Analysing Research Methodologies: A case study of Masters of Education in Educational Management Dissertations at the Zimbabwe Open University

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Abstract

The study sought to analyse research methodologies used in dissertations for the Masters of Education in Educational Management at the Zimbabwe Open University in Zimbabwe. It used the qualitative methodology. The study made use of the case study design, in which the Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU), Department of Educational studies became the case to be studied. Fifty dissertations were collected from ten regions of ZOU. The study purposively selected dissertations that indicated that they had used the qualitative methodology. It was observed that some dissertations lacked clarity on paradigm, research designs and data collection methods that related to qualitative research. It was further observed that some dissertations did not indicate the paradigms at all. There was evidence indicating that approaches to research methodology differed as per region and supervisor. This suggested lack of coordination on how the department approached research supervision. The study recommends capacity building for students and supervisors. It further recommends the setting up of research committees at faculty level.

Keywords: *Methodology; Paradigm; Research design; Data collection methods*

1.   Introduction and Background

The Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU) was established in 1999 through an Act of Parliament. It is the first and biggest Open and Distance Learning (ODL) university in Zimbabwe and the second to UNISA in Southern Africa. It started with the Bachelor of Education in Educational Administration Planning and Policy Studies and later expanded to include other undergraduate and post graduate programmes. The Master of Education in Educational Management (MEDM) was the pioneer post graduate programmes to be offered at ZOU. At the time of the study ZOU was offering more than thirty degree and diploma programmes (The Sunday Mail, February 12-18, 2012). ZOU now has four faculties. These are the Faculty of Arts and Education, Faculty of Science and Technology, Faculty of Commerce and Law and the Faculty of Social Sciences. In addition to these programmes ZOU now offers studies at doctoral level.

Apart from teaching, the other core business of institutions of higher learning such as ZOU is to promote research. Such research is not only for the purpose of attaining educational qualifications, but one that contributes knowledge for the development of the university and the nation as a whole. Such research at any level should form the basis for future professional development. The general observation is that a number of students regardless of their institutions of origin appear to struggle when they register for higher degrees such as doctoral degrees. This calls for a closer examination of the different constituents of research. The major components of research should include at least the following areas: Background to the Problem, Literature Review, Research Methodology, Data Presentation and Data discussion, Conclusions and Recommendations. From these areas students should be able to come up with chapters for their dissertations or theses. This has resulted in students coming up with documents that have five to eight chapters, depending on how they intend to treat the topic. It should be noted that areas of

presentation are influenced by both the expectations of the faculty and the problem under study. With this in mind I found it necessary to interrogate some of the key components of the research document, the methodology section. As noted earlier, there have been concerns about how students struggle when they register for higher degrees. The problems they encounter have resulted in some of them withdrawing from the programmes or at times taking much longer to complete their studies. The study is therefore the beginning of an interrogation of the different aspects of research in an attempt to identify areas that students need further support before they engage in studies in higher degrees. It is my conviction that with time and space I will be able to examine the other areas in other studies.

Purpose of the study

The purpose of the study is to analyze the research methodologies used by Master of Education in Educational Management students in their dissertations at the Zimbabwe Open University. It will focus on research design, paradigm and data collection methods.

Statement of the Problem

There have been concerns about students' failure to complete research dissertations. Further to that, students who register for high degrees appear to meet challenges in their research. For instance, in one intake in the final year at ZOU out of 34 students, 13 students did not submit their dissertation for assessment (ZOU documents, 2012). This constitutes 38.2 percent of the total students who were not able to submit their dissertations for assessment. This raises concern not only to those associated with the university, but the education system as a whole, as products of our institutions have to contribute to both economic and social development through knowledge and research. In view of these concerns, the study is guided by these questions:

- How do Zimbabwe Open University students handle the methodology section in their dissertations?
- How is the qualitative research methodology handled by Masters of Education in Educational Management students in their dissertations?
- To what extent are the students conversant with the qualitative research methodology?

2. Research Design and Methodology for the study

The present study uses the qualitative methodology. Data is collected through document analysis. The documents analyzed are the research dissertations of Masters of Education in Educational Management at the Zimbabwe Open University.

The research paradigm for the study

The present study is a qualitative research. Its interpretation of reality is based on the viewpoints expressed in the dissertation documents analyzed. The study therefore makes use of the interpretivist paradigm.

Sample

I collected data from fifty Master of Education in Educational Management dissertations at ZOU. These covered the years 2004 to 2011. The sample was purposively selected, based on students who had used the qualitative methodology in their dissertations.

Significance of the study

There are areas that have become a challenge to research students as they write their dissertations. One of the major problems is derived from the researcher's failure to treat the different sections with conviction and understanding. The study will help identify such areas, in an effort to improve the quality of researches at ODL institutions such as ZOU.

3. Literature Review

I focused on literature related to the qualitative research methodology and the components that constitute it. These include qualitative research techniques, research design and data collection methods. I focused on the conceptual framework of the different aspects of the research methodology.

The Discourse on Research Methodology

The term methodology has assumed varied meanings in research discourse. In some research cases, the term methodology has been confused with the term method. O'Leary (2004) clearly shows the distinction between the two. O'Leary (2004) defines the term methodology as the framework associated with a particular set of paradigmatic assumptions that one uses to conduct research, such as scientific method, ethnography and action research. Methodology refers to the fundamental or regulative principles which underlie any discipline, such as conception of its subject matter and how that subject matter can be investigated (Lazas, 2004).

A number of key features stand out as we attempt to conceptualize the term. Chief among these is that methodology guides the assumption of the research process and also acts as a guide on how to conduct research on a particular area. For Silverman (2005) methodology refers to the choices we make about cases to study, methods of data collection, forms of data analysis, planning and executing a research study. Silverman further notes that research methodology provides us with the general approach on how to study a topic. He gives two methodologies commonly used in research; the quantitative and qualitative research methodologies.

Qualitative research methodology encompasses different approaches or paradigms. Among these is the interpretivist paradigm. Flick, Von Kardorff and Steinke (2004) observe that qualitative research is premised on at least four assumptions. These include the assumptions that meanings and contexts that are created through social interaction help us to understand social reality. Secondly, that from the constant everyday creation of a shared world, there emerge the characters of the process, and the flexivity and recursivity of social reality. Thirdly, that it relies on the use of subjective meanings and lastly that reality is created interactively and becomes meaningful subjectively (ibid).

They note that qualitative methodology enables us to understand social reality basing on meanings and social interaction. They further note that through the qualitative methodology a researcher is able to make use of subjective meanings. Having noted this aspect, this is where those who challenge its use in research seem to have a point. The raise pertinent questions: To what extent can research be guided by subjectivity? To what extent can research rely on subjective views and still remain valid? I will leave these questions unanswered and focus on them later in studies.

There seems to be some propensity to compare qualitative research methodology with quantitative research methodology. This has become acceptable to some extent, as it is done with the pretext that it enhances our understanding of research methodologies. Walliman (2006), for example, informs us that unlike the quantitative methodology, qualitative research methodology relies more on language and interpretation of meaning, so its data collection methods tend to involve close human involvement. Walliman further notes that it also involves a creative process of theory development, rather than testing. This well supports the basic assumption of the interpretivist paradigm.

Qualitative methodology often involves intensive study of single settings or a number of people (Seale 2004). Dooley (1984) also notes that when a research is based on qualitative methodology, it makes use of non-quantitative observations which are made in the field and analyzed in non-statistical way. Further to that, qualitative methodology involves the researcher interacting, observing and interpreting meanings

from the cases being studied. It also involves the researcher describing kinds of characteristics of people and events without comparing them in terms of measurements and amounts.

Qualitative methodology can be used to study different problems. Its use, is therefore, determined by the problem being studied. The Wikipedia, Free Encyclopedia *http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Qualitative research* supports the use of qualitative research in such areas as policy research and evaluation research where understanding, why and how certain outcomes were achieved is as important as establishing what those outcomes were. Qualitative research methodology has therefore, characteristics that allow for and assist in the study of phenomena. In their support for the use of the qualitative methodology, Maykut and Morehouse (1994) identify eight characteristics of qualitative research that are quite pertinent to research. These include   a focus that is exploratory and descriptive, the use of emergent design as new questions may emerge as one analyses the data, its use of a purposive sample, the collection of data in natural settings, emphasis on 'human –as-instrument,' use of qualitative methods of data collection and ongoing inductive data analysis (ibid).

It would appear that Maykut and Morehouse (1994) cover most salient issues about the qualitative research methodology especially that they stress that qualitative methodology is exploratory; and allows for the observation of new situations, and is inductive. They further note the descriptive nature of the qualitative methodology. Hence, its use and reliance on words and language, instead of numbers and measurements.

Similarly, Key (1997) identifies characteristics that qualitative research has to be identified with. Qualitative research methodology is characterized by the following: purpose, reality, viewpoint, values, focus and orientation (ibid). Its purpose is concerned with understanding people's interpretations, how reality changes as perceptions also change. In this regard, qualitative research reminds us that reality and viewpoints are not a fixed variable in life..

Qualitative research methodology is also emphasized by Merriam (1988).For Merriam (1988), qualitative research methodology focuses on quality rather than quantity. Merriam also notes that qualitative research methodology has its philosophical roots in phenomenology and symbolic interaction. Like Key (1997), Merriam (1988) posits that the main goals of investigation in qualitative research methodology are understanding, description, discovery and hypothesis generating. The other factors that distinguish qualitative methodology from other methodologies are its setting which is often natural and familiar, a sample which is non-random and theoretical, and the researcher is treated as the primary instrument of data collection (ibid). This data is collected through the use of interviews and observations, and the mode of analysis is inductive.

Furthermore, Denzin and Lincoln (2008) make interesting observations about the qualitative research methodology. They credit qualitative research methodology with the flexibility that makes it possible for it to be used across different disciplines. For Denzin and Lincoln (2008), in qualitative research methodology one can use a variety of methods that include semiotics, narratives, content, discourse, archival and phonemic analysis. This can be done through the use of approaches, methods and techniques of ethnomethodology, phenomenology, ethonography, interviewing, psychoanalysis, cultural studies, survey research, and participant observation (Denzin and Lincoln 2008).

Another observation about the qualitative research methodology is that it is viewed as best suited for obtaining data on attitudes, perceptions, meanings and the description of social reality (Berg, 1998). These are attributes that cannot be quantified. This position is supported by Patton (1990) who further informs us that, as a research methodology, it produces a wealth of detailed information about a smaller number of cases that is transferable. Patton (1990) further notes that, its other advantages, as a research methodology, lie in the methods it uses for research. In that respect, he concurs with such scholars as Denzin and Lincoln (1994). It allows for the use of a variety of methods as noted earlier. Such a practice

is important in research as it provides for the checking and verification of data. It also allows for the divergent viewing of phenomenon. Adding to the debate on the methodology, Willis (2007) and Thomas (2003) posit that the qualitative methodology makes use of traditional research methods such as ethnographic research, case studies, histography, and experience narratives. This provides a varied choice in terms of methods to employ, as noted earlier.

Thomas (2003), whilst concurring with such scholars as Dooley (1984) and Willis (2007), develops this argument further. For Thomas, the qualitative methodology depicts uniqueness in every organization and event. He further notes that, like all other scientific methodologies, it has to pass the test of scientific rigour to justify its use in research. Going through this scientific test is in itself an advantage. Some scholars have noted that qualitative methodology tends to rely on the inquirer as the instrument. As a result it is embroiled in the bias issue and is criticized by a number of scholars who see the reliance on the inquirer as a weakness of the qualitative research methodology. It can be further argued that the bias problem does not only relate to qualitative research. The choice of topics, how we intend to cover them and the observations we make cannot be free of bias regardless of the methodology. As such, we cannot completely do away with bias, but can only minimize or control it. However, Guba and Lincoln (1981) view this otherwise. They point out that what appears as a weakness is, in fact, offset by the flexibility, insight, and the ability to build knowledge that is the peculiar province of the human instrument. The use of the inquirer as the instrument can actually be an advantage to the research, because the human mind can be much clearer of what it wants to measure, despite changing circumstances (ibid).

Limitations of the Qualitative Research Methodology
Qualitative research methodology has, however, been criticized for lacking in generalizability of findings. Denzin and Lincoln (2005), whilst acknowledging that qualitative methodologies seek subjective understanding of social reality, also highlight its lack of generalizable prediction. Their argument is based on the assumption that the purpose of research is to end up with generalizations. This is an argument often postulated by positivists. According to Blanche et. al. (2006), generalizability relates to the extent to which the interpretive account can be applied to other contexts than the one being researched. Blanche et. al. (2006), further argue that, because of the contextual nature of the qualitative research methodology, there are usually strong limits on generalizability of findings.

The issue of generalizability appears to be the emphasis within quantitative research methodologies. However, in qualitative research, transferability is emphasized. Transferability refers to the ability of the account to provide answers to other contexts, and it helps in the understanding of the context of the meanings (Blanche et. al., 2006; Willis, 2007). Nevertheless, the argument about lack of generalizability is countered by the position that, whilst qualitative methodology reduces generalizability in that it concentrates on smaller units and individual cases, the wealth of information produced can be of relevance to other cases and theory (Patton 1990). Nonetheless, despite this argument, the methodology suffers from the fact that principles drawn from one case can be applied to other cases with considerable risk of error (Thomas, 2003).

The Role of the Researcher
Yet other limitations are those relating to the role of the researcher. In qualitative research, the role of the researcher appears to be domineering. This stands out right from the choice of problem, the sampling procedures, and the choice of what to interpret. Guba and Lincoln (1981) acknowledge the problem of relying on the inquirer as the instrument. For them these problems include changes resulting from fatigue, shifts in knowledge, cooptation, as well as variations resulting from differences in training skill and experience among different 'instruments' (ibid). Such variations may have a negative effect on the research findings and may lead to failure to control the problem of researcher bias.

Qualitative research is further criticized for using non-probability sampling procedures. Non-probability sampling refers to any kind of sampling where the selection of elements is not determined by the statistical principle of randomness (Blanche et. al., 2006).These, among others, include purposive sampling, quota sampling and snowball sampling (Robson, 2002; Bless and Higson- Smith, 1995).The criticism therefore, is that much depends on the researcher, who is most likely to be influenced by some selection biases. As such, qualitative research methodology typically involves the researcher using his judgment to achieve a particular purpose (Robson, 2002).

The Interpretivist Paradigm

A study at any level is expected to be guided by a paradigm. Guba (1990) defines a paradigm as the net that contains the researcher's epistemology, ontological and methodological premises, which has a basic set of beliefs that guide action. The term is also described by Denzin and Lincoln (2008) as encompassing ethics, epistemology, ontology, and methodology. However, whatever paradigm a researcher chooses, there are basic issues that the researcher has to deal with (Lincoln and Guba, 2000). These include issues such as; axiology; accommodation and commensurability; control; foundation of truth; validity; voice, reflexivity, and postmodern representation (ibid). Whilst I focus on interpretivism here, it must be noted that it is not the only epistemological stance for qualitative research. The other epistemological stances for qualitative research are hermeneutics and social constructionism (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000).

Each paradigm, according to Guba and Lincoln (1985), has to take a position on the above issues. Saunders, Lewis, and Thornhill (2006), say that interpretivism is an epistemology that advocates the necessity of the researcher understanding differences between humans in their role as social actors. It emphasizes the issue of conducting research among people as people rather than objects.Schwandt (2000) notes that the interpretivist paradigm deals with meanings, and that for a researcher to understand a particular social action, he/she has to understand the meanings that constitute the action. He further argues that there are differences as to how actions are interpreted. He argues that the process of interpreting is differentially represented, and thereby underpinning the differences in the philosophies of the interpretivist philosophy itself.

What stands out is that interpretivism stresses the role of the actors, and the researcher is, therefore, viewed as someone studying to derive meaning from these actors.Blanche, Durrheim and Painter (2006) note that the interpretivist paradigm is about understanding in context. In this respect, Blanche et. al. credit the paradigm for having contributed to the development of methodologies that contribute to our understanding of human phenomena. This is an argument that is carried over by Henning, Van Resburg and Smit (2004), who note that through interpretivism, knowledge is constructed, not only by observable phenomena, but also by descriptions of the people's intentions, beliefs, values, and reasons, meaning making and self-understanding. Interpretivist knowledge is dispersed and distributed (ibid). Hence, the researcher has to look at different places and at different things to understand events. They go further to argue that within the interpretive paradigm, the mental processes of interpretation help us to understand phenomenon and the meanings attached to it. They also note that interpretivism acknowledges that observation is fallible and has error and that all theory is revisable. The important role of the researcher is, therefore, not only to read actions and meanings, but to interpret them as well, so as to attach meaning to the actions, words and observed phenomenon. In that respect, interpretivism helps us to understand understanding as we try to interpret reality from the people we are studying. At the same time we cannot understand understanding without involving our biases.

Saunders et. al. (2006) posit that in the interpretivist epistemology, the role of the researcher becomes paramount as the researcher has to adopt an empathetic stance with the social world of the research subjects, and try to understand their world from their point of view. The position of the interpretivist is based on a number of assumptions. These assumptions are important in guiding and determining the research outcome. Interpretivists assume that knowledge and meaning are acts of interpretation. Hence, there is no objective knowledge independent of thinking, reasoning humans, and interpretivism is

therefore, based on the belief in the social construction of reality (Gephart, 1999; Schwadt, 2000). It would appear that the major element that distinguishes the interpretivist paradigm from the positivist paradigm, or any other paradigm, is how reality is interpreted.

Gephart (1999) further notes that some of the major distinguishing characteristics of the interpretivist paradigm are its assumptions, key focus, key theories in the paradigm, its goals, nature of knowledge or theory, criteria for assessing research, unit of analysis, research methods and types of analysis. The assumptions of the interpretivist paradigm are that research is based on the intersubjective world which science can represent with the concepts of actors, and that it should be based on the social construction of reality (ibid). In terms of focus, the interpretivist paradigm focuses on meanings and the patterns that are derived from the meanings. It is from these patterns that a qualitative researcher is able to interpret words and meanings to arrive at conclusions. Based on this focus, the goal of the interpretivist paradigm is to describe meanings, understand members, definition of the situation, and examine how objective realities are produced (Gephart 1999).Further to this, Gephart (1999) points out that the interpretivist paradigm concentrates on the abstract description of the meanings and members, as well as the definition of the situation which is produced in a natural context.

Blanche et. al. (2006) also identify the salient points about the interpretivist paradigm. For them, the interpretivist paradigm deals with the understanding of different factors at play. They point out that in the interpretivist paradigm, the understanding of the communicative intentions and the understanding of the knowledge of the socio-historical and linguistic context, are important. These, according to them, enable us to understand, not only the author, but the context in which the meanings are derived.

Guba and Lincoln (1996), writing about the interpretivist paradigm, took note of the criteria the paradigm uses for assessing research. On that note, they pointed out that assessment in the interpretivist paradigm was based on trustworthiness and authenticity. They also noted that the interpretivist paradigm made use of ethnography, participant observation, interviews, conversational analysis, and grounded theory development. These are methods that support the qualitative research methodology well as noted earlier.

Denzin and Lincoln (2000), posit that genres of the interpretivist paradigm share a number of common features. They view human action as meaningful, show an ethical commitment to trustworthiness, at the same time emphasizing the contribution of human subjectivity to knowledge, without sacrificing the objectivity of the knowledge (ibid).

The interpretivist paradigm seems to highlight the issue of subjectivity. Subjectivity is central to how we arrive at what constitutes that reality. This reality, can be created through the use of a variety of data and different sources which enable the interpretive researcher to make use of different viewpoints to construct the world through different processes of observation (Henning et. al.,2004). On the interpretation of reality, interpretivism acknowledges the multiplicity of this reality. It promotes subjectivism. Subjectivism, as an element of ontology, holds that social phenomena are created from the perceptions and consequent actions of those social actors concerned with their existence (Guba and Lincoln 1994, Remenyi et.al., 1998).

To establish this reality, the interpretivist paradigm makes use of different research designs. These include ethnography, action research, discourse and narrative analysis studies and case studies as noted earlier.

Research design
Bless and Higson- Smith (1995), define research design as a programme to guide the researcher in collecting, analyzing and interpreting observed facts. They further identify a number of research designs. These include the true experimental design, quasi-experimental research design, survey design,

explanatory design and the case study.Yin (2003) posits that a research design is the logic that links the data to be collected and the conclusions to be drawn from the study's initial questions. Major differences in the research designs lie in the sampling procedures, the data collection instruments they use, and the methods of gathering and analyzing data.

Case Study Design

A case study research design, allows the researcher to study specific cases such as the individuals, groups or such organizations as schools (Yin, 2003). Merriam (1988) offers a definition of a case study that is encompassing. He views it as an examination of specific phenomena, such as a programme, an event, a person, a process, an institution or a social group. Merriam further notes that a case study offers more than an examination, as it is employed to gain an in-depth understanding of the situation and meaning for those involved. Nachmias and Nachmias (1992) describe a research design as a plan, a logical model of proof that allows the researcher to draw inferences concerning causal relations among the variables under investigation. Therefore, there appears to be a general consensus as to what constitutes a research design and how the case study suits that description.

A case study is descriptive in nature, and provides rich longitudinal information about individuals or particular situations (Blanche et. al., 2006). Case studies are characterised by a study's questions, propositions, units of analysis, the logic linking the data to the propositions, and the criteria for interpreting the findings (Yin, 2003).Yin stresses that case studies help to find answers to specific questions. His emphasis on concentrating on specific units of analysis is quite relevant. Yin (2003) further points out that as a research design, a case study is used in many situations to contribute to our knowledge of individual, group, organizational, social, political, and related phenomena. For him, a case study is useful when one wants to know 'how' or 'why' a programme had worked.

Blanche et al. (2006), concur with Yin (2003). Blanche et al. (2006), further observe that a case study research design allows ideas and hypothesis to emerge from careful and detailed observation. Secondly, they concur with Yin, that concentrating on small units is manageable even with limited resources. Thirdly, this contributes to the generation of many grand theories, as it also allows for the use of different methods to collect data. These methods include the use of documents, artifacts, interviews and observations as noted earlier.

Similarly, Willis (2007) further observes that a case study research design allows one to gather rich, detailed data in an authentic setting. It is holistic and supports the idea that much of what we know about human behaviour is best understood as lived experiences in the social context. Unlike experimental research, a case study can be done without predetermined hypotheses and goals. The idea of the authentic setting that Willis raises is often ignored by other methods. This, therefore, is in sharp contrast with experimental designs, which create artificial settings and thereby result in artificial results. An authentic setting is most likely to result in authentic findings.

However, it is also important to take note of some of the limitations of the case study. Blanche et. al. (2006) argue that case studies tend to compromise the validity of information. Secondly, causal links are difficult to test in a case study. Thirdly, they point out that generalizations could not be made from single cases. Another problem noted by Willis (2007), is the lack of control posed by case studies. Within the same context, Yin (2003) raises the same concerns about the limitations of the case study design, but further points out that a case study does not represent a sample, and its aim is to expand and generalize theories and not to enumerate frequencies. To improve on some of the concerns and limitations raised above, it may be necessary to pilot test some of the instruments and the visibility of the study.

In-depth face-to-face Interview

One of the data collection methods used in qualitative methodology is face-to-face interview. In- depth face-to-face interviews involve direct contact with the participant who is asked to answer questions,

providing respondents the opportunity to comment on widely defined issues (Bless and Higson-Smith 1995). In-depth face-to-face interviews are conducted at places convenient to respondents. The interviews are guided by interview schedules. The use of open-ended questions in interviews allows for the exploration of ideas and further probing. In-depth face-to-face interviews allow for the study of experiences.

The use of in-depth face-to-face interviews enables us to produce contemporary experiences and knowledge (Silverman, 2004). They provide social encounters where respondents are able to collaborate accounts of their past actions, experiences, feelings and thoughts (Seale, 2004). Interviews also enable the interviewer and interviewee to modify their line of thought as they engage in further probing of issues that arise during the process of interviewing. This, in itself makes one interview unique from the other.

The interviews have their limitations. For instance, these include issues of bias due to poorly constructed questions, response bias, poor recall and inaccurate articulation (Yin, 2003).Face-to-face interviews also have to deal with inaccuracies due to poor recall, the problem of dealing with emotions, opinions, and moods which change over time (ibid).

Observation

The common strategies in the observation method are participant observation and non-participant observation. Answers.com: *http://wiki.answers.com/* refers to non-participant observation as direct observation where data is collected by observing behaviour without interacting with the participants or taking part in the action. It is quite the opposite of participant observation which the same site defines as a process where data is collected by interacting with, and therefore experiencing, the phenomenon being studied.

Non- participant observation has the following advantages as noted by Robson (2002):
- Its directness enables the researcher to watch what people do and listen to what they say.
- It can complement information obtained by virtually any other technique.
- It allows the observer to observe things in their natural environment as it does not disturb the setting in the phenomenon being studied.
- Observation takes place while things are happening, allowing the researcher to study phenomena in a naturalistic way (Blanche et. al., 2006).

Non-participant observation has to deal with the problems of time, issues of rights, bias, and such attributes as attitudes and beliefs that cannot be observed. As noted by Yin (2003) non-participant observation has the following limitations:
- It can be time consuming.
- It can infringe on other people's rights.
- It introduces biases by the very fact of the observed person's awareness of being observed.
- One cannot directly observe attitudes, beliefs, phenomena related to private spheres of life.

4. Document Analysis

Document analysis is one of the data collection methods used in qualitative research. It has a number of advantages when compared with other methods of data collection in qualitative research. Document analysis had the following advantages as noted by Robson (2002):
- When it is based on existing documents, it is unobtrusive, as one can observe without being observed.
- The data are in permanent form, this provides for cross-checking.
- Documents corroborate and augment evidence from other sources.

However, Blanche et. al., (2006) and O' Leary (2004) also give the weaknesses of document analysis as follows:
- The problem of accessibility and demand for high data management, and analytical skills.
- The problems of purpose, as documents are written for other purposes other than research, and some specific audience other than those of the case being done.
- The study has to deal with the bias of the author and researcher.

Validity/Reliability/ Trustworthiness
Most arguments against the qualitative research methodology in general and the interpretivist paradigm in particular have been their lack of validity. Validity can basically be defined as the degree to which research conclusions are related to the method of inquiry and the instruments used (Blanche et, al, 2006). They identify five types of validity that they consider important in research. These include internal validity; external validity; measurement validity; interpretative validity and statistical validity.

Validity deals with more than the method of inquiry used, but it also involves the process of interpretation (Denzin and Lincoln, 2008). However, on the same note Schwandt (1996) made three proposals on the issue of validity. These proposals are as follows;
- We should search for social inquiry that generates knowledge that complements rather than displace lay probing of social problems.
- He proposes a social inquiry as practical philosophy that has its aim in enhancing or cultivating critical intelligence in parties to the research encounter
- We should be able to judge social inquiry as practical philosophy.

The contributions by Schwandt (1996) appear to challenge the role of validity in its current form, as he viewed it as ignoring the importance of practical wisdom that can help find practical solutions to social problems. On the same note, Blanche et. al. (2006) point out the problems that confront qualitative researchers. For example, they note the following:
- Qualitative researchers find it impossible to identify and rule out specific validity threats before doing the research.
- Social constructionists reject the idea that research findings can be accurate reflections of reality, and as a result qualitative researchers advocate for credibility.

To counter the arguments on lack of validity in qualitative research, views have been expressed that the major concern in qualitative research is not about the different forms of validity, but trustworthiness and transferability. Research has since moved away from the focus on the positivist approach to accepting post-positivism. This has contributed to the mixed-method approach. Post-positivism acknowledges the views held by qualitative researchers. The emphasis on transferability supports the idea of small samples in qualitative research.

5. Discussion of Findings

The study focused on an analysis of Master of Education in Educational Management dissertations at ZOU. The three concepts analyzed under qualitative methodology were the research paradigm, research design and data collection instruments.

Analysis of research paradigm, research design, data collection instruments
In a number of dissertations the paradigm guiding the study was not stated. However, in five, (10 percent) of the cases studied, the dissertations clearly discussed the paradigms before informing us of the preferred paradigm. This was noted especially with dissertations from one region and those submitted in 2011. In that regard the 2011 dissertations demonstrated an improvement on their handling of the paradigm guiding the study when compared to other years. ZOU as a university operates through ten regional

centres, and one virtual region. Such findings appear to suggest that emphasis on research paradigm depended on regions and supervisors. Lack of a paradigm in some of the dissertations appeared to concur with Kangai et.al (2011)'s findings in their studies on undergraduate research projects at the Zimbabwe Open University. They noted that 22 percent of the undergraduate research projects they analysed did not identify a paradigm.

One could observe that a number of students had the tendency of defining research designs without necessarily showing their relevance to the study. A case in point was that out of the fifty dissertations analyzed thirty (60 percent) chose the descriptive survey method. However, the dissertations did not specify the types of survey method used. The sampling procedures used in some of the dissertations tended to indicate that there was a disconnection between the sampling procedures and the research methodology. Thus, the sampling procedures were not consistent with the research methodology and paradigm. In some cases sampling techniques commensurate with quantitative research were used in qualitative research. Students tended to use random sampling in qualitative research.

A significant number of the dissertations used mixed method (30 percent), interview (20 percent), observation (20 percent), document analysis (16 percent) and another 15 percent used the questionnaire. There was a tendency to use the structured questionnaire in qualitative research as observed in 4 percent of the dissertations. Of those who used the interview 8 percent did not clarify the types of interview and observation methods used.

 The general observation was that the Methodology was not clearly defined in most dissertations. The general tendency in most of them was students tended to define terms without showing the relevance of the research design, research instruments, the sample and sampling procedures they used. One case discussed the different sampling procedures, before choosing convenience sampling which was explained and its use justified in the study. For research instruments the student used interviews, documents, observation, and open-ended questionnaires. This was found to be quite relevant to qualitative research methodology and the paradigm the student chose.

This raises questions about the assumed role of a paradigm in research. The question that has to be answered is whether it is within bounds to conduct qualitative research without identifying the paradigm. Furthermore, it could be that the researcher may still have a paradigm in mind without necessarily stating it in the study. There have been arguments to the effect that paradigms are not always necessary (Patton, 2002) and yet another school of thought postitulates that we cannot conduct research without a guiding paradigm (Schwandt, 2000).

When it came to research designs, the common research design was the descriptive survey. Out of the fifty dissertations analyzed thirty of them used the descriptive survey design. This constituted sixty percent of the dissertations analyzed. In that respect, all the dissertations were affected by the limitations of the survey research design. The noted limitations of the design include its lack of depth in what is being studied and secondly lack of reliability and validity by some of the instrument use in the descriptive survey (Leedy, 1989). The design influenced the analysis of data which tended to be descriptive in nature as well.

An analysis of the data collection instruments revealed that the commonly used data collection instrument was the questionnaire. They used both the open-ended and the structured questionnaires. Whilst the use of open-ended questionnaires has become acceptable in qualitative research, the use of structured questionnaires is still confined to quantitative research (Patton, 2002). The over use of the questionnaire at Masters level appeared to confirm studies by Kangai, et. al (2011) who noted that thirty five percent of

the undergraduate research projects they analyzed in the Faculty of Arts and Education at the same university relied on the questionnaire as the main data collection instrument.

6. Conclusions and Recommendations

The study was concerned with how Masters of Education in Educational Management students at Zimbabwe Open University handled the methodology section in their dissertations. It analyzed dissertations that purportedly used the qualitative research methodology. It focused on fifty dissertations submitted to the ZOU between 2008 and 2011. The study came up with the following conclusions:

It was noted that whilst most of the students preferred the qualitative research methodology, they had problems with the manner they handled the paradigm, research design and the data collection instruments they used. Whilst most dissertations were very clear on data collection instruments, there appeared to be lack of clarity on the use of questionnaires in qualitative research. In that regard it could be concluded that whilst most students found qualitative research easy to use in their dissertations there was a tendency to mix data collection methods and research designs that are normally associated with quantitative research methodology. In that regard students ended up using mixed methodology despite the stated methodology. In some instances students tended to concentrate on defining terms for research design without showing the relevance of the designs to their studies. They also used descriptive survey designs and case study designs. Whilst this could be tolerated at undergraduate level, the over-use of the descriptive survey tended to suggest the limitedness of the research techniques at that higher level.

The findings suggest that there was no clear position on research paradigm as some dissertations stated the paradigm and others did not. This tended to suggest that such decisions were left to the student and the supervisor. There is need for a strong and clear position on this matter. There is need for interventions and capacity building measures that prepare students and supervisors in different research methodologies. There is also need for workshops for students and supervisors to develop knowledge on the link between the methodology, paradigm, design and data collection instruments.

Furthermore, the study recommends that there be functional research committees at Faculty level where Masters students present their research proposals. The research proposals should be clear on the research methodologies and other related aspects of research for it get approved. This will assist in minimizing the gaps that appeared to exist in some of the dissertations. It further acts as an intervention that will promote and improve the quality of research at master's level.

The study focused on an analysis of Masters of Education in Educational Management dissertations and made use of a case study. Given the limitations of the case study, I propose that further studies be conducted in the area of research at higher institutions of learning.

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