

Evaluation of attitude and Behaviour of Nigerian Dental Students to Their Research Dissertations by Their Academic Supervisors

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ABSTRACT

Background/Aim: This study aimed to evaluate supervisors' perceptions of the attitudes and behaviour of undergraduate dental students to their dissertation projects.

Materials and Methods: A questionnaire survey of all academic staff of the Faculty of Dentistry, Obafemi Awolowo University Ile-Ife, Nigeria, who were involved in the training and supervision of final-year dental students' dissertations between 2013 and 2017 was carried out to record the supervisors' perceptions of their supervisees' behaviour, performance, preparedness and the challenges encountered during their research work. Data were analysed using descriptive and analytical statistics with SPSS version 16. Statistical significant level was set at $P < 0.05$.

Results: Seventeen of the 19 eligible academic staff participated in the study. Most supervisors (70%) especially of the male gender and the senior supervisors perceived the supervisees as inexperienced and lacked good understanding of the dissertation process even though majority of supervisees (58.8%) were motivated. Nevertheless, more than one-half (52.9%) were perceived to have improved in the course of the project. The perception of male supervisors with regards to the importance attached to dissertation process by supervisees was significantly ranked low (3.8+0.7) when compared to the female supervisors (5.6+0.5) ($P < 0.05$). The supervisees' challenges were in the domain of understanding the research process and meeting deadlines.

Conclusion: Supervisees were perceived to be motivated, but majority of the supervisors, particularly, the male and senior supervisors, felt that the supervisees were inadequately prepared and lacked good understanding of dissertation process as a result of limited academic research experience, poor supervision and guidance.

Key words: Dental, dissertation, Nigeria, research supervisors, supervisees, undergraduate student

How to cite this article: Otuyemi OD, Olaniyi EA. Evaluation of attitude and behaviour of Nigerian dental students to their research dissertations by their academic supervisors. *Niger J Health Sci* 2019;19:56-61.

INTRODUCTION

The Nigerian dental undergraduate curricula have been designed with a clear-cut programme philosophy and objectives of training to produce high-quality graduates and scholars in the focal area of dentistry with theoretical, practical and entrepreneurial skills.¹⁻⁴ Apart from the training philosophy, individual- or group-directed research experiences are encouraged among the final-year dental students to foster critical thinking and appraisal skills and also to develop

proper understanding of research required for evidence-based dental practice.⁵ Apart from providing a transition between coursework and independent research, the outcome of the research exercise may result in publishable scientific work which may be beneficial to both the student and the supervisor.⁶

All across the globe, the ability to carry out an independent research is perceived as an estimate of a student's academic character, competence and capability, and therefore, the priority placed on this aspect of training cannot be overemphasised.^{7,8} Todd *et al.*⁷ opined that undergraduate dissertation serves as

Submitted: 17-May-2020 Revised: 21-Jun-2020

Accepted: 15-Aug-2020 Published: 30-May-2022

Access this article online

Quick Response Code:



Website:
www.chs-journal.com

DOI:
10.4103/njhs.njhs_19_20

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a vehicle for student learning in research methodology and a proper understanding of the process at undergraduate level is of a lifelong advantage. However, there has been a very limited research work carried out in this area, especially in Nigeria, to determine the impact of research activities on student performance and satisfaction and, in particular, the perceptions and attitudes of academic supervisors.⁹⁻¹²

To date, the undergraduate dental dissertations have never been audited or evaluated despite six decades of dental training in Nigeria, apart from the recently published work by Otuyemi and Olaniyi.¹³ This study, therefore, was to evaluate retrospectively the academic supervisors' perceptions of the attitudes and behaviour of final-year Nigerian undergraduate dental students from Obafemi Awolowo University Ile-Ife, Nigeria, to dissertation performance over a 5-year period from 2013 to 2017.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This was a retrospective study conducted among all the academic members of staff of the Faculty of Dentistry Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife, who also participated in the training and supervision of final-year dental students between 2013 and 2017. The study involved the distribution of open- and close-ended questionnaires to all the project supervisors in the institution.

Ethical approval was obtained from the Health Research Ethic Committee of Institute Public Health, Obafemi Awolowo University Ile-Ife, Nigeria, with Reference No. IPH/OAU/12/1115.

The respondents comprised 19 academic members of staff on ground between 2013 and 2017. The inclusion criteria were those who had supervised one or more candidates and were ready to participate in the study.

A questionnaire was designed for all the academic supervisors which was divided into four sections [Appendix 1]; the first section was based on sociodemographic information of the supervisors, the second section assessed supervisors' perceptions of students' behaviour towards the research work while the third section was a Likert's scale to rank the supervisors' perception of their supervisees with regard to the level of general performance and preparedness to the dissertation process. The fourth section assessed the challenges encountered by the supervisees during the research work from the perspectives of the supervisors.

An e-mail was sent to all the academic supervisors using the Google form platform as a tool for data collection and requesting their participation in the study. Once an informed consent was received, the questionnaire was then dispatched to the participants and the completed questionnaire was returned via the same e-mail medium. The confidentiality of the members of staff was preserved by transferring all data to a password encrypted Google drive storage which was only accessible by one of the investigators (O.E.A). The questionnaire was piloted to three randomly selected

lecturers 4 weeks before the commencement of the survey. This was to seek their views on improving the quality of the questionnaire. Those who did not respond to the first e-mail were sent reminders.

Data were analysed using mainly descriptive and analytical statistics on an IBM compatible personal computer with SPSS Version 16 (IBM Corp, Armonk, NY, USA. Statistical significant level was set at $P < 0.05$.

RESULTS

Of all the eligible 19 academic staff, only 17 staff responded. Two staff did not respond despite that they were sent follow-up e-mails giving a response rate of 89.5%.

The sociodemographic characteristics of the academic supervisors

The male supervisors constituted about two-thirds of the academic staff in the faculty. More than one-half of the academic members of staff were in the professorial grade (58.8%) and majority had spent more than 10 years as full-time academic staff. Most of the academic staff (82.4%) were involved in students' supervision for more than three academic sessions during the study period and many of them (64.7%) had supervised more than 4 students [Table I].

Academic supervisors' perception of their supervisees' behaviour on the dissertation projects

Majority of the supervisors (70.6%) felt that the supervisees did not have good understanding of dissertation process before the commencement of research work. Most supervisors in the professorial grade (80.0%) felt that their supervisees did not demonstrate good understanding of the research process before its commencement compared with those in the junior lectureship cadre (57.1%). However, the difference was not statistically significant ($P > 0.05$). More than one-half of the

Table I: Sociodemographic characteristics of the academic supervisors

Variable	Frequency (%)
Gender	
Male	11 (64.7)
Female	6 (35.3)
Rank	
Professorial grade	10 (58.8)
Lectureship grade	7 (41.2)
Length of time as full-time academic staff	
≤10	7 (41.2)
>10	10 (58.8)
Number of times involved in student supervision	
≤3	3 (17.6)
>3	14 (82.4)
Number of students supervised in last 5 years	
≤4	6 (35.3)
>4	11 (64.7)
Total	17 (100.0)

supervisors (58.8%) believed that the level of motivation of their supervisees at the onset of the research dissertation was adequate and satisfactory. More female supervisors (66.7%) felt that the level of motivation of their supervisees at the onset of the research work was adequate compared to their male counterparts (54.6%). Two-thirds of the female supervisors (66.7%) felt that the level of motivation of their supervisees improved as the research work progressed and at the end of the research work when compared with <one-half of their male counterparts (45.5%) during the period [Table II].

Ranking of academic supervisors' perceptions of their supervisees' level of preparedness and general behaviour towards research work

In Table III, we report the ranking of academic supervisors' perceptions of their supervisees' level of preparedness and general behaviour towards research work using one-way ANOVA. The male supervisors rated their supervisees' general performance and understanding of the research process as less impressive, when compared to their female counterparts. Generally, the male supervisors felt their supervisees were less prepared to undertake research project with a mean rank score of 3.9 ± 1.2 compared to their female counterparts with a higher mean rank score of 5.0 ± 1.0 . However, the difference was not statistically significant ($P > 0.05$). The male supervisors also felt the students did not attach much importance to the research work with a mean rank score of 3.8 ± 0.7 , when compared to their female supervisors with a mean rank score of 5.6 ± 0.5 . The gender difference among the supervisors was statistically significant ($P < 0.05$). Despite the fact that the supervisors reported setting research deadlines for supervisees, the students only met these deadlines less frequently with the male supervisors, when compared with their female counterparts with mean scores of 4.4 ± 1.6 and 5.1 ± 2.4 , respectively. Again, the ability to provide answers to research questions raised during the process and keeping

appointment with supervisors were perceived as less effective by the male than the female supervisors.

Challenges confronting the dental students during the dissertation and methods of resolving them according to their supervisors

Some of the male supervisors (45.5%) considered the inability to meet research deadlines as the main challenge being faced by the supervisees, while some female supervisors (50.0%) considered lack of general understanding of the research process as the main challenge confronting the supervisees during the period. However, there was no statistically significant difference between the supervisors with regard to gender ($P > 0.05$). Majority of the supervisors, irrespective of their gender and faculty status, considered inadequate research training as the main challenge confronting the supervisees. Less than 20% of the male and almost one third of the female (33.3%) supervisors as well as supervisors in the professorial grade (20.0%) proposed early introduction of research methodology course to students as a means of improving the dissertation process in the faculty. However, those supervisors in the junior lectureship grade (57.1%) opined that the research project be conducted only during community dentistry posting [Table IV].

DISCUSSION

The central purpose of this study was to evaluate retrospectively the perceptions of the attitudes and behaviour of final-year Nigerian undergraduate dental students to dissertation performance from the supervisory point of view. Cullen¹⁴ argued that individual supervisors' style has a major role to play in the relationship and outcome of such process; however, the way in which the supervisor's style influences the relationship has been largely ignored. From this study, majority of the academic members of staff did not believe that the students had a good

Table II: Academic supervisors' perceptions of supervisees' behaviour on the conduct of undergraduate dissertation

	Male	Female	Total	χ^2	P	Professorial grade (%)	Lectureship grade (%)	Total	χ^2	P
Having good understanding by the supervisees										
Yes	3 (27.3)	2 (33.3)	5 (29.4)	0.80	0.069	2 (20.0)	3 (42.9)	5	0.30	0.59
No	8 (72.7)	4 (66.7)	12 (70.6)			8 (80.0)	4 (57.1)	12		
Total	11 (100.0)	6 (100.0)	17 (100.0)			10 (100.0)	7 (100.0)			
Motivation/enthusiasm at the onset of the project by the supervisees										
Adequate	6 (54.6)	4 (66.7)	10 (58.8)		0.627	6 (60.0)	4 (57.1)	10	0.24	0.63
Inadequate	5 (45.5)	2 (33.3)	7 (41.2)	0.23		4 (40.0)	3 (42.9)	7		
Total	11 (100.0)	6 (100.0)	17 (100.0)			10 (100.0)	7 (100.0)	17		
Motivation/enthusiasm during/at end of the project by supervisees										
Improved	5 (45.5)	4 (66.7)	9 (52.9)	4.35	0.114	5 (50.0)	4 (57.1)	9	0.12	0.94
Worsened	5 (45.5)	0 (0.00)	5 (29.4)			3 (30.0)	2 (28.6)	5		
Indifferent	1 (9.0)	2 (33.3)	3 (17.7)			2 (20.0)	1 (14.3)	3		
Total	11 (100.0)	6 (100.0)	17 (100.0)			10 (100.0)	7 (100.0)	17		

grasp of the dissertation process before its commencement. This may largely be related to not only inadequate exposure to

research methodology but also the casual importance attached to the research exercise by the students. In our institution, even though the dissertation process is mandatory and contributes 20% to the overall course assessment in community dentistry, there have been some concerns raised by supervisors in the faculty as to whether dissertation should be made compulsory, optional or totally abolished and replaced with something more practical in nature to assess students' learning during their study programme. Others also believed that dissertations should only be limited to postgraduate studies. These views were also expressed in an exploratory study of 67 lecturers in the Business School of University of Huddersfield, UK.¹²

It seems that gender and experience of supervisors tend to influence their perceptions to the conduct of research dissertation by the final-year Nigerian undergraduate dental students in this population. Male and senior supervisors in the professorial cadre tend to perceive the supervisees as less equipped but well motivated for the research exercise. It may be argued that female supervisors tend to be more empathetic and serve as positive role models as well as encouragers to the dental students during the process of dissertation than their male counterparts. The perceptions and the attitudes of the female supervisors in this respect may appear to feel the void of supervisees' deficiencies, and this could increase the students' motivation and engagement, thus increasing their level of performance in the dissertation process. On the other

Table III: Ranking of academic supervisors' perception of their supervisees' level of preparedness and general behaviour towards the undergraduate dissertation process using one-way ANOVA

	Mean ± SD		P
	Male	Female	
Rating of general performance of supervisees	5.3±1.7	5.6±1.2	0.672
Understanding of project objective by supervisees	5.0±1.4	5.8±1.6	0.984
Preparedness of supervisee to undertake research dissertation	3.9±1.2	5.0±1.0	0.057
Importance attached to the dissertation by supervisees	3.8±0.7	5.6±0.5	0.008*
Setting of deadlines for student dissertation	7.3±2.5	7.8±1.3	0.477
Meeting of set deadlines by the supervisees	4.4±1.6	5.1±2.4	0.301
Level of critical thinking/problem solving by supervisees	5.1±1.4	5.1±1.5	0.273
Ability to provide answers to research question by supervisees	5.5±0.9	6.3±1.9	0.156
Meeting of other appointments by supervisees	6.3±1.8	7.3±1.1	0.197

*P<0.05, SD: Standard deviation

Table IV: Challenges confronting the supervisees during the dissertation process and methods of solving them according to their supervisors

	Male	Female	χ ²	P	Professorial grade	Lectureship grade	χ ²	P
Issues with the supervisees' dissertation								
Not meeting deadlines	5 (45.5)	1 (16.7)	4.59	0.332	2 (20.0)	2 (28.6)	2.206	0.698
Lack of understanding	1 (9.1)	3 (50.0)			4 (40.0)	2 (28.6)		
Not paying attention to details	1 (9.1)	1 (16.7)			1 (10.0)	1 (14.3)		
Nonchalant attitude to the dissertation	1 (9.1)	0 (0.00)			0 (0.00)	1 (14.3)		
Poor writing skill/interpretation of research work	3 (27.3)	1 (16.7)			3 (30.0)	1 (14.3)		
Total	11 (100.0)	6 (100.0)			10 (100.0)	7 (100.0)		
Challenges facing the supervisees according to supervisors								
Inadequate training	6 (54.6)	4 (66.7)	1.35	0.508	6 (66.7)	7 (100.0)	2.87	0.238
Inactive supervision/guidance	2 (18.2)	2 (33.3)			2 (22.2)	0 (0.00)		
Inadequate weighting of the dissertation to the overall assessment of students' performance.	3 (27.3)	0 (0.00)			1 (11.1)	0 (0.00)		
Total	11 (100.0)	6 (100.0)			9 (100.0)	7 (100.0)		
Methods of improving the dissertation process								
Encouragement of supervisees by the supervisors	1 (9.09)	0 (0.00)	6.783	0.452	2 (20.0)	0 (0.00)	12.2	0.095
Regular auditing of the project system	0 (0.00)	1 (16.7)			1 (10.0)	0 (0.00)		
Funding to assist the students	2 (18.2)	0 (0.00)			2 (20.0)	0 (0.00)		
Group research work by supervisees	2 (18.2)	1 (16.7)			1 (10.0)	1 (14.3)		
Conduction of research work during community dentistry posting	2 (18.2)	1 (16.7)			0 (0.00)	4 (57.1)		
Improving literary and internet facilities	0 (0.00)	1 (16.7)			2 (20.0)	0 (0.00)		
Early introduction of project work to supervisees	2 (18.2)	2 (33.3)			2 (20.0)	1 (14.3)		
Institution of prizes to motivate students	2 (18.2)	0 (0.00)			0 (0.00)	1 (14.3)		
Total	11 (100.0)	6 (100.0)			10 (100.0)	7 (100.0)		

hand, some researchers shared the view that men are less likely to be successful as supervisors because they are sometimes seen as less nurturing, socially oriented, assertive, independent as well as more task-driven than the female supervisors.¹⁵⁻¹⁷ It would be interesting to investigate in future studies whether performances of supervisees are equally better or worse under the same or different gender supervisor.

Similarly, the expectation of the supervisors in the professorial cadre may be very high as a result of perceived power imbalances between the students and the senior supervisors. This expectation from the experienced supervisors may put an extra burden on the dental students. It is also important to note that the individual characteristics of both the supervisor and supervisee, including their gender and experience, are key components that may influence the nature and quality of research supervision.

The supervisors in this study believed that the students had challenges with their dissertation, especially in the area of understanding the rudiments of research methods and meeting of deadlines. This may not be unconnected with inadequate preparatory training, supervision and exposure to basic research methodology before commencing the dissertation project. In an earlier publication¹³ evaluating the perceptions of students' experiences of undergraduate research projects, the supervisees perceived that their level of preparedness to undertake the project was low.

From the findings of this study, we posit that early introduction of the dissertation process to the students should be encouraged. Others ways of addressing the challenges include proper mentoring, funding and group research work may suffice. This may also reduce the time spent on research project as the burden of research work is shared. The time of research work could be limited to the period of community dentistry posting as being suggested by a group of academic staff in the faculty. This has its drawback because the students who would rotate through this unit as their last posting may not have enough time to properly carry out the project because of the closeness to the final-year examination. It is therefore recommended that the faculty should organise research workshops and seminars for the final students on a regular basis and as early as possible on different aspects of research methodology.

One limitation of this study is the sample size of participants which was anticipated. However, this was beyond our control and it was primarily due to the small size of the faculty; the smallest of the 13 faculties in the entire university. Effort was made to recruit the entire academic staff in the survey; however, only two members of the faculty declined to participate giving a response rate of 89.5%. Another constraint of the study is the gap between the time of data collection and perceptions of the supervisors which may not necessarily reflect their real-time experience.

CONCLUSION

Even though the supervisees were perceived to be motivated, majority of the supervisors, particularly, the male gender

and the senior supervisors, felt that the supervisees were inexperienced and lacked good understanding of dissertation process as a result of inadequate research experience, inadequate supervision and guidance.

Financial support and sponsorship

Nil.

Conflicts of interest

There are no conflicts of interest.

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Appendix I: Questionnaire assessing supervisees' attitude and behaviour of Nigerian dental students to their research dissertations by their academic supervisors

Please tick the box/column that best suits your response/opinion for each question

Sex: Male Female

Faculty rank:

How long have you been a full-time academic staff of the Faculty?

How many times have you participated in the supervision of undergraduate dissertations in the past 5 years?

How many students have you supervised in the past 5 years?

Overall, do you think your supervisees had good understanding of the dissertation process before its commencement in the past 5 years?

Yes No

Give reason (s) for the chosen option.

Overall, were your supervisees well motivated/enthusiastic at the onset of the independent project?

Yes No

Give reason (s) for the chosen option.

Do you think the supervisees had gained/lost motivation/enthusiasm in course of the project?

They gained

They lost

Neither gained nor lost

What do you think was responsible for the changing levels of motivation/enthusiasm during the course of the project?

What aspect/area had the supervisees performed badly in the course of the project?

Each of the questions below are to be answered on the scale given. Circle whichever number applies

How will you rate the general performance of your supervisees in the past 5 years?

0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Extremely poor Excellent

How well do you consider a typical final year student of the faculty equipped for an independent project?

0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Poorly equipped Well equipped

How important do you think the dissertation process had contributed to the overall undergraduate training of students in the Faculty?

0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Totally unimportant Very important

How often did you set deadlines on different aspects of the project for the students under your supervision in the past 5 years?

0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Rarely Constantly

How often did the students meet these deadlines?

0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Rarely All the time

Generally, how well did the students understand their dissertation objectives?

0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Not at all Very well

What has been the general level of critical thinking as well as problem solving ability of your students in the course of the project in the past 5 years?

0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Very poor Excellent

Appendix I: Contd...

Please tick the box/column that best suits your response/opinion for each question

How often did your supervisees arrive at relevant answers to their research questions in the past 5 years?

0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Never All the time

How often did you meet with your supervisees in the past 5 years?

0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Never All the time

For the questions below, tick/fill as appropriate

What issues/problems did you encounter mostly with your supervisees?

Do you consider the dissertation process of the Faculty adequate?

If NO, what areas of the process do you consider deficient?

What are your suggestions to improve the dissertation process?

In your own view, what are the main challenges facing the students?

How do you think these challenges can be overcome?

Contd....