

PGDE STUDENTS' CHALLENGES IN CONDUCTING ACTION RESEARCH AND THE WAY FORWARD

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ABSTRACT

The study explored challenges associated with conducting action research by Post Graduate Diploma in Education (PGDE) students at Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU). The study involved participants at ZOU Midlands regional campus. Data were generated from five lecturers who supervised action research and 30 students in PGDE Intake 13. An open-ended questionnaire was used to generate data from students while a focus group discussion was held with the lecturers. The study revealed that challenges were programme and lecturer related. Students had very inadequate knowledge on the theory of action research reports. The PGDE programme was regarded as not giving students sound preparation in action report theory and writing. Some supervisors lacked adequate knowledge on the essence of action research. The study recommended adequate action research theory coverage by students, use of a well-defined action research writing format by both supervisors and students and early allocation of students to supervisors, among other things.

Key words: action research, challenges

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1.1 Introduction

The Post Graduate Diploma in Education is one programme which develops teachers at ZOU. This study was conducted to generate students` and lecturers` views on the challenges faced as students did action research.

1.2 Background

At Zimbabwe Open University practising and prospective teachers are developed in several programmes, among which is the Post Graduate Diploma in Education (PGDE). The Post Graduate Diploma in Education programme runs for three University semesters. Five modules are offered during each of the first two semesters and six modules during the third semester. PGDE 105: Research Methods is one of the modules students are expected to cover in their first semester. In the third semester, students conduct action research (AR) while they also do Teaching Practice. One of the purposes of requiring students to do action research is to develop in students the skills of reflection and problem solving in didactic situations. Nonetheless, PGDE students in intakes 12 and 13 seemed to face challenges in conducting research. At a time when students in each of these intakes were expected to hand in completed action research reports for examination, some students failed to do so. Some students from intake 12 practically took two more semesters to hand in their action research projects. At the time students in intake 13 were expected to hand in their projects at the end of 2015, thirty-three out of forty-seven students were able to do so, most under much pressure. It was against this backdrop that this study was conducted.

1.3 Conceptual framework

“Action research is an attempt to address one’s own shortcomings through a process of systematic investigations. It is an approach to action that employs research techniques in the process of finding a solution to a problem.” [1: 14].

Hopkins (2002) as cited by [1] says action research is an action disciplined enquiry, a personal attempt at understanding while engaged in a process of improvement and reform. Thus the purpose of action research is to make an improvement in an existing situation which is perceived as having some inadequacies.

The relationship between action research and classroom practice is that the practitioner wants to address a perceived failure to achieve effective teaching and learning [1]. The focus of action research is therefore the self. The practitioner starts with questions in his/her mind which are then “resolved in the process of enquiry and action, that is, during reflection on action and in action and for action” [1:16.] Insights are then used to improve, reform or correct a negative didactic situation.

Methods used in the generation and analysis of data in action research “are prolonged observations, formal and informal conversations focus group discussions, in-depth interviews and document study” [1:16].

The main characteristic of action research is that it is practical, directed at researchers’ own concerns [1] citing Bogdan and Biklen, 1992. The self focuses on how she or he can overcome perceived problems. It focuses on a local problem in a local setting. The aim of the action researcher in education is to take “professional responsibility for what goes on” [1: 16]. Goal of action research is solving of immediate problems [7].

The practitioner becomes author of change to his practice. The action research cycle rests on four activities namely planning, acting, generating data and reflecting [7]. Nonetheless, “the structure of an action report has not been agreed by academics” [7:45].

1.4 Review of related Literature

In a study carried out by [6] it was established that students in the three universities involved in the study, failed to complete their research projects on time and that students consultations were not adequate.

In a study which involved participants at Great Zimbabwe University, Midlands State University and Zimbabwe Open University it was revealed that supervisors’ inadequate research skills and expertise, non-supportive relationship of supervisors with students and negative supervisor feedback posed problems to students research progress [2].

A study which involved students at a semi-open and distance learning teacher education in Harare, Zimbabwe, revealed that financial problems, poor communication, supervision by some lectures, lack of relevant literature (books and journals) had a negative impact on students’ progress in conducting action research [4]. Domestic and personal factors were established not to be significant in impacting negatively on students’ teacher progress [4].

While these studies were related to the current study in investigating student challenges in doing research, the study by [1] and [6], focused on the conducting of researches in general, while the current research focused on action research, as it was done by P.G.D.E students’ only. The current study involved students who were studying via the Open and Distance mode of learning.

1.5 Statement of the Problem

Conducting action research is a frantic and exhausting activity for both students and lecturers. There seem to be gaps between theoretical input received by students and the actual University expectations regarding action research.

1.6 Purpose of the study

The study sought to explore problems and challenges faced by PGDE students in doing action research.

1.7 Research questions

The study was guided by the following questions:

- What are the challenges faced by students in conducting action research?
- Why do students face challenges when conducting action research?
- How could the perceived challenges be overcome?

1.8 Research Methods and Methodology

Research method

The study employed the qualitative method. Qualitative research deals with peoples' perceptions [5]. In this study the qualitative method was used to explore the challenges faced by PGDE students in carrying out action research. The study involved participants at the ZOU Midlands regional campus only.

Population of the study

The target population for this research was forty-seven PGDE students in their third semester in 2015 and fifteen lecturers supervising PGDE students during action research.

Sample

Five lecturers were conveniently sampled for participation at a weekend school tutorial held on the 10th of October. Twenty students were conveniently sampled as they handed in their projects and the other ten were sampled on 10 October as they attended the weekend school tutorial. Thus thirty students participated in this study.

Data generation instruments

A focus group discussion was held with the lectures while students completed an open-ended questionnaire. Instrument and participant triangulation assisted in heightening trustworthiness and dependability of the generated data.

1.9 Data presentation, interpretation and discussion

1.9.1 Challenges faced by students in conducting action research and their causes

Participants opinioned several challenges which were faced by students in conducting action research. They also attributed the perceived challenges to several causes. Opinions

expressed by the students who completed the questionnaire were presented in Table 1 and views given by lecturers on the same question in a focus group discussion were presented through thick descriptions.

Table 1: Student views on challenges they faced in conducting action research

Stated Challenge	No. of responses	%
Lack of relevant action research theoretical input	24	80%
Time limitations	19	63%
Lack of adequate resources on action research	19	63%
Unclear guidelines	17	57%
Supervisors too busy to assist timeously	12	40%
Lack of effective communication from supervisors and University	16	53%
Heavy workload	10	33%
Delays by university authorities in assigning students to supervisors	12	40%
Lack of experience and expertise on conducting action research by some tutors	12	40%
No agreed format on what to include in an action research project	15	50%

Twenty four out of thirty students gave the view that lack of relevant research theoretical input was a challenge students faced while conducting action research. This opinion was also given by all the five lecturers who took part in the focus group discussion. In support of this some students had the following to point out:

S7 Lack of theoretical knowledge on action research is the challenge faced by most students.

S27 When I started the action research, I was in the dark regarding what I was to do.

S28 There is lack of teaching on action research. All we are told to do is 'Read the Diploma in education Primary action research module.'

One participant in the focus group echoed the same sentiment by saying:

Students lack theoretical knowledge on the essence of action research. They find it difficult to identify action research relevant problems, have difficulties in coming up with effective intervention strategy, let alone aligning results to the initial research questions.

In response to a question which required participants to give causes of the challenge of lack of relevant research theoretical input or knowledge, it was expressed by nineteen students and all participants in the focus group that the research methods module which students studied dwelt much more on traditional research rather than on action research. In support of this one lecturer pointed out:

The PGDE 105: Research Methods module has very scanty information on action research. All it has is just two paragraphs on action research, yet the module should be one of the key sources. Resultantly when students come for supervision they show gross lack of knowledge on action research.

The finding made in this study that students lacked relevant action research theoretical input is not in tandem with findings made in the studies by (2), (4) and (6). The possible reason could be that at the institutions where these studies were carried out, if students did action research, probably adequate coverage of the essence of action research reports was

given to the satisfaction of students and lecturers. The other reason could be that in some institutions and some programmes, students are expected to do basic research and not action research.

Time limitations was a challenge which was given by 19 out of 30 students and this challenge was also given by all participants in the focus group discussion. Among the 19 students who stated that time was a limitation, eleven expressed the opinion that they had problems in finding time to consult their tutors for action research. Seven students pointed out that tutors did not give feedback timeously. This was probably so, because at the time students are expected to be supervised they are also expected to be teaching since they will be doing teaching practice. Seventeen times, participants indicated that the deadline for submission of the action research projects for examination was unrealistic. Some students had the following to say:

S14 You start working on the research topic in the final semester, you are expected to do the research, apply the intervention and hand in the project mid-way the final semester.

S11 Time provided for A.R. is too little. One cannot do justice to the quality expected.

One lecturer also had the following contribution to make:

Students are expected to embark on the action research and complete the research and write a full report in just two months.

When asked to give the cause of the time challenges twelve students and participants in the focus group attributed the challenges to the ill-timing of the time students were supposed to embark on the action research. One lecturer had the following statement to make:

Time is a constraint. The PGDE programme requires students to register to do action research in the third semester, not any time earlier and this makes the whole activity hectic.

The finding made in this study that students got delayed feedback from tutors corroborates (2). Nonetheless, the ill timing of action research in the PGDE which was a finding made in this study does not support findings made by (2), (4) and (6).

The inadequacy of resources on action research was pointed out as one of the challenges students faced in doing action research by 19 out of 30 students. Only two out of five participants in the focus group discussion shared this opinion, some students had the following to say:

S12 There are no PGDE modules on action research.

S18 Textbooks are few that have information on action research.

While two focus group discussion participants shared the same view with 19 students that there were inadequate resources on action research, the other three were of the mind that much information on action research could be sourced from the internet. That students did not share this view with lecturers could be attributed to the tradition that PGDE students are used to, that of being provided with modules that deal directly with specified content for a given module. The inadequacy of action research was attributed by seventeen students to the lack of a PGDE module on action research. The finding made in this study that participants regarded action research resources as inadequate supports findings made in a study by (4).

The absence of clear guidelines on doing action research was a challenge echoed by 18 out of 30. Closely linked to this challenge, 15 students expressed the opinion that the absence of an agreed format on what to include in an action research report was a challenge. These views were expressed by lecturers in the focus group discussion. Some authenticating statements made by participants were as follows:

S17 The format is not clear to students and supervisors as well.

S9 I just started on action research without knowing where I was going.

Lecturers attributed the challenge of lack of clear guidelines and absence of an agreed format to the general fluidity in the writing of action research projects. This view is in

support of (3) who says that the structure of action research report has not been agreed upon by academics. Nonetheless, the finding made in this study that the absence of clear guidelines in doing action research is not in tandem in any of the studies reviewed in this study.

Lack of effective communication from research supervisors and the university was opined as a challenge in doing action research by 16 out of 30 students. Only one participant in the focus group discussion expressed this view. In support of the opinion that there was lack of effective communication by action research supervisors and the programme leaders one participant had the following to say:

S3 We only got to know about the submission deadline when it was late.

The one lecturer who was of the view that there was no effective communication from supervisors and the University, attributed this problem to student non-attendance at tutorials where critical issues are usually announced and to the fact that some students fail to get tutorial letters which provide information on deadlines. The finding made in this study that students did not get effective communication from tutors and University is not shared by (3), (4) and (6).

Twelve out of thirty students expressed the opinion that delays in assigning students to supervisors was one of the challenges students faced. This view was also shared by all the participants in the focus group. This challenge according to the ten students and the five lecturers was caused by demands in the PDGE department that students write proposals which are then marked and yet it took very long for some students to have their proposals marked and approved. In this study, twelve students also pointed out supervisors were too busy to assist students in good time. The finding made in this study in part supports findings by (4) who found out that delayed feedback hindered the successful competition of the research projects.

Ten out of 30 students gave the view that heavy workload on their part was a challenge that presented itself as they did action research. One participant had the following to say:

S13 Action research project and Teaching Practice are done concurrently and other four modules.

The view that heavy workload was a challenge in doing action research was not mentioned by participants in the focus group. This was probably due to the general understanding that action research is best done by the classroom practitioner. As a result, doing Teaching Practice and action research concurrently was apt.

Twelve students gave the view that tutor inadequate expertise and experience in supervising students' action research was a challenge some students faced. One student had the following to say in support of this view:

S19 My tutor wasted most of my time by not giving clear guidance on A.R. It was clear he lacked knowledge in the area.

Lecturers who took part in the focus group discussion expressed the same view that some tutors lacked necessary expertise and experience in supervising action research. The following statements from one of the lecturer bear testimony of this:

Some of us who are not working in teacher training colleges, where action is the in-thing have challenges. We do not have expertise and experience required in supervising action research. Reading about A.R. is not enough. We need to be empowered on supervising action research.

The finding made in this study that action research supervisors did not have adequate knowledge on action research is not in tandem with findings made in any of the researches reviewed in this study.

1.9.2 Suggestions made by participants on how the perceived challenges in doing action research could be overcome

Participants' views on how challenges in doing action research could be overcome were as is represented in Fig.1.

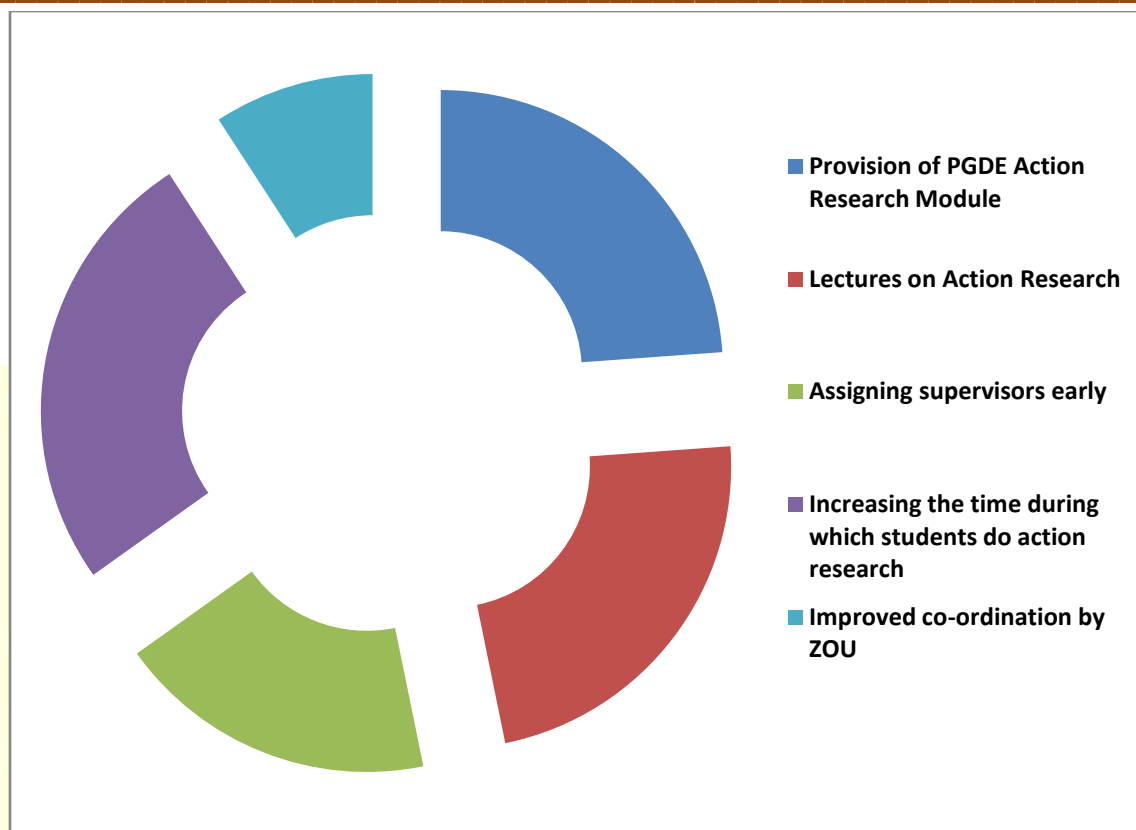


Fig: 1 Participants opinions on how perceived challenges could be overcome

Twenty eight out of 35 participants gave the suggestion that students should start doing their action early so that the activity is not left to the third semester. Twenty six out of 35 participants made the suggestion that the University should provide a PGDE action Research Module, while 25 participants proposed the use of lectures on action research. On this, one student wrote the following statement:

S19 Asking students to read on their own is not enough. This action research needs actual lectures to be delivered.

Twenty participants recommended that students should be assigned to lecturers in good time. One student simply wrote:

S4 Stop this proposal business. It wastes time. Allocate supervisors early.

Ten participants proposed that action research co-ordination be improved.

1.10. Conclusions and Recommendations

This study established that several challenges presented themselves as PGDE students did action research and causes of these challenges were mainly programme and institution-linked. The nature of theoretical input necessary to facilitate the conduct of action research was at stake and so was the time at which students were expected to start working on action research.

The researchers recommend the following:

- ✦ Adequate exposition of the essence of action research and the writing format of action research reports to students
- ✦ Reviewing of the PGDE 105: Research Methods, so that it covers adequate content on the essence of action research and the writing of action reports
- ✦ Increasing the number of semesters over which students register and do action research to at least two semesters so that good quality work can be produced.
- ✦ Early assigning of students to supervisors so that students can get ample help as they embark on action research to avoid last minute rush.
- ✦ Use of a common format for writing action research by supervisors and students, so as to strike uniformity.
- ✦ Workshops for lecturers on action research.

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