COLLABORATIVE UNDERGRADUATE RESEARCH DISSERTATION WRITING IN A LOW RESOURCE UNIVERSITY CONTEXT IN ZAMBIA

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ABSTRACT

An undergraduate final year dissertation is one of the mandatory requirements for a student to graduate with a Bachelor's degree at the University of Zambia as it demonstrates the research skills and knowledge the graduate has acquired over the course of their study. However detailed investigations on the experiences of students during the dissertation writing process in low resource university settings such as Zambia have been missing from the current literature. This study explored the experiences of 30 final-year undergraduates drawn from three study programmes (Educational Psychology, Sociology and Special Education) enrolled at the University of Zambia, School of Education. Using a qualitative case study approach, the study examined the students' positive and negative experiences during the dissertation writing process. Although students benefited from the collaborative work in relation to their dissertation, they also experienced considerable difficulties specifically in relation to data collection, supervision, dissertation writing and collaboration work.

INTRODUCTION

The growing pressure to discontinue undergraduate dissertations in preference to less demanding methods of teaching and learning in some universities overshadows the benefits of undergraduate research dissertation as one of the few tasks that uniquely shows the student's autonomous learning (Rowley & Slack, 2004). It has been suggested the undergraduate research dissertation process is a highly challenging task that plays a pivotal role in helping the students' acquire research skills in not only linking theory to practice but also learning to use various digital and information sources. In addition, through undergraduate dissertation writing, the student is provided with a rare opportunity to choose among the diverse number of research methods to use for their research (Rowley & Slack, 2004).

Research is defined as the scientific collection of data that enables both objective and replicable decision making. The steps involved in conducting research include the exploration of a problem by obtaining detailed understanding of a topic. Second, reviewing literature to justify the need for the study from various sources (journals, books and electronic databases among others) that are connected to the topic. Third, stating the purpose and research questions in general and specific ways. Fourth, conducting

research also involves collecting data from people using reliable and ecologically valid tools. Finally, analysing the collected data to obtain detailed descriptions so that a research report is written (Creswell, Shope, Plano Clark, Green, 2006). This step-by-step approach has been provided to shed more light on the exact position occupied by the dissertation in the entire research process. We note here that in the case of undergraduate research, the last part of the research process is the dissertation writing process which is the focus of the present discussion.

Dissertations, also referred to as research reports in the context of the current study are categorised in two namely; postgraduate (beyond the scope of this study) and undergraduate dissertations. An undergraduate dissertation is regarded as a document written during undergraduate studies mainly towards the end of the bachelor's degree programme that demonstrates independent academic and research skills acquired by the undergraduate student over the course of study or precisely over a duration of one year under the tutelage of a supervisor or academic staff (Roberts & Seaman, 2018). Dissertations can be further divided into two groups either fieldwork-based or theoretical desk-based (Rowley & Slack, 2004). Whereas the former involves going out in the field to interact with participants while collecting data, the later relies on the detailed study of available literature on the subject. In a number of Education and Social Science undergraduate degree programmes offered in most Zambian Universities, fieldwork-based dissertations rather than desk-based dissertations are encouraged and involve specific research projects in which the student is required to formulate a feasible and practical research problem on which the student can review available literature, develop data collection instruments to collect data which is interpreted and presented in a dissertation.

The main goal of all these efforts is either to address societal problems or advance the understanding of theory. Mostly the outcome is to formulate policy and encourage best practices in varied fields. Final year undergraduate students are required to demonstrate a knowledge of a chosen topic of research, proposal writing, data collection, analysis, and reporting. Among the many ways that students are able to show knowledge in research is through submission of a self-written dissertation, which demonstrates that the student has followed all the necessary steps in the conduct of research. Dissertation writing among undergraduate students is not only an opportunity for students to develop their writing ability but also exposes them to real-life experiences when collecting information in the field. These experiences usually have a huge impact on their knowledge, attitude, and skills which are likely to affect their future professional life. The other outcome of undergraduate dissertation writing includes the following. First, undergraduate students learn how to use theoretical frameworks to guide their research in order to refine existing theories.

As we now focus on the justification of the current study, it is vital to highlight four reasons for studying undergraduate dissertation writing, an area that has received limited attention

in the higher education literature (Roberts & Seaman, 2018). This study is critical because it is directed at undergraduate students who remain less research experienced due to their slow transition from course work to individually demanding tasks of which the dissertation is one of them. Second, undergraduate students are required to submit a dissertation as part of their graduation requirements which has the potential to catch the attention of prospective employers in research and government agencies thus, increasing the employability of the concerned student (Watson, 2018). Third, an undergraduate dissertation needs to be completed within a limited time frame consequently creating pressure for the student to manage their time and personal commitments. Time and personal management is demanded on the part of the undergraduate student at this stage. Finally, insights drawn for undergraduate students' experiences in writing their final year dissertations may guide towards the development of non-existent research guidelines on undergraduate dissertation writing, research supervision and examination in the department under study. These guidelines may help to develop both print and online resources on research that will help undergraduate students who have limited research knowledge and skills.

In the context of limited good quality supervision (Mweemba, Banja, Ndhlovu, Ziwa & Sachingongu, 2018; Manchishi, Ndholvu & Mwanza, 2015), training for supervisors (Kanyanga, Manchishi, Ndubani, Chomba, Mulavu & Simasiku, 2011), dissertation writing resources combined with an increased number of final year undergraduate students enrolled in research courses, the sheer task of writing a dissertation is overwhelming for the student, making this task not only stressful but also unsettling. In view of this, collaborative writing assignments and peer editing address this problem, collaborative dissertation writing carried out in pairs or small groups, can have several advantages for the student. Such tasks can enhance student interaction and self-confidence in the dissertation writing process (Rollinson, 2005) and enhance a sense of accountability, cooperation, and community (Murray, 1992; Savova & Donato, 1991; Villamil & De Guerrero, 1996). Furthermore, collaborative dissertation writing tends to improve student motivation, risk-taking, and tolerance (Reid, 1993).

Using a mixed approach method of examining undergraduate special education final year students at the University of Zambia perceptions towards supervision at the proposal writing stage, Mweemba, Banja, Ndhlovu, Ziwa and Sachingongu (2018) found that the supervision that was offered to the students at the proposal stage was not only below expectation but the students expressed dissatisfaction towards it because the supervisors were mostly unavailable and their feedback was not consistent. Limited supervision consequently leads to poor dissertations as observed by Todd, Bannister and Clegg (2004) who found that undergraduate social science students registered in a British university faced difficulties in writing a convincing problem statement and developing substantiated arguments in their dissertations. These difficulties observed in British undergraduate students are not different from those faced by Zambian postgraduate students (Manchishi, Ndholvu & Mwanza, 2015).

MacKeogh (2006) having examined distance undergraduate students enrolled in a psychology module found that using an online platform that facilitated peer supervision and face-to-face meetings, students engaged in peer support, by giving each other feedback on research topics, addressed critical questions from other students on how to analyse and write a report based on the data collected. The students also went as far as suggesting the use of appropriate research designs or referencing software. What was also interesting in this study was the students' willingness to source participants for surveys or to distribute questionnaires. This study suggests that collaborative research dissertation writing is the desired direction. Although the process of writing a dissertation is a challenging and stressful one, Roberts and Seaman (2018) observed that writing a dissertation in a group is not only rewarding but also cognitively stimulating only when students are aware of their responsibility to provide solutions to the problems faced during writing.

In an attempt to suggest how undergraduate dissertations should be handled in the future, Rowley and Slack (2004) recommend addressing the challenges faced by low-resourced universities with poor learner support services. They suggested collaborative dissertation writing as the best option in order to improve the quality of undergraduate research dissertations. This approach also works out for universities that have enrolled students who are both studying and working and still encountering challenges in balancing the demands of academic, family, and employment tasks. From collective planning and designing the relevant data collection tools, the next step is for the research group to move in to collect data so that they can analyse it and write their dissertation with the help of their assigned supervisor. Data collection is no doubt a critical stage in the educational research process. When the procedure is correctly followed, accurate data collection leads to the excellent quality of the undergraduate dissertations. However, undergraduate students often experience difficulties with data collection as was be discussed in this paper on challenges in dissertation research encountered by undergraduate students' enrolled public universities that struggle with inadequate funding. One of the sources of data collection challenges common among undergraduate and postgraduate students is the lack of collaboration between learning institutions that host undergraduate students and data collection institutions where students are supposed to collect data such as hospitals, schools, supermarkets and government agencies.

After data is collected, students are supposed to meet to discuss the best strategy of how to gather literature, analyse the data and report their findings in consultation with their supervisor. The experience of writing the dissertation for the first time on the part of the undergraduate student is not only demanding but also stressful (Todd, Bannister & Clegg, 2004). Personal organisation and time management are required to successfully complete an undergraduate dissertation which comes with its unique challenges.
        Increased focus on undergraduate research supervision reflected by the number of empirical evidence (Hammick & Acker, 1998; Roberts & Seaman, 2018; MacKeogh,

2006; Todd, Smith & Bannister, 2006), is an indication that other areas such as dissertation writing have remained unexplored for a long time. Whereas some studies have found that undergraduate research supervision has gained popularity in the literature on account of its benefits for the supervisor, student, and distance learning institutions (Roberts & Seaman, 2018; Todd, Smith & Bannister, 2006; Mac Keogh 2006), others have observed that supervision at the proposal writing stage remains poor in a low resource setting.

In view of the limited information on undergraduate research in Zambia, the current study extends this discussion to uncover student writing experience. While previous research has focussed on supervision of proposal writing among students drawn from special education (Mweemba, Banja, Ndhlovu, Ziwa and Sachingongu, 2018), the present study examines undergraduate dissertation writing experiences among final year students from three different degree programmes (educational psychology, sociology and special education).
Final year undergraduate students are required to write a report in a group as part of their requirements for graduation and a considerable number of students have since graduated after meeting these criteria, little is known about the experiences of both students and supervisors in the mentioned department during the process of report writing and submission of the reports for examination.

Problem Statement

Although studies exist on the supervision of undergraduate research (Mweemba, Banja, Ndhlovu, Ziwa, & Sachingongu, 2015), there is currently little information specifically addressing students' dissertation writing and yet this work shows great promise for the future of undergraduate student research in Zambian higher education institutions. The current study examined final year undergraduate students' experiences during the process of collaborative dissertation writing in a low-resource University setting. The main contribution of this study rests on its originality as one of the first studies to interrogate the lived dissertation writing experiences of undergraduate students from diverse study disciplines in the University of Zambia context. This study, to our knowledge, is the first study to examine undergraduate research dissertation writing at the University of Walubita, Department of Educational Psychology, Sociology, and Special Education. Second, studying the nature of students drawn from three different degree programmes (Sociology, Educational Psychology, and Special Education) enrolled in the research course highlights yet another unique contribution of the study to the three disciplines from which the participants were drawn. At any given time, it is rare to get varied student writing experiences from a mixture of knowledge and socio-cultural backgrounds. This diverse group of undergraduate students offer the study unique knowledge, attitudes, perspectives, expectations, and recommendations on collaborative dissertation writing. These varied experiences provide a way of closely examining the patterns that emerge from diverse students that differ from what is usually observed in a specific group of undergraduate students. From this study, it will be required to carry out similar future

research on a regular basis to fully understand the dynamics of undergraduate research and the changing trends. Third, undergraduate studies help to attract the attention of potential employers who may create the student's opportunities to get employed because of the work that they did during their research. Decision-making in the industry at all levels of society needs to be driven by research.

Finally, student research published research articles coming from the data that was collected will serve as a repository of literature that future students in the course will be able to make reference to and build on. The amount of research undertaken in the current institution will increase consequently affecting the standing of the institution related to other research institutions in the global academic market. Over the years, undergraduate research has lagged behind compared to postgraduate research. The current study is an attempt to address this gap. The skills and knowledge acquired during undergraduate dissertation writing will no doubt help to improve the skills of the students as they prepare to become graduate students in the future.

Theoretical framework

The study was framed around scaffolding (Nordlof, 2014). This theoretical position informs the study at two levels. At the supervisory level, scaffolding involves gradual withdrawal of support as the students attain mastery of the dissertation writing process. The peer group level involves more knowledgeable peers offering assistance to novice students in the group. With regard to the application of scaffolding in dissertation writing as a theoretical perspective, Todd and colleagues (2006) suggest that during the dissertation writing process, peer or supervisor support needs to be provided in a phased approach whereby at the beginning guidance should be substantially progressing to a level when it is gradually reduced when a student is able to independently and confidently carry out the writing task. When mastery is attained, the temptation to find solutions for the student should be avoided so that he/she can learn from their mistakes.

Undergraduate research dissertation writing is made much easier when is done at a group rather than at an individual level because of the following reasons. First, this approach has reduced cost implications for the institution because few supervisors will be required for undergraduate research supervision. Second, peer support will be encouraged which promotes students' ownership of the research project. Finally, collaborative learning strengthens not only increases academic writing and critical thinking skills but also promotes the use of technology, cooperation, tolerance and conflict management (Talib & Cheung, 2017). Supervisor support that strengthens the feedback to a group is expected to contribute to the acquisition of relevant skills in research and dissertation writing in undergraduate students. Group learning provides effective practice and expert knowledge in what is learned (Muzata & Ndonyo, 2019).

METHODS

Research Design

Using a qualitative case study method recommended by Creswell (2014), five themes that emerged from the participant's interviews include supervision, group work, data collection and report writing which were categorised in three groups namely, positive, negative and lessons learned from the dissertation development process. The role of a qualitative approach is to dig deeper into the students' lived experiences during the dissertation writing, an approach that cannot be attained with the use of other research designs.

Participants

Twenty-one (21) final year undergraduate students enrolled in the degree programmes (Educational Psychology, Sociology, and Special education) in the School of Education took part in the study. The participants also served as group leaders of the research groups that were formed to lead the task of dissertation writing in specific groups.

Procedure

Data was collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews. The recordings were transcribed into text that was analysed using the constant comparative method. Using the critical incident technique used by recommended to be effective when working with undergraduate student data (Christie, 2007; Roberts and Seaman, 2018). Reflective learning that attempts to collect varied undergraduate student perspectives in an unstructured and open-ended interview was administered to the participants. The following main questions, among others, in helped to understand lived experiences: describe critical incidents that occurred to you while you were engaged in activities that are linked to this research course, what has been your number one challenge in the process of writing your report? What have you enjoyed in the process of writing your report? Such a data collection tool was used in the present study in order to encourage the participants to freely express themselves regarding their experiences.

Data analysis

Constant comparative data analysis technique as described by Reid-Searl, Moxham and Happell (2010) was used to descend meaning from the collected text (reported words and phrases) by reading and re-reading the text sentence by sentence in an effort to identify relevant themes. Constant comparative technique is popular in qualitative studies (Reid-Searl, Moxham and Happell, 2010) and has been extensively used to analyse data that has explored undergraduate research supervision and more recently in cultural research (Levack, Jones, Grainger, Boland, Brown & Ingham, 2016).). Consistent with (Reid-Searl, Moxham and Happell, 2010) and the verbatim quotes presented in the

following section exemplifies the data that was collected from which themes emerged. Each participant is identified by a letter and a number, for instance, S1, S21.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

In this section, a series of themes that emerged from the participants' responses include collaborative work, data collection, dissertation writing and supervision were categorised into two groups namely, positive and negative as presented below. In this section, an attempt is made to link the current findings to existing literature. This has been done to examine how the current findings are related to what is happening in other contexts regarding undergraduate dissertation writing.

Collaborative work

Consensus was reached on the benefits that accrue when working in a group including cooperation, personal companionship, and human relations, and being able to resolve conflict when one is offended:

But all in all, I enjoyed to work with my colleagues and I am grateful and proud of myself that I was able to pick up a few skills while working with my group [S12].

What has been enjoyed is the creation of new friendship among members and also the emotional tension that was experienced which resulted to creation of strong friendship [S13].

Have learnt how to cope with difficult people who only want their ideas to be considered and not for those of others [S18].

What I have enjoyed in process of writing the report was group work, had a very cooperative group. Henceforth, made our report findings hard to come up with a solid conclusion [S9].

I enjoyed working with my other colleagues and also the interaction we had with our course coordinator [S19].

Collaborative learning is enhanced when data is analysed in a group and this type of learning is evident in the quality of dissertations submitted for examination:

Acquiring new knowledge especially data analysis, working with colleagues and also learning from them [S20].

These students' revelations are consistent with what others have found about collaborative work in other contexts (Kessler, Bikowski & Boggs, 2012; Kessler, 2009)

Data collection

While data collection is a time consuming and strenuous exercise, the participants found it rewarding, interesting and it accorded them a chance to apply theory to practice:
Going out for data collection gave me the opportunity to actually practice what I've known theoretically, which was a good thing for my future research studies [S7].

The response from respondents were also interesting especially from the learners been primary sources of information. Also the experience in the field was adventurous [S13].

In the process I learnt a lot from what we were doing and from the few interviews we had. Even though it was challenging but fun [S2].

I enjoyed when the part of data collection came in. I got to know a lot during the interview sessions [S8].

Data collection was fun and very educative [S1].

In the context of limited recreational activities for most students who find less time to engage in social activities that are both entertaining and informative, data collection seemed to fill this gap. The process of data collection exposes some students to the real world where they had first-hand information on what happens when interviewing participants, lessons learnt from reviewing primary sources and linking existing literature to practical applications. These experiences have also been reported by Rowley and Slack (2004).

Dissertation writing

Although students generally experience difficulties when they attempt to write the actual dissertation, the act of putting down on paper what they found in the field was a time of research knowledge acquisition on the part of the student that deserved reward:

I have learned how to write a report because I was the one doing most of the work. I am now able to it myself because of how I did this report [S10].

I enjoyed the presentation of the findings and discussions. They helped me learn how to draw meaning from every statement that was given as a response. It also opened up my mind in terms of how to handle qualitative and quantitative analysis of data [S6].

We developed research knowledge and skills. Just hoping that you will start giving out certificates [S11].

We developed research knowledge and skills. Just hoping that you will start giving out certificates [S11].

Specific research report writing skills were mastered by the students from the process of dissertation writing and the whole process was sustainable:

The work was done and I enjoyed the presentation of verbatim responses, discussion of findings and coming up of recommendations. Also, I joined working as a team with my colleagues [S15].

In support of Mackeogh (2006), writing a dissertation in a group accords weak students a rare chance to benefit from more knowledgeable peers and when this is supplemented by an effective supervisor, this process becomes less stressful for the students.

Supervision

Ideal undergraduate research supervision is seen as a collaborative effort between the supervisor and the student where the former guides the later to develop work for assessment. This one-to-one partnership is perceived as seem in the quotes below to be warm and responsive to the needs of the students in this study:

Well, I enjoyed most parts of it, our supervisor was supportive all the way to the end [S7]. I enjoyed working with my team and our supervisor was awesome... Learnt a lot from him [S14].

The literature is dominant of studies on undergraduate research supervision suggesting that the quality of supervision offered at undergraduate is below expectations. One would expect that this would be different for universities in high-income countries (Todd, Smith & Bannister, 2006) where supervisors are trained and experienced but this is no different from low resource contexts where supervisors are unavailable, untrained and offer poor dissertation comments that are usually provided later than expected (Mweemba, Banja, Ndhlovu, Ziwa and Sachingongu, 2018).

Overall, undergraduate dissertation writing when done by a small group of students, each equally contributing to the task in a co-operative and tolerant manner with the help of a supportive supervisor is seen both as rewarding socially and academically. Where data collection and reporting is difficult, the collaborative effort in this exercise serves a stress reliever and a way to manage human emotions in health ways. The preceding sections have addressed the positive experiences linked to dissertation writing. However, not all experiences are desirable when writing an undergraduate research dissertation. The following section presents challenges faced by students when writing their dissertations.

Limited supervision demonstrated by lack of comments or when the comments are provided, they are delayed compelling students to write dissertations without guidance from the supervisor:

Getting feedback from the supervisor. You would be told to write some parts of the report and send the documents to them. It used to take a lot of time for them to respond to that hence we would be forced to write other parts looking at the time elapsing [S3].

Lack of supervision from our supervisor as she claimed to be busy all the time [S8].

In the current absence of undergraduate report writing guidelines, where the supervisor comes with his or her on perspective of writing the dissertation, this in itself creates room for confusion and ambiguity on the part of the student who is being guided to write a dissertation. For instance, some supervisors have been accustomed to think that introduction should be written first (Hayton, 2020) whereas others argue that it should be written last (Carr, 2016). This poor quality of supervision has resulted in students submitting work that has not been supervised because the supervisor could not find time to guide the students even after students made several efforts to get the supervisors attention. In severe cases, poor supervision has resulted in medication errors calling into question the competence of unsupervised nurses (Reid-Searl, Moxham, Happell, 2010). The current debate is whether or not supervisors should be trained for them to effectively guide their students (Todd, Smith and Bannister, 2006). In order to avoid dissertation writing challenges, Greenbank and Penketh (2009) encourages both students and supervisors to plan research work effectively for the dissertation to be of acceptable quality.

Collaborative work
In any group created to do a specific task it is expected that some students will depend on their peers to do most on their behalf:

The challenge was that of working in groups, I feel as much as this method reduces work load since we works in groups, it has a negative impact on the type of graduate produced. It's a known fact that not all group members would contribute to the development of the report, probably just one or three people would out of the five. Then in the end those riders (group members who did not participate in the writing process) will graduate with assurance on their degree that they did research but cannot deliver when it comes to real life situation hence giving a negative image to the school [S7].

The number one challenge has been organizing the group. Some people could come empty without any contribution and wait for others to do the work on their behalf [S6].

I didn't have any moment of enjoyment as they were a lot of challenges, like lack of cooperation among the group members [S16].

Team work was quite a bit of challenging [S8].

Cooperation to work as a group has been my biggest challenge from my group members [S1].
Lack of team work spirit, Lack of supervision and getting feedback late from our supervisors, Busy schedules as was one of the most given excuses, stress, anger, the heat, ma temper (temper tantrums), hunger in the field, blame games when targets haven't been mate, laziness, dependency syndrome, lack of communication skills and time [S5].

Dependency syndrome, laziness and lack of team work [S11].
The participation from group members wasn't that much [S2].

Frustration on the part of the group leader is anticipated when group meetings planned do not take place as scheduled:

It was hard coordinating people in the group. People had different priorities. The people in our group are those who pay other people to do the work for them [S10].
No one used to show up for the group meetings. They would ignore my calls because they knew what I wanted to tell them [S10].

Collaborative research writing is encouraged in the literature. However undergraduate students are still new to the concept of collaborative research writing and that is why the students under investigation faced numerous challenges (Roberts & Seaman, 2018). Among the challenges faced where are coordination of different views among themselves, time management where students had a number of other competing demands in other courses in addition to the course that was being studied. These challenges could have emerged from a number of sources namely boring power relations among the students the group leaders could have been looked down upon by the group members. Second, coordinating students with different attitudes towards dissertation writing is a difficult task. For example, among students who are both studying and working paying somebody to do the writing for them is their best option. This would lead to non-participation of the student who is willing to pay another student to do the work for them. This should be discouraged at all times in order to enable the students to gain the desired knowledge and skills that come with collaborative dissertation writing (MacKeogh, 2006).

Data collection

In the absence of a well-coordinated research communication between target data collection institutions and sending institutions where students are enrolled, effective data collection is a missed opportunity as expressed below:

Management should give more support on valid introductory letter because I remember being rejected at over 4 schools because they needed a letter from DEBS (District Education Board Secretary) yet we had the one from the school. So management should

at least engage relevant stakeholders in ensuring that we get the actual participants. Because truth be told we had to revise our population due to the same [S7].

Getting teachers to participate in answering the questionnaire was not easy. Most of them were busy and did not have time to answer our questionnaire [S21].

There is no doubt that undergraduate research was adversely affected by the closure of learning institutions due to the global health crisis caused by the COVID-19:

Figuring out on how we would collect data, due to the pandemic (COVID-19) was a challenge. Although we came up with a better solution which worked well for us. The other challenge was the response from the participants. We don't know whether they understood the questions or it was hard for them to use technology [S2].

Our number one challenge was the process of collecting data on the part of lecturers using purposive sampling the targeted lecturers were mostly busy and not always available. This created a problem delaying presentation of findings [S15].

The biggest challenge was having access to the target population because of the pandemic [S16].

The number one challenge we faced in the field was school administration refusing to be interviewed, from all the sample we had for interviews, we only managed to interview 3 teachers [S9].

The challenge we faced during our report writing was unwillingness of participants to take part in our study [S19].

It was difficult to interview persons with disabilities because it was as if we were labelling them as disabled [S10].

Undergraduate research that is not funded poses various challenges which affect data collection:

Collection of data especially from the bursaries committee office [government agency] was not easy [S4].

Financial issue was another challenge as we had to travel to various government ministries just to collect data for which others were able to attend to us and others refused [S12].

Data collection challenges faced by students could have been caused by the lack of communication between the institution where the student is coming from and the target institution where the student was expected to collect information. For instance, no prior communication was made to the target institutions that the students where are going to collect the data from there are target institution. It was as if the target institutions namely the schools where data was collected, where ambushed. In future it is expected that the two institutions should be able to communicate prior to data collection (Hammick & Acker, 1998).

Dissertation writing
The challenges reported here are not different from those reported by Todd and colleagues (2004) in a study they conducted to explore challenges faced by undergraduate students in one of the universities in the United Kingdom:

To begin, the biggest challenge has been finding literature connected to our study since there are only a few studies that have been conducted related to our research [S12].

Our number one challenge has been coming to consensus on a particular issue with each other as a group. For instance, when discussing about a certain point of view, each and every member had a different view and just for us to come to agree on the specific point to write was really pathetic because each and every individual point was considered to be better than the other one's point [S13].

And for writing, we have had a tight academic schedule so balancing has been really a challenge [S4].

Personal and time management in the context of the university setting where a number of academic tasks need to be completed within a limited time is demanded of a final year undergraduate student and failure to do so creates pressure for the student:

One of the challenges I faced while writing this report was that we were also writing other things like long papers and tests which also had tight due dates. Multi-tasking made my attention to be divided [S10].

The period we did the report wasn't enough but tried our level best [S2].

Number one challenge was lack of time management due to busy schedules by some group members, there by delaying the set time to achieve certain tasks [S13].

When the data that is collected is inaccurate due to inappropriate responses given by the study participants, this consequently affects data analysis and reporting:

Chapter discussing of data was hard especially with questionnaires which were answered by grade nine learners as they did not fully understand the topic [S6].

It is clear from the above presented verbatim quotes from the interviewed students that although the dissertation process was pleasant, it was not devoid of negative experiences. This statement is consistent with MacDonald's words "there must be a positive and negative in everything in the universe in order to complete a circuit or circle, without which there would be no activity, no motion" (MacDonald, 2016:14). As already indicated in this paper, it is not our intention to only focus on the positive but the negative experiences as well, so that our analysis is balanced. As we discuss these experiences, we are also aware of the argument that focussing on the negative experiences tends to outshine the positive ones (Chitiyo & Muwana, 2018). This is one of the explanations for our focus on positive experiences in the current study.

CONCLUSION

Undergraduate final year dissertations are critical for one to graduate as they indicate the research skills and knowledge that the students has acquired from their studies that span over a period of four years, however detailed investigations on the experiences that students go through during the dissertation writing process for students enrolled in low resource university settings have been missing from the current literature. The main objective of this study was to examine these students' experiences during dissertation writing, especially when students complete this task in groups, a practice that has been implemented to respond to the scarcity of supervisors in the department under study.

Taken together, out of the diverse positive experiences reported by undergraduate students interviewed, collaborative research dissertation writing experiences emerged as one of the most enjoyed activity. Thus, we argue that in the context of a low resource Zambian University, this approach towards undergraduate student research warrants further research. However, in view of the limited nature of the study as it was conducted in single Zambian institution and within a narrow subject area (undergraduate dissertation writing), the findings should not be generalised to other study settings.

Successful dissertation writing among undergraduate students requires collaborative effort in all the stages of the research process: development of the research questions, review of related literature (gap identification and problematisation), and selection of data collection techniques, presentation of findings, discussion of key findings and providing recommendations based on what has been found. That is the reason why beyond the current study, future research needs to pay attention to not only dissertation writing experiences but also other stages involved in undergraduate student research such as research topic development, literature review search and data collection experiences among undergraduate students.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Arising from the current findings, there is need to open the discussion about writing undergraduate dissertations in general, specifically focusing on collaborative dissertation writing. This study suggests that collaborative dissertation writing is one of the effective ways of addressing the scarcity of research materials and supervisors in low-resource university settings. We recommend that in such contexts, collaborative dissertation writing should be norm.

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