissertations and theses examined. In extreme cases, no interpretation of results was offered at all. In more moderate cases the problem was one of inadequacy, with the interpretation of findings falling short of the expected standards. Most affected in this regard were Ph.D. research reports. In many cases the inadequate interpretation of findings was occasioned by the researcher's decision to present and interpret data simultaneously instead separating the two, with the discussion of findings constituting a separate chapter. The separation of data presentation and analysis (interpretation) has two advantages. First, it strengthens the report considerably by making the presentation more systematic. In particular, it allows one to appreciate all the patterns emerging from the data first before the most significant of these are teased out for further treatment through detailed interpretation/discussion. Second, it allows for a better, more focused and uninterrupted critical appreciation of this important element of the research report by the reader. In other cases the discussion of findings was crowded by unnecessarily lengthy summaries of the study results instead of keying on the interpretation of those results. In addition, and contrary to expectations, there were many cases in which researchers failed to make extensive reference to the empirical literature; to state whether or not the findings of their studies were consistent or inconsistent with these. A further weakness of data interpretation was unsystematic presentation and poor targeting occasioned by the failure to anchor the process on the objectives and the unique findings of the study.

The core contents of a quality dissertation/thesis should culminate with the presentation of the conclusions drawn by the study and, if necessary, (policy) recommendations offered. To be well targeted and to tie the whole report together, the conclusions must be anchored on the study objectives and reflect the findings of the study (i.e., be data driven). Similarly, the recommendations should capture the research objectives and offer actionable as opposed to abstract suggestions. The basic weaknesses identified with the dissertations and theses whose examination reports were analyzed for this study included the presentation of repeat

summaries of findings in place of conclusions, poorly targeted conclusions that were inconsistent with the study objectives, and the presentation of conclusions that were not data driven and therefore irrelevant. The recommendations offered by most studies appeared to share some of the same weaknesses. For instance, some researchers provided poorly targeted policy suggestions that did not address the research questions underpinning the study. Also, in some cases recommendations were too abstract to constitute actionable steps.

A quality of a postgraduate dissertation/ thesis must incorporate a reference list. The list should be complete (include all sources cited in the text as well as provide all the required information), devoid of unnecessary items (those not cited in the text), and presented in a strictly alphabetical ordering utilizing a conventionally acceptable style such as the American Psychological Association (APA) and the Harvard styles. The presentation of reference lists for virtually all dissertations and theses presented the greatest challenge to quality. Nearly all lists were incomplete in two ways. Either they failed to incorporate all the sources cited in the text or did not provide all the information required. On the other hand, some lists were crowded with sources that had not been referred to in the text and therefore did not warrant inclusion. Incomplete and crowded reference lists manifested an element of carelessness on the part of the researchers. In addition, contrary to expectations, items in many reference lists were not ordered alphabetically. Furthermore, a lot of inconsistencies in the listing of sources, both in terms of surnames and years of publication, were observed in many reference lists. For instance, it was not uncommon for surnames and years of publication presented in the reference list to differ from those cited in the text. Another weakness was the use of et al in the reference list. The conventionally accepted practice is to list surnames and initials of all authors unless a source has far too many authors. Finally, some of the reference lists were not presented utilizing a conventionally acceptable style such as the APA and the Harvard styles.

Is it possible to talk about the excellent and very good theses/projects /dissertations for readers to appreciate the fact that there is also quality work in Africa or is this implied in the above discussion? What were the minor correction for the good ones?

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Overall, the results of this study showed that dissertations and theses produced by the African universities covered were of low quality. Of the master's and doctoral research reports examined, only 2% earned the rating of excellent translating to a recommendation of 'accept as submitted' while 35% were rated good and received a recommendation of 'accept with minor corrections' The remaining 63 percent received ratings of satisfactory (36 percent), poor (25 percent) and very poor (2 percent) whose equivalent recommendations were 'accept after major corrections/revisions', 'revise and resubmit for further examination' and 'not accepted for the degree', respectively. Further content analysis of the examiner's reports revealed that the low quality of dissertations and theses was embodied in common weakness that spanned them from the preliminary sections to their main bodies and reference lists.

There exists a wide variety of factors that constitute possible explanations of the poor quality of postgraduate dissertations and theses that were the locus of this study. Most of these are exact replicas of the factors isolated in the theoretical background section of this paper or a mutation of them. Such factors constitute major challenges whose impacts may vary from country to country, institution to institution, or even from program to program within the same institution. Capping the list is institutional (or program) policies, structures and practices for the regulation of postgraduate studies. It is not uncommon for African universities, at least the ones the authors of this study have interacted with, to lack strong formal policies and

standardized structures available to all research students and supervisors to govern training and the research completion process, including clearly spelt out statements of quality expectations and/or a quality assurance system. Where such policies, codes and practices exist, the problem could be one of enforcement. The failure to enforce policies to the letter may be caused by laxity on the part of supervisors, program heads and/or postgraduate studies offices. For example, poor quality in some institutions may point to the lack of constant monitoring and assessment of progress within the context of institutional requirements and other broad requirements for quality assurance. Such monitoring and assessment enables researchers and their supervisors to identify emerging problems and initiate the necessary corrective (remedial) measures. This, in turn, ensures that the final product measures to the standards set by the institution and/or the program.

There are also cases where aspects of such policies and frameworks are unrealistic. For example, some universities have set and continue to enforce unrealistic time frames for the completion of dissertations and theses. As Lee (2007) averred, the push to finish timeously occasioned by unrealistic time frames causes conflicting pressures; the pressure to produce quality original research versus the pressure to complete. To illustrate, in one university whose dissertations and theses form part of the examiner's reports analyzed for this paper, it was mandatory that all master's students complete and submit the thesis by the end of the second year of their studies. This decision disregarded important militating factors such as the large numbers of students admitted to the program each year (the average class size was about 40 students), the acute shortage of faculty in general and of qualified and experienced faculty to supervise postgraduate research (in all, the program in question has a total of 16 faculty, a large number of them holding the trainee positions of Tutorial Fellow and Assistant Lecturer who had not attained the PhD degree), and differences in student abilities and competence to complete research works. This trend might not be alien to many other universities in the continent.

Examination practices may also contribute to the poor quality of dissertations and theses produced by African universities. Specifically, the examination of postgraduate work in some universities may not meet the rigor necessary for quality to be sustained. In this regard, we are aware of cases where practice allows supervisors to serve as internal examiners. As indicated earlier, this is tantamount to one assessing one's own work. In other cases the practice of oral defence of all theses (the viva) does not exist; the written word remains the sole determinant of the candidate's level of proficiency in research. Here students can easily get away with sub-standard research works or works that have been authored for them by a better qualified individual. Furthermore, there are cases where a viva is required but is held without the presence of the external examiner(s). This can create conditions for the downplaying of external examiner's report thereby undermining its capacity to inform the final decision reached. Still in other cases, it may be the selection of the examiner that compromises the quality of postgraduate research. We are particularly concerned about those situations whereby friendship networks take precedence over qualifications, skill, and experience in research in the general area of the research as the guiding principle (Tinkler and Jackson (2004). As Tinkler and Jackson (2004) emphasized, this can sometimes compromise examiner intellectual independence and objectivity, thereby decreasing the propensity to uphold quality. The propensity for friends and acquaintances to be prioritized as examiners is likely to occur in situations where each dissertation and thesis attracts a different examiner, with the supervisor playing a role in determining who is selected. The practice is also likely to be rampant in countries with many universities offering postgraduate programs, such as South Africa and Kenya.

The “commercialization” of postgraduate studies in some countries may also have a role to play in the declining quality of postgraduate research. We are referring to those situations where the size of government funding is pegged on the number of postgraduate programs an institution has as well as the number of students enrolled in those programs. South Africa is a typical example. The urge to command a substantial share of government funding may drive some institutions to enroll large numbers of students even in those programs where capacity is lacking. This is a recipe for compromising quality and standards. Closely related to the commercialization of postgraduate studies in the massification of higher education that has swept many African countries. This has resulted in ballooned numbers at both the graduate and undergraduate level that are not matched by growth in facilities and qualified faculty.

Learner centered challenges may also have contributed to declining standards of postgraduate research in many African universities. These include the quality of entrants, unrealistic bloated expectations from students coupled with a culture of entitlement and the lack of a reading culture. Concerning the quality of entrants admitted to programs, the dissertations and theses examined suggested that some of the students might have been inappropriately qualified and ill-prepared for postgraduate studies or they did not get adequate preparation during the pre-dissertation or pre-thesis period. To illustrate, the failure by most students to offer in-depth and meaningful interrogation of research findings testified to the lack of critical thinking skills among many students. In addition, many dissertations and theses were characterized by endless language and writing problems, suggesting that students lacked sufficient competence in the English language and had inadequate writing skills. Similarly, the unclear and incomplete methodology chapters in many dissertations pointed to a postgraduate student who had a poor grasp (or understanding) of the research process and methods, including the techniques of data analysis. While this could be a reflection of the way most programs teach research methods - in some of the universities a single course in research methods is offered to postgraduate students - the poor quality of entrants cannot be ruled out altogether.

Unrealistic expectations and the culture of entitlement among students normally manifest themselves through impatience with supervisors and a seemingly blatant disregard for quality. Despite the heavy workloads that faculty carry in many African universities, it is not uncommon for research students, buoyed by unrealistic completion datelines, to complain that supervisors are not doing their work and do not wish students to complete their work timely. In their view, supervisors should attend to all submissions immediately they hit their in-trays. In some cases failure to review a student’s submission instantaneously could lead to the student filing a complaint with the program head or with other higher management offices. This sours, rather than cements, the relationship between the student and the supervisor and is a recipe for lack of completion or for a poor quality research report. The unrealistic expectations by students sometimes snowball into a disregard for quality. This is reflected through practices such as plagiarism (the cut and paste approach) that sometimes characterizes postgraduate dissertations and thesis (the literature review offers the worst case scenario) and the submission of research report ‘bought from research consultants (or bureaus) in town’. This is inconsistent with ethical academic practices that all universities must withhold. A further pointer to the disregard for quality work is the failure to make extensive use of up to date journal literature even in those research areas where such literature abounds. Mention must also be made of the tendency for the student to be more concerned with completion at the expense of the learning (apprenticeship) that comes with the dissertation/ thesis authoring process. In this regard, students opt to submit their research for examination not because it meets acceptable standards of quality but because the set dateline has arrived or because it is time for them to graduate.

Another learner centered impediment to quality postgraduate research is the lack of a reading culture coupled with the absence of a culture of hard work among postgraduate students in some African universities. Jointly these two lead to a shallow acquaintance with the empirical literature in the subject area of the student's research. This in turn impairs the competent identification and statement of the research problem, the formulation of measurable objectives, exhaustive review of the literature, the delineation of suitable testable hypotheses, the selection of a suitable research design and methods and the sufficient execution of the study.

This study considers inadequate supervision to be the leading cause of poor quality dissertations and theses in African universities today. Postgraduate research is a guided learning process that requires the inputs of both the supervisee and the supervisor. However, in many universities, shortage of qualified and experienced faculty, lack of commitment to a full-time academic career among faculty, lack of interest and active involvement in research and publications and heavy workloads cause poor supervision of postgraduate research students. In Africa, higher education has been experiencing pressure in terms of growth in participation and increasingly severe financial stringency (Zhao, 2003). The consequence has been declining educational infrastructure, reduced research funds, declining quality of faculty, and heavier workloads (Zhao, 2003). The situation has been aggravated by the extensive migration to Europe, North America, and the Middle East of the most qualified academics, chasing better remuneration. Of all the African countries only Botswana, Lesotho, Namibia, South Africa, and Swaziland (all in Southern Africa) are recipients of migrant academics from the rest of the continent. As a consequence, the number of faculty without PhDs has grown substantially to overtake those with PhDs and experienced in research. Ståhl, and Hall (2003) echoed this fact when they decried the glaring deficit of good researchers in many African universities. Due to the shortage of qualified and experienced faculty, many universities have been forced to rely mainly on inadequately prepared, unskilled and inexperienced faculty to supervise postgraduate research students. Not to forget that understaffing is burdening to full time faculty who must handle many supervisees. This often leads to ineffectiveness and hence substandard work. In some extreme cases, universities have been pushed to rely on part-time (adjunct) faculty working in other institutions to supervise postgraduate research. This impairs the program's ability to enforce and monitor quality and supervision effectiveness. It may also result in the importation of practices from parent universities (such as failure to take supervision seriously) that undermine the quality of the final product.

A second contributory factor to inadequate supervision of postgraduate research in many African universities is the lack of commitment to a full-time academic career among faculty. In many universities, especially those where academics earn depressed wages that can hardly finance their basic needs, being an academic is prized not because of the import of the career but mainly for its flexibility, free time, and limited employer control. Pecuniary destitution has turned academics, especially those who are well skilled and competent researchers, into full-time consultants for whom the formal university salary only supplements income from consultancy work. For these individuals, an academic career affords one the necessary reputation to earn consultancies while the employing institution provides a physical address to give to those one consults for and a guaranteed monthly pay, however meager, as one pursues other economic exploits. This reduces the availability of the supervisor to consult with the student which, in turn, decreases the completion rate, increases the completion time and the propensity to drop out, and, above all, undermines the quality of the final output by research students. The lack of commitment to a full-time academic career among faculty in many African universities is best captured by a commentary appearing in a recent copy of

the *Chronicle for Higher Education*. In that commentary titled “When family Ties Bind African University”, Holm (2010) writes:

Many, if not most African academics dedicate surprisingly little time teaching, advising students, conducting research, writing scholarly articles and serving as administrators. Often they are away from their universities for a combined period equals as much as half or more of the academic year, ...

Heavy workloads are also partially to blame for poor supervision of postgraduate students. As indicated earlier, many universities are experiencing faculty shortages that are responsible for heavy workloads. This means that faculty do not have adequate time to oversee postgraduate research. In some countries, especially in the East African region, the situation has been compounded by the established of parallel degree programs in which faculty are allowed to teach for extra remuneration. Not to forget the widespread tendency by most public universities to allow the part-time engagement of their faculty by other private and public universities. Kenya provides an excellent example with regard to parallel degree programs and part-time teaching in other universities. The consequence is a faculty that is overloaded, sometimes teaching in excess of six (6) courses. Yet, it is general knowledge that any course load in excess of three (3) courses is likely to impair research productivity as well as the performance of other responsibilities including the supervision of research students among faculty.

Poor supervision can also be understood within the context of lack of involvement in research by faculty in many African universities. The rise of a consultancy and moonlighting culture among faculty in many universities has dealt a deadly blow to academic research. As such, many faculty lack the currency and experience necessary for them to steer the postgraduate research student into quality work. By actively participating in research activities faculty keep their research tools sharpened, constantly updating them to ensure that they remain in sync with global trends. Just like the wood cutter must constantly sharpens his/her axe if he/she wishes to remain productive, so should the researcher keep abreast with emerging trends in theoretical and methodological knowledge.

A discussion of factors undermining the quality of postgraduate research in Africa would remain incomplete if the snowball effect of poor postgraduate research training is not factored in. It must be underlined that the nature of training received at the postgraduate level has a direct bearing on the quality of future research supervisors. Given that postgraduate research is the training ground for future research mentors, poor supervision at the master's and doctorate levels entrenches mediocrity in researchers that is transported across generations as inadequately prepared and skilled researchers take their positions as research supervisors to postgraduate students. As the saying goes, garbage in garbage out. The adverse effect of this factor is likely to be felt for many generations to come. The situation in some universities has been exacerbated by the increasing reliance on faculty who have only master's degree qualifications and by extensive inbreeding whereby most faculty have acquired their masters and PhD training from the very same institution of employment.

To conclude, the evidence adduced by this study has demonstrated that the bulk of dissertations and theses produced in African universities today are of low quality and characterized by many weaknesses and flaws that spanned them from the preliminary sections to their main bodies and reference lists. As such, there is an urgent need for universities to create environments that support research achievements/ are suitable for the production of quality postgraduate research. We hypothesize that multiple factors, including institutional (or program) codes, policies and practices; learner centered challenges; and the quality of supervision received

by postgraduate students, constitute possible explanations for the poor quality of postgraduate research reports observed by this study.

REFERENCES

- Africa Union Commission. 2006. Plan of Action: The 2nd decade of Education for Africa (2006-2015). Addis Ababa: AUC
- Ballard, B. 1996. "Contexts, of Judgment: An analysis of Some Assumptions Identified in Examiners' Reports on 62 Successful PhD Theses". Paper Presented to a *Conference on Quality in Postgraduate Research*, Adelaide, Australia.
- Bourke, S., Hattie J. and Anderson, L. 2004. "Predicting Examiner Recommendations on PhD Theses". *International Journal of Educational Research*, 41: 178-194.
- Bourke, S. and Holbrook, A. 2008. "PhD Thesis Quality: Predicting Examiner Recommendation as One measure of Quality". In M. Kiley and G. Mullins (Eds.) *Quality in Postgraduate Research: Research Education in the New Global Environment – Conference Proceedings*. Canberra: CEDAM, ANU.
- Cullen, D. J. Pearson, M., Saha, L. J. and Spear, R. H. 1994. *Establishing Effective PhD Supervision*. Canberra, Australia Government Printing Service.
- Delamont, S., Atkinson, P., and Parry, O. 2000. *The Doctoral Experience: Success and Failure in Graduate School*. London: Palmer Pres.
- Donald, J.G., Saroyan, A. and Denison, D.B. 1995. "Graduate Student Supervision Policies and Procedures: A Case Study of Issues and Factors Affecting Graduate Study". *The Canadian Journal of Higher Education*, 25 (3): 71-92.
- Down C. M., Martin, E. and Bricknell, L. 2000. *Student Focused Postgraduate Supervision: A Mentoring Approach in Supervising Postgraduate Students*. (Version1). Melbourne: RMIT.
- Fraser, R. and Mathews, A. 1999. "An Evaluation of the Desirable Characteristics of Supervisors". *Australian Universities' Review*, 42 (1): 5-7.
- Goulden, N. 1991. "Report of the Perceptions of Communication and Relationship during the Dissertation Process by Speech Communication Doctoral Advisors and Advisees". *ACA Bulletin*, 76: 39-48.
- Hamilton, R. G. 1993. "On the way to the Professoriate: The Dissertation". *New Directions for Teaching and Learning*, 54: 47-76.
- Hockey, J. 1991. "The Social Science PhD: A Literature Review". *Studies in Higher Education*, 16 (3): 319-332.
- Hogan T. D. 1981. "Faculty Research Activity and the Quality of Graduate Training". *The Journal of Human Resources* Vol. 16 (3): 400 – 415
- Holdaway, E. Deblois, C. and Winchester, I. 1995. "Supervision of Graduate Students". *The Canadian Journal of Higher Education*, 25 (3): 1-29.
- Holm, J. D. 2010. "When Family Ties Bind African Universities". Commentary Published in *The Chronicle for Higher Education*, August 2010.
- Ives, G. and Rowley G. 2005. "Supervisor Selection or Allocation and Continuity of Supervision: Ph.D. Students' Progress Outcomes". *Studies in Higher Education*, Vol. 30, No. 5 October 2005, pp. 535-555.
- Jacobi, M. 1991. "Mentoring and Undergraduate Academic Success: A Literature Review". *Review of Educational Research*, 61: 505-532.
- Johnston, S. 1997. "Examining the Examiners: An Analysis of Examiners' Reports on Doctoral Theses". *Studies in Higher Education*, 22: 333-347.
- Kiley, M. and Mullins, G. 2004. "Examining the Examiners: How Inexperience Examiners Approach the Assessment of Research Theses". *International Journal of Educational Research*, 41: 121-135.

- Kyvik, S. and Smeby, J. 1994. "Teaching and Research: The Relationship between the Supervision of Graduate Students and Faculty research Performance". *Higher Education*, 20 (2):227-239.
- Leder, G. C. 1995. "Higher Degree Supervision: A Question of Balance". *Australian Universities' Review*, 38: 5-8.
- Lee, A. M. 2007. "Developing Effective Supervisors: Concepts of Research Supervision". *South African Journal of Higher Education*, 21 (4): 680-693.
- Maslen, G. 2010. *GLOBAL: Postgraduate Quality Principles Adopted*. 26 September 2010, Issue: 41 Available: <http://www.universityworldnews.com/article.php?story=20100925160727604>. Accessed: March 19, 2011
- Pearson, M. 1996. "Professionalizing Ph.D. Education to Enhance the Quality of the Student Experience". *Higher Education*, 32 (3): 303-320.
- Pearson, M. and Kayrooz, C. 2004. "Enabling Critical Reflection on Research Supervisory Practice". *International Journal of Academic Development*, Vol. 9 (1): 99-116.
- Pitkethly, A. and Prosser, M. 1995. Examiners' Comments on the International Context of PhD Theses. In C. McNaught and K. Beattie, *Research into Higher Education: Dilemmas, Directions and Diversions*, pp. 129-136. Melbourne: HERDSA.
- Phillips, E. and Pugh, D. 2000. *How to Get a PhD: A Handbook for Students and their Supervisors* (3rd Edition). Buckingham, UK: Open University Press.
- Powles, M. 1993. "Staff Development for Ph.D. Supervision". In D. J. Cullen (Ed.) *Quality in Ph.D. Education*. Canberra, Australia: Australian National University, pp. 75-84.
- Quan-Baffour, K. P. and Vambe, M. T. 2008. "Critical Issues in the Supervision of Postgraduate Dissertations in Distance Education Environments". *Open Education - The Journal for Open and Distance Education and Educational Technology*, Vol. 4, Number 1.
- Stähl, Michael and Hall, Richard. 2003. *Is there a Missing Generation of Scientists in Africa? Paper Presented to the 2nd FARA Plenary 18-19 May 2003*. Available: <http://www.ifs.se/Publications/MissingGeneration.pdf>. Accessed: March 17, 2011
- Thomas R. M. (2003). *Blending Qualitative and Quantitative Research Methods in Theses and Dissertations*. Thousand Oaks, California: Corwin Press Inc
- Tinkler, P. and Jackson, C. (2004). *The Doctoral Examination Process: A Handbook for Students, Examiners and Supervisors*. Berkshire, England: Society for Research into Higher Education and Open University Press
- Underwood, S. 1999. *What is a PhD? Towards a Discussion Paper*. Lancaster: Higher Education Development Centre
- Winter, R. Griffiths, M. and Green K. 2000. The 'Academic' Qualities of Practice: What are the Criteria for Practice Based PhD?" *Studies in Higher Education*, 25 (1): 25-37.
- Wisker, D. 2005. *The Good Supervisor*. Basingstoke: Macmillan
- Zhao, F. 2003. "Transforming Quality in Research Supervision: A Knowledge Management Approach".
- Zuber-Skerrit, O. and Roche, V. 2004. "A Constructivist Model for Evaluating Postgraduate Supervision: A Case Study". *Quality Assurance in Education*, Vol. 12, No. 2: 82-93.