Students’ Challenges in Postgraduate Research: The Case of National Open University of Nigeria

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Abstract: The study was designed to examine the challenges encountered by Postgraduate students of the National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN) in their research. This was necessitated by the observation that most postgraduate students in the NOUN tend to graduate long after the stipulated time period for their programmes, indicating an apparent disparity between ‘what is’ and ‘what ought to be’ in running postgraduate programmes in Nigeria. The study was guided by three research questions. Using simple random sampling technique, 400 postgraduate students from the four (4) approved NOUN Study centres in the South East zone of Nigeria were selected for the study. The study used a questionnaire titled “Challenges Encountered in Postgraduate Research Survey Questionnaire” (CEPRSQ). It was structured on a two-point scale of Yes and No. The split-half method was used to establish the reliability. Data collected were analysed using frequencies and percentages. The result revealed among others that postgraduate students of NOUN encounter challenges in their research work due to lack of knowledge of research process. On the strength of the findings, it was recommended among others that postgraduate students should be properly trained and oriented in research methodology in order to cope with the demands of research.

Keywords: Students’ challenges, postgraduate research, challenges encountered, postgraduate students, National Open University of Nigeria.

Introduction
By the mid-70s, the social demand for education at all levels had become so high that educational expansion of all levels of education became one of government’s priorities. The 1979 Nigerian Constitution included education in the concurrent list thus making it possible for State Governments to establish their own universities (Ajadi, 2010). The Federal Government controls all the universities through the National Universities Commission (NUC), with a major function of coordinating university administrative and academic programmes and policies to ensure uniformity of standards (NUC, 1994).

As cited in Ajadi, Salawu and Adeoye (2008), the National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN), was established in July, 1983, by an Act of the National Assembly as the first distance learning tertiary institution in Nigeria, when it became crystal clear to the then Federal Government that the ever growing demand for education by her people cannot be met by the traditional means of face-to-face classroom instructional delivery. NOUN, a federal government-owned university emerged as the first dedicated university in Nigeria to introduce education through distance learning mode (Jegede, 2003). The vision statement of the university is that the NOUN is to be regarded as the foremost university providing highly accessible and enhanced quality education anchored by social justice, equity, equality and national cohesion through a comprehensive reach that transcends all barriers. While the mission statement is that the NOUN is to provide functional cost-effective, flexible learning, which adds life-long value to quality education for all who seek knowledge. Ajadi (2010) enumerates eight major objectives of NOUN as:

i. Provide a wider access to education generally but specifically in university education in Nigeria.
ii. Enhance equity and equality of opportunities in education.
iii. Enhance education for all and life-long learning.
iv. Provide the entrenchment of global learning culture.
v. Provide instructional resources via an intensive use of ICTs.
vi. Provide flexible, but qualitative education.
vii. Reduce the costs, inconveniences, hassles of and access to education and its delivery.

viii. Enhance more access to education.

According to NOUN (2014b) the method of instruction at the NOUN is by the distance learning mode within an open learning environment. Open learning is an innovative movement in education that emerged in the 1970s and evolved into fields of practice and study. The term according to Dodds (2001) and Ikegbusi (2016) refers generally to activities that either enhance learning opportunities within formal education systems or broaden learning opportunities beyond formal education systems. He further says that open learning is primarily a goal, or an educational policy. An essential characteristics of open learning is the removal of all barriers to learning (Ajadi, 2010). This means no prior qualifications to study, and for students with disabilities, a determined effort to provide education in a suitable form that overcomes the disability (for example, audio tapes for students who are visually impaired). Ideally, according to him, no-one should be denied access to an open learning program. Thus open learning must be scalable as well as flexible. Ehlers (2013) defines open learning as any form of learning in which the process enables the individual learners to exercise choice over any one or more of a number of aspects of learning.

Distance education on the other hand according to Jegede (2003) is less a philosophy and more a method of education. Students can study in their own time, at the place of their choice (home, work or learning centre), and without face-to-face contact with a teacher. Furthermore, Bates (2005) defines distance learning as an educational process in which a significant proportion of the teaching is conducted by someone removed in space and/or time from the learners. Distance education involves the use of a range of media such as print, written correspondence, audio, video, computer based and networks as well as multimedia facilities for the presentation of information and for communication between the university and her students (NOUN 2006). The instructional mode provides opportunity for working people to acquire knowledge, skills and technique which may be relevant to their present work situation or future career prospects. Distance education thus provides people with the opportunity to improve their academic qualifications without giving up their jobs and without being removed from their domiciles areas. The system also allows for teaching people who live in any location, regardless of the types of jobs they do (Ikegbusi, 2016). The system is also flexible in terms of age and time, allowing for enrolment at any time and age and at a convenience of pace dictated by the student (NOUN, 2014b).

According to NOUN (2006) the National Open University of Nigeria operates from its administrative headquarters located in Lagos, Nigeria. The reading and studying of printed course materials can take place in the home, in an environment convenient to the students or at some designated approved places called Study centres. At present, there are 54 Study centres which are located in the state capitals, major and important towns in all the six geo-political zones of the country as well as the Federal Capital Territory (Abuja). Some of these centres have permanent NOUN structures, while others are situated within some selected colleges of education and polytechnics. The National Open University of Nigeria according to NOUN (2014a) has 5 schools namely: School of Postgraduate Studies, School of Arts and Social Science, School of Education, School of Law, School of Management Sciences, School of Science and Technology, School of Health Sciences and School of Agricultural Science. The school of Postgraduate Studies continued with its responsibility of coordinating postgraduate studies in the university with the broad aim of maintaining and improving standards, excellence, integrity and relevance of its academic and professional programmes. In the year under review, the school held its statutory meetings as and when due to consider students’ results, appoint project supervisors, external examiners and new programmes for recommendations for senate approval.

To promote scholarship, tertiary institutions should build capacity for research and teaching activities at an international standard in identified areas that are crucial for national, economic and social advancement (Ojaide, 2015). He maintains that there are research challenges in the areas of Medicine, Physical Sciences, Nutrition and Education respectively. In other words, research must be relevant. Okoli (2016) and Brown (2007) are of the opinion that every tertiary institution should make budgetary provisions earmarked for research. They further say that the research funds and grants will help every institution to justify the establishment of postgraduate programmes as well as ensure quality and relevance of research output.

In most of the universities, postgraduate programmes are usually divided into course work and research (Toncich, 2016). All postgraduate students are bound to carry out research in their areas of study. Due to the importance of research in the academic pursuit of postgraduate students, Patton (2015) states that credit loads as high as 20

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and 24 are usually assigned to research. Despite the above revelation, Nwankwo (2016) ascertains that many students still fear research. These students according to him, think that it is a difficult and complex course which must be avoided. According to Nwankwo (2013), the meaning of research was cited right from creation, the history of man is full of attempts to probe into the unknown. It started with the building of Tower of Babel. They wanted to build a tower that would reach heaven in order to make a name for themselves. Though, God did not allow that to take place, the seed of research was sown. Today, man is several thousand times culturally superior to his primitive ancestors. Most of those things that were regarded as mysteries can be scientifically explained through the instrumentality of research (Best & Kahn, 2015).

Research according to Lubbe (2015) is a process of finding solution to a problem. Thomas (2014) sees research as a systematic and objective search for knowledge in order to discover the truth. Research is the study of something at a deeper level in order to systematically explain and predict its behaviour (Babalola, 2009). The meaning of research may also be explained and understood through the characteristics outlined by Best and Kahn (2015), and they include:

1. Research is directed towards the solution of a problem.
2. It emphasizes the development of generalizations, principles or theories that will be helpful in predicting future occurrences.
3. Research is based upon observable experience or empirical evidence.
4. It demands accurate observation and description.
5. It equally involves gathering new data from primary or first-hand sources or using existing data for a new purpose.
6. Although research activities may at times be somewhat random and unsystematic, it is more often characterized by carefully designed procedures that apply rigorous analysis.
7. Research requires expertise because the researcher is expected to have searched the related literature carefully and also it should be thoroughly grounded in terminology, concepts and technical skills necessary to understand and analyse the data.
8. Research strives to be objective and logical, applying every possible test to validate the procedures employed, the data collected and the conclusions reached.
9. More also, it involves the quest for answers to unsolved problems.
10. More importantly, it is characterized by patience and unhurried activity.
11. It is carefully recorded and reported.
12. As well as sometimes require courage.

But to Bak (2014), research could be summarized under four characteristics viz:

i. Research aims at solving problems.
ii. It is conducted in systematic and objective manner.
iii. It is based upon accurate observable experience and descriptions.
iv. It equally emphasizes the development of generalizations, principles or theories that will be helpful in predicting future occurrence. These characteristics of research according to Zuber (2014) and Wisker (2013) have far reaching implications for research works. For this reason, they must:
   1. Be well trained in research methodology in order to cope with the demands of research.
   2. Be painstaking and imaginative in their work.
   3. Be men and women of integrity, and
   4. Willing to spend hours when necessary, seeking to solve their research problem(s).

The focus of this study is on the challenges encountered by students in the National Open University of Nigeria. The researchers are motivated to carry out this study due to the fact that in NOUN, it is observed that a great number of postgraduate students after the mandatory course work, often abandon their research work to linger up to five years and above, another great number do not come and only a small percentage complete their research on record time. This according to Okoli (2016), indicates a disparity between ‘‘what is’’ and ‘‘what ought to be’’ in running postgraduate programmes in Nigeria. Another motivation came from poor quality of project reports which some students submit for defence and grading. One then wonders the factors responsible for this ugly trend and what could be done to improve the situation.

According to Mouton (2007) and Nwankwo (2013) educational research like other researches employs the use of scientific method. The scientific method is systematic, controlled, empirical and unbiased method of investigation. The method is very objective and the outcome is easily verifiable. The process according to Heath (2012) and Nwankwo (2016) consists of a sequence of events or activities that are initiated at a given point and proceeds through several steps which they summarized as:

i. Identification and definition of the problem.
   At this step, there is need for a proper articulation and understanding of the problem of the study before seeking solution to the problem.
As regards research and knowledge production, Udofot (2012) explains that it is central to the academic concern and what distinguishes a good university from an indifferent one is the quality and quantity of research carried on within it. He laments therefore, that the performance in this regard is below bar. Mapesela and Wilkinson (2005) also observe that it is not surprising that research endeavours, including postgraduate supports, suffer most in African universities. It is not surprising because according to them, stakeholders are aware of the obstacles and constraints confronting academics in tertiary institutions. In the case of NOUN, Wole and Ayotolo (2016) among other things state that there is hardly any long vacation during which academics devote their time and energy to research, and graduate students have unhindered sessions with their supervisors. Therefore, if the challenges encountered by these students are not identified for timely interventions, the benefits of tertiary or university education may be significantly hindered. In the view of above, the authors have decided to carry out this study on the challenges encountered by postgraduate research students in the National Open University of Nigeria.

Research Questions
The following research questions were formulated to guide the study.
1. How does lack of good knowledge of research process constitute challenge in postgraduate students conducting research in NOUN?
2. What are the challenges encountered in sourcing materials for postgraduate research in NOUN?
3. In what ways do attitude of supervisors cause challenges in postgraduate research in NOUN?

Methodology
The study was a survey type. Nwankwo (2016) describes a survey research as an attempt to collect data from a sample of a population in order to determine the current status of that population with respect to one or more variables. This design was employed in this study to collect data from respondents on the challenges encountered in postgraduate research in NOUN by selecting few people to be representative of the entire group. The study was carried out in all the NOUN Study Centres in the South East geo-political zone in Nigeria. South East zone consists of five states in Nigeria namely- Abia, Anambra, Ebonyi, Enugu and Imo. The four government approved NOUN Study centres in the zone as at June, 2016 are as follows: National Root Crop Institute, Umudike, Umuahia, Abia state; Federal Polytechnic, Nekede, Owerri, Imo state; NOUN Study Centre, Nike-Lake Road Enugu; and NOUN Study Centre, Defunct Party Building, Abagana, Anambra state. There is no Noun Study Centre in Ebonyi state at the time of this study. The target population was all the Masters and PhD students in the four approved Study Centres in the South East zone of Nigeria. These Study Centres have been approved by the National Universities Commission (NUC) of Nigeria.

The sample of this study was made up of 400 respondents selected from the four NOUN Study Centres in the South East geo-political zone of Nigeria. 100 postgraduate students were purposefully selected from the Study Centres. The researchers constituted an 18-item questionnaire titled ‘“Challenges Encountered in Postgraduate Research Survey Questionnaire” (CEPRSQ). The construction of the questionnaire was guided by information and ideas gathered from the review of related literature. The instrument has two parts, part A was on the students’ bio data, while part B has three sections. Section one was on challenges due to lack of good knowledge of the research process; section two was on challenges encountered when sourcing materials for postgraduate research and section three was on challenges encountered due to the negative attitude of supervisors. The CEPRSQ was structured on a two-point scale of Yes and No. Face and content validity of the instrument were established. To do this, the copies of the CEPRSQ were submitted along with the research purpose, scope and research questions to experts in Educational Management and Policy, Imo State University, Owerri-Nigeria and one in Measurement and Evaluation, Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka-Nigeria. Their suggestions led to the final draft of the questionnaire. The split-half method was used to establish the reliability. Copies of the questionnaire were personally administered by the researchers to a sample of 40 respondents in NOUN Study Centres in the South-South geopolitical zone of Nigeria. The two tests were conducted on a two sets interval. Then, the Pearson Product Moment Correlation was computed between the two sets of scores, a coefficient alpha of 0.80 was obtained for the items, and was considered adequate for the study.
The researchers personally visited the Study Centres on the appointed days, and with the help of six research assistants, administered copies of the questionnaires. This direct delivery method was used to ensure maximum recovery of the copies of questionnaire distributed, and to explain any point the respondents may not understand very well. The data collected from the respondents were analysed using frequencies and percentages.

Results

Table 1: Frequencies and percentages of respondents’ response on the challenges encountered due to lack of knowledge of research process.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>S/N</th>
<th>Items</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Identification and description of research problem</td>
<td>385</td>
<td>95.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Statement of research questions</td>
<td>385</td>
<td>95.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Designing research</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>7.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Collection of data</td>
<td>300</td>
<td>75.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Organization of data</td>
<td>194</td>
<td>31.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Analysis and presentation of results</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Discussion and implication of results</td>
<td>155</td>
<td>18.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1 above indicates that 95% of postgraduate students encounter challenges in identifying and description of research questions as well as in the statement of research questions. 31.3% has problems in organization of data; 18.3 in discussion and implication of results; 7.6% in designing research; 75% in collection of data and none of them encounter challenges in analysis and presentation of results.

Table 2: Frequencies and percentages of respondents’ responses on challenges encountered in sourcing materials for postgraduate research.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>S/N</th>
<th>Items</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Availability of relevant materials</td>
<td>384</td>
<td>98.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Identification of relevant materials</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>10.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Organization of relevant materials</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>22.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Proper reporting and referencing reviewed materials</td>
<td>203</td>
<td>34.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Financial constraints</td>
<td>400</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>Lack of adequate time</td>
<td>400</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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Table 2 shows that all the students under this study encounter financial and time constraints in their research work. 98% are of the opinion that relevant research materials are not available, 34.3% have challenges in reporting and referencing, 22% face challenges with organization of research materials, while 10.8% have problem in identification of relevant research materials.

Table 3: Frequencies and percentage of respondents’ responses on challenges encountered in postgraduate research due negative attitude of supervisors.

<table>
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<tr>
<th>S/N</th>
<th>Items</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>Lack of orientation of students by supervisors</td>
<td>400</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>Unavailability of supervisors</td>
<td>390</td>
<td>96.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>Unapproachability of supervisors</td>
<td>376</td>
<td>92.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>Lack of patience in proof reading students’ research work</td>
<td>398</td>
<td>99.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>Lack of proper guidance and direction by supervisors</td>
<td>372</td>
<td>97.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In table 3, the results indicate that all the students agree that their major challenge from supervisors’ negative attitude is due to lack of orientation by supervisors. 96.6% and 92% are of the opinion that
supervisors are not always available and approachable respectively; while 99.3% of students have problems in supervisors’ lack of patience in proof reading their research work, 99.3% lack proper guidance and direction from supervisors.

Summary of Findings
From the results, the following findings are made:
1. Students in postgraduate research encounter challenges due to lack of good knowledge of research process.
2. Students in postgraduate research encounter challenges in sourcing materials for their research work.
3. Negative attitude of supervisors towards students is a challenge encountered by postgraduate research students.

Discussion of Findings
One major finding of this study is that postgraduate students encounter some challenges in their research. A major objective of educational research according to Patton (2015) is that of improving the efficiency of education or proving a guide for positive change in education. Such practice according to Nwankwo (2013) cannot be achieved when students cannot identify a research problem, state research questions, design research, collect data, organize data, analyse data as well as present and discuss results. The result in table one is in line with the view of Lubbe (2015) who found that many students in postgraduate research face different types of challenges in their research work and research process because they do have adequate knowledge in them.

All the students involved in this study encounter challenges in sourcing materials for research work. This according to Toncich (2016) states that when a researcher finds it difficult to source, organize, report as well as properly reference material, he or she cannot be able to investigate and find solutions to educational problems. The students also affirmed that lack of adequate time and finance also hinder sourcing of materials. In line with this finding, Brown (2007) emphasizes that Master’s students experience a lot of challenges due to lack of research materials and finance. Bartlett and Mercer (2011) also emphasize that research is very relevant but researchers cannot achieve anything without the necessary ‘carrots’ which include research materials and finance. They conclude that adequate research materials and finance will ensure quality and relevance of research output.

The findings further reveal that educational researchers also encounter challenges due to the negative attitude of their supervisors. According to Aspland (2015) on the functions of a postgraduate supervisor, stipulates that supervisors should always give students proper orientation, guidance and directives. They should also be patient, available and approachable to their students. In support of the findings, Heath (2012) found that PhD students face lots of challenges due to unwelcome attitudes of their supervisors, and that majority of the supervisors are not always approachable and available.

Conclusion
Based on the above discussion, the following conclusions are highlighted.
Adequate knowledge of research work and research process would minimize the challenges encountered by postgraduate research students in the NOUN. Disbursement of research funds and grants to all postgraduate schools for sourcing research materials for research work, this will ensure quality and relevance of research output. Encouragement and positive attitude from the supervisors will enhance greater performance from postgraduate research students. Therefore the study has shown that postgraduate research students of NOUN encounter some challenges in their research work. These challenges are encountered due to lack of knowledge of research process, sourcing materials and negative attitude of supervisors.

Recommendations
The following suggestions are made based on the findings:
1. Federal government should provide grants to postgraduate research students. This will go a long way to reduce financial problems which hinder research works in the NOUN.
2. Postgraduate research students should be properly trained and oriented on the importance of research methodology in their academic studies in order to cope with the demands of research.
3. Standard and modern libraries should be provided in all the NOUN Study Centres and adequate arrangement made for their attendant staff, stock should also be always provided.
4. The “Data Bank” for Nigerian universities and all Federal and State Bodies responsible for obtaining, organizing and storing information should be restored, revived, updated and maintained. This will enable the continuous flow of information and provide statistics necessary for data collection. This would also require the adequate provision and maintenance of computers and the necessary softwares in the NOUN Study Centres and Servicing Bodies in Nigeria.
5. Enrollment into the NOUN postgraduate schools should match the number of qualified
and experienced supervisors available for postgraduate studies so as to make supervision of research work more manageable. This will help reduce the minimum observed number of years spent in doing postgraduate programmes and writing research.

References


