



CHALLENGES OF WRITING DISSERTATIONS: PERCEPTUAL DIFFERENCES BETWEEN STUDENTS AND SUPERVISORS IN A GHANAIAN POLYTECHNIC

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ABSTRACT

This study explored the perceptions of students and supervisors on the interplay of institutional-student-supervisor related factors that militate against the writing and completion of quality dissertations in Ghanaian Polytechnics. Based on 491 usable self-questionnaires retrieved from final year students and supervisors, descriptive results indicate both students and supervisors unanimously agreed that students experience considerable challenge accessing scholarly journals, textbooks, internet and literature, inadequate funding and irregular and delayed feedback from supervisors when writing their dissertations. Furthermore, the Mann-Whitney U-test results revealed that both students and supervisors exhibited self-serving attribution bias in their perception of the challenges of writing and completing dissertation concerning student and supervisor related factors. Improvement in students' access to scholarly literature and supervisors being more accessible and providing quick feedback to students are recommended.

Keywords: Dissertation, Students, Supervisors, Ghana, Supervision, Polytechnics, Perpetual difference, Self-serving bias.

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Contribution/ Originality

The paper adds to existing literature by examining the differences in opinion between students and supervisors regarding challenges in dissertation writing among undergraduate students by applying the self-serving bias and better- than- average models.

1. INTRODUCTION

In all functional faculties in every tertiary institution most students at their undergraduate and postgraduate levels obtain their degrees by research after full completion of mandated coursework. For example, in a study of undergraduate tourism programmes at 30 UK institutions, [Stuart-Hoyle \(2003\)](#) found that 22 included dissertations as a core course in the final year of study. It is a prerequisite emphasized by the statement “*in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the award of any relevant degree*”. The undergraduate has no option for opting out. This is principally the case with all polytechnics in Ghana. Undoubtedly, dissertation helps in the development of analytical problem solving skills of students as well as providing a platform for application of theoretical knowledge ([Hussey and Hussey, 1997](#)). However, whilst much is not expected from the undergraduate dissertation compared to Masters and PhD levels in terms of new knowledge development and additions to knowledge that have already been gained ([Rowley, 2000](#)), its originality and quality should not be compromised ([Reynolds and Thompson, 2011](#)).

Yet, many students face challenges in writing and completing their dissertations. For example, a study by [Rudd \(1985\)](#) reveals that between 40% to 50% of postgraduate students failed to successfully complete their work in UK universities. Similarly, [Dunkerley and Weeks \(1994\)](#) also found out from research that 46% of 1,969 candidates withdrew from undertaking undergraduate research work. In addition, [Garcia et al. \(1988\)](#) establish a large attrition and delay in completion rate for graduate dissertation. Furthermore, [Garcia et al. \(1988\)](#) reveal that for the high proportion of those who do complete their research degrees, it takes them a significantly longer time than expected. Similar to their colleagues pursuing undergraduate studies, Higher National Diploma (HND) students in the ten (10) Polytechnics in Ghana are not exceptions to the difficulties enumerated above in completion of their work.

A review of the literature advances three key major challenges that impact on the quality and rate of completion of research work. Thus (i) supervisor or tutor-related challenges ([Cullen et al., 1994](#); [Mouton, 2001](#); [Buttrey and Richter, 2005](#); [Pearce, 2005](#); [Abiddin, 2007](#)); (ii) student-related challenges ([Aspland et al., 1999](#); [Thomas and Nelson, 2001](#); [Cresswell, 2003](#); [Pearson and Kayrooz, 2004](#); [Anderson Day and Laughlin, 2006](#); [Dysthe et al., 2006](#)) and (iii) institution-related challenges ([Sharp and Howard, 1996](#); [Mouton, 2001](#); [Pearce, 2005](#)). However, most of these studies significantly highlight the perspective of students with little attention to supervisors whose role is indispensable in this process.

Furthermore, to the best of our knowledge no study has explored differences in the evaluative views of students and supervisors regarding the threesome factors. In addition, the use of simple frequency and percentage distribution dominate data analysis protocol of previous studies examining students' dissertations ([Chabaya et al., 2009](#); [Thondhlana et al., 2011](#); [Kaigai and Mapolisa, 2012](#); [Mapolisa and Mafa, 2012](#); [Mapolisa, 2013](#)).

With reference to Ghana, a significant omission in empirical research is the difficulty students in polytechnics face when writing dissertations. This subject has eluded sufficient empirical investigation. The authors further acknowledged that the challenges of writing and completion of dissertation in

polytechnics might be different from those confronting undergraduates in Ghanaian universities as well as other jurisdictions considering the massive contextual variations regarding faculty and library resources and institutional orientation and mandate. A study of this nature is very important because the findings will help administrators of Polytechnics to fully understand and appreciate the challenges that confront students when writing dissertations. In addition, it is expected the results of the study will make considerable input into policy formulation that seeks to eradicate the difficulties and promote educational quality and effectiveness.

This study therefore sets out to explore the effects of the three dimensional factors on writing and completion of dissertation and to assess whether there are a perceptual differences between supervisors and students.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Several studies have been undertaken to identify the factors that influence the accomplishment and progress of students in research work. These factors have been categorized into three main challenges namely tutor-related, student-related and institution-related.

Student-related challenges are factors specific to students that impact either positively or negatively on the conduct and completion of a research work. A number of factors have been identified from the perspective of students. Among them are failure to define a research problem (Pearson and Kayrooz, 2004) which can lead to students frustration (Mapolisa, 2013); lack of training and experience in research methods (Thomas and Nelson, 2001; Cresswell, 2003); failure to prepare a clear and precise research proposal (Dysthe *et al.*, 2006) and poor time management (Thondhlana *et al.*, 2011). According to Cone and Foster (1993), students should spend at least 20hours per week on their research projects. Other influences include inability to write well-organized, logical and coherent papers, lack of personal drive to complete the project and failure to consult supervisors regularly (Cone and Foster, 1993; Mouton, 2001; Majoni and Chidakwa, 2004); lack of finance, physical space to do uninterrupted writing (Cone and Foster, 1993; Brown, 1997; Phillips and Pugh, 2000; Majoni and Chidakwa, 2004); lack of commitment and motivation to do the research, lack of adequate theory in the area being researched on, students' failure to meet regularly with the supervisor, family problems/commitments (Aspland *et al.*, 1999; Bell, 2000; Sidhu, 2001; Pearce, 2005; Anderson Day and Laughlin, 2006) and increasing proportion of the undergraduate student from previously disadvantaged backgrounds with limited experience of library facilities and independent research work.

Aside the student-related challenges several other authors suggest that students capacity to conduct research is also constrained by institutional factors. (Mouton, 2001; Nyawaranda, 2005; Pearce, 2005). Sharp and Howard (1996) identified imposing research topics on the student and giving students three to six months within which to submit their research projects as factors militating against timely submission of research projects by students. Other issues include lack of exposure of tutors to research skills, lack of internet services, lack of exposure to computers, research material, electronic database and increasing number of students.

Effective supervision has been empirically proven to be one of the elements of success factors for research students (Cullen *et al.*, 1994; Buttrey and Richter, 2005; Abiddin, 2007). Welsh (1978) reports that supervisors see their role as that of "guide, philosopher and friend" and this phrase can also be applied to the supervision of undergraduate dissertations. Abiddin and West (2007) proposed that "without good supervision from a good supervisor, difficult circumstances will arise which can affect progress". According to Mouton (2001) an effective and efficient project supervisor's characteristics include a good track record as a scholar, experience in supervisory practices, interest in the research topic, making time for supervision and treating the student as a peer and an equal. Others suggest effective use of time, making time for close and regular contact, assist in selection of topic and guiding on relevant literature, helping in deciding the theoretical framework of the study, and monitor progress according to an agreed schedule and provide constructive criticism (Cone and Foster, 1993). Nyawaranda (2005); Chabaya *et al.* (2009) and Pearce (2005) highlight some of the supervisor-related challenges to include too few meetings with students, no interest with students' topic, too little practical help given and direction. Others include failure to return work promptly, absence from work (Department) without leaving any co-supervisor and lack of research experience. Thomas and Nelson (2001) and Bogdan and Biklen (1992) also observe lack of relevant research skills and or knowledge.

A number of studies have directed attention towards student-supervisor relationship. The major ideas within this remit include differences in student-supervisor expectations; approaches to managing the relationship; different approaches to supervision in general; issues related to communication and understanding; and differences in student-supervisor perceptions of the overall experience. (Dysthe, 2002; Woolhouse, 2002; Armitage, 2006; Lamm *et al.*, 2007). A longitudinal study conducted by McCormack (2004) on a small cohort of postgraduate research students found a substantial gap between students' understanding about research and what was expected of them against what supervisors believed students were able to do. Another common theme uncovered in the literature is the need to develop a plan when undertaking dissertation (Phillips and Pugh, 2000; Woolhouse, 2002) and also the need for supervisors to have a very clear understanding of students' expectations of the supervisory process from the outset and to provide explicit guidelines as to what the supervisor will and will not be able to provide (Exley and O'Malley, 1999). Bitchener and Basturkmen (2006) also pointed out that the supervisor-student relation is made more difficult by the fact that supervisors have tacit knowledge of the features and approaches to dissertations that they do not communicate to students. Lumadi (2008) also reported on differences in expectations between students and supervisors. Students expected their supervisors to provide more support with research techniques, to be more explicit about the criteria upon which their work would be judged, and to provide feedback on their work more promptly. Supervisors complained that students were poorly prepared for the dissertation, failed to take their comments and feedback into account when revising, and that poor language skills on the part of many students meant that the supervisor had to spend a great deal of time on editing and correcting the students' work. Many researchers (Dong, 1998; Lumadi, 2008; Drennan and Clarke, 2009) support the need for supervisors to identify student expectations from the outset and to provide clear guidance on their role and the input they will provide.

Another important factor with potential impact on students' dissertations is teaching and learning of research methods. [Armstrong \(2013\)](#) study on UK dissertation supervision, found considerable variation in how research methods are taught. Whilst some departments offer it as a stand-alone course, others include it as training within another module such as market research or provide it as additional, non-credit workshops that students can attend if they choose. Some students are required to submit and pass a research proposal assessment before they undertake the dissertation. Other students are also allowed to proceed with their dissertations having failed their research proposals ([Armstrong, 2013](#)). In their comprehensive review of the literature on teaching research methods in the social sciences, [Wagner et al. \(2011\)](#) found that a wide range of approaches are advocated, including exercises, problem-based approaches, collaborative and group work methods, simulations, and experiential learning. In furtherance of teaching method argument, [Edwards and Thatcher \(2006\)](#) suggest that supervisory staff can benefit from refresher training and more specific teaching resources in addition to the traditional research methods textbooks to help overcome the challenges associated with teaching the subject to their students.

Other notable challenges identified include; intellectual challenges students face in choosing and then narrowing down a topic for research and difficulties students have in being analytical and critical in their work ([Todd et al., 2006](#)); difficulties in writing up the discussion section. Especially difficulties in expressing and linking ideas ([Bitchener and Basturkmen, 2006](#)); identify and clarifying research problem ([Zuber-Skerritt and Knight, 2010](#)); writing of effective research proposal ([Baker, 2000](#)).

2.1. Theoretical Framework

This study explored students and supervisors' judgment on the triad variables considered sine qua non for dissertation completion in higher education institutions. Respondents were therefore involved in a sort of self-assessment. Consequently, the likelihood of both cohorts in the study indulging in bias judgments is high. Just like all other forms of self-assessment, there is a possibility of incongruence between the respondents' self-assessment and their objective performance leading to bias self-evaluation. The likelihood of students and supervisors to engage in bias self-assessment in this study will be explained by the self-serving bias ([Miller and Ross, 1975](#)) and the better-than-average effect ([Alicke et al., 1995](#)) perspectives. A self-serving bias is any cognitive or perceptual process that is prejudiced by the need to maintain and enhance self-esteem. The desire to sustain or enhance one's sense of self-worth forms the basis for self-serving bias ([Snyder et al., 1976](#); [Stephan et al., 1976](#)). Accordingly, people make self-serving attributions because of the benefits to self-worth. Such individuals perceiving oneself as responsible for desired outcomes enhances personal self-worth, whereas perceiving oneself as responsible for undesired outcomes diminishes self-worth. Another explanation for self-serving bias is the need for self-presentation, which is the drive to convey a desired image to others ([Schlenker, 1980](#)). People are eagerly sensitive to how they are regarded by others and often act in ways to gain approval and avoid embarrassment ([Weary, 1978](#); [Arkin et al., 1980](#); [Tetlock and Levi, 1982](#)). Accordingly, people make self-serving attributions to manage impressions. They claim personal responsibility for successes but not failures in an attempt to influence how others perceive

them. Better-than-average effect model is the tendency for people to evaluate themselves more positively than valid information suggests, as well as more positively than third-party observers do (Robins and Beer, 2001; Zuckerman *et al.*, 2004). According to this account, people appraise themselves more positively than they appraise others because it makes them feel good about themselves to believe they are above average. The better –than-average effect was originally thought to be motivated by self-enhancement needs (Alicke, 1985; Brown, 1986). Both students and teachers have been found to indulge in self-serving bias and better-than-average effect tendencies in any evaluation situations (Cross, 1977). Based on the self-serving and better-than-average effect perspectives, it is anticipated that both students and supervisors will exhibit defensive attribution bias in their assessment of the challenges students face in the dissertation writing and completion process.

3. METHODOLOGY

The work entailed a survey of third or final year students and lecturers/supervisors of Ho Polytechnic. The choice of the final year was based on the fact that the students successfully had gone through the theoretical and practical aspect of the module and are currently undertaking their research work. This puts them at a better position to speak to the issue. All supervisors in the sample had at least five or more years' experience in supervising student research projects. The researchers employed a quantitative approach specifically, descriptive survey design. The method was deemed appropriate because it enabled the authors to describe the views of both students and supervisors on the triad factors in the assessment of dissertation writing and completion (Punch, 2005; Jackson, 2009; Saunders *et al.*, 2012). Furthermore, it allows for collection of numerical data from a larger number of respondents (Cresswell, 2003).

The study was based on a sample of 501 respondents comprising 90 lecturers'/supervisors and 411 students selected from a population of 110 lecturers and 1,854 students. The sample size was determined using Krejcie and Morgan (1970) computed table based on 95% level of certainty or significance. A multistage sampling technique was used for the sampling. The first stage involves the stratification of the students into ten (10) departments of affiliation. The aim is to sample a representation population of each faculty and department for the study (Saunders *et al.*, 2012). The second stage employs proportionate sampling technique to determine the actual size of sample to be drawn from each group. The third and final stage involves the use of convenience sampling technique to draw specific students and supervisors from each department.

Self-administered questionnaire was used to collect primary data for the study. The choice of this method is beneficial because each person or participant responds to the same set of questions in a predetermined order (Salkind, 2011). Furthermore, is less intrusive, allows for more privacy and induces less time pressure (DeLeeuw *et al.*, 2008). Closed-ended questions in the form of three (3) point item Likert scale (1=disagreed; 2= Neutral; 3=agreed) was used to determine views and experiences of students and lecturers (Shaw and Pieter, 2000). The questionnaire was designed to evaluate thirty-three (33) statements categorized under three main factors; institutional related factors (9 statements), student related factors (12 statements) and supervisor related factors (12 statements) that impact either

positively or negatively on student writing and completion of research process. The questionnaire was administered in ten (10) sections according to the number of departments at the institution by ten (10) trained research assistants allocated to each department between March and April 2014.

A total of 501 out of 547 questionnaires sent to the field were retrieved and found to be useful for data analysis, this represent 91.5% response rate. Subsequently, the useful questionnaires were coded and keyed into the SPSS version 22.0 for analysis. Two main methods were engaged in data analysis. The factors that influence the quality of dissertation writing were assessed using descriptive statistics (mean) and frequency distribution. Differences between students and supervisors about the factors were assessed using the Mann-Whitney U- test base on p value of 0.05.

4. RESULTS

4.1. Assessment of Institutional, Student and Supervisor Related Factors

Nine (9) institutional factors that influence the writing and completion of dissertations in the Polytechnic were evaluated and results are presented in *Table 1*. In the view of 65 percent of respondents ($M=2.42$), students and supervisors receive research guidelines on time, and the guideline contains adequate information ($M=2.40$) to direct both students and supervisors. Regarding time allocated for the writing of dissertations, respondents were divided in opinion. 40.4 percent agreed that time set aside for writing the dissertations was adequate while an almost equal proportion (40.0%) disagreed. However, over 6 out of 10 respondents opined that the increasing number of students is reducing the time supervisors spend on students. Results of the study showed that only a minority of respondents agreed that students have easy access to scholarly journal articles (24.8%), textbooks (28.6%), internet facilities (39.%) and literature (35.1%) when writing their dissertations.

Twelve (12) student related factors that influence the writing and completion of dissertations in the Polytechnic is shown in *Table 2*. It is evident from the table that a greater proportion (79.9%) of respondents agreed that students have inadequate funding when writing dissertations. More than half (66.4%) of respondents were in agreement with the statement that students lack commitment and motivation to write their dissertations.

Table-1. Descriptive Statistics for Institutional Factors

	F	% in Agreement	% in Disagreement	Mean
1. Research guidelines are provided on time.	492	65.0	23.4	2.42
2. Research guideline is informative.	498	64.1	23.9	2.40
3. Increment in student population is reducing the time supervisors spend on students.	497	62.2	26.2	2.36
4. Research guideline is easy to understand.	489	59.5	25.8	2.34
5. Time allocated for completion and submission of dissertation is adequate.	493	40.4	40.0	2.00
6. Students have easy access to	498	35.1	43.5	1.91

literature.				
7. Students have easy access to internet facilities.	492	39.4	49.0	1.90
8. Students have easy access to text books.	496	28.6	52.2	1.76
9. Students have access to journal articles.	487	24.8	52.4	1.72

Mean scores were calculated on a re-categorized 3-point scale (from 3= Agree to 1= Disagree)

Table-2. Descriptive Statistics for Student-Related Factors

Student Factors	F	% in Agreement	% in Disagreement	Mean
1. Inadequate funding to dissertation writing.	492	79.9	10.6	2.69
2. Students lack commitment & motivation to write.	491	66.4	20.6	2.46
3. Students lack library skills.	493	66.7	21.1	2.46
4. Students have limited background to do independent research work.	499	65.5	23.8	2.42
5. Students have poor time management attitude.	496	62.1	23.0	2.39
6. Students lack understanding of research methods.	499	59.5	24.2	2.35
7. Students have limited computer skills.	492	58.5	26.0	2.33
8. Students lack of personal drive.	493	54.2	25.6	2.29
9. Students lack of physical space to work.	482	52.5	24.3	2.28
10. Students have poor writing skills.	495	53.3	28.9	2.24
11. Students fail to prepare clear research proposal.	496	45.8	35.3	2.10
12. Students fail to consult supervisors regularly.	498	38.0	46.2	1.92

Mean scores were calculated on a re-categorized 3-point scale (from 3= Agree to 1 Disagree)

As indicated in *Table 2*, more respondents (66.7%) agreed with the statement that students lack library skills while only 21.1 percent rejected the assertion. Another 65 percent of the sample concurred that students have limited background and experience to do an independent work of the magnitude of a dissertation. Furthermore, more than half (62.1%) of respondents were of the view that students have poor time management attitude. Regarding students' understanding of research methodology, 59.5 percent of the respondents averred that students have limited ability in the subject. Interestingly, more than half (58%) of the respondents asserted that students have limited computer skills. About 53.3 percent of the respondents were in agreement with the statement that students have poor writing skills.

Table 3 evaluates twelve (12) statements deemed important in relation to supervisor-related factors in research writing and completion. A little over half (53.9%) of the respondents agreed that supervisors do not make time for regular contact with students. Two-fourth of the respondents were in agreement with the statement that supervisors do not provide quick feedbacks on students' work. Less

than half (48.2%) of respondents agreed that supervisors do not have time to guide students in the writing of their dissertations. Furthermore, 46.4% of the respondents claimed that supervisors do not direct students on how to locate relevant literature. On research skills of supervisors, more respondents (61.8%) disagreed that supervisors lack research skills. About 58.7 percent of the respondents dismissed the contention that supervisors impose research topics on students. Likewise, another 53.6 percent of respondents were of the opinion that supervisors provide objective criticism on students' dissertations

Table-3. Descriptive Statistics for Supervisor-Related Factors

Supervisor Factors	F	% in Agreement	% in Disagreement	Mean
1. Supervisors do not meet students regularly.	495	53.9	32.9	2.21
2. Supervisors do not provide quick feedback.	497	50.5	36.8	2.14
3. Supervisors do not have time for supervision.	496	48.2	37.9	2.10
4. Supervisors do not direct students on how to locate relevant material.	491	46.4	40.3	2.06
5. Supervisors have no interest in students' research topics.	497	35.4	45.3	1.90
6. Supervisors do not assist students in the selection of topics.	480	39.0	49.0	1.90
7. Supervisors treat students as peers and equals.	498	33.9	45.8	1.88
8. Supervisors do not monitor progress of students' dissertation.	496	33.3	47.8	1.85
9. Supervisors do not provide quality guidelines and direction to students.	494	33.8	48.6	1.85
10. Supervisors do not provide objective criticism of students' work.	496	29.0	53.6	1.75
11. Supervisors force research topics on students.	496	29.4	58.7	1.71
12. Supervisors lack research skills.	497	18.3	61.8	1.57

Mean scores were calculated on a re-categorized 3-point scale (from 3= Agree to 1= Disagree)

4.2. Perceptual Differences between Students and Supervisors

Table 4 illustrates the results of a Mann-Whitney U test conducted to explore differences between students and supervisors regarding institutional factors affecting the writing and submission of dissertations. The results of the test indicate that students and supervisors significantly differed in opinion on three (3) of the nine (9) institutional factors evaluated. Of the three (3) factors, supervisors tends to agree more on two factors; Thus for research guideline being informative (supervisors: $Mdn=278.76$ and students $Mdn=243.05$; $U=15727$, $Z=-2.508$, $p<.012$.) and research guideline easy to understand than students (supervisors: $Mdn=290.10$ and students: $Mdn=234.83$; $U=13896$, $Z=-3.823$, $p<.000$) compared to one factor by students who surprisingly, claimed they had more access to journal articles than supervisors (Student: $Mdn=249.95$ and supervisors: $Mdn=217.76$; $U=15503$, $Z=-2.152$, $p<.031$).

Table-4. A Mann-Whitney U Test for comparison of students and supervisors' perception on institutional factors

Institutional Factor	Student (n=404)	Supervisor (n=88)	Z Statistic	P- Value
	Median Ranks			
1. Research guidelines are provided on time	242.37	265.45	-1.637	.102
2. Research guideline is informative	243.05	278.76	-2.508	.012
3. Increase in student population is reducing the time supervisors spend on students	244.09	271.19	-1.883	.060
4. Research guideline is easy to understand	234.83	290.10	-3.823	.000
5. Time allocated for completion and submission of dissertation is adequate	243.46	262.87	-1.258	.208
6. Students have easy access to literature	254.84	225.31	-1.896	.058
7. Students have easy access to internet facilities	247.55	241.67	-.388	.698
8. Students have easy access to text books	246.84	256.00	-.603	.546
9. Students have access to journal articles	249.95	217.76	-2.152	.031

*the mean rank difference is significant at the 0.05 level.

Table 5 shows Mann-Whitney U test results conducted to explore differences between students and supervisors regarding student related influences on writing and submission of dissertations. With the exception of two factors, students "lack of commitment and motivation" and "having limited computer skills", there is a strong evidence of statistically significant perceptual differences between students and supervisors on the remaining ten (10) factors assessed. Of the ten (10) factors that was retained significant, supervisors tend to agree more on eight of the student-related factors compared to only two by students ("inadequate funding for dissertation" and "students lack physical space to work").

The results regarding perceptual differences between students and supervisors concerning supervisor-related factors are indicated in Table 6. The result indicates a strong evidence of statistically significant perceptual differences between students and supervisors on the eleven (11) out of twelve (12) factors evaluated. Of the eleven factors students agreed more on all the eleven than supervisors. This is in sharp contrast to student related factors assessed above. A cursory look at the percentage distribution of the supervisor related factors shows that supervisors disagreed with all the statement attributed to them.

Table-5. A Mann-Whitney U Test for comparison of students and supervisors' perception on student related factors

Student Factors	Student (n=404)	Supervisor (n=88)	Z Statistic	P- Value
	Median Ranks			
1. Inadequate funding for dissertation writing	250.86	226.50	-2.08	.037
2. Students lack commitment & motivation to write	243.99	255.20	-.805	.421
3. Students lack library skills	241.77	271.06	-2.102	.036
4. Students have limited background to do independent research work	242.89	282.31	-2.799	.005
5. Students have poor time management attitude	235.24	309.98	-5.140	.000
6. Students lack understanding of research methods	242.36	284.72	-2.875	.004
7. Students have limited computer skills	245.04	253.18	-.552	.581

8. Students lack of personal drive	232.90	310.12	-5.146	.000
9. Students lack physical space to work	248.15	211.73	-2.437	.015
10. Students have poor writing skills	231.00	324.51	-6.201	.000
11. Students fail to prepare clear research proposal	227.66	342.51	-7.445	.000
12. Students fail to consult supervisors regularly	237.75	302.79	-4.228	.000

*the mean rank difference is significant at the 0.05 level.

Table-6. A Mann-Whitney U Test for comparison of students and supervisors' perception on supervisor factors

Supervisor Factor	Student (n=404)	Supervisor (n=88)	Z Statistic	P- Value
	Median Ranks			
1. Supervisors do not meet students regularly.	266.00	167.02	-6.617	.000
2. Supervisors do not provide quick feedback.	267.54	165.16	-6.762	.000
3. Supervisors do not have time for supervision.	265.68	170.99	-6.221	.000
4. Supervisors do not direct students on how to locate relevant material.	258.31	191.17	-4.448	.000
5. Supervisors have no interest in students' research topics.	260.20	198.36	-3.997	.000
6. Supervisors do not assist students in the selection of topics.	253.41	183.01	-4.746	.000
7. Supervisors treat students as peers and equals.	259.47	204.30	-3.557	.000
8. Supervisors do not monitor progress of students' dissertation.	258.60	202.94	-3.621	.000
9. Supervisors do not provide quality guidelines and direction to students.	265.00	168.93	-6.295	.000
10. Supervisors do not provide objective criticism of students' work.	261.92	187.94	-4.904	.000
11. Supervisors force research topics on students.	263.32	181.67	-5.569	.000
12. Supervisors lack research skills.	252.31	234.04	-1.260	.208

*the mean rank difference is significant at the 0.05 level.

5. DISCUSSION, CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Regarding institutional factors, results of the study strongly suggest that inaccessibility to journal articles and textbooks, and lack of internet services constitute critical challenges to students in writing dissertations, and this finding is consistent with previous studies (Mouton, 2001; Pearce, 2005). For example, Sharp and Howard (1996) have intimated that lack of internet services, lack of exposure to computers, research material, electronic database and increasing number of students limit the ability of students to write dissertations. These findings appear to support the commonly held view that higher education institutions in developing countries are inadequately resourced with scholarly material to facilitate teaching and learning. The students on the other hand, do not have the financial means to subscribe to either internet services, e-journals and buy personal computers' because they are heavily dependent on their parents.

For student related factors, findings of the study support the results of previous studies that suggested that inadequate funding, students lack commitment and motivation to write, limited library skills, and poor time management are critical concern areas to students in the conduct and completion of dissertations (Bell, 2000; Phillips and Pugh, 2000; Majoni and Chidakwa, 2004; Pearce, 2005; Thondhlana *et al.*, 2011). The cost dimension is very significant because the progress of students hinges on it. Majority of the activities students undertake involves cost. This ranges from money spent on searching of relevant materials in a web domain, to printing of draft copy of chapters for lecturers' review, travelling expenses in terms of data collection, etc. It is therefore very important that the institution enters into agreement with relevant corporate institutions interested in the work of polytechnic graduates to support them financially to lessen the financial burden on them. Similarly, the lack of motivation among students boils down to inadequate information on the benefits of writing dissertation. Regular seminars must be organised for these students where supervisors and past students share their experience with their colleagues. Regular presentation on each stage of the project must also be encouraged. This procedure will drive students to work hard to meet deadlines and eventually improve the quality of their work.

Finally, regarding supervisor-related variables, there is evidence to suggest that students have difficulties with unavailability of supervisors and long delays in providing feedback on dissertations. These findings also concur with the previous literature. For example, on feedback, within a postgraduate context, inaccessibility and provision of poor feedback were identified as some of the causes of unsatisfactory supervision (Grant and Graham, 1999). Similarly, Wadesango and Machingambi (2011) studied postgraduate students' experiences with research supervisors in South Africa and found lack of supervisory support and poor feedback in relation to their research work as some of the challenges the students faced. Also on accessibility of supervisors, a study of Ezebilo (2012) involving three Swedes and four internationals in Sweden found that inaccessibility of supervisors was a major challenge the students faced. Supporters of feedback contend that the earlier corrective information is provided, the more likely that work will be done within schedule. For example, Sassenruth (1972) contends that immediate feedback encourages proactive response once participants commit themselves to act correctly. Similarly, Kulik and Kulik (1988) reported that immediate feedback is more effective than delayed feedback. It is therefore important maximum attention is devoted to determining the length of time the work of student should be kept with a lecturer to navigate this challenge. Also individual students must also be assigned second supervisors who may provide second opinion on students' work in case the substantive supervisor is indisposed.

Results of the Mann–Whitney U Test analyses clearly show that students and supervisors were sharply divided in their evaluation of student-and supervisor-related factors. Supervisors seem to notably reject statements that tend to blame or question their professional efficiency while tending to agree more with statements that impute culpability to students. In a similar manner, students tended to agree more with what appear to be negative statements about supervisors. Interestingly, students and supervisors reached a near consensus in opinion on challenges relating to institutional factors. Obviously, students and supervisors were self-focused in their evaluation of the challenges of writing

dissertation, especially regarding student-supervisor related factors. This finding is not surprising as students and teachers have consistently demonstrated bias judgement in evaluation situations (Cross, 1977). The observed pattern of assessment in the study can be explained by the self-serving bias and better-than-average effect models. The study reveals that for institutional the following three factors were significant. Information of project work guideline, understanding of the guideline and access to journals. However, supervisors differed more on guideline being more informative and easy to understand. Furthermore, students differed more on access to journals than supervisor. For the significant difference between students and supervisors relating to both supervisor and student related factors, the two categories assessed tend to agree more with factors relating to either party. This attribution syndrome is a source of potential conflict between teachers and students since neither would take responsibility. The perceptual differences is also likely to create delusions and error, since both groups may attempt to avoid what to them may be termed negative feedback. Eventually, it may not help in policy formulation and administrative measures to rectify genuine shortcomings.

5.1. Conclusion

The present study sought to explore the effects of the three dimensional factors experienced by undergraduate students in conducting research and to assess whether there are perceptual differences between supervisors and students regarding the factors. The study identified inaccessibility to journal articles and textbooks, and lack of internet services as some of the main institutional factors that challenged dissertation writing. In addition, inadequate funding, students' lack of commitment and motivation to write and limited library skills, and poor time management are critical student's related factors that require attention. Finally, unavailability of supervisors and long delays in providing feedback are supervisor related factors that confront the writing and completion of dissertation among polytechnic students. Furthermore, there is sufficient evidence to conclude that there is a significance difference between student and supervisors regarding student's related factors and supervisor's related factors. However, the study observed propensity of a self-serving bias attitude among the respondents. The results calls for continual and close monitoring of both students and supervisors alike for a considerable progress on students' dissertation completion.

5.2. Limitation

This study is limited in that; it is localized to only one polytechnic out of ten in the country. Secondly, the authors used convenience sampling in the last stage of sampling difficulties in accessing the target population. Both instances poses a serious challenge when generalizing the conclusion for the larger population. The authors propose adoption of probability methods in future research to enhance representative of sample. This would promote easy generalization. We also encourage replication for the same purpose.

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