Original Research Article

Challenges and strategies of research engagement among Master of Education students in Uganda

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A qualitative investigation was done to explore the challenges and strategies of research engagement among Master of Education students in Uganda. Two focus group discussions (n = 12) and seven key informant interviews (n = 7) were conducted among purposively selected students and university staff respectively. Participants in the focus groups included Master of Education students of 2011/2012, 2012/2013, 2013/2014, and 2014/2015 cohorts who were still on or had completed their studies by January 2016. The key informant interview participants included heads of departments, deans of faculties, and directors of institutes and directorates. Challenges faced by the students were mainly work-life balance related: work interference with personal life, personal life interference with work, and workplace support challenges. These challenges caused further challenges in the students' research engagement in the aspects of active and collaborative learning, student effort, student-faculty interaction, and institutional support. Strategies to overcome the challenges included provision of work-life balance activities and opportunities to learn. Implications for educational practice were suggested.

Key words: Master of Education, challenges, strategies, work-life balance, research engagement

INTRODUCTION

The world is experiencing ongoing drastic changes in the job market. These changes include the heightened demand on employees to be flexible, multi-skilled, and to be able to make required outputs within a short period of time (Eurofound, 2011). With the general feeling that a university degree can significantly conduce a better future life for a student (Lawnham, 2004), many employed as well as unemployed graduates enrol for further studies with an aim to "better" their academic standards so as to cope with the increased job demands. They hope to perform better, get promoted, and earn higher wages in their jobs when they graduate with higher degrees. Such are the same reasons many graduates enrol for master's programmes in Uganda - to upgrade their academic standards and hence upscale their employability.

Although the decision to pursue higher education is taken after much consideration of all the possible implications including fiscal and personal concerns, often only a few entrants into master's programmes are chanced to get a sponsorship for a specified period of study. The vast majority of the students enrol against all odds, meaning they have to toil for and foot all their tuition and scholastic bills by themselves. Whereas the ideal situation should be for employees who opt to pursue further studies to obtain a study leave, many Master of Education students in Uganda are less likely to request for study leave because of fear of being forced to leave the job and later face financial crises.

Experience has shown that master's research generally entails intense mental exertion which takes a great toll on the students' self-regard (Musisi and Mayega, 2010). More often than not, the students face a low work-life balance which impacts negatively on their research engagement.

This implies that family life (which requires arduous attention to several minute details), social life (which obliges the student to abide or sacrifice against his or her wish in order to amass social capital), work life (with several dos and don'ts), and master's study itself (with a tight schedule of deadlines and demand on new study skills), all drain the student of time, money, resources, and physical as well as mental health. Consequently, the student loses grip on his or her research engagement.

The overall life demands often result in innumerable indicators of poor health and diminished wellbeing including poor mental (or psychological) and physical health, less life satisfaction, higher levels of stress, higher levels of emotional exhaustion, less physical exercise, higher likelihood to engage in binge drinking, increased anxiety and depression levels, poor appetite, and fatigue (Frone et al., 1996; Greenhaus et al., 2003; Kossek and Ozeki, 1998). The overwhelming pressure, compounded by the above psychosomatic effects, translates into compromised research engagement and hence academic procrastination. Consequently, the study cannot be accomplished in minimum time, and sometimes ends up being abandoned. Therefore, there is need to have strategies that the students, faculty, and institutions can have recourse to, to enhance the research engagement of the students. This study was conducted to explore the challenges and strategies of research engagement among Master of Education students in Uganda.

Literature Review

Challenges facing master of education research students

Research by CRISIS (2006) identified three broad types of barriers to people's participation and persistence in learning and skills development in general, which may also apply to Master of Education students. The first type is personal barriers including those related to substance misuse, low confidence and self-esteem, negative experiences of learning, and service barriers. The second type is lack of priority given to learning and skills by some agencies and their staff, the inability or unwillingness of some mainstream providers to respond appropriately to the needs of people, and funding barriers. The third type is the fragmented approach taken by each of the potential funders of learning and skills work with disadvantaged people, which may lead to narrow outcome targets that learning providers find difficult to satisfy when working with people, which in turn result in a reluctance among mainstream providers to focus resources on disadvantaged people and a subsequent reduction in funding for specialist provision.

Vorhaus et al. (2011) present a substantial body of evidence supporting the theory that learners are most likely to drop out of formal learning for reasons related to their personal circumstances. These barriers to formal engagement include funding-related reasons (childcare,

travel costs) and other reasons (*e.g.*, social constraints). Researchers have classified barriers to participation and persistence in four groups (NALA, 1998; Litster, 2007 cited in Vorhaus et al., 2011): (a) dispositional: negative attitudes to learning, (b) informational: lack of appropriate information, (c) institutional: the rules of procedures of provision, including onerous application forms, negative associations with traditional classroom settings, and (d) situational: the barriers that arise in everyday life, such as insufficient time, childcare issues, financial issues.

One influential study from the United States (Meader, 2000 cited in Vorhaus et al., 2011) suggests that numeracy and literacy learners may be affected differently by barriers to persistence, with numeracy learners mainly facing dispositional and academic barriers. Research entails mainly numeracy related engagements such as data management, data analysis, data presentation, and data interpretation. Therefore, the barriers so far posited in here are likely to hinder the concentration of the students on the demanding numeracy aspects of research engagement. Another approach to understanding barriers to skills development reported by Vorhaus et al. (2011) involves identifying 'structural and situational' barriers. These barriers include time constraints that may prevent individuals from undertaking skills training; the financial cost of training; the lack of relevant training opportunities near the home and issues of accessing childcare.

Ofsted (2007), in evaluating the provision of direct learning support for literacy, language, and numeracy in colleges found that retention rates for courses where learners received learning support were higher than for those courses in which learners received no support. Ofsted cited examples of learners at colleges starting but then leaving their courses owing to inadequate support. Many of the learners receiving support reported that they would have dropped out of college had it not been for the extra support they received. Access to technology for learning at home and also learner access to technical support for on-line learning require sustainable resources. According to Ofsted (2007), many learners, sometimes those most in need of supplementary support, may face intense personal demands on their time outside the classroom due to family, settlement or employment responsibilities. In general, adequate systems are not yet in place to support self-study. This is also true of the Ugandan Master of Education degree circumstances.

Bean (1985) cited in Andres and Carpenter (1997) found that a student's peers are more important agents of socialization than informal faculty contacts. The author further notes that academic, social-psychological, and environmental factors influence socialization and selection factors such as college grades, institutional fit, and institutional commitment. Environmental factors such as finances, opportunity to transfer, and outside friends can lead to either dropout or institutional commitment. Bean also argues that students play a more active role in their socialization. In other words, negative peer influence is a likely demotivating factor among Master of Education

students undertaking research. Those who are unable to complete the studies are likely to discourage those still in the struggle.

Another challenge to research progress among Master of Education students is the policy of open admission to the programme in many universities, which does not challenge the students to look and think ahead, so most of them come with inadequately ready in terms of knowledge and skills for post-graduate studies. Schroeder (2004) argues that many students lack confidence in their intellectual abilities, are uncomfortable with abstract ideas, have low tolerance for ambiguity, are less independent in thought and judgement and more dependent on the ideas of those in authority, and are more dependent on immediate gratification and display more difficulty with basic academic skills.

Charema (2013) and Manchishi et al. (2015) posit that choosing a topic is probably the most challenging part of carrying out research. This may arise from the fact that the opportunities for hands-on training in formulating topics, and generally handling the finer details of research are limited. This results in other associated problems such as inability to make synthetical citations which culminates in suggestions of plagiarism. Mhute (2013) observed that plagiarism, which is the act of presenting another's work or ideas as your own, is one of the most common mistakes committed by students. Other resultant problems associated with the challenge of theoretical rather than practical training of the students are presented by Paul Wong and Psych (2012): failure to provide the proper context to frame the research question, failure to delimit the boundary conditions for your research, failure to cite landmark studies, failure to accurately present the theoretical and empirical contributions by other researchers, failure to stay focused on the research question, failure to develop a coherent and persuasive argument for the proposed research, too much detail on minor issues, but not enough detail on major issues, too much rambling without a clear sense of direction, too many citation lapses and incorrect references, too long or too short phrases, failing to follow the American Psychological Association style, and slopping writing.

Manchishi et al. (2015) note that some students lack quality and abilities which are required for masters' studies. This in itself is one of the challenges facing the students' progress in research. The fact that the students must present a master's degree certificate in order to retain their jobs drives every educational practitioner, regardless of ability level, to pursue Master of Education. Given that most universities do not subject the students to a system of sieving by grade, low quality students are likely to be recruited with the negative consequence that the students will not readily grasp the methodology of research. Compounded by the fact of inadequate grooming by lecturers and poor student-faculty interaction, the slow students are likely to drag on much longer in the research process or even opt out without completing.

Astin (1984) summatively posits that administrators and faculty members of universities must recognize that

virtually every institutional policy and practice (*e.g.*, class schedules; regulations on class attendance, academic probation, and participation in extracurricular courses; policies on office hours for faculty, student orientation, and advising) can affect the way students spend their time and the amount of effort they devote to academic pursuits. Moreover, administrative decisions about many non-academic issues including the location of new buildings such as dormitories and student unions; the design of recreational and living facilities; on-campus employment opportunities; number and type of extracurricular activities and regulations regarding participation; the frequency, type, and cost of cultural events; roommate assignments; financial aid policies; the relative attractiveness of eating facilities on and off campus; parking regulations) can significantly affect how students spend their time and energy. All this holds true for Master of Education students on research.

Demographic characteristics such as age and sex are also factors to reckon with in disentangling the demands of master's degree studentship in Uganda. Before the 1990s, master's students used to benefit from government sponsorship, but later this ceased. The self-sponsored students that enrolled traditionally joined at advanced ages of mid-life after accumulating sufficient resources from their jobs to meet the tuition demands. However, with the advent of many scholarships favouring students younger than 35 years of age, today's master's degree students are mainly young adults, and are more likely not to be married or employed. Their career choices are least likely to be based on pragmatic factors such as income, working hours, location of practice, job availability for spouses, flexibility and length of training time, with sense of vocation being a much valued consideration than in previous generations of master's degree students (DeJaeghere et al., 2009).

Other new trends also set in. For instance, a policy was established in early 2010s requiring headteachers of secondary schools to update to master's degree level, lest they risked losing their positions. This implies that a big number of Master of Education students would likely be realised in higher degree awarding institutions in Uganda or elsewhere regardless of whether the institutions had upgraded their capacities to accommodate the numbers. Whereas such clandestine moves were positively intended to foster knowledge and skills acquisition among the school administrators, the entrants would face challenges: the faculty may not take on bigger numbers of research students than provided for by policy (DeJaeghere et al., 2009). The students themselves would continue to serve in their jobs and other responsibilities. It was therefore expected that students who enlisted earlier in 2011 and 2012 would continue to face heightened pressures in work-life balance and research engagement.

Under such conditions, burnout is expected to intensify. Burnout itself has been associated with poor health, mood disturbances, alcohol abuse and anxiety. Ultimately, psychological distress will occur which is associated with poor academic performance. Distressed students exercise

less empathy and compassion, and so provide suboptimal care for dependants, that is, school children, family members, and community members (Lawnham, 2004). Reciprocally, they receive less support from their families, workmates, associates, and from their institutions, which works to the detriment of their academic progress. In this case, antisocial tendencies are propagated in the community.

The literature search did not reveal any studies done in the Ugandan setting in particular to investigate the challenges of Master's research progression. Hence part of the aim of this study was to unveil these challenges with a broader aim of suggesting strategies to overcome the challenges to enhance completion.

Strategies to enhance research engagement among master of education students

Vorhaus et al. (2011) argue that in order for any strategy of student engagement to work, it is imperative to first identify the positive and negative forces (the barriers) that respectively help and hinder persistence. The authors advance that once identified, these forces should be prioritised; the positive should be upheld while the negative should be weakened further. With reference to strengthening positive forces, the literature suggests that learners who develop a learning identity are more likely to persist (St Clair, 2006). For education providers this can mean supporting self-efficacy through building the feeling in adults that they can be successful learners, through regular recognition of learner progress, and by using successful adult learners as role models.

Earlier research on traditional students (see Franklin, 1995; Grosset, 1991; Dietsche, 1990 as cited in Andres and Carpenter, 1997) maintains that the quality of student efforts in academic pursuits and interactions with faculty and peers is more influential on learning than the institution's characteristics and environment. In a recent study by Halm (2015), to understand how student identity, classroom practices, and intrinsic motivation impact student engagement, the results suggested that at the core of student engagement is a bond between teacher and students. A relationship of mutual respect and trust heightens student engagement, as does a variety of active learning experiences. Those personal, academic, and professional goals that many students bring to class also impact engagement.

Other similar studies (Derrick and Ecclestone, 2008) further stress the importance to progress, of scaffolding, so that learners have challenges at the right level of difficulty, and of tailoring learning to the individual learner's needs (which implies the need for a broad repertoire of teaching methods and substantive expertise). More to this, Lopez et al. (2007) highlights the importance of good teachers and good teaching to learner persistence, that even where learners are learning outside formal provision or settings, they do not want lonely learning - some degree of structure and support is still necessary. It is therefore clear that an amicable student-lecturer rapport is necessary for effective research engagement among the Master of Education

students.

Two other supports to learner persistence reported by Halm (2015) are that learners should establish a goal, and that progress is made by learners towards this goal, a process supported by measuring progress, but not necessarily by the same measures that are used for programme goals in terms of accountability. By acknowledging gains already made, flexible and innovative assessment can support learner persistence when adults 'drop out' of formal programmes (NAO, 2004). This implies that flexibility is required on the part of those handling such learners with challenges to bolster their efforts whenever possible.

In addition to building self-efficacy and self-confidence, research shows that assistance with childcare, transport, and access to social services can make a difference to learner persistence. There is some evidence to suggest that persistence is supported where providers are aware and manage the critical periods when learners are more likely to withdraw or to fail. Support in form of pastoral care, adequate financial resources and facilities, and administrative leadership will strengthen the students to persist and engage in the programme (Benseman et al. 2005), citing Comings et al., 1999; Eldred, 2002; Quigley and Uhland, 2000; Yaffe and Williams, 1998).

With respect to critical periods for withdrawal, Quigley (2000) identifies the first three weeks of a course as vital, thus emphasising the role that induction and orientation processes have to play in supporting persistence. Appropriate placement supports learning (Martinez, 2001) whereas poor, inadequate, or inappropriate information, advice, and guidance can cause students to withdraw (Lopez et al., 2007). Many of the students with poor basic skills will have had negative school experiences, so the transition to the learning environment must be handled sensitively to enable them first fit and then engage in the demands.

Halm (2015) presents five pathways through which students get engaged to their academic undertakings. The first is the long-term pathway: Here learners actively engage in programmes for an extended period, and participate in computer-assisted instruction or self-study as well as class. Second is the mandatory pathway in which learners strive to attend a prescribed programme such as a research methodology workshop. Third is the try-out pathway: Here learners participate short-term but face barriers that are at least temporarily insurmountable, or, students do not have a clear goal to sustain their motivation. In the intermittent pathway, learners join and leave a programme several times; the breaks in participation are often caused by a personal crisis, and students return when the problem has passed. The fifth pathway is the short-term pathway in which learners participate intensely but briefly to accomplish a specific goal (e.g., to attain a partial transcript) and then quit. In order to accomplish research, students should be directed and supported to use the first two pathways.

A host of strategies that Halm (2015) offers for education

providers to adopt to encourage adult learners to persist in academic pursuits include the following:

1. Information-gathering strategies: the more providers know about their learners, the more programmes can respond to the needs of learners.

2. Support strategies: including pastoral support; child care facilities; help with transportation; referral procedure for using external agencies

3. Operational strategies: including extended opening hours; flexible and drop-in and off-site classes; improving access to ICT.

4. Programmatic strategies: including the curriculum changes, recruiting students in innovative ways, redesigning tutor training, redesigning student and tutor orientation.

5. Building persistence in adult learners so that they stay in programmes and engage in self-directed learning activities for much longer periods of time.

6. Gathering data and building accountability around longer-term outcomes.

7. Developing community-wide learning support systems that strengthen collaboration among educational providers and social service and community-based organisations to meet learners' needs.

8. Utilising technology to increase system capacity, coordination, and effectiveness in order to reach out timely to the students to access their work and provide feedback.

Research from both the United Kingdom (UK) and US stresses that, for learners, dropping out of learning programmes can be a rational and positive response to changing circumstance. What is important in terms of learner persistence is that these breaks from learning are supported, principally by distance and blended learning, so that learners are not penalised and do not have the door to learning closed on them. For example, one development project carried out by NRDC as part of its work of the PPA project (QIA, 2008), looked at ways in which learners who had taken a break from formal studies due to pregnancy were supported in their learning by continuing to have access to college resources, including online learning and phone tutorials. This was a very small initiative, but an example nonetheless of how time out of formal provision can be incorporated into the learning journey.

In terms of learner persistence, Reder and Strawn (2006) assert that it is important to consider ways in which programmes, as well as providing classes, can be designed to support self-study. This would serve more adult learners (given that many adults self-study and never come to formal classes), attract new learners to classes (because some adults who self-study might later opt to attend classes), and increase the overall persistence of adult literacy learning (because many adult learners engage in self-study and attend classes at different points in time). Some problems could be addressed by better coordination between government agencies and stronger collaboration between government agencies, providers and employers. For instance, a government offer of study leave with pay to the working students would enable them to get time to concentrate on the research work.

Anderson and Gantz (2013) stress that adult learners will require teacher support if own-time learning is to be effective. In this case consideration should be given to soliciting the support of the students' employers. The adult learners need more time and varied opportunities to learn, yet work and family take a huge chunk of this time away. In this case, the length of workplace interventions should be raised to promote significant and sustained learning progress. Anderson and Gantz (2013) affirm that supporting the adult learners at the work place would not only impart in them the widely common and diverse skills but also attract other students to aspire to those positions.

Astin (1999) argues that greater attention needs to be paid to the passive or unprepared student – the one most likely to drop out. He encourages teachers to focus less on content and teaching techniques and more on student behaviours as a means for understanding student motivation and the amount of time and energy students spend on the learning process. Counsellors and student personnel workers are encouraged to focus their energies on increasing student involvement. Peer interaction and quality learning teams have also been identified as useful.

Wilson and Peterson (2006) propose that there is need to organise the adult learners' environment and learning situation to provide students with active, hands-on learning and authentic tasks and audiences. Opportunities for "active" learning experiences, in which students are asked to use ideas by writing and talking about them, creating models and demonstrations, applying these ideas to more complex problems, and constructing projects that require the integration of many ideas, have been found to promote deeper learning, especially when they are combined with reflective learning experiences. The university needs to establish a timeframe of activities with real purposes, audiences, and activity structures to get the students engaged.

Rantanen et al. (2011) observes that there is need for policies on work and study so that employees get the support they require for a healthy balance of work and nonwork responsibilities. Supervisors are in a key role for building a work-nonwork culture consisting of a beneficial worklife balance, that is, a culture which is sensitive to employees' needs. A supportive work-nonwork culture also means increasing employees' entitlement to make use of existing policies within organizations. The state needs to come in actively to demand accountability from employers for career development and from the employees for time spent in seeking professional development. This could be achieved through frequent validation exercises and pay rises basing on academic qualifications. In this way, some level of research engagement could be fostered among the student employees.

Morganson et al. (2014) have indicated that a more specific training model from positive psychology for training in student engagement is the PsyCap Intervention (PCI) developed by Luthans, Avey, Avolio, Norman, and Combs (2006). The goal of this training is to increase the

students' hope, optimism, resiliency, and self-efficacy. Training and developing hope and optimism benefits both followers and organizations by increasing resiliency (Seligman, 1998; Snyder, 2000). PCI can develop these resources by identifying a goal, choosing measurable success points, approaching goal accomplishment, and identifying subgoals to stay motivated (Luthans et al., 2006). These practices are not only beneficial in the work and study settings, but identifying goals and subgoals outside of work may be a form of work–family development (a facet of enrichment).

Similarly, as advocated by Halm (2015), offering Youtube videos could step up some of the students' expectations and experiences. The clips would demonstrate to the students (moreover in a repeated way because they can be played again and again) how to carry out certain research procedures in the absence of the supervisors. This would encourage self-study and hence research engagement. In the words of Salas and Cannon-Bowers (2001, p. 480) cited in Durlak et al. (2011), "It is well documented that practice is a necessary condition for skill acquisition." Sufficient time and attention must also be devoted to any task for learning to occur. Therefore, the video clips would motivate the learners to devote some time primarily for skill development, in this case giving effect to Schroeder's (2004) postulation that students require a practice-to-theory approach rather than a more traditional theory-to-practice approach.

According to Bandura's (1997) model, people's beliefs about their situations form a source of motivation; people are motivated when they believe the circumstances in which they find themselves are conducive to accomplishing the goals they hold to be personally important. The organizational setting in which people work shapes much of what they do. There is little to be gained by increasing peoples' motivation and capacity if working conditions will not allow their effective application. As advocated for by Louis et al.(2010), it would be important to restructure organizations to support collaboration, build productive relationships with families and communities, and connect the school to the wider community in order to establish workplace conditions that will allow staff members to make the most of their motivations and capacities when they enlist to pursue higher degrees.

METHODOLOGY

Qualitative methods were employed to achieve the objectives of the study. Two focus group discussions (FGDs), one among 2011/2012 and 2012/2013 cohorts and another among 2013/2014 and 2014/2015 cohorts of students, were conducted. Constitution of the students for the focus group discussions was based on residence; those from the same areas were constituted into one group regardless of the university and year of registration. The sample of Master of Education students for the study was composed of seven students for the first discussion and five students for the

second. The seven students for the first FGD were drawn from Kampala International University (KIU) – Western Campus, Mbarara University of Science and Technology (MUST), Makerere University (Mak), and Uganda Christian University (UCU). The second FGD was conducted among students from Gulu University (GU), Islamic University in Uganda (IUIU), and Mak. In total, 12 student participants from six public and private universities were engaged in the FGDs. The second FGD among the continuing students proved repetitive of the first, thus indicating instrument reliability and data saturation (Merton et al., 1990). The discussions were intentioned this way to foster triangulation through a deeper description and explanation of the topics covered in the questionnaire.

Seven key informants were interviewed: one academic registrar, two directors of postgraduate research, three deans whose faculties offered Master of Education programmes, and one head of Educational Foundations and Psychology Department. These key informants were selected because they were directly engaged in the academic engagement of Master of Education students. Apart from the academic registrar, the rest of the interviewees were in senior teaching positions, seasoned and highly reputable researchers and research supervisors, and were experienced research administrators.

A focus group discussion guide and an interview guide were formulated to collect indepth qualitative information on the study objectives. The instruments contained similar items to be administered to the different groups of key informants, that is, student participants and nonstudent participants respectively. The aim here was to compare and contrast the responses that would ensue from the student and nonstudent groups who play quite complementary roles in student research engagement.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Strategies to overcome the challenges hindering master of education students' progress in research in Uganda

A number of challenges facing Master of Education students with regard to research were enumerated in this study. Most of these challenges emanated from work-life balance and research engagement issues. The findings reveal that the work-life balance of the students was generally described as low. The respondents attributed this to a number of challenges which were put in themes including work-place support challenges, work-interference with personal life, and personal life interference with work.

Subthemes under work-place support challenges include challenges relating to work-environment support, organisational support, manager support, and coworker support. Subthemes under work-interference with personal life include time based interference, strain-based interference, and behaviour-based interference. Subthemes of challenges under the theme of personal life interference with work include stress-related interference, marital-related

interference, time-related interference, family intrusion, and dependent care issues. These are similar to Talebloo and Bin Baki's (2013) findings, which indicated that the challenges faced by post-graduate students can be classified into four categories: problems related to facilities, social environment, academic system, and institutional policy issues.

Some of the challenges registered by the students were directly linked with their research engagement, and thus themed here as research engagement challenges. Challenges in this theme were further segregated into subthemes of student effort challenges, active and collaborative learning challenges, institutional support challenges, and student-faculty interaction challenges.

The study participants enumerated a number of strategies to countervail the challenges of Master of Education research. The underlying tenet of all was that all stakeholders need to be appropriately engaged to perform their duties and responsibilities adequately to enhance the students' progression. It was realised that social support at work, by peers, research supervisors, and family members would serve to minimize some of the challenges. Previous studies (Manchishi et al., 2015; Muriisa, 2015) have indicated that coworkers have the ability to temporarily relieve an employee from his or her job duties at work in order to attend to personal needs. For example, if an employee needs to leave work early to take care of a sick child, a coworker can show their supportiveness through staying late for that employee. The support received and reduction in pressure may increase employee satisfaction and organizational commitment.

Straub (2012) similarly notes that not only can coworkers reduce some of these pressures, but also supervisors at work can act as gatekeepers to stimulate employees to have access to and feel comfortable using work-life initiatives. In fact, previous studies have shown that perceptions of supervisor support have a greater impact on employee outcomes compared to coworker support (Rousseau and Aube, 2010) or the availability of work-life balance policies alone (Allen, 2001). Participants in this study who felt oppressed or unfairly treated by their employers suggest similar strategies, in addition to seeking study leave, in order to concentrate on academic work. It can thus be concluded that studying as well as working and maintaining a family is possible to the extent that the employer, coworkers, peers, and family members are supportive. However, where hiccups exist in social relations in either of these life facets, it would be best to obtain a study leave to concentrate on the studies.

Many of the participants noted the lack of strict timelines in the mode of administration of Master of Education research as a challenge that required immediate attention. This was mainly noted to arise with the full-time model offered through coursework and research, which did not allow balance between work life, family life, social life, and study life. It was suggested that a weekend model be adopted to have ongoing interactions with the lecturers so as to enable the student be in tune with changing research dynamics. However, the weekend model might disadvantage the students because the little time available during the weekend may not permit them to dig deep into the requisite academic contents. It is therefore better to grant the students study leave in order to concentrate effectively on their research undertakings.

Many participants suggested that to ensure that students' academic needs are taken care of, universities should have enough learning facilities for studies and the final research. This was in response to challenges noted with library resources. A library that provides a variety of support services is one of the important facilities needed by a university. Most books, journals, on-line resources, and other reference materials in libraries need to be up to date. This implies that universities should prioritise investment in library resources by networking with other libraries, subscribing to regular periodicals and journals as well as on-line resources. Old text books should be replaced with latest ones and students should be inducted to access these resources; students' reliance on lecturers' notes should be eventually discouraged. The challenge of having to travel to distant universities and libraries in order to source information would then be overcome. The libraries should strive to provide the students with modern research skills through organising sensitisation workshops on current advances in information search; webinars, blogging, video conferencing, the use of Skype, and other social media should be exposed to the students.

The inadequate research skills proficiency reported by the students was to be abated by provision of hands-on exposure to academic writing, computer training, data analysis, and information and communication workshops. However, the efficacy of such workshops can be enhanced if they are a true semblance of the final research work. This implies that the supervisors should strive to attach their students to research projects other than the students' own dissertation works so as to gain apprenticeship. According to Sumari (2002), students gain professional experience through involvements in research and paper presentations. This involvement is made more possible if the students are assigned what to do by their supervisors. But the current findings tend to indicate that the supervisors themselves may not be involved in serious projects that can be assigned to their students. In addition, the supervisors may also need retooling in order to more effectively handle their students' expectations as far as research proficiency is concerned because the findings show that their conversance in these skills is wanting. In other words, there is need for continuous professional development workshops to sharpen the research skills of, first of all, the research supervisors, and later, the students.

As argued by Muriisa (2015), Universities need to change the nature of training ... to formally make it mandatory that students need to have some training which must be reflected by doing some course works. This can improve the research skills of the candidates. These course works may be taken at any stage during the course ... so that students are given chance to identify what may be

appropriate along the way. Experience shows that packing all the trainings in one period like in the first year of enrolment makes students get on track in the first year, but eventually loosing [*sic*] it in subsequent years especially after collecting their data. There is therefore a need to spread the trainings so that students keep on getting refreshed. (p. 211).

To combat the shortage and poor quality of academic staff, the participants suggested the need for the universities to improve remuneration for the don. They argued that increased motivation would motivate the staff to take on their roles seriously rather than part-timing in many universities in order to make ends meet. Muriisa (2015) similarly advances that "lack of supervisors can be dealt with by improving the overall motivational environment."In line with Dungy (2003), if consultations are not done effectively from appropriate professionals, the research progress may be negatively affected. This means that the supervisors should be relieved of excessive work by shedding it onto junior staff such as assistant lecturers and teaching assistants who can teach and examine undergraduates.

Nearly all the participants acknowledged that the students had financial constraints in meeting their tuition, family, personal, and other scholastic demands. Hence it was generally suggested that financial aid should be extended to them. The main idea behind financial aid is to assist needy students pay the cost of their studies. The suggested forms of the aid include scholarships, fellowships, grants, and assistantships. Some participants also proposed that the government should extend loans to them which they can repay after completing their studies. However, fees increments midway the programme tend to inconvenience the students. In addition, the rising costs of educational services makes financial resource mobilisation challenging to the students. Some of the students have often plunged themselves into huge loans from money lenders, to the negative effect of suffocating other aspects of life. Such inconveniences could be avoided if the system of financing postgraduate studies was streamlined and the aid granted to them.

According to a cross-section of the participants, there is need for the National Council for Higher Education to unify programmes and harmonise the administrative modules adopted in the various universities. This suggestion was given in response to irregularities in course provision and programme completion noted by the participants; some universities were noted to be faster than others with regard to graduation rates. This calls for strict follow up of the implementation of the National Council for Higher Education guidelines so that offending universities are convicted. In this case there is urgent need to develop more stringent certification processes that cut across the public-private divide of universities. Otherwise, there is a risk of some universities fast tracking the completion of their students without due regard for quality, such that the graduates fall short of the required skills, values, and attitudes expected to be of Education programmes.

From the findings of this study, it is clear that the Master of Education students do not seek guidance and counselling from the help desks at their universities. One reason advanced is that they feel too mature to "mix and collide" with the undergraduate students at the service points. This presents a serious challenge to their fitting within the university. According to Caple (1995), spending time with someone with empathy and trained to help them releases graduate students' stress; they are then able to find ways to adjust. Although student affairs professionals have limited capacities to change certain things that cause academic stress to graduate students, they may help them manage their stress through advice and counselling. Student affairs professionals who work in advising offices and counselling centres must understand problems and stresses that graduate students face and help them integrate new experience into their lives. Therefore, there is need for the universities to focus on postgraduate student affairs guidance and counselling desks that can ably handle the students' plight.

Conclusions

The students faced a number of challenges. These included work-life balance challenges: work interference with personal life, personal life interference with work, and workplace support challenges; and research engagement challenges: challenges affecting active and collaborative learning, student effort, student-faculty interaction, and institutional support. In addition to poor student-faculty rapport and low level of institutional support, there was generally a need for more time and finances to enable the students to progress relatively easily in the research journey.

The strategies suggested to overcome these challenges allude to the fact that adult learners generally require support if own-time learning is to be effective. This adds weight to the student engagement theory by Kearsley and Schneiderman (1999) that students must be engaged in their academic work in order for effective learning to occur. Consideration should be given to what level of psychosocial, emotional, and material support can be provided by the family, employing organisation, university, and the society at large. Varied opportunities to learn (eg., workshops, seminars, and conferences) than the usual formal supervisor-supervisee meetings should be encouraged to allow students acquire skills that they did not gain during course work.

Recommendations

In order to enhance the research engagement of the students, there is need for the universities to provide research skills proficiency training activities as formal and examinable components of the curriculum. For instance, computer applications, academic writing, information and communication skills should be provided as mandatory

courses to enhance the research skills proficiency of the students.   Frequent and practical course works in these courses stretching well into the research year should be given to the students so as to keep attuned to these skills. On the other hand, the students should be encouraged to attain such requisite skills even on their own, for example, through subscribing for online courses and webinars, evening courses, and attending conferences and workshops where such skills can be fostered.

The coverage of research methods courses should be made extensive as well as intensive.   The whole complement of descriptive and inferential statistics should be meshed properly with qualitative analysis methods, and this should not be a one-off treatment. One strategy of minimising research engagement challenges is to focus on a development programme of the best pedagogies and delivery methods (combining face-to-face and technology-based, formal and self-study methods), and to carry out small-scale but intensive case studies to follow individuals from pre-test to intervention, to assessment, to application in the home and workplace.   The students should be exposed to research methodology and research activities right from the start to the end of the time line.   More importantly, the teaching of research methodology should be made more practical (through projects) than theoretical as the practical way would impart the research skills in the students. In this case, more contact hours (at least sixty hours) spread throughout the two years should be allotted to research methodology courses for the Master of Education students to keep in harmony with research jargon.

Separate postgraduate desks should be set up in institutions that offer postgraduate programmes because the findings of this study reveal that this category of students did not feel free to share their challenges in the common guidance and counselling offices of the universities.   Brochures, handbooks, talks, and seminars that highlight the challenges of the students should be made available to them from the postgraduate office such that they can brace themselves ahead of time to meet the challenges.

Education of the masses through the mass media should be one strategy that researchers and the universities should use to reach out to families, employers, and the general public to alert people on the challenges faced by the students.   The necessary help that each member of the society can provide to the students should be solicited through such fora as radio talk shows, newspaper articles, television shows, and public debates to enable the students to benefit from societal input.   For instance, such arrangements could tip employers on how best to motivate their employees by providing opportunities to exercise their research skills on the job. Employers and managers therefore would create environments that allow or encourage the use of new skills. Conditions for effective workplace learning include voluntary engagement gained from the Master, extensive contact and study time, and sustained formal and informal opportunities for acquiring a

and improving skills.

In general, on the basis of the study findings, institutions and individual stakeholders responsible for postgraduate student formation need to reorganize their academic systems to scaffold the students through cross-cutting courses to help sharpen the students' research skills proficiency.   In addition, the institutions need to start training supervisors on how to handle postgraduate students who are plagued by work-life imbalance intricacies. In the words of Muriisa, "investments should be made … to enable students complete their training" (p. 213).

It is generally recommended that combating the challenges of research among master of Education students in universities would require a combination of individual, interpersonal, institutional, workplace, and societal efforts. At individual level, the students have to work on their dispositional factors including their core self-evaluations and academic motivation so as to seek opportunities in every bit of challenge they encounter in their academic pursuit. The faculty have to be continually updated with skills in supervising master's students so as to get the best out of the students in the shortest possible time.   The universities have to make available the resources that can enhance the engagement of the students in the academic investment. Workplace support needs to be provided to the student employees in form of study leave and other resources that can enable them undertake research even at the work place. The society needs to be sensitised through the mass media in order to appreciate the challenges of Master of Education pursuit, and accord the students the support they require, say in form of participating in research and providing materials that the students require.

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