Quality Research Supervisory Practices at a Distance: Exploring the Experiences of Zimbabwe Open University Postgraduate in Education Students.

Chiome Chrispen.
(Corresponding Author)

Lecturer, Department of Educational Management Masvingo Regional Campus. Zimbabwe Open University
Phone: 0026339264965
Fax: 026339264993
Cell: 0263912905274
E-mail: chrischiom@yahoo.ca

Raphinos Alexander Chabaya

Regional campus Director: Zimbabwe Open University

Phone: 0026339 264993
Fax: 0026339 264993
Cell: 00263 912369969
E-mail: raphinoschabaya@gmail.com

Mupa Paul

Quality assurance co-ordinator: Zimbabwe Open University.
E-mail: mupapaul@cooltoad.com

Chabaya Owence (Dr)

University of Fort Hare

E-mail: chabayaowence@yahoo.com

ABSTRACT

Quality research supervision is one of the main concerns among institutions and stakeholders today especially those involved in open and distance learning (ODL). This study examined the views of postgraduate students on factors contributing to quality in postgraduate research supervision in the Zimbabwe Open University. The study was qualitative. Open-ended questionnaires and autobiographical accounts were used to collect data from a purposive sample of 43 Masters in Education and three (6) Doctoral students from the Zimbabwe Open University.

The study found out that while students preferred to be supervised by effective, efficient, dynamic, reflective, results and quality oriented supervisors they still needed to be accorded respect as scholars and colleagues in research. They cited support systems that include library, Internet and ancillary services as critical aspects that ensure quality research. Respondents further impressed that tutor availability, timeous feedback, conducive environment, a vision for quality and excellent research leadership as quality factors in an ODL context.

The study recommended scholarly and ethical practices in postgraduate research supervision supported by resources and quality oriented, skilled and experienced supervisors in a colleagueship environment. Further research could be done on the support needed and challenges encountered by postgraduate students in the Zimbabwe Open University.

Key words: *Open and Distance Learning (ODL), quality supervisory practices, distance education, research students, supervisors, supervisees, quality, and research supervision.*

BACKGROUND

The Context

At independence in 1980, the Zimbabwe government adopted campaign style strategies to institute educational reforms in the country. Enrolments rose by leaps and bounds (Zvobgo 1985). The education for all policy saw a rapid expansion of secondary and primary schools.

The impact of the large expansion was felt in higher education in 1984 and 1986 as the students who had begun secondary education in 1980 now completed their 'O' and 'A' levels (Zindi 2006). The growing mass education cascaded into colleges, polytechnics and universities, resulting in a mismatch between school leavers and places in higher education institutions. The government reacted by appointing the Williams Commission in 1989. The commission was tasked with the mandate to find ways of addressing the high demand for university education. The commission after a through work recommended among other things:

- The establishment of a second university in Bulawayo.
- The establishment of private universities.
- The establishment of the National Council for Higher education
.

The National Council for Higher Education Act was passed in 1990 resulting in expansion of universities. In 1993, the University of Zimbabwe established the College of Distance Education in 1993, now the Zimbabwe Open University. In terms of numbers the Zimbabwe Open University with an enrolment of about 20000 is currently the biggest university in Zimbabwe and the second in southern Africa after UNISA (ZOU 2010).

Quantity and Quality

As the Zimbabwe Open University try to consolidate the quantitative gains it does so on the backdrop of increased competition, dwindling government support, donor fatigue and a depressed educational market (MoE 2010). According to the dictates of the Phillip's curve, there is an inverse relationship between quantity and quality of educational provision. Studies undertaken in Brazil confirmed the inverse relationship between quantitative provision of education and quality (Psacharopolous and Woodhall 1985). Thus there is a trade off between quality and quantity. As the university grapples with the large numbers of students, the macro-economic outlook is not

sympathetic either. The ravaging economic conditions dwindling government grants and declining graduate market also impact heavily on the university's operations. Worldwide, universities are expanding current distance education offerings and creating new programmes to address growing enrollment (Neely and Tucker 2010). At the same time that distance education enrollments are increasing, most colleges and universities are facing unprecedented pressures to cut costs (Nagel 2008). State funding for higher education is being cut dramatically and university endowments have decreased in value (Stratford, 2009).

Faced with this kind of scenario, the degrees awarded by the universities can be questionable should they fail to meet the grade. Right from the word go the Zimbabwe Open University has to be a responsive organisation that is not abstracted from societal and client needs. In this regard, the only answer to the threat of a volatile environment is quality. ZOU must strive for academic excellence so that its undergraduate and post-graduate degrees remain competitive. Responsiveness, creativity, innovation and customer focus in pursuit of quality can only be the panacea for success (HMIE 2009). The need for student centeredness in graduate supervision cannot be over emphasised (Otago 2010). Open and distance learning (ODL) is enjoying phenomenal growth in Zimbabwe, new forms of provision are being developed, new campuses are being established and there is a surge in online export and import. However, there is still need to ensure that increasing access does not result in lowering standards(Jung and Latchem 2007)) and to prove that ODL is at least as good as conventional education and, in many cases, more innovative, effective and efficient especially in research and knowledge management.

ZOU world-class vision

On paper ZOU has scored a first in pursuit of quality. Its vision is to become a world class university (Strategic plan 2010). What is left is to see the tangible results on the ground, and the first port of call is research. The creation of knowledge is one of the main functions of a university. Universities fulfil significant functions in our society. They value learning throughout life and promote the pursuit, preservation and transmission of knowledge (Nelson, 2002). Obviously, there is a close nexus in the fundamental roles between education in universities and knowledge management (Zhao 2002) because research is an integral part of university business. It is at the core of university functions and as such is central to the respect and recognition the university is accorded. As an academic institution, ZOU needs to develop a research culture based on the notion of a community of inquirers:

> *"To shift the research agenda from an analysis of what has been to the creation of what has never been."(Katz in Dzvimbo, 2001).*

Knowledge is replacing infrastructure and networks are replacing hierarchies in the society (McShane and Glinow, 2000). Therefore, the primary goal of universities is supposed to be the development of students as competent knowledge workers. There is need to inspire, motivate and manage a research community based on interactive learning environment at a distance (Neely and Tucker 2010). Research supervision helps students to achieve a scientific, professional or personal goal and to learn about research and how to conduct research against the quality standards of the system. In the view of this, supervisors should be able to contribute to the advancement of scientific knowledge through creating effective learning/research situations and entail opportunities to conduct research projects with students that enhance their own learning, research and reputation

(Narayana 2009). If Zimbabwe Open University is not involved in quality research supervision, its reputation and integrity will be put to question, especially as the university works under an environment in which conventional systems are dominating and there are sceptics who still believe learning is meeting at the same time and same place (AFT 2009)

Regional Concerns on Quality Research

The Southern African Development Community- Centre for Distance Education (SADC-CDE) identified research and publication as a critical area to be addressed in Southern Africa. This is in compliance with the SADC Protocol on Education and Training and the strategic plan of the Distance Education Association of Southern Africa (DEASA) (SADC-CDE 2006). Zimbabwe Open University as a member must be seen to be championing research. Research is critical as it informs practice. It has attained a high degree of respectability. Goodfellow and Lamy (2009) saw it as a practice that vividly exemplifies learning cultures as they emerge in distance education across disciplines. Educators, managers, politicians and others turn to researches when seeking information on which to base decisions. Thus both students and staff of the Zimbabwe Open University must be scholarly and imaginative people of the highest integrity who are willing to spend long hours painstakingly seeking the truth (Best and Kahn 1993). With a very good research base, Zimbabwe Open University will be able to offer programmes that are academically sound, relevant and competitive if it pursues quality research.

The SADEC-CDE (2006) identified the following quality issues in research

- Experienced researchers for good research output.
- Staff development Programmes in research focusing on writing research proposals, getting research grants, research processes and writing research reports.
- Guideline documents on regulatory aspects that impacts on research such as human and animal protection laws, ethics and intellectual property rights.
- Regular presentations of research findings at institutional level.
- In-depth knowledge of research processes that include identifying a research problem, review of literature, detailed methodology, data collection procedures, data analysis and interpretation and writing a research report.
- Relevant ICT Hardware and software and statistical packages.
- Adequate levels of financial support.
- Adhering to research contract.
- Monitoring and supervising research processes.
- Use of and training of research assistants
- Getting articles published (SADC-CDE 2006).
.

Institutions serious about quality will take the advice given by SADC-CDE. For instance, that there is need for regular presentations of research findings at institutional level and monitoring and supervising research processes. ZOU as a signatory to this research protocol has a mandate to implement it in letter and spirit through quality research supervisory practices.

Quality Supervisory Practices

Quality is a broad based approach used by world class companies to achieve organisational excellence, based on customer satisfaction and business excellence (Oakland 1999). The Zimbabwe Open University has already set its sight on being a world class institution (ZOU 2010). In the same manner the department of education is striving to become a centre of excellence in pursuit of this noble vision. As such this research will focus on this department as it is the flagship of the Zimbabwe Open University.

Developing research candidates as capable researchers is the focus of research supervision (Marxwell and Smyth 2010). For a university to achieve quality research supervision practices, both parties to the process should aim at completing the research project within the set time limits. Nevertheless, research students do not complete their degrees owing to a variety of reasons chief among these are personality factors, motivational factors, feelings of isolation, family demands, financial circumstances and lack of support (Chabaya, Chiome and Chabaya 2009; Burnett 1999). This section describes some of the ways in which completion rates and quality products could be improved.

The primary goal of research supervision is the achievement of quality and completion (Zhao 2002). In this case, the research supervision process will more effectively achieve the goal if knowledge management is effectively integrated into the process. Unfortunately, this may not be the case in the Zimbabwe Open University considering that Chabaya, Chiome and Chabaya (2009) found out that there was culture decay in research supervisory practices.

Collaboration at postgraduate level is key to quality. Collaboration entails a situation in which students in the same cohort work together to achieve desired results. In collaboration, research students will be running away from the traditional model which Yeatman in Burnett (1999) described as a process where the established master inducts the new apprentice into the mysteries of the craft. In a study, Conrard and Phillips (1995) found out that research output increased in the students in their sample when the students moved from isolation to collaboration.

Orientation has also been seen as a critical aspect of quality supervisory practices in research (Murphy, Bain and Conrad 2007). Orientation for both supervisors and their supervisees will enable both parties to spell out roles and expectations so that the research process will not have many obstacles.

An interesting finding on quality supervisory practices that can assist the Zimbabwe Open University is the issue of technology. Sussex (2008) argues that technological options can be taken to enhance supervisory practices when working with distance education students in research. Zimbabwe Open University has an e-learning facility. What remains is to see how it contributes to quality supervisory practices.

Maxwell and Smyth (2010) bring another dimension to research supervision. In their study, they found out that a student's reliance on her or his supervisor for guidance and motivation on work organisation and problem solving, research preparation, and communication exerts a significant effect on the relationship between style and quality of research supervision. This finding suggests that appropriate research supervision has no set prescription. Rather, the interactions, support and understandings are elements that need to be mutually agreed on.

The study understands that researches have been conducted in the Zimbabwe Open University on the role of tutorials (Majoni and Chidakwa 2005). Drop in weekend school tutorials: Can the whole story be told? (Mukeredzi and Chiome 2006). Factors affecting students' progress towards the completion of their research projects. (Chabaya, Chiome and Chabaya 2009). However the quality supervisory practices appear not to have been looked at.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

The Zimbabwe Open University's vision is to become a

"World Class Open and Distance Learning University." (Strategic plan 2010-2015)

Unfortunately studies appear to suggest that this critical aspect of university business does not measure up to expectations. This is a threat to the vision as it will remain a pipedream, and this becomes a problem.

RESEARCH QUESTION

What are quality supervisory practices in post-graduate research supervision in the department of education of the Zimbabwe Open University?

SUB QUESTIONS

1. How can research supervisors promote quality supervisory practices?
2. How do students foster quality supervisory practices in a distance education context?
3. What conditions promote quality supervisory practices in the Zimbabwe Open University?

PURPOSE OF STUDY

The purpose of the study is to expose quality supervisory practices from the experiences and perceptions of post graduate students in education in the Zimbabwe Open University an open and distance learning institution.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

This study will among other things seek to:

1. Establish the nature and extent of supervisory practices that foster quality.
2. To determine the contributions of supervisors and supervisees to quality research supervisory practices.
3. To determine conditions that are conducive to quality supervisory practices in research.

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

The Zimbabwe Open University has been mandated through an act of parliament to offer affordable, flexible university education through distance education. This mandate can be accomplished through provision of quality service and generation of new knowledge through research. Research is a requirement for all university courses throughout the world and ZOU is not an exception. This research will contribute in a small way towards the attainment of the university

vision and mission. This will also go a long way towards accomplishment of national goals of providing quality education to all deserving citizens.

METHOD
Research Design

The researchers used mostly qualitative research strategies. Qualitative research has the advantage of allowing the researchers to study a phenomenon in-depth from the lived experience of people involved in it (White 2005)). Empirically this research drew from a qualitative case study of the Zimbabwe Open University.

Population

According to Best and Khan (1993), the term 'population' refers to any group of individuals that have one or more characteristics in common that are of interest to the researcher. Population refers to the whole group from which a sample is chosen. The population for this study consisted of all the 98 Masters in Education students and 9 Doctoral students who were registered for research in the ZOU Masvingo regional campus in 2010.

Sample and Sampling Techniques

Purposive sampling was used to select 43 Masters in Education and 6 Doctoral students in education who participated in this study. The subjects who have had one semester of research were chosen during the June 2010 semester. The researchers used purposive sampling in order to select information rich cases for this study.

Instruments

Data was collected through autobiographical accounts (Thorne 2000). White argues that personal accounts are useful instruments for collecting data because they assign significance and value to a person's own story and the interpretations s/he places on his/ her experiences. In addition the personal accounts document the inner, subjective reality as constructed by the individuals. The personal accounts in this study placed value on the lecturers' own perceptions of their needs and how quality could be enhanced in research. Five masters students and three doctoral students were further interviewed. The researchers decided to adopt the multiple method approach of data collection to triangulate data in line with Seidel's (2010) assertion.

Procedure

The students were requested to produce the personal accounts of their experiences as postgraduate researchers and the justification for their positions. After all personal accounts had been collected and the interviews transcribed, the researchers individually analysed data and then compared their findings.

Data analysis

Analyzing qualitative data is essentially a simple process. It consists of three parts: noticing, collecting, and thinking about interesting things (Seidel 2010). In qualitative research, data analysis is carried from the beginning of the study to make sense of what the researchers saw, heard and

read. In this study the bulk of data analysis was carried out after all data had been collected. Because qualitative data analysis is iterative in nature (Holliday 2007), the researchers separately read through the data from personal accounts first aggregating the data and drawing out common themes. Then the researchers read through the interview transcripts and drew out themes from these and then compared them with those from accounts. There was constant review of and reflection on the original data to ensure that all data was used in the final themes was common to data from both interviews and personal accounts.

FINDINGS

The findings in this study were that quality factors in postgraduate studies came from a variety of factors. Some of these are discussed below as factors in the supervisors, factors in the students and factors in the supervision environment.

Factors in the supervisors

Honouring obligations

The students were of the opinion that both student and supervisor must honour they side of the agreement because research supervision is a bi-lateral process. A research candidate in this study gave testimony of the orgy he went through to access his supervisor who is always committed. Two months down the line, he has not met the ever committed supervisor. He had this to say in an interview:

> *Appointment dates are always disregarded. I am asked to book with the secretary but each time I go there I am told he is not in his office even if he is there. Appointment dates need to be strictly adhered to in order to avoid inconveniences otherwise I am contemplating to opt out of this mess.*

Another student added:

> *Tutors should be readily available so that students can consult them for help at any given time they should spare their precious time and help students in a polite way. We need reliable tutors who make themselves available when wanted.*

Research evidence (University of Otago, 2010; Maxwell and Smyth, 2010; Narayana, 2009 and Murphy, et. al. 2007) also suggest that the most common supervisor-related problem that research students face is having a supervisor whose extensive commitments make him/her too difficult to get hold of. This comes as a result of supervisors having too many other commitments. Students see this as the main barrier to receiving optimal supervision. It is also a major source of research student attrition.

Constructive, consistent and prompt feedback

What emerged from the study was that delayed feedback was an issue that affected quality as exemplified by the following statement:

> *Delayed feedback from the supervisors must be stopped. Timeously giving feedback to students is required of research supervisors.*

The issue of feedback was also raised in the study at the University of Otago (2010). The research found out that students see an ideal supervisor as one who provides feedback and criticism of their work that is constructive and prompt. In addition students value consistency in the feedback given. Some valued consistency across time. This is often a sign that the supervisor and student share the same focus regarding the project. In addition, where more than one supervisor is responsible for providing feedback, consistency between supervisors is important.

Results and quality oriented supervisors

Among many characteristics, the research candidates in this study cited supervisors who are effective, efficient, dynamic, reflective, results oriented and quality oriented supervisors. One research candidate gave this list of qualities of a supervisor in an environment that will produce quality research results:

> *Students should be fully guided by supervisors who are approachable, results oriented, efficient, committed, and accommodative.*

The issue of qualities of supervisors was also raised in a study at Otago (2010). In that research, they cited ten most important qualities of the ideal graduate research supervisor. Some of these are:

- Supportiveness is the quality that PhD students value most highly in supervisors. This involves supervisors being encouraging, mentoring, and aware that students' lives extend beyond the PhD.
- Availability: students value availability in their supervisors.
- Interest and enthusiastic: This is achieved by supervisors who are positive, empowering, motivational, and committed.
- Knowledge and expertise in the field surrounding the research area and the methodology to be used.
- Good communication constructive feedback, approachability and rapport.
- Experience and interest in supervision (University of Otago 2010).
- With these qualities, supervisors will be able to clashes of personality with their supervisees and can compensate for lack of experience.

Members of an active research committee who get along with each other

An interesting finding from the research students was that no supervisor knows everything that needs to be done at post graduate level. In this case, they suggested that:

> *An active research committee must be put in place to help the research student and the research supervisor in areas in which they are challenged. However, members of the committee must get along with each other otherwise we will get conflicting advice and opinions from each supervisor.*

An active research committee allows supervisors, to some degree, to be involved in the processes in which they have the most experience and expertise. This specialization may contribute to the overall quality of the supervision (Neely and Tucker 2010). The committee can also help increase the capacity of individual members to deliver on their targets. Leder in Burnett (1999) speculated that supervisors' research preferences and prejudices sometimes constrained and limited the scope, perspectives, methodology and direction of a dissertation. It appears research candidates in this study wanted to run away from this challenge.

Monitoring and Supervision task force

An interesting finding from this study is that research students expect the university to appoint a monitoring and supervision task force whose mandate is to quality assure the research process as it unfolds. This statement from an interview sums up the view:

> *An inbuilt mechanism must be put in place such as a supervision task force whose mandate is to monitor, quality assure and give advisory services to the research process.*

Factors in the students

Innovation oriented candidates

An interesting finding in this study was that postgraduate students need to be innovative research candidates. A substantiating statement is:

> *Innovation is an indispensable characteristic of a research candidate at post graduate level so that research supervision will be a knowledge-creation exercise.*

Research supervision is a complex process. How to achieve quality, relevance and productivity of research supervision warrants extensive attention and discussion. Innovation in supervisory theory and practice holds the key to transform the quality of research supervision and higher education as well, for research supervision is an integral part of higher education (Zhang in Narayana 2009).

Appreciation of scholarly tradition

A major finding concerning research candidates is that of appreciation of scholarly tradition. The respondents pointed out that some students fall by the way side because they are not receptive to other people's ideas. The following quote from an interview bear testimony;

> *Some supervisors have their own challenges. However, in most cases we are solely to blame for our failures. Some of us fail to appreciate the scholarly demands put to them by their supervisors.*

The University of Otago (2010) in a study pointed out that students find clashes of personality with their supervisors to be problematic for all concerned. Lack of appreciation of the scholarly tradition may be one source of the clashes. The research students in this study thought it affects quality supervisory practices.

Community of learners

Research students in this study were of the opinion that they can foster quality if they are grouped into a community of learners who share experiences.

> *As a community, we will live, share criticise. Upraised each other and hopefully transfer some of these into quality research output.*

Adult learners need to share their experiences. Allen and Seaman (2008) confirm this and go on to argue that this is one way that will enable the students to persist in the course. Kiewra (2010) also support this idea, arguing that learning occurs best when associations are built. Supervisors need to help students dispel crippling studying myths by joining peer groups that support them in their research efforts. Burnett had this to say regarding the Collaborative Cohort model (CCM) at an Australian university:

> *Having a rolling cohort membership provided more advanced students with the opportunity to share their insights about the dissertation process with colleagues in a collaborative environment (Burnett, 1999:8).*

Students in the Australian cohort were encouraged to support each other and received training on providing constructive feedback in a colleagueship environment. Thus students felt less isolated, gained a greater breath of knowledge and acquired critical feedback skills. Criticisms that are too harsh or accompanied by petty personal attacks on students could be potentially damaging (Chabaya, Chiome and Chabaya, 2009).

Student Sherpas (Coaches)

An interesting term was given by one doctoral student who prescribed *sherpas* who will help fellow students. She had this to say:

> Sherpas are useful at this level of the game. They accompany the research student, share his/her burden and are highly concerned with the successful completion of a quality research product.
> Another one claimed:
>
> The deep involvement of a colleague could boost morale

The students called these student coaches *sherpas* in parallel with those Nepalese professionals who guide mountain climbers and in the process share their burdens and loads.

Autonomous but responsible students

As graduate students, the respondents in this study wanted their intellectual capital to be respected and they be accorded the respect they deserve as graduate students. On their, part, they indicated that autonomy and responsibility go hand in hand. Substantiating statements are:

> *We are adults; we are graduate students as well. We need this to be acknowledged and respected. On our part, we will be responsible.*

Student control and freedom is integral to 21stCentury life-long education and learning. Apart from the supervisor's responsibilities, the research student has responsibilities to fulfill for quality supervision processes. These responsibilities include the following (Radford, 2001, Stoacley, 2007);

- Discussing with the supervisor the type of guidance they find useful ;
- Setting targets and agreeing on schedules of meetings with the supervisor;
- Taking the initiative in raising problems or difficulties they meet;
- Maintaining the progress of work in accordance with the stages agreed with the supervisor;
- Meeting agreed deadlines, and raising any training needs.

Conditions fostering quality supervisory practices
Self sufficient Library

Students in this study were of the opinion that their library must be self sufficient some supporting statements are:

- *Postgraduate students must not labour to access appropriate information for use in their research work. There is need to purchase more resources and access to previous researches must be easy.*
- *We need to access all our library requirements at one place because we are being robbed of our hard won cash by other libraries.*
- *We are being treated as squatters when we visit other libraries. The university must open a centrally located well stocked library.*

The need for an all-inclusive library is a real issue at the Masvingo regional campus, considering that Chabaya, Chiome and Chabaya (2009) also found out that it is problematic for students who lack access to those who maintain a current knowledge of the literature. It is important at post graduate level to access current literature.

Ancillary services availability
Ancillary services were cited by students in this study as important issues of quality in postgraduate research. Some supporting statements are:
Typing services and photocopying should be available at our regional centre so that all students could freely access them.

Conducive supervision meeting place
As a distance learning institution, the students thought the environment for supervision could affect

the quality of their researches.

> *A convenient place of supervision must be agreed on. If the worst comes to the worst, allow us even to visit supervisors at home otherwise offices specifically for that purpose must be made available.*

Ample time to work on a quality product

Time was cited as an important issue of quality. Substantiating statements for this theme are:

> *The student must be given ample time to work on a quality product.*
> *As a result, students must not be rushed.*
> *Increase number of conduct hours.*

Student concerns with time constraints appear understandable. However, the issue of increasing contact hours is questionable here in this age of networked intelligence (Marxwell and Smyth 2010). To add to this, Goodfellow and Lammy (2009) note such factors as the growth of multiculturalism and the widening participation policies in national systems of higher education, which face the constraints of low IT literacy and lack of familiarity with online systems and pedagogies, the rapid expansion of transnational e-learning, and the spread of new media communication practices (i.e., Internet community, socializing, and informal learning practices), which are becoming increasingly influential for the learning process.

Qualified researchers and a quality product

It was interesting to note that the respondents in this study were of the opinion that quality must manifest itself in the final product to be produced from the supervision process. They expected to see a quality document and a qualified researcher through statements such as:

> *The end product must not be questionable. The document produced must be original. Well presented document with no errors.*

> *It is important that at the end of it all, a flawless product and a knowledgeable, capable and confident researcher emerges from the supervisory process.*

The findings appear to support Narayana's (2009) assertions that the outputs of the research supervision from knowledge-creation, transfer and embedding processes are qualified researchers who successfully complete their research degrees by producing and presenting research outcomes with potential value to our knowledge-based society.

Reacting to student challenges on time

The other theme that emerged from the research was the role of the coordinator of the postgraduate programme. Examples of statements touching the coordination process were that:

The coordinator needs to react to students' challenges on time.

Coordinator not to allow disputes to escalate but must act there and there.' She/he must be easily reachable and ease to communicate with.

Where assistance is needed by a researcher, the coordinator must come in to help.'

The tendency by coordinators to turn away students does not augur well for quality in postgraduate research.'

Orientation to research

Orientation to research was seen as important, necessary and relevant for quality supervision. Some supporting statements are:

> Orientation facilitates transition from examination based courses to research and guides me on the early part of my journey. It produces a set of clear, flexible guidelines for fledgling researchers preparing a dissertation and helps to take away nervousness.
> There is need to welcome postgraduate students to the research fraternity, connect them to other researchers and help them cross the bridge.

Orientation has been acknowledged as a defining moment. Shupp (2009) says this is time in which basic habits are formed that will eventually influence student success. More importantly, these orientations introduce research candidates to the individuals and resources they will need when they meet challenges along the way.

Fostering knowledge sharing and utilisation

It was the contention of the respondents in this study that the process of research supervision must foster knowledge sharing and utilization. One student put it this way:

> Knowledge management must be fully integrated in the research supervision process. There is close connection between research, knowledge management, knowledge generation and knowledge utilization.

The process of knowledge management (KM) through knowledge construction, dissemination, use and embodiment is gaining momentum in the knowledge industries and our society (Zhao 2002). Quality research supervision processes should then help transform research students into knowledge workers and managers (Beijerse, 2000). Universities undertake significant level of knowledge-management activities associated with the creation and maintenance of knowledge repositories, improving knowledge access, enhancing knowledge environment and valuing knowledge (Rowley in Narayana 2009)). The Zimbabwe Open University then has the responsibility to address knowledge management issues through quality research supervision practices by providing intellectual leadership and development to students.

Adhering to ethics

Quality research supervision is measured according to the following aspects: availability of the supervisor, research interest, comment and feedback, research development, relationship and motivation (Amzat, Yusuf and Kayode 2010). In this research, they added the dimension of ethics. To this end, they had this to say:

> *Ethical considerations are important so that the research is credible and trustworthy. Parties to the research process need to adhere to research ethics.*

Re-skilling workshops

The ideas of Murphy, Bain and Conrad (2007) that research higher degree students need to be oriented so that they are motivated from the beginning were alluded to in this research.

- Workshops will do for us as they give us knowledge on quality practices in research. The institution should organise research symposiums for both supervisors and research students so that they speak the same language.
- Role clarification is paramount at these workshops. They will also clarify conflicting views from supervisors and students.

Workshops expose the students to ways of defining the topic, designing the project, gathering materials. Writing and working through drafts and disseminating their work (Burnett 1999). Supervisors will also be exposed to mentoring roles which has been described by Jacobi in Burnett 1999 as including support and encouragement, guidance, facilitating access to resources and opportunities, providing information, protection and sponsorship, stimulating the acquisition of knowledge and serving as a role model.

Availability of e-learning resources

E-learning resources were seen as keys to quality supervisory practices. In this context, ZOU appear to be an affiliate of various e-libraries. A library circular (ZOU 2010) acknowledges that students in the university can access library resources from institutions in which it is an affiliate some of these are the World Bank library, EBSCO, British Library inside Wed, the Oxford University Press etc. However, it was further interesting to find out that Sussex's (2008) suggestion that universities could use ***technological options in supervising research*** was short down. The majority of those interviewed confessed that they are terribly short of skills to use in this regard while others had indicated in their personal accounts that their access to technology is grossly impaired. In this regard, the respondents further suggested that:

> *Keeping abreast of technological developments is a sure way of fostering quality supervisory practices in research supervision.*

On line learning challenges are not confined to Zimbabwe Open University. A Ghanaian study (Ansuka 2008) found out that the students did not respond favourably to online constructivist teaching approaches such as asynchronous discussions and project based learning activities. In ZOU the ZOUONLINE (www.zouonline.ac.zw/zouonline) is a case in point, the E-learning facility could go a long way towards alleviating problems of communication between a distant supervisor and a distant student.

Conclusion:

The findings in this study appear to point to a ***triad of quality supervisory practices.*** This triad is made up of supervisors, research candidates and conditions that nurture quality supervisory practices. This study argues that supervisors need to honour obligations, provide constructive consistent and prompt feedback to research students. They need to be members of an active research committee that helps to increase the capacity of individual members to deliver on their target. Quality supervisory practices at a distance demand students who are responsible, innovative and appreciate the scholarly tradition. These need to be part of a community of learners who are autonomous but responsible research students who get help from student sherpas. The conditions in the university that nurture quality supervisory practices include, a self sufficient library, ample time to work on a product that will result in the production of qualified researchers who can manufacture knew knowledge and come out with a quality dissertation document. The institution has to react to student challenges on time, adhere to ethical practices, avail e-learning resources and hold research symposiums and foster knowledge sharing and utilisation practices in order to ensure quality research practices

Recommendations:

In the light of the above conclusions, it is recommended that:

- The Zimbabwe Open University need to institute the Collaborative Cohort Model so that research students have exposure to a wide range of research processes to bring about quality in research practices.
- The university should hold workshops, seminars and symposiums on quality research processes with both supervisors and supervisees. This will go a long way towards improving quality research practices.
- Since quality research supervisory practices are in the embryonic stages, all stakeholders need to be involved in developing the standards that bring about quality research practices in the Zimbabwe Open University.
- A systems approach to research supervision would help empower both the supervisors and supervisees where all systems that include supervisors, library, supervisees, research directorate and research committees are employing quality supervisory practices.
- The department of quality assurance should monitor, supervise and quality assure research processes in order to raise standards in research practices.
- The university should create a research assistance centre close to the students that is tasked with research support for both supervisors and supervisees.

REFERENCES

AFT (2009) Distance Education: Guidelines for Good practice. Washington DC. AFT Higher Education Department

Allen, E., & Seaman, J. (2008). *Staying the course*. Babson Survey Research Group: The Sloan Consortium.

Amzat, I. H.; Yusuf, M. & Kayode, K. B. (2010) *Quality research supervision in some Malaysian public universities: Supervisees expectations and challenges.* Retrieved from http://ssrn.com/abstract=1668172 on 03 September 2010

Ansuka, S. (2008). On Line learning in Higher Education in Sub-Saharan Africa: Ghanaian university Students' experiences and perceptions. *The International Review of Research in Open and Distance Learning*. 9 (3) 1-20.

Berjerse, R. P. U., 2000, 'Knowledge management in small and medium-sized companies: Knowledge management for entrepreneurs', *Journal of Knowledge Management*. 4 (2), pp162-179. Best, W. J. and Kahn J. V. (1993) Research in Education. 7th ed. Boston: Allyn and Bacon.

Blaxter, L. Hughes, C and Tight, M. (1996) How to Research. Buckingham; Open University Press. Borg, W. R. and Gall, M. (1983) Educational Research 6th ed. London: Longman.

Burnett, P. C. (1999) 'The supervision of doctoral dissertations using a collaborative cohort model', *Counsellor Education and Supervision*, 39 (1), pp46-51.

Chabaya, O., Chiome, C. & Chabaya R. A. (2009) Students' failure to submit research projects on time: a case study from Masvingo Regional Centre at Zimbabwe Open University. *Open Learning: The Journal of Open and Distance Learning 24 (3) 211-221.*

Chiome, C. and Mukeredzi T. G. (2006) Factors Contributing to Low Student Turnout For Tutorials *(Forthcoming)*

Dzvimbo, K. P. (2001) "Change is here to stay." ZOUNEWS, 3 (1) 4-6 Harare: ZOU.

Goodfellow, R. and Lamy, M. (2009). *Learning Cultures in Online Education*. New York: Continuum Studies in Education.

HMIE (2009) *Leadership for Learning: The challenges of leading in a time of change.* HMIE: Livingston.

Holliday, A. R. (2007). Doing and Writing Qualitative Research, 2nd Edition. London: Sage Publications

Jung, I. And Latchem, C. (2007) Assuring quality in Asian open and distance learning. *Open Learning* 22(3) 235-250.

Kiewra, K. (2010) *Teaching how to learn: The teacher's guide to student learnin*g. Penn State: Corwyn Press.

McShane, L. S. & Von Glinow, A. M., 2000, *Organizational behaviour*, (Sydney, Irwin McGraw- Hill).

Majoni C and Chidakwa C (2005) "Students' Views on the Role of Tutorials in Teaching and Learning at the Zimbabwe Open University" in *International Journal of Open and Distance Learning Volume 2 2005.*

Maxwell, T. W. And Smyth, R. (2010). Research Supervision: The research Management Matrix. *Higher Education*. 59 (4) 407-422.

MoE, (2010). *A Handbook for school Development committees.* Harare: Ministry of Education.

Murphy, N.; Bain, J. D. and Conrad, L. (2007). Orientations to research higher degree supervision. *Higher Education* 53(2). 209-234.

Nagel, D. (2009, October 28). Most college students to take classes online by 2014. *Campus Technology Online.* Retrieved from http://campustechnology.com. On 18 November 2009.

Narayana, R. K. V. S. S. (2009) Ph. D. Research Supervision: Some thoughts. A knoll.

Neely, W. P. and Tucker, J. P. (2010) Unbundling faculty roles in an on line distance education programmes. *International Review of Research in Open and Distance Learning.* 11(2) 1-13.

Nelson, B., 2002, *Higher education at the crossroad: An overview paper.* (Canberra, DEST)

Otago (2010) *Perspectives on quality supervision.* Otago: University of Otago (New Zealand).

Radford, A. (2001) *Research Supervision.* Radford: Andrew.

SADC-CDE (2006) Research and Capacity Building Workshop 2006. ASADC-CDE Publication.

Seidel, J. V. (2010) Qualitative data analysis. Retrieved from www.qualisresearch.com on 12 August 2010.

Shupp, M. R. (2010) *Rethinking new student orientation.* Retrieved from http://www.newfoundations.com/PolHeader.html on 12 September 2010.

Stoacley, D. (2007) Good practice: Good supervision. Queens University, Centre for Teaching and Learning. Retrieved on March 15 2007, from http://supervisionof research13.htm

Sussex, R. (2008) Technological options in supervising remote research students. *Higher Education.* 55(1) 121-137.

Thorne S (2000). "Data analysis in Qualitative research" in Evidence-Based Nursing 2000; *3*:68-70

White, C. J. (2005) Research: A Practical Guide. Pretoria; Ithuthuko Investments.

Zhao, F (2002) *Transforming Quality in Research Supervision: A Knowledge Management Approach.* Paper to be presented at the 7th Quality in Higher Education International Seminar, *Transforming Quality*, RMIT, Melbourne, October 2002

Zindi, F. (Prof) (2006) "Opinion" Sunday Mail 23-29 July 2006 Harare: Zimpapers.

Zvobgo, R. (1985) Transforming Education: The Zimbabwean Experience. Harare; College Press.

ZOU (2010) Strategic Plan 2010-2015. Harare ZOU.