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Collaborative Autoethnography Qualitative Study on Essential Tips for Successful Graduate Dissertation Writing: Insights from Academicians in Higher Education

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ABSTRACT

The graduate dissertation is a crucial milestone in academic studies, serving as a definitive demonstration of a student's research maturity. However, recent research reveals that many graduate students face significant challenges during the writing process. Drawing from the personal experiences of two supervisors from Tanzania and the Philippines, each with years of experience in higher education, this study provides essential, experience-driven tips to help post-graduate students navigate this complex endeavor. The study synthesizes systematic observations of recurring challenges, misconceptions, and struggles that students encounter across diverse academic disciplines. It offers practical guidance on key aspects, including familiarization with institutional guidelines, strategic topic selection, effective proposal writing, coherent data presentation, analysis, discussion of findings, and proper citation and referencing. By following the tips outlined in this study, post-graduate students can enhance their chances of producing high-quality work that meets institutional standards and showcases their academic abilities, ultimately improving their success during the dissertation writing process. This research addresses a critical gap in existing literature and suggests that future studies should explore the applicability of these strategies in various institutional contexts.

INTRODUCTION

The dissertation represents a critical milestone in post-graduate studies, serving as the definitive demonstration of a student's academic maturity and research capabilities. While dissertation writing is a mandatory requirement after coursework completion, it consistently emerges as the most challenging phase of post-graduate studies (Lestari, 2020; Terrell, 2022; Lobo, 2023; Schell, 2024). Contemporary research indicates an alarming trend, which is a significant proportion of post-graduate students encountering substantial difficulties during this phase, resulting in delayed completion, sub-optimal performance, or program abandonment (Amutabi, 2023; Akparep et al., 2019; Hoon et al., 2019; Chidi & Sylvia, 2020; Musa & Ibrahim, 2017). Although existing literature extensively documents various contributing factors ranging from student preparedness and supervisor guidance

to institutional support mechanisms (Akparep et al., 2017; Amutabi, 2023; Cekiso et al., 2019; Tlali et al., 2022; Chikte & Chabilall, 2016; Komba & Chiwamba, 2017; Mkhai, 2023), there remains a conspicuous absence of practical, experience-based guidance for students navigating this crucial academic endeavor.

The motivation for carrying out this imperative research stems from extensive firsthand experience as a senior lecturer and dissertation supervisor in Higher Learning Institutions (HLIs). Through supervising more than 70 post-graduate students across diverse academic disciplines, I have systematically observed recurring challenges, persistent misconceptions, and common struggles that characterize the post-graduate dissertation writing process. Besides, I have had the opportunity to work as an external examiner in respect of several post-graduate dissertations in other

universities, as well as being an internal reviewer for a number of post-graduate dissertations, as well as chairing quite a good number of viva voce examinations at my own university.

While theoretical frameworks examining dissertation writing challenges abound in academic literature (Komba & Chiwamba, 2017; Kostere & Kostere, 2021; Tlali et al., 2022; Yende, 2021), there is a notable paucity of research offering practical, experience-driven guidance derived from successful supervision cases. The existing studies conducted in Tanzania, such as those by Amani et al. (2024), Elia and Ndenje-Sichalwe (2024), Kaponga (2024), Komba (2016), and Mkhai (2023), have focused on broader challenges facing postgraduate students and supervisory practices but have not specifically addressed the personal experiences of supervisors. This study aims to address this critical gap by providing personal experience tips, specifically aimed at helping students navigate common pitfalls and optimize their dissertation writing process.

The primary research question guiding this study is: “What practical strategies, derived from supervisory experience, can enhance post-graduate students' effectiveness in dissertation writing and improve completion rates?” This article is structured to systematically address key aspects of dissertation writing, drawing from supervisors' experiences and established postgraduate guidelines. Starting with the methodology, followed by data presentation and discussion of findings. The discussion encompasses crucial elements, including proper familiarization with institutional guidelines, strategic topic selection, effective proposal writing, comprehensive literature review methodology, rigorous data presentation and analysis, coherent discussion of findings, formulation of meaningful conclusions, and proper citation and referencing practices. The next section presents the methodology of this study.

The purpose of this study is threefold: (1) to identify and present practical strategies, derived from extensive supervisory experience, that can enhance postgraduate students' effectiveness in dissertation writing and improve completion rates; (2) to provide structured, experience-based guidance on key stages of the dissertation process, including familiarization with institutional guidelines, strategic topic selection, effective

proposal writing, comprehensive literature review methodology, rigorous data presentation and analysis, coherent discussion of findings, formulation of meaningful conclusions, and proper citation and referencing practices; (3) to bridge the gap between theoretical frameworks on dissertation writing and the lived, practice-driven insights of supervisors, thereby offering actionable recommendations that support both academic quality and timely completion.

METHODS

This study adopts a qualitative narrative approach (McLeod, 2024) to present practical guidance for successful graduate dissertation writing. The insights are drawn from the researchers' extensive experience supervising graduate research across diverse disciplines in higher education. Over the years, this supervisory role has revealed recurring challenges faced by students, making these lived experiences a valuable source of qualitative data.

Narrative inquiry, particularly when grounded in personal and professional experience, is a well-established method in qualitative research (O'Kane & Pamphilon, 2015). It allows the researcher to reflect critically and constructively on real-world academic practices. For example, Agathokleous (2021) effectively utilized personal reflections to support young researchers in scientific writing, while Gula and Nuñez (2022) employed collaborative autoethnography to share their own experience in the research process.

Building on these precedents, the current study offers a comprehensive set of tips that span the entire dissertation process, from topic selection and proposal development to data collection, analysis, presentation, discussion, and the formulation of conclusions, recommendations, and appendices. Ethical considerations have been carefully observed throughout the writing process, with all sources properly acknowledged to maintain academic integrity.

The trustworthiness of this study stems from the researchers' extensive experience as a dissertation supervisor/advisor over the past years. The insights and tips provided are based on direct observations and interactions with numerous graduate students, allowing for the identification of recurring challenges and effective strategies.

Moreover, the narrative approach ensures that the recommendations are grounded in real-world experiences rather than hypothetical situations. By leveraging a well-established body of supervisory knowledge, this study offers valuable and reliable guidance to master's students.

The next section presents the themes identified in the study. Additionally, personal experiences enrich research articles by offering unique insights and deepening the understanding of complex conditions, such as how Cushing's syndrome complicates pregnancy, diagnosis, and management strategies.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Before Writing Your Dissertation

Familiarization with graduate guidelines

Mastery of institutional graduate guidelines represents a fundamental prerequisite for successful dissertation completion. Every higher learning institution maintains specific guidelines for graduate students and a thorough comprehension of these requirements is essential from the outset of the research journey (Hapinat, 2022). Through supervisory experience, it is evident that students who thoroughly understand these guidelines early in their research process encounter fewer revisions and progress more efficiently.

Critical components of the postgraduate guidelines that students must familiarize themselves with include the academic integrity prerequisite, which the students must comprehend what constitutes plagiarism and academic dishonesty of which should go hand in hand with awareness of institutional plagiarism detection tools and processes, as well as comprehension of disciplinary actions for academic delinquency.

Besides, knowledge of proper citation and attribution practices, such as Structural Requirements, is another vital component to be considered. The student should be aware of the prescribed proposal format and components, mandatory dissertation sections and their organization, minimum and maximum page limit for both proposal and dissertation, as well as required formatting standards (margins, spacing, font type, and size). Similarly, the candidate should be aware of technical requirements such as referencing styles, for instance the American Psychological Association (APA)-7th Edition,

Chicago Referencing Style, Modern Language Association (MLA) and so forth and their specific applications, time and the number of references required including citation formats of different sources, to be precise the student should understand how to cite journal articles which is different from citing a book or chapter in a book and a like. The candidate must also be aware of the number and type of publications expected before completion of graduate degrees.

Furthermore, another important tip that a student will benefit from graduate guidelines is procedural requirements, which include submission protocols and deadlines, review and defense procedures, required forms, documentation, and supervisor's consultation expectations. Students must recognize that the guidelines and tips serve not merely as bureaucratic requirements but as quality assurance mechanisms ensuring academic rigor and standardization across all postgraduate research. Early familiarization with these guidelines prevents costly revisions and potential delays in dissertation completion.

Selection of Research Title

The selection of an appropriate research title represents a crucial first step in the dissertation journey for post-graduate students (Ede et al, 2020; Keshavarz & Shekari, 2020; Eze et al., 2021; Khan et al., 2023). This foundational decision significantly influences the entire research process and ultimately determines the study's direction and success. Based on extensive supervisory experience, several critical factors warrant careful consideration during title selection. Firstly, personal interest and intellectual curiosity should drive the selection process. Students must choose a research topic that genuinely engages them, as sustained motivation is essential for the lengthy dissertation process. For example, a student in educational technology might be personally interested in mobile learning applications, leading to a title like "Effectiveness of Mobile Learning Applications in Enhancing Students' Engagement: A Case of Secondary Schools in Iringa Region, Tanzania".

A well-crafted research title should demonstrate several essential elements that collectively ensure its academic rigor and feasibility. The title must exhibit focus and clarity by clearly indicating the specific area of investigation, while maintaining appropriate scope

and specificity of the research. Moreover, the research topic should demonstrate originality by contributing new knowledge to the field and clearly identify a specific research problem that needs to be addressed. Practical considerations are equally important: the topic must ensure data accessibility and feasibility in terms of data collection, while setting realistic goals that are achievable within a given timeframe and resources. Finally, the selected topic should address an existing knowledge gap in the field rather than being over-researched, thereby ensuring that the research makes a meaningful contribution to the existing body of knowledge.

Writing the Proposal Stage

If the graduate student has already identified his or her supervisor(s) and thoroughly understands the guidelines and procedures for graduate students at a particular university, he or she would be ready in the position of focusing on writing the research proposal. With the research title in hand and ensuring that it adheres to the characteristics of a good research title as highlighted in the previous section, the post-graduate student can proceed with the research proposal writing process.

Most universities have established common elements that should be included in a research proposal for post-graduate students. Depending on the student supervisor's preference, the post-graduate student may start with a concept note or directly with Chapter 1. Some supervisors may wish to guide their students chapter by chapter, while others may provide general guidelines, allowing a student to write from Chapter 1 to Chapter 3. Based on experience, it is often better to start with Chapter 1 and then proceed to Chapter 2 and finally Chapter 3.

Chapter one

In Chapter 1, the student should demonstrate the ability to effectively structure and articulate the key components of the dissertation. Although it may have slightly difference between one university and another but normally, chapter one includes, the background to the problem, statement of the problem, research objectives and research questions, scope and delimitations of the study, limitation of the study, significance of the study, operational definitions of key terms and concepts coupled with the overall organization of the study (Shambare, 2021; Sanak et al.2023; Hazari, 2024). It is important to note that these elements are

typically written in the future time when writing the research proposal, and when writing the report, they should be in the past tense.

The background of the problem should set the contextual foundation for the study, providing a comprehensive overview of the relevant issues, gaps in knowledge, and the need for further investigation. The statement of the problem, on the other hand, should concisely convey the specific concerns, challenges, or unanswered questions that the study aims to address. This section should not exceed one page or preferably be limited to half a page, to maintain focus and clarity (Terrell, 2022).

The research objectives coupled with the research questions should stem directly from the background information and should utilize action-oriented verbs that clearly indicate whether the study is qualitative, quantitative, or a mixed-methods approach. For instance, in a qualitative study, the use of verbs like “explore” or “investigate” can effectively communicate the exploratory nature of the research.

Regarding the scope and limitations of the study, the student should clearly delineate the boundaries and constraints of the research, such as geographical, institutional, or methodological factors. It is worth noting that, in some institutions, the limitations of the study are presented in Chapter 3 rather than in Chapter 1.

Finally, the operational definitions of key terms and concepts should start with the original definitions and then be contextualized within the specific framework of the study. This ensures a shared understanding of the terms used throughout the dissertation. By thoroughly addressing these essential elements in Chapter 1, the student can establish a strong base for the rest of the dissertation, setting the stage for a well-structured and coherent research study.

Chapter two

This chapter provides the literature review of the research work. In this regard, the literature review should begin with the theory governing the study with a theoretical review, followed by an empirical literature review and a conceptual framework. The theory guiding the study should explain its assumptions and application and highlight its strengths and weaknesses. If possible, the student should cite studies that have successfully applied the same theory.

The literature review should avoid using outdated studies related to the topic and should be organized based on the research objectives identified in Chapter 1. When writing the literature review, the student should consider the five "C"s: Cite, Compare, Contradict, Critique, and Connect with the study, rather than simply copying and pasting the content. By considering the five "Cs" the student will avoid the erroneousness which most post graduate students, even proficient ones were not able to synthesize especially when having large information, critique or explain the literature in their writing (Shahsavari & Kourepaz, 2020; Walter & Stouck, 2020); while others mainly focused on summarizing other researchers' findings and interpretations (Shahsavari & Kourepaz, 2020).

Kindly note that a successful literature review not only synthesizes existing knowledge but also identifies gaps, generates new perspectives, and sets the stage for future research (Elsbach & van Knippenberg, 2020; Lim et al., 2022; Pandey, 2024). Finally, the conceptual framework should be presented after identifying the gaps in the literature.

Chapter three

This part generally presents the research methodology that the post-graduate student should follow these tips: First, write the research approach by indicating whether the study is qualitative or quantitative. Then, discuss the research design, research area (providing justifications for the selected area), the population or target population, sampling size, and sampling procedure coupled with data collection methods such as interviews, Focus Group Discussions, documentary reviews, participant or non-observation, and questionnaires, depending on the research approach. Remember to consider the "who, why, and how" when discussing sampling and data collection methods.

Besides, include information about the piloting study, specifying the schools or institutions involved (which should not be part of the main study), data analysis procedures, trustworthiness, and ethical considerations such as anonymity, privacy, ethical clearance, and voluntary participation.

Passing the ethics committee is a crucial milestone in the dissertation process, as it ensures that the proposed research adheres to established ethical standards and protects the rights and well-being of participants. Approval from the committee

confirms that the study design, data collection methods, and consent procedures are ethically sound and legally compliant (Drolet et al, 2022). Once this approval is granted, the researcher can confidently proceed to the next stages of the dissertation, including data collection and analysis, knowing that the research meets institutional and professional ethical guidelines.

Finally, under the guidance of a post-graduate student's supervisor, the next step is the proposal presentation, which is typically done after the supervisor and other relevant organs have approved the proposal. However, many students stay long in this stage. Previous studies have also identified similar and key challenges in proposal writing, which include linguistic factors such as poor grammatical ability, limited vocabulary which results into difficulty when organizing ideas (Alfaki, 2015; Islamiah, 2020; Lin & Morrison, 2021).

Other challenges include failure to justify the research problem and identifying research gaps (Suryatiningsih, 2019; Susanti & Mahaputri, 2022). The students are advised to read previously published dissertations to apprehend the problem justification; review journal and conference papers, attend proposal writing training, and apply knowledge from academic lectures. It has to be noted that the research proposal is the foundation of the dissertation. A well-crafted research proposal is crucial for subsequent research stages.

Before and During Data Collection

Before commencing the data collection process, the post-graduate students are advised to obtain the necessary clearance and approvals from their respective universities. This typically involves receiving a research committee number and an official letter that authorizes the candidate to seek permission from other relevant authorities, such as the President's Office, Regional Administration and Local Government Tanzania (PO-RALG), Regional Education Office, District Education Office, and any other relevant authorities.

When preparing for data collection, the candidate should ensure that the research tools and instruments are designed to effectively answer the research questions of the study. In qualitative research, the sample size is often determined by the principle of data saturation, as highlighted by Sebele-Mpofu (2020), Alam (2021) and Braun and

Clarke (2021). However, the researcher should consider multiple factors beyond just data saturation, including the depth of information gathered, the diversity of the sample, and the iterative nature of the data collection process, as emphasized by Sebele-Mpofu (2020), Islam & Aldaihani (2022), and Mwita (2022). By employing triangulation or the use of multiple research tools and data sources, the candidate can enhance the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings.

In quantitative research approach, the sample size is determined sometimes by employing the sample size calculation formula developed by Yamane (1967) which assumes a normal distribution of members in terms of the parameters for interpretation of their perceptions of the skills required and applied in practice and that; the confidence intervals which show the degree of uncertainty will show the probability that a parameter will fall between a pair of values around the mean. Equipped with the necessary approvals and well-designed research instruments, the candidate can then proceed with the data collection phase, mindful of the key considerations and best practices highlighted in the existing literature.

Data Analysis Presentation and Discussion of Findings Stage

Data analysis

Congratulations!! Now the student is back from the field, and if they have adhered well to what has been identified in the previous section, the raw data from the field is ready. In other universities, this section is separated. In that regard, the student should make sure that they have familiarized themselves with their university guidelines. Thereafter, the main requirement at this point is that the student has to analyse data based on either a qualitative or quantitative approach, or both.

At this stage, the student is advised to attend some training to be familiar with data analysis. Some of the training is offered by the university or by research experts, so by attending training, the student will get knowledge and skills on how to operate the SPSS program, input and process data, and read the output or interpret the results of processing the data (Murana & Rahimin, 2021; Mustika et al, 2022). At his or her own pace student can also learn how to analyze qualitative data by reading articles see for example the article

published by Lester et al (2020), Learning to do qualitative data analysis: A starting point, or read an article by Reyes et al. (2024) as well as Kiger and Varpio (2020); Lochmiller (2021), and Terry & Hayfield (2021) on thematic analyses, on the other hand someone can read Vears and Gillam, (2022) on contents analyses and many others.

Data presentation

After having themes and codes as well as quotations and findings from documentary reviews. At this stage, the postgraduate student can prepare tables and figures to make his or her work interesting to the reader. For quotations, present at least three quotations and provide interpretations. While writing the post-graduate student should make sure that he or she is aware of terms and concepts such as “participants” and “informants”, these are for qualitative and “respondents” are for quantitative research. Remember, in each theme, a student should have to triangulate his or her findings. The student should not rely on his or her findings from only one method of data collection, validity, and reliability of findings (Lemon & Hayes, 2020; Bans-Akutey & Tiimub, 2021; Donkoh & Mensah, 2023). This will also add more grade from external examiners.

Discussion of findings

What a journey to achieve this crucial step! In the discussion of findings stage, it is essential to thoroughly interpret the results presented in the previous chapter, ensuring their alignment with the research objectives outlined earlier in the study. When discussing the findings, it is important to refer to the literature reviewed in Chapter 2 to support or contrast the observations made in the study. The student should use the theoretical framework that guided their research to provide a solid foundation for the interpretation of the results. For instance, if the study was grounded on Bandura's social cognitive theory, the student can examine how the findings relate to the core concepts of self-efficacy, observational learning, and reciprocal determinism.

Throughout the discussion, the student should ensure to critically analyze the findings, presenting their stand on the implications and significance of the results. The student should not simply restate the findings; instead, they should engage in a thoughtful exploration of what the results mean within the context of their research objectives and

the existing body of knowledge. Let the student identify any unexpected or contradictory findings and provide plausible explanations for them, drawing on relevant literature to support their perspective. Effectively linking the discussion of findings to the research objectives, supporting it with relevant literature, and offering a well-reasoned critique will demonstrate his or her comprehensive understanding of the topic and his or her ability to draw meaningful conclusions from the data. This will strengthen the overall quality and coherence of the dissertation.

The student should remember to maintain a logical flow and cohesion throughout the discussion, seamlessly transitioning between the various research objectives and findings. For example, he or she could structure the discussion by addressing each research question or objective in a separate section, highlighting the key findings, interpreting them in light of the theoretical framework and existing research, and then synthesizing the implications. By carefully crafting this section, the post-graduate student can provide a robust and compelling interpretation of his or her study's results, setting the stage for the concluding chapter. The discussion of findings should showcase his or her critical thinking skills and the ability to engage with the scholarly discourse, coupled with the capacity to derive insightful conclusions from the research.

During the Summary, Conclusion, and Recommendations

In this stage, the student should provide a summary and conclusion of the study from chapters one to four. Then tell the advisor about the implications, recommendations for action, recommendations for policy makers, and recommendations for further studies. Normally, they do not come up with new ideas at this stage; the student should make sure that the recommendations emerge from the study findings.

Recommendations in a research study should be clearly linked to the research questions and framed as actionable suggestions. Students are advised to remain realistic and avoid overly ambitious proposals. Each recommendation should be specific and directed toward identifiable individuals or groups, rather than using broad terms like "stakeholders." It's better to refer to specific roles such as "school principals" or "education

officers." To enhance clarity and presentation, recommendations should be listed using Roman numerals (i, ii, iii, etc.) and kept to a manageable number. For recommendations related to further studies, it is generally expected that students provide at least one recommendation per research question, resulting in a minimum of three well-grounded suggestions.

References, Appendices, and Proofreading

After finalizing the dissertation content, it is crucial to ensure that all references appearing in the text are accurately listed in the reference section, following the guidelines of their respective university. Proper citation and referencing practices are essential to maintain academic integrity and avoid issues with plagiarism. Moreover, all relevant appendices, including research instruments, research permits, and the plagiarism report, should be attached to the dissertation for reference. According to Ede et al. (2020) and Susanti & Mahaputri (2022), common errors made by graduate students include incorrect referencing, editorial mistakes, and pagination errors. To mitigate these issues, it is highly recommended to have the dissertation thoroughly edited by a qualified and approved professional editor before submission for the pre-viva stage, or use the referencing tools feature of MS Office or referencing websites such as Zotero or Mendeley.

If changes are required after the pre-viva, the dissertation should be sent back to the same editor for additional proofreading and correction before binding the final version. This step is essential to ensure the dissertation is free from any errors or inconsistencies before the final submission and grading. By accurately addressing the references, appendices, and proofreading, post-graduate students can demonstrate their attention to detail, adherence to academic conventions, and commitment to producing a high-quality dissertation that meets the university's expectations.

Publication of the Research

Once a student has publicly presented their research during the viva or oral defense, many universities require the final dissertation to be submitted in a hard-bound format for archiving in the graduate school library. This serves as a permanent academic record and a resource for future researchers. In addition to physical submission, institutions increasingly mandate

electronic publication of the dissertation (Tribe & Tunariu, 2016), often through institutional repositories or digital libraries. This ensures wider accessibility and contributes to the global body of academic knowledge.

Electronic submission typically involves formatting the dissertation according to specific guidelines, including metadata tagging, copyright declarations, and digital archiving standards. Some universities also require students to obtain an ISBN or register their work with national thesis databases. In certain cases, students may be encouraged or required to publish parts of their dissertations in peer-reviewed journals or present findings at academic conferences as part of their graduation requirements. These publication practices not only validate the academic rigor of the research but also enhance the visibility and impact of the student's work within the scholarly community.

CONCLUSION

This study aimed to provide essential, experience-driven tips to enhance graduate students' effectiveness in navigating the dissertation writing journey. Drawing from the authors' extensive firsthand experience as dissertation supervisor and advisor in higher learning institution over the years, the discussion encompassed crucial elements such as proper familiarization with institutional guidelines, strategic topic selection, effective proposal writing, comprehensive literature review methodology, rigorous data presentation and analysis, coherent discussion of findings, formulation of meaningful conclusions and proper citation and referencing styles practices.

The insights and recommendations provided in this paper can empower graduate students to better understand and apply effective practices throughout the dissertation writing process. By adhering to the essential tips outlined, graduate students can enhance their chances of producing high-quality dissertations that meet institutional requirements and showcase their academic abilities. Besides, the experience-driven strategies can contribute to improving the overall success and experience of post-graduate students during this crucial stage of their post-graduate studies.

However, this study is limited to the specific context of higher learning institutions where the authors are based or their personal experiences. The

transferability of the findings and recommendations to other institutional settings or cultural contexts may require further validation and contextualization. Nevertheless, this study addresses a critical gap in existing literature, which has predominantly focused on documenting the challenges faced by post-graduate students during dissertation writing, rather than providing empirically grounded strategies and actionable tips. By drawing from the author's unique, insider perspectives, this study contributes to enhancing post-graduate students' effectiveness and improving completion rates. Based on the insights gained from this study, future research should explore the applicability and adaptability of the presented strategies across diverse institutional and cultural settings. In the same vein, longitudinal studies tracking the long-term impact of implementing these experience-driven tips on dissertation outcomes and post-graduate student satisfaction would further validate the efficacy of the proposed approaches.

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