A call for Paradigm Shift in Postgraduate Research Methodology Training

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Abstract

This article reflects on the experiences of an emerging researcher who attended two research capacity development courses. It details the developmental and eclectic approach used to enhance research methodology and proposal development workshops. The article also attempts to critique the predominant approaches to training postgraduate students as future researchers. The paper draws on two personal scenarios, one largely immersed in an African context (the OSSREA Research Methodology Training) and another from a European perspective (the DAAD-DIES ProGrant Workshops). According to the author's observations, both the OSSREA and DAAD-DIES workshops addressed the multidisciplinary needs of participants and equipped them with much-needed research skills. Given that these programmes deal with emerging researchers from diverse and multidisciplinary backgrounds, the diversity and culture of the course facilitators are remarkable. The article narrows the discussion by recognising the relevance of training received outside of the terrain of formal university training. Finally, the article makes recommendations for a paradigm shift in research methodology training.

Keywords: Research methodology training, multidisciplinary approach, postgraduate students, emerging researchers.

1. Introduction

Jansen pointed to "mediocrity" in a candid reflection on the state of research at South African universities (Jansen, 2002). According to him, even among previously disadvantaged institutions, there has been a failure to develop a research culture "with strong African traditions that are geared towards addressing third-world developmental conditions on our doorsteps" (Jansen, 2002). Jansen subsequently bemoans the fact that the mediocrity of the public school system has permeated institutions of higher learning (Jansen, 2018). In support of this fact, Darling-Hammond, Flook, Cook-Harvey, Barron and Osher (2020) note that research training is typically disconnected from real-world, problem-solving practice.

A number of South African universities' visions and missions incorporate concepts such as "quality education," "excellence," "local relevance," and "global competitiveness." In many instances, this refers to scholarship, professionalism, and community development, all with the aim of improving the quality of life in the community that the university serves. The term "scholarship" refers to the high-quality research that a university strives to produce. Nonetheless, grave inadequacies (see, for example, Shai, 2019; Shai, 2020a; Shai, 2020b) stand in the path of academics

seeking to "reclaim their birthright in African scholarship" (see Shai, 2020c). One of the shortcomings, I submit, is the very low output of "high-flyers" (Ismail Rasdi & Wahat, 2005). For instance, producing postgraduates who will be nurtured to become academics and researchers. Apart from the recently established Department of Higher Education and Training's New Generation of Academics Programme (nGAP), there has been little effort "to grow our own timber," to borrow an old phrase from Kaunda and Low (1998). Manyaka (2020) attributes this failure to "academic bullying," among other things. He retorts, "Most young people in academia will ultimately lose interest because many of them are bullied by the very senior academics who are supposed to nurture their talents and develop them into future professors. The good intentions of the New Generation of Academics Programme will not bear fruits if academic bullies are not isolated."

Several other factors account for the failure of research capacity building initiatives. Among issues are ineptitude and inadequacy in research methodology instruction (Kärner, 2009), as well as deficient postgraduate supervision (Laleka & Rasheed, 2018). This article discusses these constraints and offers tentative solutions. It is based on a combination of perspectives collected from postgraduate students and lecturers involved in the teaching of research methodology, as well as reflection drawn from my personal experience of attending a research methodology course outside of a formal university context. The latter prompted this call for a "paradigm shift" in postgraduate research methodology training.

2. Research methodology instruction and supervision at a South African Comprehensive University

Anecdotal evidence suggests that current research methodology instruction and postgraduate supervision at the South African university mentioned in this article are completely inadequate for a variety of reasons. In the case of postgraduate supervision, both sides (postgraduate students and supervisors) attempt to place responsibility on the other. From the supervisors' perspective, the low intake and output of postgraduate students can be attributed mostly to student-related factors such as a lack of commitment and motivation, language difficulties, and a general state of under-preparedness. Because postgraduate research is significantly more independent than undergraduate research, it makes sense to expect students to be adequately prepared to assume responsibility for their own success. Postgraduate work does, in fact, necessitate self-discipline, commitment, and responsibility. Therefore, it appears reasonable to attribute (at least partially) the low postgraduate output to the postgraduate students themselves.

Students, on their part, believe that enrolling in postgraduate study should be viewed as, if not adequate proof of commitment, then as a willingness to put in extra effort for higher level work. Supervisors can be faulted for a variety of reasons, including: poor guidance during the proposal writing process (and beyond), inadequate supervisory skills and (research) experience, a lack of commitment, miscommunication or a lack of communication, to mention a few. Students are merely returning the compliment to supervisors, as neutral observers may notice. An inquiry into postgraduate students'

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perceptions of research support and supervision at the University of South Africa's Faculty of Education yielded similar results (Lessing & Schulze, 2002). The role of the supervisor, in particular, was found to be crucial to the research development process. In this instance, the student's understudy cited "encouragement and support they received, as well as the endorsement of independence and creativity" as significant factors in their success (Lessing & Schulze, 2002:146). In the same vein, the committees responsible for approving research proposals have also come under fire for the ineffectiveness and slowness of their procedures. So much for research supervision and research proposal procedure.

Students also bemoan current research methodology instruction, which is minimal, because it is examination-driven, its content being limited to notions of the kinds to be produced on an examination paper; too theoretical, i.e., not enough skill-based, practical and utilisable in real research projects; and at times bewildering. On the latter, a student sums it aptly: "Every time I attend a workshop/ course with a different facilitator, I always feel like we are talking about something different from what I know … they always differ in ideas about the same issues in research methodology."

Perhaps it is worth noting that research methodology instruction has primarily been Eurocentric in nature, failing to take into account the African society in which the research is being conducted. While this may not appear to be a significant issue at first glance, failure to root research methodology to the nature of the society in which issues are researched and solutions proposed is as substantial an impediment to successful capacity building as most of the other causes briefly mentioned. It is also an indictment of the 'relevance' that is always reflected in the vision and mission statements of most universities.

As noted earlier, one of the impetuses for this article was personal experience. In the next section, I will give reflections on research methodology instruction based on my experience as a postgraduate student a few years ago. Thereafter, I will describe my experiences at two research methodology training workshops, draw implications, and offer some suggestions for enhancing research methodology training at universities that are developing their research culture.

3. Research methodology in postgraduate studies

My postgraduate studies included compulsory modules/ courses or units within courses on research methodology as a preparation for the dissertation, grant proposal writing, and research beyond the degree requirements. Reflecting on the programme, I would single out two main features, which I criticise in this article, as highlights of the research methodology instruction received. These are: strictly discipline-based nature (because it involved only teaching staff in my area of specialisation and related studies) and its bias toward one paradigm i.e. quantitative or qualitative, according to the instructor. Being restricted to research in the area of study, the research methodology instruction denied me and other fellow student's insights into the broad view of social science research methodology in which my primary field is deeply rooted. The failure of most instructors to deal with both quantitative and qualitative paradigms in their respective courses gave all of us the distorted view that

these two strands were mutually exclusive.

The insufficient link between the two main research paradigms prevails today, as was revealed by several postgraduate students interviewed for this article. One direct implication of the forced bias is the lack of in-depth knowledge to engage in real-situation research beyond the programme or the degree requirements. This is my own experience following the completion of my degree programme and transitioning into active life as a researcher and research capacity development practitioner. The frustrations I encountered compelled me to look for other alternatives to gain a much-needed research methodology grounding. Hence, when opportunities to attend outside formal university training programmes in research methodology arose, I seized them with both hands.

First, when an opportunity to attend a training programme in research methodology was offered by the Organisation for Social Science Research in Eastern and Southern Africa (OSSREA), I jumped at it. Second, when another chance to attend a six-week Grant Proposal Writing workshop offered by the DAAD: German Academic Exchange Service, I also could not ignore it. In the next subsection, I relate these experiences, which buttressed my resolve to call for a paradigm shift.

4. An African experience: The OSSREA research methodology workshop

OSSREA is a non-governmental and non-profit research network with its headquarters in Ethiopia. Its constituency is on membership drawn from social sciences in Eastern and Southern Africa. It recognises the need for upgrading research skills to build the teaching and research capacity of the institutions in eastern and southern African countries where it has its membership. The OSSREA Research Methodology Institute offers training in social science research methodology (OSSREA, 2020). The OSSREA training focuses on emerging thinking in social sciences research, ethical issues in social science research, mainstreaming gender and environmental issues, developing research proposals, choosing study approaches and designs, planning and managing social sciences research and writing a research report (OSSREA, 2020).

The broad role of OSSREA is reflected in its training programme, which aims to improve its members' research skills in order to strengthen the teaching and research capacity of institutions of higher learning and research in the eastern and southern African region. To meet its role, it pursues the following specific objectives (OSSREA, 2020):

- To familiarise researchers with skills specific to particular methodologies. For example, qualitative and quantitative approaches;
- To equip them with analytical skills needed to evaluate policies, analyse and assess research, orientations, strategies and diffusion, evaluate programmes and projects;
- To provide them with computer skills required by today's research processes; and
- To expose them to training in methods relevant to issues such as environment and development, and gender sensitive research.
- The next subsection details my European experience in a similar or related project.

• The European experience: The DAAD-DIES Grant proposal writing workshop
The DAAD-DIES Proposal Writing for Research Grants (ProGRANT) courses are practical professional development courses for young academics in Africa, Latin America, the Middle East, and Southeast Asia. The aim is to teach and train the skills necessary for making a successful application for third-party funding. The courses are run by the ProGRANT coordination office at the University of Cologne (DAAD, 2020).

Starting in 2013, DIES has been cooperating with the University of Cologne to offer ProGRANT Proposal Writing for Research Grants (DAAD, 2020). The objective is to enable researchers and younger PhD holders (up to 40 years of age) from countries in the Global South (mainly Latin America, Africa, the Middle East and Southeast Asia) to develop proposal writing skills according to international standards and to design, write and budget a promising proposal for national and international research funding. The courses are organised and conducted by the International Office of the University of Cologne in close cooperation with ProWiss (Consulting Services for Researchers) and partner institutions in the regions (DAAD, 2020).

I was part of a group of 33 postdoctoral participants who gathered in Cape Town for the ProGRANT course. The ambiance created by the diversity of the participants, who came from numerous southern African countries, including Botswana, Lesotho, Malawi, Namibia, South Africa, Zambia, and Zimbabwe, was a remarkable experience. Participants came from a wide range of specialisations, including agriculture, applied linguistics, economics, education, geology, nursing, political science, psychology, sociology, and theology. Both course facilitators were of German origin and had extensive experience delivering courses to multinational groups from East Africa, South East Asia, Central Asia, and the Middle East.

5. Discussion

As the preceding accounts of the two independent training programmes indicate, there are parallel benefits to be derived from these experiences. For example, based on the small list of specific objectives outlined in the OSSREA experience, one might infer that the programme's training and instruction were skills-based, developmental, and hands-on. It provided participants with an understanding of research methods while also providing the skills needed to carry out research projects.

Similarly, the ProGRANT course was practical, hands-on, and depended heavily on contributions from a diverse multidisciplinary group. It adopted an eclectic approach to developing skills in proposal writing, research project budgeting, and research project management.

Another strength of both groups is the diversity of the trainees' backgrounds, including their cultures and beliefs, nationalities, professions, and disciplines. The OSSREA trainees came from 10 African countries and disciplines as diverse as agriculture, economics, education, linguistics, philosophy, political science, psychology, and sociology. The nature of the tasks required participants to comprehend and accommodate each other's points of view. This tolerance or understanding was critical and had a positive impact on the success of approaching research problems.

The approaches used in the delivery of both training programmes had the following advantages: first, they provided new and novel ways of designing and executing research projects. Second, they provided a comprehensive approach that accommodated all types of learning activities (such as group/team work, individual work, project work, and so on). According to Kemp and Nurius (2015), this is a significant benefit of using developmental and eclectic approaches to training emerging researchers. The importance of an eclectic approach in education is emphasised by Hayashi, Bourdeau, and Mizoguchi (2006) who acclaim the fact that it is broad and inclusive nature contributes to keeping the learner interested in the subject throughout the learning process. Hence, according to Paramboor (2018), these approaches also saved the participants from monotony. In other words, the experience from these courses stimulated creative environments and allowed developing confidence in emerging researchers.

The experience not only helped participants improve the ability to look at problems from a multidisciplinary perspective, but it also helped them grasp the nature and distinctiveness of research undertaken in African society, as well as the various ways to apply appropriate methods. Consequently, it fostered an Afrocentric culture among individuals engaged in research. This aspect of the training was especially crucial because research methodology taught in our universities often overlooks issues of relevance to local settings. It also contributes to researchers' ignorance of the critical role of those who act or are perceived to act as "gatekeepers" in relevant societies in data collection. It downplays issues of democracy and communal perspectives (a distinctively African feature) in decision making, as well as specific ways of defining certain concepts (for instance, poverty) that differ from those found in textbooks. One of the implications of this irrelevance and slavish reliance on textbooks is that most research findings are inapplicable.

Finally, because of the diversity of their disciplines, backgrounds, and experience in research and training, the facilitators in both programmes were well qualified to advise on appropriate methodology for research projects of different kinds, which typically required a multidisciplinary approach. The multifaceted expertise also provided each of the training programmes a distinct character. This stands in stark contrast to the narrowness of expertise and approaches that continue to characterise research methodology instruction across our higher education system. In light of the preceding discussion, I now propose some suggestions for a "paradigm shift" in research methodology instruction.

6. The way forward: a quest for paradigm shift

Firstly, research methodology instruction must consider the nature of society in which the researchers trained are expected to conduct their investigations (Attia & Edge, 2017). In other words, it must be rooted in the African culture (Chilisa, 2017). It means that research students should be taught to know and respect certain traditional and cultural values that society has on some issues. They must be taught why there is a need to value the role of traditional bureaucratic structures in society. For example, unlike in other societies, in most African communities researchers have to know

who the gatekeepers are for any successful research project to be conducted. Most of these considerations being uniquely African, research methodology instruction must incorporate and emphasise these local approaches and support the noble decolonisation of the South African education movement. According to Khupe and Keane (2017), this will contribute towards the achievement of decolonisation, and help ensure that new knowledge is relevant and contextual.

Secondly, research methodology instruction must also adopt a "team approach" to create a dynamic research culture (McKenzie, Hains-Wesson, Bangay, & Bowtell, 2020). In this way, research/postgraduate students will benefit from varied and multi-disciplinary expertise rather than being limited in their outlook by a narrow perspective within their discipline. A formula should be developed to allow instructors from various disciplines who are interested in facilitating research methodology instruction to collaborate on a single postgraduate programme of instruction or common module (at Honours, Masters or even doctoral levels).

According to Boudersa (2018), team approach instruction will benefit students who are not prepared or do not have the necessary skills to conduct research.

Thirdly, where/when it is possible, the target audience, besides being drawn from different disciplines, for at least part of their postgraduate research instruction, should reflect a diversity of cultures, beliefs and nationalities (Lee, Quartiroli, Baumann, Harris, Watson, & Schinke, 2020). Our universities should cultivate a regional perspective by attracting research and postgraduate students from other SADC countries and coach them to approve social and other problems to be investigated from an African or regional perspective. Interaction among students from a regional catchment will strengthen research capacity. Several advantages of adopting a multidisciplinary approach to research methodology training have been identified:

- It contributes to improved communication ability. For example, if a participant is the only one from, say Economics in a group, she will be encouraged to share knowledge with other candidates from a subject-specific perspective.
- It can help participants be acquainted with the collaborative process, especially because the process of multidisciplinary collaboration is hard to learn without real experience, so the advantage of having such collaboration in research methodology education is to become acquainted with the complex process in real-life situations often brought about when joining the industry.
- It helps in fostering collaboration skills, especially with partners of different backgrounds. The lack of shared common language and knowledge attained from compartmentalised fields of study requires better collaboration skills. Not only by being friendly and flexible but also by sharing ideas in a mild-mannered way.
- It is positively beneficial for future career development – being part of a multidisciplinary group gives students a sense of reality and prepares them for industry practice where every project is implemented for real. At the same time, the process gives them the self-confidence to cope with their future career.
- Different fields of study complement each other – participants in a multidisciplinary research methodology group would learn from others with different backgrounds. In industry, it is usual to work in heterogeneous groups.

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So, this experience allows participants to observe different ways in which peers approach research problems and therefore would learn how to work as a team by complementing each other.

- Improve sense of achievement and professional abilities. In reality, teaching research methodology from a multidisciplinary perspective may take enormous time and effort. However, students exposed to this type of approach can complete with more confidence in their ability to understand problems from multiple perspectives. This is often complemented by a very strong sense of achievement.

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