

Unearthing the Gaps of Dissertations: Input for Institutional Research Policy Formulation

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Abstract

One of the key objectives of this study was to discover gaps and inconsistencies in dissertations prepared by Cagayan State University graduate students enrolled in the Doctor of Philosophy in Education with a concentration in Educational Administration program. Using qualitative content analysis of dissertations, the researchers were able to identify characteristics and gaps that needed to be addressed in order to enhance dissertation writing management practices. Ninety-two (92) of the 124 dissertations were subjected to full enumeration in order to conduct content analysis. On the basis of three different experts' assessments of the gaps in the dissertations, a round-table discussion was held to obtain a consensus on the gaps. An Auditors' Focus Group Discussion was held following that, in which the auditors, together with the researcher and her consultant, participated (FGD). This results in the reduction of over-researched titles and themes, the identification of specialists to serve as consultants, and the establishment of the direction of investigations. Additionally, it is advised that the graduate school establish a plan for graduate students to meet with their advisers and statisticians. In addition, the strategy should take into consideration a system model of research supervision, which includes a defined set of stages as well as stringent oversight methods. The issue of irregular consultations must be resolved by both parties coming to an agreement on how frequently students should consult in order to put an end to it. Their face-to-face meetings are no longer necessary because they can connect with one another through online tools and services.

Keyword: gaps, dissertations, research policy formulation,

Introduction

In recent years, the quality of dissertations written as part of an educational program at various schools has been a serious concern. According to the findings of the studies, dissertation quality varies from dissertation to dissertation, with overall quality being low. Many faculty members agree that it is rare to come across an extraordinary dissertation (Boote&Beile 2005; Lovitts 2005). Furthermore, contradictions in the quality of the dissertation have been identified (Basturkmen et al. 2014; Nelson, Range & Ross 2012).

Following the need to improve the quality of graduate school education and the production of quality dissertations in the country, the Commission on Higher Education issued CHED Memorandum Order No. 15, s. 2019, also known as the Policies, Standards, and Guidelines for Graduate Programs, in response to the need to improve the quality of graduate school education and the production of quality dissertations in the country. In particular, this

issuance requires the submission of dissertations to national and international refereed journals in accordance with the definition that doctoral programs lead to advanced research qualifications and are devoted to advanced study and original research, as defined by the National Science Foundation. As a result of this provision, graduate programs are pushed to concentrate on research for publication rather than only as a prerequisite for graduation.

Due to this setting, this study attempts to fill four (4) critical gaps in the existing literature. First and foremost, given previous study findings indicating that dissertation quality is frequently inadequate and therefore

Because the quality of dissertations varies from one to the next, it is necessary to assess the substantive and methodological aspects, as well as the overall quality of the dissertation, as input for planning research management enhancement. As a result of Globalization, Regional Integration, Internalization of HEI, and the Fourth Industrial Revolution, there is an increasing pressure for Higher Education to raise standards and improve the quality of research in order to meet the demands of these trends (CHED Memo No. 5, s. 2019). Third, there is a need to improve the production of high-quality research that enhances the contribution of CSU graduate school in knowledge production (research), knowledge sharing and exchange (teaching), knowledge application and utilization (extension), and knowledge commercialization (commercialization of knowledge) (production). It is necessary, fourth, to enhance the number of research papers published by faculty and students in national and international journals for the purposes of SUC leveling, PBB, and accreditation by fostering teacher-student collaboration in research projects.

Content Analysis is being used in this study to sort through the vast number of dissertations that have been submitted. As stated by Stemler, S., the practical use of Content Analysis in this research is considered beneficial in examining trends and patterns in the dissertations of Educational Management graduates (2000).

In light of the preceding backdrop, this work fills four (4) critical gaps. First, given previous study findings that dissertation quality is generally poor and inconsistent between dissertations, it is necessary to assess content and methodological aspects, as well as dissertation quality, as input for planning research management enhancement. Second, in response to the demands of Globalization, Regional Integration, HEI Internalization, and the Fourth Industrial Revolution, there is a growing desire for Higher Education to improve standards and research quality (CHED Memo No. 5, s. 2019). . However, due to a variety of interplaying elements attributed to students, structures, and procedures in graduate school, much is required to increase the quality of dissertations. Through knowledge production (research), information sharing and exchange (teaching), knowledge application and usage (extension), and knowledge commercialization, the university may contribute even more to the quest and improvement of educational theory and practice (production).

Statement of the Problem

1. What are the gaps and areas needed to be addressed in improving the dissertations?

Research Methodology

Research Design

The study used a mixed research design in examining the dissertations in educational management. The quantitative design was utilized in determining the substantive and methodological characteristics as well as in ascertaining the congruence of the dissertations relative to CHED, DepEd, and CSU research agenda. On the other hand, the qualitative design was used in investigating the quality and gaps in the dissertation. In both designs, content analysis was employed which, according to Bozkurt, et al. (2015), is an effective research method that employs both quantitative and qualitative approaches to study the patterns of data and draw conclusions from them.

Locale of the Study

The dissertations which were content-analyzed were the outputs of the graduates in Doctor of Philosophy in Education major in Educational Management which include dissertations of graduates in the three campuses of the university offering the same degree namely Andrews, Aparri, and Sanchez Mira.

Study Participants

Fourteen study participants were included in the study namely, seven Ph.D. graduates, four graduate school professors and three dissertation auditors. The inclusion criteria for selecting the graduates are as follows: (a) they must have been graduates of SY 2014 – 2018; (b) their students must have been selected among the thirty dissertations which were randomly sampled; (c) they were willing and available for interview. On the other hand, the inclusion criteria for choosing the graduate school professors were as follows: (a) they must have taught in the graduate school for ten years or more; (b) they must be graduate of Ph. In Educational Management and (c) they were handling dissertation advisees for five years or more. (d) they were willing and available for interview.

Finally, the inclusion criteria for selecting the three dissertation auditors include (a) they must have expertise along educational management (b) they must have acted as dissertation advisers; (c) they must have published researches in international and national refereed journals; and (d) they were willing and available to become auditors of the dissertations.

Sampling Procedure

Complete enumeration was utilized in examining the dissertations which were content-analyzed. The Graduation Programme invitations were the bases for determining the list of graduates and the titles of dissertations. Of the 124 dissertations produced within the period covered, only 92 (74.19%) out of 124 dissertations were reviewed for this study. The 32 (25.81%) of the dissertations were either eaten by termites; lost due to borrowing; and not submitted before graduation. Table 1 shows the number of dissertations in the campuses of the university.

Research Instrument

The researcher utilized two instruments in the study namely, Dissertation's Substantial and Methodological Checklist and Rubric for Dissertation Quality. The Checklist instrument was divided into three sections. Part I uncovered the substantive characteristics of the dissertation which includes area of the study, locale of the study, and respondents/participants of the study. Part II determined the methodological characteristics of the dissertation which includes the research design, research method, sampling technique, research instrument, source of data collection tool, statistical analysis, and publication. Part III ascertained the congruence of the dissertation relative to the research agenda of CHED, DepEd and CSU. Before the checklist was used in the study, it underwent validation by the experts to determine whether it is useful, reliable, and valid in gathering the needed data.

On the other hand, the Rubric for Dissertation Quality determined the quality of the dissertations based on the following dimensions: (a) articulation and originality of a question of interest/Problem statement; (b) comprehensive literature review; (c) methodology; (d) communication of results; and (e) discussion of results/implication for future research. Using the same rubric, the three independent auditors also examined the strengths, weaknesses, and gaps of the dissertations.

The foregoing instruments were designed by the researcher and validated by the research experts. The computed Cronbach's Alpha of the Checklist is .716 while the rubric has .811 which means that both have good reliability.

Analysis of Data

Following the procedures of quantitative content analysis, the researcher examined the content of the dissertations according to pre-set categories and codes. Descriptive analysis (frequencies, percentages, and ranks) was employed for the substantive and methodological characteristics of the dissertations as well as their congruence to CHED, DepEd, and CSU Research Agenda. Moreover, the quality of dissertations was determined using the following scale:

3.25-4.00 – Excellent – Dissertation meets far better than the minimum standards

2.50-3.24 – Good – Dissertation meets more than the required minimum standards

1.75-2.49 – Fair - Dissertation meets most of the required minimum standard

1:00-1.74 – Poor - Dissertation is below the minimum standard

To ascertain the gaps and areas needed to be addressed in improving the dissertations, thematic analysis was utilized during the round table discussion. This ensured the consensus of the three experts on common themes to be used for interpretation.

Discussion of Results and Findings

Gaps and Areas Needed to be Addressed for Improving the Dissertations

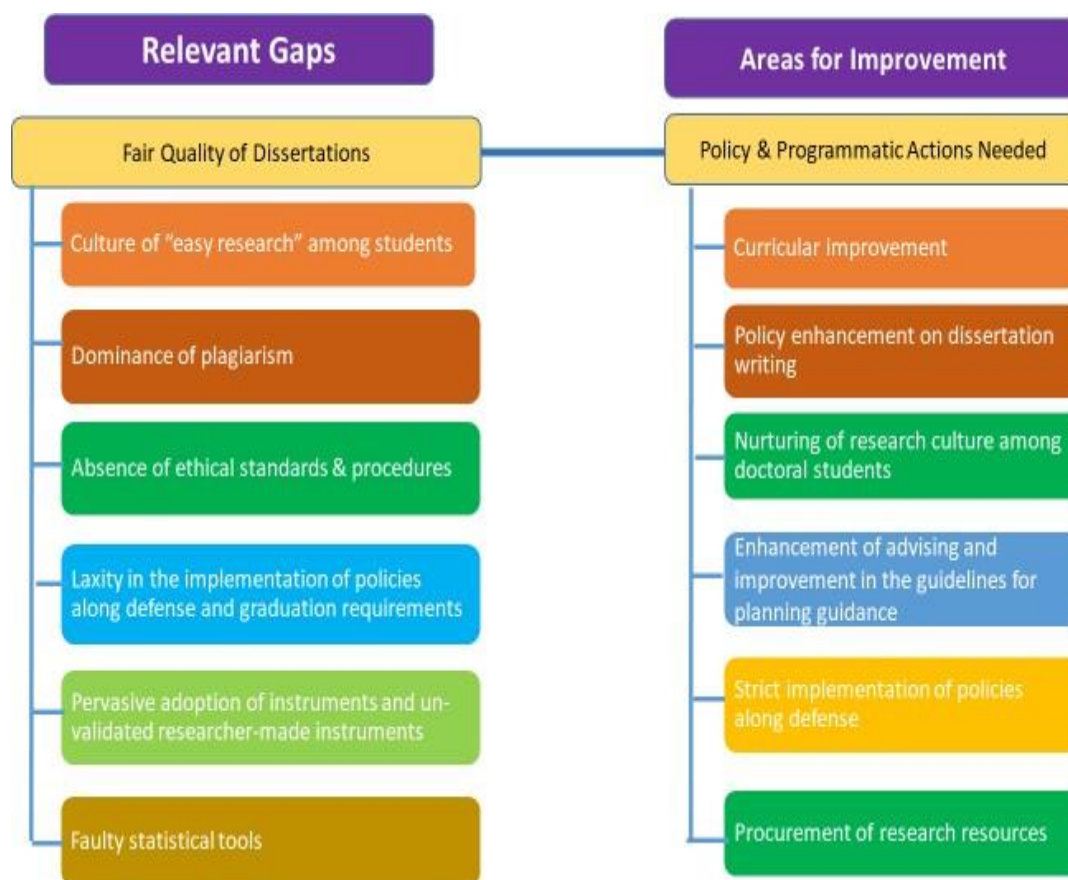


Figure 2. Gaps and Areas Needed to be Addressed for Improving the Dissertations

As illustrated in Figure 2, there are various gaps and opportunities for improvement in the dissertations that must be addressed. The results of the evaluators' thematic analysis suggest that the most significant gap is the "fair quality of the dissertations." However, while it may appear that such a disparity may be attributed solely and directly to the students, it can be explained by a variety of interrelated factors, including the professors, organizational structures, and procedures in place at the graduate school.

The first aspect to consider is the attitude of students toward research. A focus group with the evaluators revealed that the majority of graduate students prefer to perform "simple research," that is, research that can be completed quickly and with little effort, time, or price. The evaluators are unanimous in their assessment that this is the primary cause of the problem because it has various negative consequences. Students are influenced by this negative attitude to easily adopt instruments and restudy the same research themes that have already been studied by other researchers, so losing the freshness and originality of their work. The assessors also voiced concern that this could result in poor methodology because students are unwilling to adopt robust methodologies such as the triangulation approach in

their data collection. The majority of the time, they rely significantly on one technique of data collection, which is the survey approach.

In addition, there has been evidence of plagiarism in some dissertations, which may have been done either purposefully or unintentionally by graduate students in some cases. They all agree that such a condition exists because the proposal and final papers are not subjected to a plagiarism check before being submitted for evaluation. Moreover, they indicated that the institution has not purchased plagiarism detection tools to determine how much of the dissertations' material has been plagiarized as of this writing. It was also stated that the graduate school's policies on plagiarism should be updated and aggressively enforced, and that these policies should be communicated to students during the graduate school orientation program and prior to the subject of their dissertation writing project. According to Gilmore et al. (2010), unintentional plagiarism is common among graduate students who "may not have received explicit instruction in paraphrasing, lack an understanding of what constitutes plagiarism, or are unaware of proper citation methods." The presence of plagiarism in the students' dissertation outputs corroborates their findings. The author, Walker (2010), states that plagiarism is at a "moderate" level when less than 20% of improper text borrowing occurs, while it is at a "extensive" level when more than 20% of inappropriate text borrowing occurs. Journal publishing, on the other hand, only allow less than ten percent (10%) of the total.

The third problem is that there is insufficient adherence to ethical standards and procedures when doing dissertation research. The majority of dissertations, according to the evaluators, have not fully followed with the ethical norms by acquiring the Free and Prior Informed Consent (FPIC) from their respondents or participants in the first place. They also stated that this occurs as a result of the graduate school's failure to enforce strict adherence to ethical standards in research. Aside from this, they discovered that the proposal defense did not thoroughly analyze the ethical norms and processes of a dissertation project. Furthermore, there has been no development of an institutionalized FPIC template for use by dissertation writers. The insufficient adherence to ethical standards and procedures on the part of the dissertation writers is consistent with the findings of a study conducted by Kjellström, Fridlund, and Ross (2010), which revealed that research ethics are inadequately covered in the majority of dissertations written by Swedish nurses. Their contention is that fundamental ethical concerns are absent, and that the complexity of reasoning on ethical principles, reasons, and implications is inadequate. While this may be attributable to the fact that traditions and norms tend to overlook ethical considerations, it may also be a reflection of the ability of PhD students and supervisors to deal with the inherent complexity of dissertation writing as a whole.

Another issue is the lack of rigor with which policies regarding final defense and necessary graduation criteria are implemented. Because several university regulations are already codified norms, the majority of the assessors stressed the need to have the following policies strictly enforced at the university: Even if the adviser certifies that the dissertation is ready for oral presentation, the dissertation must be screened before it is scheduled for final defense; (b) members of the panel must be selected based on their expertise in the field or in

the topic of the dissertation; (c) defense must be scheduled a week after the manuscripts have been forwarded to the panel members; (d) Minutes of the Meeting during proposal defense must be reviewed prior to the conduct of final defense; and (e) the dissertation must be submitted to the committee

The fifth point to mention is the widespread use of instruments, as well as the usage of unvalidated researcher-made instruments. The evaluators uniformly concluded that several graduate students used foreign tools to measure their constructs, and that this was unethical. A few of these instruments are either not culturally appropriate or do not fit into the Philippine environment. They also pointed out that some researcher-made instruments were employed without having been subjected to face and content validation before being used in study. To put it another way, these instruments are unable to reliably measure the constructs under consideration in the study. Graduate students who were affected by this case were either instructed to refloat or their grades were deferred until they had improved their interpretation and analysis of the situation.

The sixth point to mention is the use of improper statistical tools. Statistics-trained specialists indicated that some statistical methods and analyses are erroneous, according to two assessors who made the assertion. For example, one reviewer pointed out that one study utilized the T-test and Pearson r to run nominal variables, which are statistical tools that are categorically incorrect in this situation. This is demonstrated by the fact that no statistician is present during the proposal and final defense. As a result, the statistical component of the investigations is not thoroughly explored. These findings prompted them to recommend that a statistician be present at all dissertation defenses, especially those involving quantitative data analysis, because their experience is critical in boosting the overall quality of students' dissertations.

Evaluations suggested the following policy and programmatic actions to close the gap in producing fair quality dissertations: (a) curricular improvement for PhD. in Educational Management; (b) policy enhancement on dissertation writing; (c) promotion of a research culture among doctoral students; (d) improvement in the guidelines for research planning guidance; (e) strict implementation of policies throughout the dissertation defense process; and (f) procurem for doctoral students.

Surprisingly, the reviewers primarily recommended that graduate school curriculum be improved as a primary strategy for producing high-quality dissertations. In this vein, evaluators have stressed the necessity to execute CHED Memorandum Order No. 15, s. 2019, which directs the adoption of new policies, standards, and guidelines for graduate programs, as soon as possible. The following was said by one of the evaluators: "I believe that it is past time for the graduate school to embrace the research track at the doctoral level." This means that no graduate student will be awarded a degree until his or her paper (or a portion of it) has been published in a professional journal. This is presently being done in leading universities in Manila as a response to the push for SUC leveling, internationalization, Outcomes-based Education, and ASEAN integration, all of which have been endorsed by the government. If this is implemented, the graduate school's curricula will be tailored to prepare students for

advanced research positions, as the CMO needs a commitment to advanced study and unique research.

Another aspect that might be improved is the graduate school's policy and guidelines on dissertation writing, as well as the strict application of those policies and procedures. The evaluators were unanimous in their conclusion that the outdated instructions or manual for dissertation preparation in the graduate school should be reviewed and updated as soon as possible. Thus, such has not been addressed in many years, and any revisions or enhancements should be formalized and distributed to graduate students so that they can adhere to the rules and regulations to the letter. Unfortunately, even the most basic structure has not been established throughout all university campuses. One evaluator vividly captured such condition in these words: *“As a professor in the graduate school for many years, I am aware that there has been manual for dissertation writing to guide our students. This we used as early as 1990’s when we opened the graduate school. To this date, however, the manual for dissertation writing has never been circulated, updated, or cascaded to students. This is the reason why the dissertation format is not uniform across campuses as we observe now.”*

Moreover, nurturance of a research culture among doctoral students is one area that is needing improvement. As claimed by some evaluators: *“So far, graduate students have the old mentality of coming up with a dissertation that is for mere compliance. Students want to conduct a research that is easy without thinking of its impactful contribution to the existing body of knowledge. The culture of being a seeker of knowledge is yet to be developed among them.”* In light of this insight, the assessors proposed various ways for bringing it to fruition. To begin, graduate schools should regularly perform research dissemination activities because this might serve as an excellent source of inspiration for future dissertation writers. Maintaining students' awareness of high-quality outputs created by graduate students and faculty members is the most effective way of spreading the word about the importance of high-quality dissertation standards. It is also the responsibility of the graduate school to organize research workshops and seminars on the many elements and methodologies of research, with a particular emphasis on qualitative research approaches and methods. During the workshops, the students will learn how to improve their research abilities, while the seminars will provide an opportunity for them to present the results of their study to their peers, colleagues, and supervisors for the goal of receiving feedback in a non-threatening environment.

Given the importance of advisers in the creation of quality dissertations, the assessors advised that existing guidelines on advising and dissertation preparation advice be strengthened further. They advised that dissertation names and problem statements be examined first by a pool of experts or an office in comparison to a list of dissertation titles that have already been conducted at the university in question. As a result, over-researched titles and themes are reduced, the identification of specialists to serve as advisers is ensured, and the direction of investigations is established. In a similar vein, it is recommended that the graduate school develop a schedule for graduate students to confer with their advisers and statisticians. In addition, the plan should take into account a system model of research supervision, with a defined set of stages and tight monitoring procedures. In order to resolve

the issue of irregular consultations, it is necessary for both parties to reach an agreement on how frequently students should consult. They are not need to meet face-to-face all of the time because they can communicate using online tools and resources.

As Moira (2011) claims *“research supervision, as a form of teaching, includes a commitment to maintaining standards as a reviewer and an examiner as well as to being a supervisor. Supervisors need to be actively engaged in research related activities in which they can collaborate with their students so that they can perfect their research skills and at the same time rubbing their research skills on to their students.”* Another suggested area for improvement is to enforce a strict implementation of existing and proposed policies along defense and graduation. Numerous recommendations were provided by the evaluators relative to this concern. For example, the time-gap in the schedule for proposal defense and final defense must be considered. As observed by some evaluators, some students just finish their studies in barely two to three months causing haphazard production of their dissertations. Sadly, they are recommended for defense by their respective advisers even if the papers are not yet well-written. Furthermore, questionnaires must be perused by the panel members before its use in the data gathering process. They, too, must be subjected for face and content validation to ensure that the constructs are measured appropriately. For qualitative researches, the transcriptions of the FGD or interview have to be appended to guarantee that they indeed conducted the process. Researchers must also show how they arrived at the themes based on the transcripts. Transcript of the minutes of the meeting has to be prepared and to be placed on top of the full manuscript to make sure that agreements during the proposal defense were properly complied.

According to some evaluators, implementing the foregoing undertakings can possibly address the issues along: (a) haphazard scheduling of defense without determining whether or not the paper is ready for presentation; (b) mismatch of panel members' expertise in the field or topic presented; and (c) absence of statistician to examine appropriateness of statistical tools and analysis used in the paper.

Moreover, the evaluators recommended for the procurement of research resources and establishment of support system that are essential in writing the students' dissertations. According to them, a very important resource to be procured is the plagiarism detection software which helps in determining how much of the write-ups are copied from somebody else's work. If this will be available, then the dream of publishing dissertations in international referred journal will be possible. It must be stressed that graduate students are not exempt from committing plagiarism. According to Ison (2012), 72 % of the dissertations had at least one case of improper paraphrasing and citation (verbatim text accompanied by a citation) and 46 % had verbatim text without any citation. Journals (in print or in electronic copies) are also research resources that need to be available and accessed by dissertation writers. Evaluators revealed that students are very much reliant on google scholar because the library has inadequate and outdated journal collections on educational management. They also suggested that the research office of the university particularly the statisticians may extend their technical assistance to the dissertation writers with minimal fee. Accessing their

expertise may aid them in providing a clearer direction and better research outputs in the graduate school.

Recommendation

On the basis of the aforementioned conclusions, the following recommendations are presented:

1. In order to make dissertations relevant in the cultivation of research and innovation in the country, it is encouraged that the Graduate School Management strictly implement the Policies, Standards, and Guidelines for Graduate Programs embodied in CHED Memorandum order No. 15, series of 2019 in order to make dissertations relevant in the cultivation of research and innovation in the country;
2. The Graduate School Management is encouraged to formulate a Research Management Policy Framework and proposed Action Plans for the Improvement of Graduate Schools.
3. Future dissertation writers are encouraged to conduct research in the area of child protection, which encompasses bullying, teen pregnancy, child maltreatment, addiction, and media consumption. Furthermore, they are urged to investigate studies in the areas of Multiple Intelligences/Learning Styles, Disaster Risk Management, and Inclusive Education, as these are topic areas that are still largely untapped in the current literature.

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