

Research output crisis in state universities in the age of Open and Distance Learning (ODL)

Mercy Kurebwa
Zimbabwe Open University
kurebwam@zou.ac.zw/ mtkurebwa@gmail.com

Abstract

Research plays a pivotal role in the university community. It enhances career development while at the same time bringing in new innovations to the nation at large. Universities are ranked on the basis of research output, among other criteria. Research output also contributes to the recruitment and promotion of university personnel, and possession of Doctoral qualifications is also a basis for recruitment and promotion for University faculty. Admittedly, research by faculty members indispensably feeds into quality teaching within universities. Arguably, our universities still have few doctorate holders, senior lecturers and professors, an indicator to limited research output. Furthermore, most tenure applications fail due to absence of research output evidence. Given that most universities, including those traditionally conventional, have adopted ODL in response to market needs, this study sought to explore the factors accounting for the low research output in Zimbabwean universities. A qualitative research approach underpinned by the interpretive paradigm was employed in this study to explore the factors leading to low research output among university faculty members. Purposive sampling was used to select participants from a two state universities until data reached saturation point. Documents were also interrogated to find out the research output of staff members as well as their qualifications. Transcribed data from in-depth interviews were thematically analysed. It emerged from the study that there was limited research output in universities due to lack of competences, unavailability of research grants, work and family commitments, research phobia, lack of interest, lack of confidence and mentorship, and scarce research funding, work overload, and mere laziness. The research recommends the need for training of university staff in research and publication, advocacy on the need for publication, providing access to research grants, and deliberate mentorship arrangements. These interventions might engender the positive environment for research output in universities.

Key words: Research output, Open and Distance Learning, University research.

Introduction

Research plays a pivotal role in the university community. Universities worldwide require research excellence. Research enhances career development while at the same time bringing in new innovations to the nation at large. Successful publishing “not only plays a crucial role in determining the fate of ideas, but also influences the career advancement

of individual scholars” (Bedeian, Van Fleet, and Hyman, 2009). Furthermore publishing is a consideration in tenure and promotion decisions Glick, Miller and Cardinal (2007) and influences financial rewards (e.g. salary and merit pay) and the professional recognition accorded to faculty (Bird, 2006). Universities are ranked on the basis of research output, among other criteria. The more academic publications the more social

prestige universities obtain Sureepong, 2016). Research output also contributes to the recruitment and promotion of university personnel, and possession of Doctoral qualification is also a basis for recruitment and promotion for University faculty. Publications have been found to be one of the criteria used for university lecturers' yearly performance appraisal (Belchere, 2007). Academics are required to meet research output targets to sustain their career trajectory (McNaught, 2015). It is for these reasons among many that university lecturers are under pressure to publish in reputable national and international journals.

Although research is a high priority for University lecturers, studies have indicated that university lecturers face an array of limitations in research output. These limitations in writing for publication include insufficient linguistic skills leading to paper denial, Coates, Sturgen, Bohannan and Pasini (2002) lack of capability of expression, Flowerdew (1999) and procedural difficulties such as textual organisation, developing own voice and reporting the literature (Al—Fadda, 2012). Furthermore, lack of availability of resources Slager-Meyer (2008) heavy teaching load, difficulty in accessing publishers, dearth of research funds and managerial duties, limited lecturers from researching (Sureepong, 2016). Cognisant of the important role research plays in the university community and the limitations inherent in research publication discussed in the background. This study investigated the factors that militate against research output in universities.

Statement of the problem

Research plays a pivotal role in the university community. It contributes to the recruitment and promotion of university personnel, and

possession of Doctoral qualifications is also a basis for recruitment and promotion for University faculty. However, in spite of all the benefits research offers to the university community, there is evidence of limited research output which this study investigated.

Research questions

1. What are the challenges faced by University lecturers in writing for publication?
2. What kind of research support do lecturers need?

Research methodology

Based on the research questions, this study employed a qualitative research approach. Qualitative approach to research is an approach that advocates the study of direct experience taken at face value (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2007). Furthermore, the approach entails the interpretation of lived experiences of participants Blaster, Hughs, High, (2005) and provides rich and deep data which describes phenomena in words (Kazdin, 2000). Lecturers with five years and above were selected for this study. Purposive sampling was used to select the 20 participants who were interviewed in this study. Data were collected through in depth face to face interviews and telephone interviews. The goal of purposive sampling is to select cases that are likely to be rich in information with respect to the purpose of the study (Gall and Borg, 2007, p. 21). The responses were transcribed into transcripts. Documents were interrogated to find out the research output as well as the prevalence of doctors and professors among participants. The researcher analysed the transcripts using predetermined thematic categories associated with the questions and then reanalysed it using

themes that emerged from the data. According to Cohen, Manion, Morison, (2004) data analysis takes place throughout the data collection process commencing with reading the data and dividing into smaller and meaningful units. Themes that emerged from the data were identified.

Findings

The study focused on the challenges faced by university lecturers in research output. A plethora of challenges emerged from the study. The study's findings indicated that university lecturers faced number factors which inhibited them from research writing and publishing. These challenges were discussed under the following headings; lack of resources such as money and time, work over load, lack of competencies to write academic papers and difficulties in finding journals, negative comments from journal reviewers. The participants suggested that universities increase research grants, mount workshops to equip junior researchers with competencies, placing young researchers under mentorship programmes and giving incentives to encourage research output.

Lack of resources

Financial resources

It emanated from this study that university lecturers lack financial resources to carry out research. The studied universities were incapacitated to fund research activities. Lecturers end up financing research activities which included research papers and conferences using their own financial resources. Some lecturers lamented,

"Publishing an article is very expensive. As such I just publish a few articles. I just have to sacrifice for my career development and promotion but the going is tough."

"Journals charge exorbitant fees for processing articles."

"The university has not been able to assist in the publication of papers and conferences."

Apparently, the absence of research funding and grants seem to be a great hindrance to research and publication. Academics used their own resources which is very restraining. As illuminated in this study, lecturers were burdened by funding research initiatives and this tended to de-motivate them from writing and publishing.

Time resources

The study also indicated that lecturers had no time to carry out research. Some lecturers intimated that they spent most of their time in attending numerous meetings, teaching, marking among other responsibilities.

"We have heavy teaching loads and we also spend a lot of time on community service."

"I am running too many programmes and am overwhelmed with work. All the lecturers who passed on in our faculty were not replaced and I am doing most of their work."

"I am concentrating on further studies and I spend most of the time working with my supervisors. Honestly, there is just too much work."

Lecturers also spent time on other income generating activities. This they said was to augment their meagre salaries. The findings tend to suggest that the mentioned commitments leave very little room for lecturers to write and publish. Observably, it would appear that lectures were compelled to work under pressure and this limiting their research output since they will be preoccupied by other things such as teaching in other universities to supplement their incomes. *Concomitantly*, creating a balance between research and teaching was difficult.

Lack of competencies

This study further revealed that some lecturers lacked writing and publication competences. According to Stepheson and Moniques, (2008) inadequate skill base made it difficult to conduct high research. The study indicated that some lecturers lack procedural skills. One lecturer commented, “*It is difficult to get reputable Journals’ and I don’t know how to identify them.*” Some lecturers had problems with structuring research papers as well as coming up with research questions. Lack of competencies came up as a major challenge. This challenge was further coupled with computer literacy limitations where some lecturers failed to access some on-line journals. The findings seem to indicate that limited knowledge in publications was really a drawback in so far as writing for publication. These findings resonate well with Sawyerr (2004); Kamoche, (2011) who concurred and reported that the lack of skills of academic staff to conduct high-quality research, institutions’ focus on teaching and inherent heavy teaching loads, inadequate infrastructure limited lecturers from researching.

It also emerged from the study that lack of competencies lead to publication phobia. Some lecturers had not written for publication throughout their entire educational life. As such, a belief that researching and publishing was difficult prevailed. Some had tried sending in papers to publishers and their papers were rejected and some received very negative comments. The following comments were made by some lecturers.

“I made an attempt to publish and my paper was rejected. This actually demotivated me.”

“The comments I received from the reviewers discouraged me from publishing.”

“I sent my paper for publication and to date nothing has materialised.”

The findings tend to suggest that confi-

dence to publish was also reduced by phobia, negative comments as well as delayed responses from publishers.

Conclusion

The study was set to investigate the challenges faced by university lecturers in writing for publication. The study concludes that writing for publication was fraught of challenges. This is because lecturers lack resources to write and published. Some lecturers were burdened by work over load and this limited them from writing for publication. Furthermore some lectures lacked competences to publish and had phobia to publish. This emanated from a poor research base and negative comments from reviewers. The study therefore proffers the recommendations below.

Recommendations

The following five recommendations were made in response to the findings highlighted in the study;

1. universities need to come up with research workshops to equip lecturers with requisite research competencies;
2. junior researchers need to be under mentorship of senior researchers;
3. teaching load need to be reduced by university authorities;
4. universities need to increase research grants and incentives for publishing;
5. universities need to forge research links with other universities, government and private sector; and
6. universities need equip undergraduate students with research skills.
7. universities need to provide researchers with incentives other than tenure and promotion.

References

- Al Fadda, H. (2012). Difficulties in academic writing: From the perspective of King Saud University Postgraduate Students. *English Language Teaching Journal*, 5(3)123- 130.
- Bedeian, A.G.Van Fleet, D.D. and Hyman, H.H. III (2009). "Scientific achievement and editorial board membership", *Organizational Research Methods*, 12:211 38.
- Belchere, D. (2007). Seeking acceptance in an English-only research world. *Journal of Second Language Writing*, 16: 1-22
- Bird, S.J. (2006). Research ethics, research integrity and the responsible conduct of research", *Science and Engineering Ethics*, . 12: 411 2.
- Blaster,I .Hughs and Tight ,M. (2005) *How to research* (2nd ed).Buckingham: Open University Press.
- Coates,R., Sturgen,B., Bohannan ,J. and Pasini,E. (2002). Language and publication in cardiovascular research articles. *Cardiovascular Research*, 53(2) 279-285.
- Cohen, L., Manion, L. ,Morison, K.(2007)*Research Methods in Education*.Milton Park: Abingdon,Oxon.
- Gall, M. D., Gall, J. P., & Borg, W. R. (2007). *Educational research: An introduction*. (8 th edition). Boston : Pearson/Allyn & Bacon .
- Hewitt, J. & Peters, V. (2006). Using wikis to support knowledge building in a graduate education course. In E. Pearson & P. Bohman (Eds.), *Proceedings of World Conference on Educational Multimedia, Hypermedia and Telecommunications 2006* (pp. 2200-2204). Chesapeake, VA : AACE
- Flowerdew, J. (1999). Problems in writing for scholarly publication in English: The case of Hong Kong. *Journal of Second Language Writing*, 8(3):43-264.
- Glick, W.H., Miller, C.C. and Cardinal, L.B. (2007), "Making a life in the field of 'organistion science'", *Journal of Organistional Behaviour*, 28: 817 35.
- Henning, E. Van Rensburg ,W. and Smith, B. (2004) *Finding your way in qualitative research*. Van Shaik: Pretoria.
- Kamoche, K. (2011), "Contemporary developments in the management of human resources in Africa", *Journal of World Business* , 46 (1) :1-4.
- Kazdin, A.E.(2000) *Psychotherapy for Children and Adolescents: Directions for Research and Practice*. New York : Oxford University Press.
- Salager-Meyer, F. (2008) Scientific publishing in developing countries: Challenges for future. *Journal of English for Academic Purposes*, 7:121-132.
- Sawyer, A. (2004). "African universities and the challenge of research capacity development", *Journal of Higher Education in Africa* , 2 (1) 211-240
- Surepong ,P.(2016). Thai Universities Academics Challenges of Writing for Publication. *Theory and Practice in Languages Studies Journal* .6(4) 681-685.