Researching into Postgraduate Research in Addis Ababa University: Threats to the Future Generation of Social, Educational and Behavioral Researchers

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Abstract: Thesis work is customarily regarded as an inevitable requirement qualifying students for postgraduate degree. An inherent feature of this academic pursuit is a requirement to produce an independent piece of scientific work that has some kind of practical and theoretical contributions. The objective of this research was to investigate the competencies of student researchers through a variety of techniques: assessment of the qualities of MA theses produced in three selected departments in Addis Ababa University, reflections of External Examiners (n=10), researchers' personal memos, questionnaire (n=92 students) and student narratives (n=7 narratives). Thematic analysis and synthesis of data indicated that there is a serious gap in the general, specific and behavioral research competencies of students. The quality of the theses work is to such a level today that appears seriously compromising the standards expected of an MA thesis. Evidences still suggest that doing MA thesis could even become a platform for learning undesirable behaviors and skills that in a way threaten not only the existing academic tradition but at the same time the future generation of social, educational and behavioral researchers in Ethiopia. Some strategies were suggested to avert the threats.

Keywords: Student research, MA thesis, dissertation, generic research skills, specific research skills

Introduction

Research is a systematic, controlled, empirical and critical investigation of materials, practices, behaviors or hypothetical propositions (Kerlinger, 1970, p. 8) that lead to the development of generalizations, principles or theories, resulting in prediction and possibly eventual control of events (Best & Khan, 2006). Inalienably interwoven with quality education (Berhanu, 2006), research is an important and powerful tool for expediting development.

According to Leary (2001), a background in research provides students with knowledge and skills that may be useful not only in professional life but also in everyday life as it enables becoming more informed, critical, intelligent and effective research consumers. No wonder

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then that many universities across the globe include research methods courses that gear towards building the requisite profile to carry out a senior essay in undergraduate (UG), thesis in MA, and dissertation projects in doctoral programs[2].

Unlike the undergraduate qualification attesting attainment of general knowledge related to a subject named in the award (Hart, 2006), a Master's qualification, by contrast, demands moving from general to specialized knowledge of a subject (Biggam, 2008). Furthermore, while the UG learning primarily takes place through the lecturer, Master's level learning is independent with the learning responsibility shifting from the lecturer to the learner and supervisors acting as a guide. This opportunity can be quite liberating, but it requires the building of new skills and confidence in the abilities of students (Biggam, 2008). A meaningfully organized postgraduate program plays an important role in providing context to student learning and providing a sense of what it means to be a researcher (Boyer, 1998); and graduate students' research engagement is an important mechanism in enhancing the teaching-research nexus (Healey, 2005).

The Concise Oxford Dictionary (1998: p.391) defines a dissertation as "a detailed discourse on a subject, especially the one submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements of a degree or diploma." In fact, dissertation is more than a detailed discourse on a subject; it is an independent piece of original work demonstrating that the student is a competent researcher with advanced knowledge on a specific topic. This requirement for an independent work has turned dissertations into problematic areas for students (Biggam, 2008, p.1). To ease some of the difficulties, it has become a common practice in many universities to set out a thesis guideline that clearly delineates how to carry out as well as report the research process. In fact, successful completion of a thesis is more than just adhering to such guidelines; the candidate needs competence in generic and specific research skills and certain personal qualities or "street savvy about the rules of the game" (Biggam, 2008; Roberts, 2007). According to Biggam (2008), a competent student researcher is someone who can exhibit proficiency in handling the requirements of the various phases of a dissertation life cycle starting from the identification of relevant and feasible research problem up to reporting of the findings.

In addition to these generic competencies and skills, student researchers need to develop various kinds of specific skills (Belay & Abdinasir, 2015; Biggam 2008) such as:
- Time-management skills- to intelligently plan how long the dissertation will take to successfully complete each chapter and sub- chapters,
- Self-discipline skills- to observe the timetable of activities even when unpredictable problems (e.g. illness, relationship problems, family issues, etc.) arise,

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[2]There are a wide range of differences in the meaning of thesis and dissertation. The common parlance in Addis Ababa University follows this designation. Other universities use dissertation and thesis interchangeable while the rest use thesis for doctoral and dissertation for MA programs. For our present purpose, we use these terms interchangeably.

- Organizing skills- to structure the various aspects of the dissertation activities including the overall structure, sub-sections within each chapter, as well as the ideas and arguments,
- Communication skills- to present ideas and arguments with clarity of thought and expression,
- Technical skills- including internet searching skills, library skills, word processing skills, and data analysis software skills,
- Independent learning skills- to identify a research topic, put forward a research proposal, plan and implement dissertation activities by oneself,
- Social skills- to get along with supervisor, fellow students, research subjects, authorities in the research sites, etc.
- Cooperative/collaborative learning skills- sharing ideas about one's work with fellow students- this can be done informally but preferably formally through what is called "*learner circles*" (Biggam, 2007) and research groups.

In addition to the aforementioned generic and specific skills, Roberts (2007) also specifies certain personal qualities that are necessary prerequisites for the completion of a successful dissertation: self-motivation, self-confidence, and self-centeredness:

- Motivation in thesis work is required so that students may not consider it as a burden and do it merely as a requirement. Motivated student researchers are likely to develop a positive outlook and enthusiastic curiosity about challenges faced in every stage of the work and considers the whole experience as enjoyable and productive.
- Having confidence in one's own abilities, review the work of other researchers rather than literally taking their ideas, or believing that one's views are as valid as anyone else's.
- Self-centeredness is a quality that serves well during the thesis work so that when others will make demands upon one's time, the student researcher can inform these people that the dissertation is his/her priority and is serious about completing it.

Generic and specific competencies and behaviors generally presented so far as the cornerstones for a successful student dissertation need, therefore, to be periodically gauged in the various graduate programs to ensure not only quality dissertations but, more importantly, quality postgraduate education.

In Addis Ababa University, MA programs are usually two year programs in which the first year is devoted for course work while the second year is for the research project. The research project is named 'MA thesis' and it seems to be a second opportunity in student research; the first (called "senior essay") being tried as a partial fulfillment for an undergraduate degree. The type of Master's theses students are expected to produce is a dissertation which encompasses both a Literature Review and collection and analysis of primary research data so as to provide students with the opportunity to compare theory (from one's Literature Review) with practice (from the collected primary data). At the heart of this

these work is the study of a particular subject, usually selected by the student himself/ herself or in some cases provided by the supervisor.

As originally envisioned to steering up staff development and desire for engagements in research activities (Endashaw, 2001), opening of the graduate programs in Addis Ababa University has in fact contributed a lot both in staff development and promotion of the status of research in the University. The graduate programs have also contributed to research output directly because the number of MA theses and dissertations written exceeded about 1,200 by then (up until 2000/1), many of which being of high standard and thus of publishable quality. However, Endashaw holds that budgetary and resource (material and human power) constraints have, on the one hand, unduly constrained the potential growth the programs could attain, and, eventually, led the program to become donor dependent, on the other hand; obviously undermining intrinsic reasons for research engagements.

While Endashaw (2001) has praised quality of dissertations in the early years of graduate expansion in Addis Ababa University, other indirect evidences seem to cast doubts on such claims (e.g. Amare, 2000; Mulugeta & Amanuel, 2000; Desalegn, 2000). For example, Amare (2000) conducted content analysis (the research issues, type of designs and data, researcher characteristics, etc.) of a sample of 116 articles published in "*The Ethiopian Journal of Education" (EJE)*, the reputable educational journal in Ethiopia since 1967. Accordingly, Amare found out that content-wise, there was uneven distribution in the themes of educational issues studied-educational research being one of the least studied themes. In terms of conceptualization of the research, he found that there were no hypotheses employed as a guide for the research and that about one-third or more even lacked clarity in research objectives and conceptual rigor. Moreover, though Amare observed improvements across periods, he suggested, however, that educational researchers still have to traverse a long distance ahead when looked from the vantage point of research designs, instruments of data collection, type of data used, and sampling procedures used etc. There was a tendency to resort to simpler techniques in the sense that the majority of the articles employed descriptive survey/quantitative methods (that dominantly depended on secondary data); to the exclusion of experimental designs (and the use of tests). When primary data were used, the data sources (population and sample) were not properly identified. He also noted that cluster sampling was not employed; though this is a technique usually recommended for sampling from infinitely large population. Hence, the sampling involved in most of them did not meet the requirements of randomness making the data unrepresentative of the population.

Examining again the articles published in *EJE*, Desalegn (2000) also found out that in the articles published in *EJE* during the periods from 1981 to 1998, quantitative methods were used in about 70 % of the articles. As part of the content analysis of the articles published in *EJE* in this time span, Desalegn also examined the situation in the MA theses produced in the three graduate programs (Educational Psychology, Curriculum and Instruction, and Educational Administration) of the then Faculty of Education. Having checked the research designs employed in these theses, Desalegn noticed a trend towards exclusive reliance on the

quantitative aspect. According to him, out of a total of the 116 theses reviewed for the same period, about 97 % of theses employed quantitative methods compared to 70% of the articles published in *EJE*. In this connection, being critical of the importance of the simultaneous use of qualitative and quantitative designs in educational research, Mulugeta and Amanuel (2000) strongly suggested that mere pursuit for quantification in the interest of simplicity and time should be seriously gauged among (Ethiopian) researchers if the purpose is to work towards advancing knowledge in education and/ or to meaningfully addressing the practical educational problems of the country.

Wossenu and Zenebe (2000) rather focused on research fund allocation practices of the School of Graduate Studies (SGS) of AAU and found out that the major source of funding for AAU's graduate research work is donation from external international agencies. It was indicated that the SGS did not have a clearly defined set of criteria for allocating research fund and as a result graduate students in the various faculties were not treated fairly/equitably. The decisions of the SGS were not consistent throughout the specified periods of time and consequently the practice has negatively affected the motivation of students while conducting their research theses. According to them, there was also insufficiency of the allotted fund, delay in the release of funds and continuous decline in the amount of fund secured from external donors, and graduate students reported that their proposals were not approved on time and this was believed to hinder accomplishment of their research as planned.

Although tremendous expansion of graduate programs is observed in Addis Ababa University in the past some years, there has still been absence of research addressing the research competencies of students and quality of dissertations produced except for the efforts above that touched on postgraduate student research only partially or indirectly. The present research, therefore, attempts to examine the major concerns (generic and specific research competencies, skills and personal or behavioral qualities) exhibited in the MA theses projects carried out in AAU. The basic research questions raised were:

- What are the major problems regarding generic research competencies/skills of postgraduate students?
- What are the major problems of specific research competencies/ skills, and
- What are the major concerns of behavioral competencies (motivation, time management, and adherence to research ethics) among postgraduate students?

Methods

Study design

The study mainly employs a design having a qualitative-tilt. According to Creswell (2003), qualitative design merits over other designs if the concept, experience to be examined needs to be understood because little knowledge exists in the field. Donalek (2004) still argues that

qualitative approach is employed in the event that little knowledge exists in a particular field of inquiry. In fact, we also complemented data by employing the quantitative data to show extent of concerns in some cases.

Data sources

Departments considered in this research are the ones with a long history of running graduate programs. Two types of data sources were employed to gather relevant data from the departments: primary and secondary sources. The primary sources were external examiners and students. As regards examiners, a sample of eleven external examiners (with ranks from assistant to associate professor) were identified and provided with a form to share their views regarding the major strengths and concerns witnessed as an external examiner. They were provided with this form along with the thesis document and the departmental format for assessing thesis. Filled in forms duly signed by examiners were collected right after the defense together with the evaluation sheets.

The second group of primary data sources consisted of two types of students. The first sample of 92 graduate student researchers (out of a total of 262, i.e. 35%) was considered from the three departments (see Table 1) to fill in the structured questionnaire. Their list was secured from the thesis defense schedule of the respective departments. Then, putting ourselves available as per the schedule, we distributed the questionnaire to all candidates when they were about to enter into the oral defense hall to defend theses. Although the questionnaire was given to all the candidates, it was only the 92 students who returned the filled in questionnaire in the address indicated on the cover page of the questionnaire. The questionnaire contained close-ended items regarding selection of their research topics, management of the time allotted for the research, challenges experienced at the different phases of their research and lessons drawn, and views regarding adherence to research ethics.

Table 1
Distribution of the sampled students across the three departments

Department	Population	Sample size
Department One	80	36
Department Two	53	20
Department Three	129	36
Total	262	92

*Source: *MA Thesis Defense Schedules of the three Departments.*

The second group of graduate students was drawn a year later so that they would get enough experience to reflect on thesis writing in the departments. All the graduate students (n=7) of one program and year attending a research methodology class were used to share their experiences in writing as focus group discussions wouldn't address such sensitive and personal topics. These students were asked to remember ethical violations observed among their senior graduate students and write vignettes about them. This was done during a research methodology class where the lecture on "ethical code of conduct" was about to commence.

Secondary sources are the second major data sources that constituted of personal memos/ records and theses document reviews.   First, the personal records of one of the researchers were consulted. It was found out that this researcher has been recording his comments of the thesis he was invited to examine in his own department for about five consecutive years. The records contained general editorial and substantive comments as well as chapter by chapter comments to be incorporated in the thesis reviewed. Furthermore, a sample of 20 MA thesis documents were randomly selected from more recent acquisitions in the library from the three departments and subjected to critical review by the present researchers using the existing theses evaluation formats as guides.

Ethical considerations

Oral consent was secured from all participants; personal identities were not also disclosed including the name of the departments sampled for this research.

Data Analyses and Findings

Data analysis is presented thematically rather than by the tools of data collection. Data obtained through different sources are clustered under a similar theme so that we would ultimately draw meanings and implications about the skills and behaviors of student researchers. With the need to unveil concerns, capture attention of scholars and authorities, and urge for timely interventions, we have deliberately focused to bring limitations to the fore. We would opt to be critiqued for leaning to the deficit model rather than being praised for striking a balance (between strengths and limitations) as far as this would help fixing the crisis before it turns debilitating. We would then organize data beginning from the generic cognitive competencies and then move onto the specific skills. Finally, we deal with non-cognitive (behavioral) competencies involving motivations, time management skills, and adherence to general ethical codes of conduct. Regarding data presentation, we would like to say that unless mentioned in parenthesis, data presented in the results section were secured from authors' personal anecdotal records and sampled MA theses for the purpose. For practical convenience and to avoid frequent mentioning, data sources are not mentioned when these two are the sources.

Generic and specific competencies/skills

Student researchers were asked from the outset to rate the extent to which they have been challenged by the tasks in the various phases of the thesis work. As presented in Table 2, the majority of participants seem to mention challenges almost in all the phases of the research; perhaps implying, among others, that there is lack of experience and skill in conducting scientific research. Of course, this in itself is not a sufficient condition to say that student researchers lack the requisite research skills; as research is an exercise that is inherently challenging even for experienced researchers. However, subsequent analysis would clarify that these challenges are characteristics more of lack of competencies rather than the challenging features of scientific research. We begin with analysis of concerns regarding generic skills; skills that don't refer to any component of skills in scientific research but to the more general research competencies.

Table 2

Academic challenges experienced during research work

Aspect of the research	How challenging the task was	
	Not/least challenging	Challenging/ most challenging
Finding, defining the research topic, objectives	26.1%	59.8%*
Literature review	19.6%	66.3%
Designing tools	34.8%	50.0%
Willingness of officials to permit data collection in their organization, cooperation to facilitate data collection	43.5%	48.9%
Finding subjects/participants or getting their cooperation	31.5%	54.3%
Data analysis	32.6%	54.3%
Report writing	31.5%	48.9%

percentages do not add up to 100 due to missing of responses to specific items

Lack of basic competency in research methods: The major concern regarding thesis work is student researchers' engagement in a research project without mastery of the basic research skills as it can be seen in terms of three problems: misconceptions of some related components, rigidly adhering to formats, and considering components in their literal sense.

First and foremost, over adherence to research formats and lack of flexibility to unique features of one's work and copy formats from others' thesis in the library were commonly mentioned problems. "The most important reference for the students seems to be thesis of their senior's tends to duplicate errors" (Examiner 4); "there was time I told black and white they shouldn't do this, taught them some steps of flexibility and gave them a different format; yet they submitted their thesis following the formats copied from previous thesis" (Examiner

3). In some cases, they deliberately make the topic broader so that they can have something to delimit later while writing the delimitation section. There is this general problem of being conditioned by the viewpoints of earlier investigators and the temptation to blindly adhere to their procedures.

Furthermore, there are common difficulties differentiating between seemingly related components of a research act. It was reported that there are common difficulties among students distinguishing between background and statement of the problem (Examiner 3), objectives and research questions (Examiner 8), operational definition-conceptual definition (Examiner 4), justification-significance, delimitation and limitation (Examiner 4), random sampling and non-random sampling, summary and review of literature, analysis and discussion, objectivity-and opinions/implications/subjectivity, summary and conclusion (Examiners 2, 3, 4, 5).

A related common problem of thesis work evidently noted was the tendency of taking concepts in their literal sense (Examiner 1): acknowledgement, research problem, literature review, triangulation, and pilot test can be cited as examples.

- Acknowledging intimate and loved ones possibly as an expression of reciprocity to the support and care received for activities that in fact are remotely related to the research work.
- Research problems being understood in the literary meaning of a problem; thus the purpose in many cases destined to identifying lacks, limitations, challenges, deficits.
- Titles being very broad in scope eventually compelling use of a variety of participants, instruments, and yet procedures; but mistakenly explained for the purpose of triangulation.
- Different sample and tools used in combination possibly for triangulation. But, tools measure different variables rather than triangulating measurement of the same variable; themes differ for different groups and this can't be triangulation.
- Literature review should not merely string together what other researchers have found. Rather, it should discuss and analyze the body of knowledge with the ultimate goal of determining what is known and what is not known about the topic. This determination leads the researcher identify the research questions and/or hypothesis. In this regard most of the theses are under requirement.

Originality of dissertation work: In the face of the problems above, we may not be surprised if originality is lacking in many of the student theses. Almost all the examiners underscored lack of novelty in the dissertation work. An examiner eloquently expressed this problem as "while it is a bit cynical to reclaim my experience in the field tells me that average MA thesis at least in the areas I have been advising seemed little worthy of the respect to be called scientific paper'' (Examiner 2). According to this examiner "In fact, one would get baffle why a university award an MA degree, among others, in the honor of candidates producing original research via a thesis, while the nitty-gritty of the MA thesis in

question is neither an original research at all nor nothing but a summarized account of someone's original".

Lack of reflectivity or reflective inquiry: General observations of assessors underscored that the originality of the research in most theses is very much compromised not by the lack of choice of new topics but lack of critical analysis in arguing for or against this or that assumption and/ or theory. According to Examiner 2, for example, instances where students make their own informed hypothesis either to disprove or approve previous research findings are minimal at best and nil at worst. As such, what we see in the analytical part is the mere restatement of ideas reflected by the publicist. Here, it is not to say that backing one's analysis with scholarly arguments has no value. The bottom line is students should provide their own vision of learned and plausible analysis forwarding arguments with acceptable and valid findings from literatures. Students need to be acquainted with critical thinking and analytical skills before embarking on thesis writing. Critical thinking and analytical skills will empower students with intellectual faculties to see and investigate problems with truly scientific lines – examining things with dispassionate and logical inquiry in to the nature and modus operandi of things. This Examiner says he will give them the intellectual courage and analytical excellence to do research asking "why something is" rather than focusing on "how to extrapolate" the results of previous researchers (Examiner 2). Students have to learn to really reflect better on the research process; the literature, their own methodology, and particularly on their findings. "Most, if not all, of MA theses that I came across so far appeared to lack this reflectivity" (Examiner 8).

Problem of operationalization: Description, objectivity, or specification is lacking in many sections of the reports. According to Examiner 6, "there was lots of theorizing but the candidates did not translate those theories into operational frameworks for analyzing data in their studies." To Examiner 4 and Examiner 8, there are problems of adequately operationalizing purposes of the studies, variables, methods and procedures, and recommendations.

Novelty equated with changes in research settings: Student researchers tend to take it for granted that doing the same research that is done elsewhere in a new setting is like picking up a new research agenda. However, considering a topic studied elsewhere merely by changing the place as a legitimate area of research is only defensible if the researcher is able to present arguments as to how the new setting would structurally operate to possibly bring about different results from the previous setting. Looking into implementations of dissertations in this regard, there is nothing contextual except for picking participants in a new research setting. The settings considered are not explained if they could make a difference in the first place and how.

Lack of systemic thinking: Personal records of the present authors as well as analysis of the selected MA theses indicate that there seems to be a neglect of research as a thinking process as students tend to focus on techniques and procedures. Our notes indicate that there is an

apparent lack of conceptual guide, coherent system of thinking, lack of evidence-based planning of approaches, resources and methods. This is particularly more common while writing reports as noted in lack of integration, coherence, flow of ideas, and organization between and among issues raised under the various subheadings and chapters. For example:

- research questions fail to match with the title,
- list of variables under the subheading 'operational definition' (of course in many cases a non-operational definition) do not match with the variables included in the research questions or objectives (key variables omitted while less useful ones included),
- purpose of the study not linked with the review of literature or the review not used for specifying research questions,
- data analysis, research questions and limitation of the research not linked to conclusions,
- basic question not answered by the study,
- lack of coherence between sentences, paragraphs, subheadings and main headings,
- relationships, interconnections, links between sections missing; or mismatches between purpose and many other important sections (title, operational definition, tools, sampling, analysis, techniques, conclusions, review, and recommendations) and within these various sections.

Technical flaws: are other problems that overwhelm student papers as it was noted in the sampled MA theses. Examiners also noted that although there were several interesting insights in the MA theses analyzed, the candidates seem to have a little mastery of how the materials and methods are to be reported, results be presented and data be interpreted (Examiner 6). Verbosity and lack of parsimony and precision in report writing were commonly noted problems (Examiner 4). Findings are hardly communicated to the reader with reasonable degree of precision, clarity and analysis –too low to be intellectually gibberish for someone in the field of inquiry (Examiner 2).

Common to the thesis works are marked editorial and format problems; none of the theses have followed the format provided by their school (Examiner 4). Most of the papers were in need of serious editing work including language and editorial problems, problem of logically organizing and maintaining flow of ideas, and difficulties referencing adequately and correctly (Examiner 6). Most of the theses works have proof reading (style) problems like spelling errors; failure to use appropriate punctuation marks; inconsistent use of line spacing; no space between paragraphs, too long paragraphs; and inconsistent use of font size for headings, sub headings (Examiner 5); redundant sentences, statements and paragraphs throughout the thesis as in, for example, research objectives and methods that unnecessarily appeared a number of times (Examiner 6); lack of appropriate referencing of ideas/documents used in different parts of the theses were common (Examiner 6); many of the references used were not properly written and finding them was really impossible for a significant proportion

of the references (Examiner 4); and problems of creating the reference list and in text citation (Examiner 5).

We are now to deal with a sample of the comments of assessors, critiques on the theses, and personal memos of the researchers regarding the quality of MA theses reports. In view of the extensive nature of such comments, we are presenting in this section summaries being thematically organized under the major components or sub headings of dissertation work.

Preliminary pages

The preliminary pages are expected to include title, list of contents, tables, and figures, acknowledgments, abstracts, acronyms and abbreviations. Below are the specific observations and comments raised regarding student researchers' thesis work on these components.

Title of the thesis: The purpose of thesis title is to provide a brief, informative summary of the contents of the MA thesis document. Accordingly, the title should answer the question i.e. what (the research theme), who (participants), and where (the research setting, context, or place). But, in many dissertations either one of these basic components is missing or more issues are included. The problem is if the first problem happens (i.e. one or two of the component/s is missing), the research title becomes broad and vague to understand. On the other hand, if additional issues are included, it becomes unnecessarily lengthy and may even become very narrow (Examiner 7).

Table of content, list of tables, list of figures: Containing too specific subtopics which, in some cases, may even go up to four or even more levels of specification thus making the table overcrowded, and unnecessarily lengthy, omitting in the table of content the list of items which the appendix encompasses, mismatch between titles, page numbers, and formats in the list (of contents, tables, and figures) and their appearances in the text.

Abstract: fails to highlight key points of the major section of the paper like, for example, purpose, methods, major findings and principal conclusion (Examiner 7).

Acronyms and abbreviation: common to see long list of acronyms, describing standard acronyms that are already become part of the English vocabularies and may even be found in standard dictionaries (e.g. UNICEF, HIV/AIDS), use of those long, meaningless, and inconvenient acronyms which force readers make repeated references to the description, creating acronyms that are not frequently used in the text, use of acronyms that coincide with other standard acronyms thus creating a negative transfer for the reader who is familiar with the standard acronyms.

Main Body

Research topics: Student researchers were given a list of research activities so that they would rate the extent to which the activities are academically challenging to them during research work (see Table 2 above). While only 26% of the participants rated "*finding, defining the research topic, objectives*" to be *not challenging at all or least challenging*, nearly 60% of them have rated these experiences to be *challenging to most challenging*. Attempts were made to specify this problem by asking participants what processes and factors would they consider in the choice of their thesis topics to learn if the participants have the competencies for observing proper practices in the choice of their research topics (Table 3). Of interest to us in Table 3 is the fact that, for the majority of participants, the title considered was not a continuation of previous work, and nearly in one out of four participants relevant professionals outside the department and in the research site were not consulted. It is even surprising to note that the factors considered for picking up their research topics were governed by peripheral factors rather than a commitment to solving an intellectually puzzling problem (see Table 3).

Although it appears encouraging to note that the participants did not seem to connect choice of a topic to the kind of supervisor they will be assigned to, extent of familiarity to the research site, and opportunities provided for employment be selecting this or that research topic, this would not appear the case in reality. This is mainly because one of the examiners gave a strong critique that MA thesis he examined were, "Lesser in intellectual pursuit, factors external to the research (familiarity to the research setting and participants, future benefits of the research in terms of employment...) were considered than internally focused (filling gaps in knowledge, resolving controversies, identifying new trends and patterns)" (Examiner 6). He further explicates that "I feel that there was little attempt to relate research problem and the findings of the study to respective program or field of study" (Examiner 6).

Table 3
Graduate students' selection of research topics

		Responses in %		
How did you go about selecting, refining, and executing your research?		Yes	No	Not sure
The topic of my MA Thesis is a continuation of or related to other papers done earlier to fulfill course requirements or done for other purposes		18.5	46.7	20.7
I discussed my research	Friends	85.9	8.7	2.2
	Professional/s in my department or outside	67.4	26.1	1.1
	Person/s working in a place I conducted my research	58.7	34.8	1.1
Factors detrimental in the choice of the title of my MA Thesis	I rejected a topic that wouldn't allow me get assigned to an advisor whom I wanted to work with or picked a topic that would allow me to do so	14.1	76.1	4.3
	I rejected a topic on which literature was not available or picked a topic on which literature was not any problem	42.4	46.7	7.6
	I rejected a topic that did not fit in the tools of data collection I already have in my reach or selected a topic that did allow me to do so	40.2	46.7	7.6
	I rejected a topic that failed fitting in a place where there were familiar persons to me during data collection or selected a topic that allowed working in a place where there were persons well known to me	26.1	62.0	7.6
	I selected a topic that would suite a method of data analysis of my preference	48.9	33.7	9.8
	I rejected a topic that would not help me get better opportunities of employment after graduation or picked the one that ensured me employment	10.9	67.4	14.1

percentages do not add up to 100 due to missing of responses to specific items

Definition and justification of the research problem: Note that the first chapter of a research report is meant to define the research problem and its significance. The definition and justification is made in a step-by-step process such that the background section broadly introduces the theme of the problem and it's setting, thus giving a better picture than the title. Then, in the same way, the statement of the problem presents further specification of the research by showing gaps to be addressed followed by the specific research questions, operational definitions etc. Hence, this approach lacks logical flow such that subsequent discussions are to be shaped by preceding ones. There should be a flow from general to the specific providing key background like scope, nature, magnitude of the problem (Examiner

7). Defining a research problem is a step-by-step process means also that one can stop the process at a stage the problem definition eventually becomes complete and clear. But, in many of the theses reviewed, all the steps were rigidly followed to the extent of having delimitation as a final subheading to defining the problem while the problem has already been adequately delimited quit early. This effort was observed either as a repetition or else could be better made by including the delimited issue in the very title itself and at the very beginning. It was also interesting to note that in some cases the research problem still lacks clarity, of course, after having gone through all these steps.

An added problem in this section is the tendency to confuse background with problem statement, problem statement with research questions, operational definition with conceptual definition, and delimitation with limitation. Lack of resources (time, money, materials) is a commonly reported reason to delimiting the scope. In effect, this cannot be considered as a major reason because one has to pick up a research problem that is feasible within the available resources.

Difficulties articulating what gap the research is meant to fill is again a more serious problem; significance not usually discussed in terms of how the study adds to the theoretical body of knowledge in the field (Examiner 1). Research gap or newness of the problem (justification) is not established; or in many cases justified either in terms of its practical benefits or in terms of the new setting it is conducted without establishing how the new setting would make a difference.

Review of the literature: There often are three places where literature is reviewed: introduction, statement of the problem and the chapter on literature review. This is highly confusing. The introduction and the statement of the problem should contain very limited literature review; the statement of the problem should preferably be not more than half a page (Examiner 8). The three literature reviews are sometimes a basket full of independent pieces of information; a logical sequence is often lacking. Also, it is sometimes lacking the final conclusion and summary of the literature review; a conclusion which contains the white areas studied in this thesis and as a consequence, the research questions as part of a conceptual mode (Examiner 8).

- Summary rather than review in the strict sense that is little efforts were made to evaluating the literature or the idea already summarized to check: the validity or accuracy of the research finding/s, appropriateness of the methods, aspects of the research problem that was not given attention, context etc
- A goal in itself than used as a means to identify research gaps.
- In some cases, opinionated; a page or so discussion without references
- Composed of many peripheral topics with little or no relevance to one's purpose; thus making the chapter to take almost half of the manuscript. This should be done only on variables that are studied in the paper. In most of the papers I have examined, there were so many unnecessary literatures included making the study document bulky with

no consideration to use it in the discussion (Examiner 3). Inadequate cover of the literature leading to inadequately stated research problems (Examiner 4).

- Quoting from old references, textbooks, repeatedly taking ideas already quoted by others when it is still possible to access the original one showing, quoting the obvious (Examiner 9).
- Review mainly focused on external sources. Local literature not usually given much coverage with a pretext that it is non-existent. first exhaust local reference materials and then regional and global, increase list of references by reading books, articles or journals plus clear reference writing styles (Vancouver/Harvard, others) (Examiner 7).
- Authors in the text not included in the reference list and vice versa,
- Review not synthesized, implications not finally drawn,
- Language being better in this section implying the tendency to copy from other sources.

Methods: The major concerns regarding use of methods that emerged from examiners' responses, authors' personal records, and sample MA thesis analysis included the following:
- Study sites not described in relation to the topic of the research,
- Population and sampling not adequately described,
- Instruments: construction, validation, administration, and coding were either missing or inadequately done.
- Data analysis not tuned to analyzing basic questions (Examiner 3), techniques not indicated in a coherent manner and with purpose for which they are specifically meant to be applied for, failure to test assumptions of statistical tests (Examiner 4).
- Pilot study not conducted or when it was done it was merely to check reliability.
- Sources are literature or modifications; no attempts made to sample items from field experiences.
- Procedures not operationalized: (Examiner 4).
- Justification given only for sampling (Examiner 1)

Results, discussions, conclusions, and recommendations: Data secured from the various sources converge to show the following problems with respect to:
- Data presentation before introducing it,
- Analysis by factors not in tune with purpose,
- Analysis organized by tools, or by issues rather than research questions
- Lack in creating links between tables,
- Paying more attention to details than major issues thereby making the analysis unnecessarily lengthy,
- Sometimes use of statistical methods not appropriate for the data,
- Direct quotation and paraphrasing of data from focus groups, interventions or historical artifacts then are used to support the generalization made. In some cases information from field notes or other interpretive data aren't properly managed (Examiner 1).

Regarding discussions, concerns emerged from the data were the following:

- Following the same pattern as in the analysis rather than organizing it in a new, more meaningful, and broader way; or difficulty creating synthesis of the analysis,
- Speaking either less or more than what the data permits,
- Tendency to compulsively make a one-to-one match between findings and the literature while attempting to interpret the data,
- The discussion chapter is generally not more than a summary plus some comparison with earlier studies. But often a reflection on the results is lacking (Examiner 8).
- Most of the students skimp on this chapter even though it may be the most important one because it answers the "so what?" Most of the students' thesis works I evaluated as such didn't address what researcher's findings mean for communication professionals in the field being examined. In other words, what are the study's practical implications? (Examiner 1).

Concerns regarding conclusions were:

- Failure to relate limitations while making conclusions. They should emphasize their studies strength and state clearly limitations (Examiner 7).
- Conclusions being lengthy and fail to precisely indicate what major findings are,
- Conclusions made based more on discussion than analysis,
- Conclusions written in definitive than probable terms; thus leaving no room for uncertainties.

Problems on recommendations were:

- Making recommendations based on personal interpretation of findings than on actual findings,
- Recommendations limited only to suggesting practical implications of the research. Recommendations failing to show suggestions for further research,
- Practical recommendations given being broader; thus failing to show what is to be done, who should do it, when and how,
- Practical recommendations consisting of a list of too many and yet pieces and bites of actions to be done than neatly organized sets of actions whose implementation would ultimately bring about the desired changes,
- Recommendations that are too obvious and don't require this research,
- Recommendations not clearly related to the list of possible benefits and contributions of 'the research already promised under the subheading in the first chapter called "significance of the study",
- Long list of recommendations (Examiner 7)
- Recommendations not feasible for implementation (Examiner 7),
- Recommendations that are very general, and in some cases without sufficient data (Examiner 4).

Behavioral concerns

Successful execution of a research work requires not only cognitive competence but at the same time such interrelated non-cognitive (personality) or behavioral competencies as motivation to solve a problem, effective time management, and adherence to research ethics.

Motivation: doing thesis only because it is a requirement is the general attitude seen in many student researchers. Asked about the problems experienced during their research, students responded that some students tend to go for an easy fix to the work rather than facing some challenges. For example, about 44.6% have reported certain difficulties as a limitation of the research while it was possible to overcome them. Furthermore, about 42.4% of the participants have generally considered the research as a burden, lack interest in it, and seek an easy way out to (getting) the MA Degree.

Time management (allotment and usage of time): With respect to time management skills, students were asked about their allotment and usage of the time for the research work in months. Their responses show (mean average of months spent) that the total time allotted for the research was perceived smaller for a meaningful majority. As summarized in Table 4, this could be because of problems in the usage of time; as more time appears to be devoted to literature review. Looking into copies of theses produced, we may find that almost half of the manuscripts in many theses are covered by literature review and yet it is this section that appears to have many problems as the assessment results indicate.

Table 4
Allotment and Usage of time

How much of the allotted time for the MA research work did you use for the following activities? (Please indicate at least approximately how you used the 12 months period)				
Tasks of the research work	*Time spent in month/s*			
	Min	*Max*	*Mean*	*SD*
Identifying the research topic, specifying objectives	*.2*	*4.0*	*1.48*	*.77*
Literature review	*1.0*	*8.0*	*2.24*	*.84*
Designing tools, pilot-testing, fixing the sample	*.5*	*6.0*	*1.46*	*.63*
Data collection	*.5*	*3.0*	*1.41*	*.71*
Data processing, analysis, interpretation	*.5*	*3.0*	*1.77*	*.64*
Report writing	*.5*	*3.0*	*1.42*	*.77*
How do you evaluate the amount of time allotted to the MA Thesis? Adequate=46.7% Moderate=9.8% inadequate=40.2%				

Adherence to research ethics:

Extent of adherence to ethical considerations ensures the integrity and credibility of the research process and hence student researchers need to be ethical in every bite of the research activity. However, the following ethical violations were noted:

- Coping from a text without acknowledgement; a sort of intellectual dishonesty and temptation of appropriating large portions of the work of another, without acknowledging indebtedness.
- Manuscripts containing innumerable references that are in fact obtained from one source but quoted as if directly referenced (Examiner 2).

Of all the concerns, we may rather be more preoccupied with violations of ethical code of conduct as indicated in Table 5. Asked how commonly MA students exhibit one form or another kind of ethical problem, students indicated problems that are in fact difficult for assessors to detect. Such perceived violations, of course by others, range the whole gamut of research work; from research topic selection in which students tend to hide their titles to different kinds of problems noted in report writing. For our present purpose, we reiterate students' responses in Table 5.

Table 5

Students' perceptions of adherence to research ethics

How commonly do MA students in this College exhibit the following problems? (Please put a mark 'X' if the behavior in the box is commonly exhibited)			
1. Hide their research topics from other persons	39.1%	2. Hide books/materials or information that can be useful to others doing the same job	59.8%
3. Collect data without the awareness of concerned officials in the institution they conduct the research at	18.5%	4. Disguise the purpose of one's research and tell a different purpose for officials	16.3%
5. Make promises to authorities (that could not be fulfilled) to win their cooperation for data collection	18.5%	6. Disguise the purpose of the research or tell a different purpose for respondents	14.1%
7. Make unfulfilled promises to respondents about the importance of the research and solicit their cooperation	20.7%	8. Rep ort in their paper as if pilot-test was done without doing it	44.6%
9. Give an exaggerated report in the paper of the actual sample size of the research	32.6%	10. Consider accessible and willing respondents as a sample but misreport to have used random sampling	33.7%
11. Fabricate their own data partially or in full	26.1%	12. Omit responses or select out findings that are difficult for them to explain, or contradict expected answers	31.5%
13. Wrongly acknowledge advisors, other persons	33.7%	14. Manipulate advisors to their end, or work to please their advisors	29.3%
15. Quote ideas from one source but acknowledge a different source	29.3%	16. Quote ideas from a non-existing literature and provide a fabricated source in the reference list	18.5%
17. Copy the works of others in part or fully without acknowledgement	35.9%	18. Report certain difficulties as a limitation of the research while it was possible to overcome them	44.6%
19. Fail to report a real limitation of the research which, if reported, would discredit the quality of the research	47.8%	20. Generally consider the research as a burden, lack interest in it, and seek an easy way out to (getting) the MA Degree	42.4%

With the view to elucidate the problems above, other group of students were required to prepare vignettes of known ethical violations of a more recent experience, practiced, seen,

and heard. Because these vignettes serve to show the extent of the problem, they were directly presented translating them from Amharic to English.

Perhaps a lesser evil could be filling out questionnaire oneself or by friends. The saddening experience is that such students feel smart and advise others to follow their example. Cases noted in this regard were a student who:

- administered his questionnaire only to half of the respondents; the remaining half he did it himself Case 7, August 20, 2014),
- filled out a questionnaire by giving it all to his roommates and yet encouraging them to follow his actions (Case 1, August 20, 2014),
- filled out all the copies of the questionnaire on the effect of chat on students' seated in the dormitory chewing chat himself (Case 4, August 20, 2014),
- copied information from internet and filled out the questionnaire himself (Case 5, August 20, 2014).

This problem was also observed to occur in a team work:

We were assigned to work for the thesis in a group of five students. The topic we selected how to control the spread of HIV/AIDS in Town X. whereas we were expected to go to the community to collect information, we rather completed the questionnaire ourselves as if we represent the community (Case 6, August 20, 2014).

Students' disregard to acknowledging the sources of information are the most common problems. I want to emphasize that this culture of disguised plagiarism will take the quality of thesis writing nowhere (Examiner 2). Distorted presentation of information in literature is still common:

I was not able to find recent relevant literature. So, I was forced to change the dates of the old literature and made them appear newer. I took ideas from other sources and used them as if they are my own. By luck or by advisor's limitations, these frauds were not recognized and, hence, I was able to produce a paper that appeared good. Advisor commented on my paper to include information about Ethiopia in the 'introduction' section. However, because I was not able to find information about Ethiopia, I took the descriptions given about other places as if they refer to the Ethiopian (Case 1, August 20, 2014).

I mentioned of using reference books that I knew to be found in the library without actually using them (Case 5, August 20, 2014).

More notorious ethical violations of louder visibility and greater risk taking involve submitting others' work as one's own even without making modifications except for the names:

A student took two Kilos of butter to the advisor before they were very much advanced into the advisement project. This bribe left the advisor into a state of 'yilugneta' and he was simply appreciative of and approving whatever the advisee was doing. At this time, the advisee went to the department, contacted the secretary in clandestine, and was able to find a similar thesis that was already completed and graded from the shelf, resubmitted it, and secured a good grade (Case 2, August 20, 2014).

Another friend of mine was able to graduate in 2014 from University 5 submitting a thesis already done for a degree requirement only by changing his name (Case 5, August 20, 2014).

Plagiarizing papers done in one university by those students who are in another university has been a common practice and needs serious attention (Case 6, August 20, 2014).

One of my friends submitted a thesis done in another university only by changing the location of the research and earned a grade of 'A' (Case 1, August 20, 2014).

A distance program student told me that she was using other students to workout assignments and projects. She told me that she identified three best papers already prepared by students in government universities and submitted to her department so as to approve one and let her move forward. After getting approval of one of the topics, she waited for the date of submission and then submitted the full paper of the approved title only changed her name (Case 3, August 20, 2014).

A friend of mine resubmitted a paper that was already prepared for a degree requirement in another university simply by changing the names (Case 7, August 20, 2014).

Buying papers from commercial shops that prepare student papers with payment were still noted**:**

I had a friend who told me that he was preparing graduation research papers for many students with payment. Because of this, he was named 'EdemeLe Ante' to acknowledge that it was because of him that the students were graduating. Surprisingly enough, he also told me that he was preparing research papers for students outside his own field of study by imitating other papers already submitted ('be demb ye michekile') (Case 3, August 20, 2014).

Worst in this regard was involvement of some advisors in thesis preparation as a source of income**:**

A student paid got his thesis done by university teacher paying Birr 10,000.00. Personally, too, I had a problem with my advisor and didn't visit him after the first contact. However,

after finishing the report, I wrote in the acknowledgement section that I got extensive and kind support my advisor while I didn't met him more than once (Case 4, August 20, 2014).

Internet plagiarism, purchasing thesis also seem emerging faces of ethical violations. An attempt was made in 2014 to conduct a similarity test of the MA thesis submitted for oral defence in one of the sampled departments. The purpose was to gradually introduce a mechanism for protecting plagiarism. It was observed that the level of similarity index ranged from a minimum of 17 % to a maximum of 78 %; the majority being more than the normal 25% level of similarity. Perhaps a more saddening experience that has started unfolding today is the tendency even to buy completed thesis from shops. There are shops opened to assist in editorial work, conducting statistical analysis, and related others but in reality cooking a thesis for sale. One of the authors of this paper, for example, gave a call to one of the shops to make some kind of check and found that they are willing to support producing the material on any subject with payment.

Discussion

MA thesis work, in which students have to complete a substantial dissertation, is a problematic area for students as they are expected to deal with this project along with the core subject areas largely through independent study, and within tight time constraints. For many Master's students, their venture into the world of the dissertation becomes nothing short of a guessing-game, where the tasks to be completed are difficult to comprehend, and where the final mark awarded for their efforts is even trickier to fathom. Students are aware that they have to write an Introduction, but they are not really sure how to go about it; they know that they have to complete something called a Literature Review, but they are at a loss where to start or what it ought to contain, or what will get them good marks; the section on Research Methods seems so abstract to them, and concepts such as "positivism" and "phenomenology" so revered by their tutors, do not help matters; and so on (Biggam, 2008, p.1).

It has been documented in this paper that the quality of MA thesis projects in Addis Ababa University seems to be seriously compromised. Students didn't seem to develop the required knowledge, skills, and ethical behaviors to conduct scientific research.

The quality problem may be a reflection of the general profile of graduates in the country that affects the level of preparedness for a graduate study. The general pool for admission may not promise strong candidacy for graduate programs. Yet, the mechanisms employed to select better ones from this pool and practices in place thereafter do not seem to fill in the gaps. Graduate admission in many programs has become open to all with first degrees irrespective of UG field of study. We can understand from this diversity the possibility that some of such students may be quite unfamiliar to some core subject matter issues of the discipline they are registering for. Perhaps, experience and knowledge in educational and psychological research is no exception. Yet, the graduate programs are not flexible to address the felt needs of the students. The approach is like (the Amharic proverb "Siga Seteto Bila Mekelekel") inviting guests for a meal but fail to provide the required fork and knife to use to eat. While the

admission program is progressive and generous enough to inviting all interested candidates with potentials for postgraduate education to join the programs, the actual design of the existing programs is as yet rigid, monolithic, insensitive and unresponsive to the needs of those invited. No matter how they are designed, more worrisome is that these programs need to contribute to the development of higher order thinking (critical thinking, logical reasoning, reflectivity, analytical skills and ability to synthesize pieces) that are critical for learning and execution of scientific research. Although research courses are basically meant to contribute to these skills, their major share is rather to teach learners to integrate the skills that are already developed in other courses rather than developing them afresh. So, failure in research skills is not a mere failure in research courses alone. This is particularly evident in writing skills that has to develop over the years through writing essays to be able to develop arguments logically, coherently and meaningfully in different language courses from early high school grades rather than in claiming to develop them in one specific research course.

This doesn't, however, mean that quality of the research courses offered to graduate students is not a factor to blame. There is no doubt that graduate research courses that are designed comprehensively along with the inputs from students themselves, offered in a step by step, integrated, and practical manner with individual and group exercises, assignments and projects are obviously important. But, many graduate research courses are disproportionately focused (e.g. topics on research ethics, behaviors are skipped), still fact-laden, less reflective and less practical themselves. With a tone of making them practical, the tradition is to give one major paper at last. This is less useful because students were supposed to pass through other experiences that enable them writing major papers at last. Experience shows that such major papers are usually completed being unguided by course instructors and hence are less educative. Hence, they are usually unwelcomed by the students and considered as burdens; not just as sources of inspiration. It is this same feeling that unfolds while doing thesis work.

After completing basic (introductory) courses in methodology and statistics, students are usually not yet ready to carry out independent research projects. This is something that instructors of research seminar courses and supervisors of thesis projects know only too well, and students themselves often feel the same way, too. Part of the problem is that there are some critical gaps in the knowledge and skills of students who undertake thesis projects. For example, students' familiarity with basic concepts about research design and statistics is often rather poor, despite their previous coursework. Some possible reasons are outlined next.

There are other critical shortcomings in the way that methodology and statistics courses are often taught in some programs. These subjects are typically dealt with in separate courses and, consequently, their integration may not be emphasized. For example, various types of research designs may be discussed in a methodology course with little attention paid to options for data analysis. Techniques for analyzing data are covered in statistics courses, but their connection with design may not be obvious. That is, both methodology and statistics may be presented outside the context of the other, but in real research projects they are integral parts of the same whole (Kline, 2009, pp.4-5).

This means then that students may start thesis work inadequately prepared. One consequence of this problem is that students often have difficulty executing their own research projects. According to Kline (2009), they may experience a lack of confidence in what they are doing or, worse, wind up conducting a series of statistical analyses the results of which they do not really understand. That is, students too often carry out their analyses in a relatively blind way in which they have lost sight of the connections between their hypotheses (research questions), study design and procedures, scores, and interpretation of the results. Students also tend to become overly fixated on the statistical analysis and thus pay less attention than they should to other issues, including those of methodology and measurement.

Other causes of lower thesis quality could be lowered expectation from and attention given to the MA research program because of shifted attention to the doctoral programs as this has partly been the case to UG program expectations at the launching of MA programs. A related experience that would jeopardize the MA thesis writing exercise, in addition to level of expectation, is the kind of expectation that students, advisors, and departments have about the MA thesis project. It is believed that the project is just another opportunity for students to learn research methods through practice. So, what is important for students is the fact that they pass through this learning process through constant consultation with advisors. But, there is a misconception on the part mainly of students that they are merely expected to produce and submit a paper. In fact, this misconception is enhanced by the evaluation process itself in which students are only graded on the paper submitted and the oral defense session held in about an hour.

Lowered program expectations, lesser attention paid to the program, and failure in appreciating the learning process are problems that naturally unfold themselves in the thesis advisement process. With respect to the advisement process, one previous research (Yekoyealem & Belay, 2015) has indicated that the advisement experience neither promoted a sense of independence and responsibility nor educative and enlightening for the advisees. It was perceived to be less motivating to the advisors, less friendly, cold, and unrewarding to the advisees and non- continuous or limited only to few contacts that hardly allow getting adequate and timely feedback. This in turn is mainly because advisors were unavailable during consultation hours and yet hardly arranged for any compensatory schemes to fill in the gaps including consultation out of the consultation hours and communications other than face-to-face like, for example, advisement through e-mail or telephone. Findings indicated that graduate advisees had negative perception of their advisors' credibility (i.e. competence, caring and character) and reported to witness a low level advising from their thesis or dissertation advisors. In fact, we would also say that had there been a proper and adequate mentoring process all the problems indicated in previously would have been controlled; particularly data and literature fabrication, plagiarism and related problems could be easily detected. So, a failed thesis project is mainly an advisement that went awry.

Leaving students unmonitored, unsupervised, and unguided means expecting them fetch a finished product irrespective of where to fetch it from. It is like the Amharic proverb "Get the

grain milled anywhere but bring the powder" ('Yetim Fichew Duketun Amchiw'). In the face of perceived lower self-esteem of thesis writing skills, where such students decide to go is crystal clear. This problem is exacerbated with the fact that there are many choices of sources and agents to copy from. On the one hand, thesis reports produced every year are not properly documented in each university. On the other hand, such lack of data base would turn the expansion of universities in the country into a liability than an asset as thesis reports submitted in one university can be safely submitted for a degree requirement in another university. Absence of plagiarism monitoring mechanisms like similarity check would still give courage to students that they can safely copy from internet sources.

The MA thesis project being implemented under these circumstances suggest a number of implications: that after being worked out for one full year, MA theses may not communicate valid data and knowledge and this is a loss to the student, the departments and the university. It is the contention of the present authors that if properly implemented, MA theses could play an important role Ethiopianizing the western-dominated knowledge discourse in all the disciplines. It is this opportunity that is being lost. Furthermore, MA thesis projects wrongly implemented would also give a platform of learning undesirable behaviors, set bad examples, and make programs a liability to a nation in terms of producing graduates of a take it easy type while making bigger blunders of buying degrees, enhancing corrupt bureaucracy in offices and a number of ill practices in the society.

These problems are likely to occur given the fact that the ethical aspect of research is hardly given due regard in the research methodology courses, and that the thesis formats, too, still pay little attention to this ethical aspect until such time that the problem becomes conspicuous to be labeled a plagiarized work. Perhaps, the objective of the thesis work as a partial requirement for the degree would also partly curtail other possible roles and objectives; thus making departments and advisors to be less concerned in making close follow up about the ethical aspects. Assessors also mentioned this problem lesser. What worries most is that students passing through this experience would be encouraged to continue for earning bogus degrees anytime the need arises.

Recommendations

The preceding discussion brought to the fore how MA thesis projects in AAU have admittedly turned into problematic areas threatening in the process not only the status quo but at the same time the future profile of social, educational and behavioral researchers of Ethiopia in the long run. Intricate and complex chain of factors account for these problems and, hence, pointing fingers at the student body is like blaming the victims themselves while they are the last force to bear upon the state of quality of education in a rather long chain of forces within the complex educational structure (Taye, 2016). Hence, while genuine cure to the problem can be envisaged with in the broader systemic overhaul of education in the country, we would rather opt, instead of a 'wait- and- see' systemic changes, for suggesting

some medium-range strategies of intervention that include admission, training, supervision, and advisement issues.

Firstly, concerned departments need to exercise a bit more stringent criteria of admission preferably giving more credit to profiles (e.g. critical thinking, writing skills, UG grade on research methods) that allow success in thesis writing. Once students are admitted, it can also be helpful to integrate mini research projects along all the courses beginning from first semester down the road. Encouraging students to develop anyone of these mini projects into their thesis would help them build on foundations that are already established during course work. Offering research methods through block teaching approach in one month as currently practiced in AAU doesn't seem appropriate for skill courses like research methods because it doesn't give enough time to process knowledge and then put it to use; savvy from educational psychology has consistently shown that compared to massed-learning, learning distributed over time improves performance. As regards the very course offering of research methods, there is a need to give enough space for 'ethics in research'; a section that is either underestimated or even missing in the course offering.

Improving practices and legislative framework of research advisement would also help. For example, requiring advisors to work with students to ultimately publish thesis would encourage them closely follow up the process and ensure validity and reliability of findings. Advisors also need to know that getting one's advisement done through "learner circles" would reduce burden and yet improve quality at the same time (Akister et al., 2006).

Finally, departments need to give orientation to students at the beginning of the research project about expectations, rules (including plagiarism) and schedules and then exercise the rules when there are violations-like for example punishing for plagiarism. It is also recommended that AAU, other universities as well as Ministry of Education need to create a shared data base of theses done in the country so that advisors can have data at their finger tip to check if titles are already submitted elsewhere.

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