

# STUDENTS' AND SUPERVISORS' RESEARCH CULTURE AS PREDICTORS OF THE QUALITY OF UNDERGRADUATE THESIS IN BENUE STATE UNIVERSITY, MAKURDI - NIGERIA

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## Abstract

*The study investigates students' and supervisors' research culture as predictors of the quality of undergraduates' research work in Benue State University, Makurdi. There is increasing need to examine and reposition the behaviour of students and supervisors towards research writing as an integral mechanism to improve the quality of university education in Nigeria. Three research questions are developed for the study. The study is a descriptive survey research in which students and lecturers are the target population. A sample of 400 students and 200 Lecturers from the faculties of Education and Social Sciences are purposively and randomly selected. Data is collected through questionnaire, analysed using simple percentages and multiple regression. The findings reveal that student and supervisor factors have significant combined cause of poor undergraduate research ( $R^2 = .057$ ,  $F_{599} = 9.003$ ). Students' knowledge of research process ( $\beta = .150$ ,  $t = 1.745$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ), Supervisors' Workload ( $\beta = .082$ ,  $t = 2.810$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ), Supervisors' Attitude to Supervisees ( $\beta = .055$ ,  $t = 2.911$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ) and Students' Attitude to research ( $\beta = .078$ ,  $t = 2.201$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ) have significant relative contribution to poor quality of undergraduate research. The university should employ more research professionals, reduce workload for lecturers, and provide free open internet access to students.*

**Key words:** Students, Supervisors, Research, Culture, Attitude, Workload

## Introduction

University education is meant to offer sufficient knowledge and skills needed for intellectual development and production of high man power across the globe. University as the highest institution of teaching and learning revolves round research work in the quest to provide solution to challenges created either by nature or human activities in the society. International organisations and government at various levels as well as

individuals look unto university institution to discover amicable solution to socio-economic, political, psychological, scientific and technological problems or issues confronting the present society for effective growth and development. Research is an integral part of all academic programmes in which the basic foundational concepts should form the background knowledge of students in every academic discipline. Research in the university education is very significant that no learner can graduate from a university without writing a research report as one of the prerequisites for award of degree certificate. Despite the importance attached to research work in university across the world, the quality of research conducted by students as guided by supervisors largely depends on the knowledge, attitude and the general behaviour of individual student and the supervisor concerning the particular issue under investigation.

Yoloye (2009) defines research in a broad term as any activity involving information gathering and analysis with a view to reaching a better understanding or solution of particular problems. This means that the quality of information gathered and analysed by different researchers largely depend on individual knowledge and skills in research process. According to Emaikwu (2011) research is a scientific process of finding solutions to problems or how to improve on existing issue in the society. Research is a process that involves a systematic and comprehensive investigation into a problem or phenomenon to proffer solution to a problem or improve on the existing knowledge about nature or human activities. Research is a process because it involves some basic step – by – step investigation into an issue: identification of research problem or topic, articulation of the purpose, review of literature, methodological design for data collection and presentation of findings. The steps may vary from one institution to another, however, the major components of research must be implemented in carrying out scientific study by researchers.

The major aim of research is to provide solution to problems or improve on existing phenomenon. This implies that the population of university graduates conducting research every year could have provided substantial findings to solve most problems militating against social, economic, political and technological development in Nigeria. It seems many people do not conduct proper scientific research before graduating from most Nigerian Universities.

Papanastasiou (2005) observes that ignorance of the usefulness of research, anxiety and negative feelings about research process by university students have affected their attitude towards research work in Nigeria. Learners are bound to be anxious and can develop negative feeling about research work when they fail to acquire the basic knowledge and skills in research related courses (research method, statistics, etc). Students' inability to understand the basis of research writing cause many of them who are not properly guided by their supervisors to pirate or bootleg other people's research works. In support of the above fact, Sizemore and Lewandowski (2009) discovered that

students' attitude and general behaviour to research courses such as statistics, research method and other related courses hinder their understanding of research in Nigerian universities.

According to Evans (2011) in Li (2012), students require intellectual ability to comprehend the basis of research and to develop more positive attitude towards its conduct. Also, some supervisors fail to guide their supervisees either due to inadequate knowledge of research or excess workload among lecturers in Nigerian universities. The student's attitude to research and supervisor's knowledge of research, workload among other factors could affect student's degree of confidence to undertake research work in universities particularly in Nigeria. Westhuizen (2014) attributes poor conduct of research among university students to lack of research knowledge and research self-efficacy. It means that lack of Research self-efficacy among researchers in identifying unique problems for investigation and employing appropriate procedures often leads to plagiarism of other people's intellectual properties. Students' predictor variables such as creativity, hard work and general attitude towards research could influence their commitment and general effort for successful research writing.

Bordovskaia and Kostromina (2013) discovered that students' personality such as attitude is one of the predictors to successful and effective research in academics. They also discovered that high level of research potential of students has positive significant correlation with extraversion, self-control, emotional stability and expressiveness. However, it has been observed that even students with negative attitude to studies can be successful when properly taught and guided by knowledgeable teachers who are committed to work and have good interaction with learners.

Bezuidenhout and Alt (2011) commenting on the responsibilities of Lecturers (Research Supervisors) to learning outcomes, state that Lecturers should not only focus on developing theoretical knowledge and understanding of students, but also aim at inculcating skills and positive attitudes for good quality research among university students. It has been observed that lecturers in Nigerian universities are occupied with excess workload such as; students population, personal and students research work as well as administrative responsibilities (examination matters). Bezuidenhout and Alt (2011) also lamented that excess workload given to lecturers in the developing Nations hinder effective supervision of scientific research. It has been observed that, many lecturers supervising both undergraduate and post graduate programs with other responsibilities seem to be too busy to properly guide or direct their project supervisees during research process. The poor quality of research work conducted by undergraduates in Nigerian universities continue to diminish every year.

Research activity is specific in its content and requirements for the students, and it is very important for students and lecturers to understand the problem under investigation

and work together for successful achievement of the set research objectives. The nature of interaction between supervisors and students during research process is one of the major driving forces for any effective research work. The supervisors who are more accessible, friendly and willing to guide students exhibit positive attitude that serve as motivation to their research students (supervisees) for high quality performance (Moskvichevaa, Bordovskaiab, & Darinskayac, 2015).

Traditionally, teaching and research is the primary responsibility of university Lecturers. However, the excessive workload placed on the university lecturers can hinder his/her job performance thereby affecting students' learning outcome (Houston, Luana, & Paewai, 2006). This has led to the increasing number of unpublished undergraduate research work because of their poor quality as such works seem to lack originality and significance to address societal challenges. Many students and supervisors perceive undergraduate thesis as a mere requirement to get Bachelor Degree. Projects are being recycled over years without any contribution to existing knowledge. It seems lecturers (supervisors) are finding it difficult to guide and direct their research students aright due to the heavy workload such as the number of courses taught in a semester/session, student population in the class and number of students allocated for project supervision.

### **Statement of the Problem**

The quality of academic research is primarily judged by the relevance of the issue or problem under investigation, the appropriateness of the methodological approach employed in the research and the significance of its findings to the society. The quality of most research conducted by the university students in Nigeria in the 21<sup>st</sup> century seems not to be providing solution to the societal challenges, needs and aspirations. The inadequate knowledge of research and the general attitude to study among students and supervisors can be said to be the reasons research in Nigerian University education system is becoming a mere academic exercise.

It seems lack of proper research knowledge and skills, commitment, heavy workload and general negative behaviour of both students and supervisors is responsible for this development. Most students seem not to be interested to go through the rigor involved in carrying out a scientific research. They normally pirate past projects to merely fulfill the condition for award of Bachelor degree from the universities. This study seeks to determine whether the student's negative attitude to research is responsible for the research dilemma in Nigeria or whether the problem stems from the supervisors' ignorance of research or their overbearing workload. It is based on this premise that the present study seeks to investigate students' and supervisors' research culture as predictors of the quality of undergraduate thesis in Benue State University, Makurdi.

### **Research Questions**

The study answers the following research questions:

- i. What is the composite contribution of student factors (knowledge of research process and Attitude to research) and supervisor factors (knowledge of research process, workload and attitude towards supervisees) to the quality of undergraduate research in Benue State University?
- ii. What is the relative contribution of each of the student and supervisor factors to the prediction of undergraduate research quality in Benue State University?
- iii. What are the major ways of improving the quality of undergraduate research report?

### **Methodology**

#### **Research Design**

The study is a descriptive survey research because it involves large sample no manipulation of variables.

#### **Population**

The target population for the study is all the 5685 final year undergraduate students and 557 Academic Staff members (Lecturers) from Benue State University, Makurdi. (Academic and Establishment Record Units, Offer of the Registrar, 2017).

#### **Sampling Technique and Sample**

The study employs purposive and simple random sampling techniques to select 600 respondents (400 final year students and 200 Lecturers) from Faculties of Education and Social Sciences. Purposive sampling is used to select 400 final year students because they are the people undertaking research project at undergraduate level. Also, 200 Lecturers from the departments of Educational Foundations, Curriculum/Teaching, Psychology, Political Science and Mass Communication of aforementioned faculties are randomly selected for the study. The use of random sampling gives every Lecturer from the University equal opportunity to be selected for the study.

#### **Instrument**

Two self developed instruments titled: Student's Attitude to Research Questionnaire (SARQ) and Supervisor's Attitude to Research Supervisees Questionnaire (SARSQ) are used for data collection. Student's Attitude to Research Questionnaire (SARQ) has

section A – C; Section 'A' contains items on students' basic knowledge/skills in research process, Section 'B' contains information on students' anxiety concerning research and Section 'C' elicits information on student attitude towards research work. The section also contained an open ended item for students to suggest ways of improving quality of undergraduate research work. Also, SARSQ contains section A – D. Section 'A' contains items on Supervisor's workload, section 'B' is on supervisor's knowledge of the research process and section 'C' elicit information on supervisor's attitude towards project supervisees. Section 'D' contains open ended items that required the respondents (Lecturers) to identify ways of improving quality of undergraduate research work in the university. Both SARQ and LBRSQ contain four-point scale to elicit respondents' responses; Strongly Agreed (SA=4), Agreed (A=3), Disagreed (D=2) and Strongly Disagreed (SD=1).

To establish the reliability of the instrument, it is first trial-tested on thirty students and thirty lecturers from other departments different from those sampled for the study. After field- testing, Cronbach Alpha reliability estimate is used, SARQ produced reliability coefficient value  $r = .922$  on 15 items while LBRSQ has reliability coefficient  $r = .861$  on 15 items respectively. This means that the instruments are highly reliable for data collection.

### **Method of Data Collection**

Data for the study is collected through personal visit and administration of the instruments to sampled respondents in the university by the researcher. The instrument is administered to students and collected on the spot after a successful completion by the respondents while the questionnaires administered to lecturers in their offices and collected the following day.

### **Method of Data Analysis**

The study employs two statistical tools for data analysis. Multiple Regression is used to answer research questions 1 and 2 that bother on composite and relative contribution of the independent variables to the dependent variable. Also, descriptive statistics (frequency count and percentages) is used to answer research question 3. This is done with the aid of SPSS computer analysis.

### **Result/Findings**

**Research Question 1:** What are the composite contributions of student factors (knowledge of research and Attitude to research process) and supervisor factors (knowledge of research, workload and attitude to research supervisees) to the quality of undergraduate research in Benue State University?

**Table 1** : Regression summary of student and supervisor factors as predictors of undergraduate research quality in Benue State University

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R	
			Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.239	.057	.051	4.374

The result on table 1 shows that the combination of student factors (knowledge of research, anxiety and attitude to research writing) and supervisor factors (knowledge of research, workload and attitude to research supervisees) have a multiple correlation (R) of .239. The cause of poor undergraduate research is linked with these independent variables (student and supervisor factors). This implies that 5.7% of the total variance in the causes of poor undergraduate research writing in the university can be explained by the combined contribution of the student and supervisor factors built into this regression model as shown by co-efficient of determination  $R^2$  (.057). The result shows that the model is fit.

**Table 2. Analysis of Variance**

Model	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	p
Regression	688.838	4	172.209	9.003	.000*
Residual	11380.947	595	19.128		
Total	12069.785	599			

Significant at  $p < 0.05$

The analysis of variance observed in table 2, shows that the causes of poor undergraduate research work (student and supervisor factors) when taken together, significantly predict the quality of undergraduate research work [ $F(4,595) = 9.003$ ] in Benue State University, Makurdi which confirms that the value of multiple correlation is significant at ( $P < .05$ ) using the regression F – Ratio at  $df = 4,595$ . This implies that both student and supervisor factors have significant effects on the quality of research carried out by undergraduate students in Benue State University.

**Research Question 2:** What is the relative contribution of student and supervisor factors to the prediction of undergraduate quality of research work?

**Table 3:** Showing parameter estimates of relative contributions of student and supervisor Factors to the prediction of undergraduate research quality.

Model	B	Std Error	Beta	t	P
Constant	15.868	1.566		8.556	.000*
Student knowledge of Research	.140	.060	.150	1.745	.002*
Student Attitude to Research	.113	.054	.078	2.201	.031*
Supervisor Knowledge of Research	.165	.071	.124	0.667	.067
Supervisor Workload	.201	.088	.082	2.810	.010*
Supervisor Attitude to Supervisees	.227	.110	.055	2.911	.030*

Significant at  $p < 0.05$

Table 3 shows that among the predictors of students' poor quality of research work, the value of t- ratio associated with respective variables indicate that (students' knowledge of research process –  $\beta = .150$ ,  $t = 1.745$ ,  $p < 0.05$ , Supervisor's Workload –  $\beta = .082$ ,  $t = 2.810$ ,  $p < 0.05$ , Supervisors' Attitude to Supervisees –  $\beta = .055$ ,  $t = 2.911$ ,  $p < 0.05$  and Students' Attitude to research work -  $\beta = .078$ ,  $t = 2.201$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ) each of these variables contribute significantly to the poor quality of undergraduate research work in Benue State University. However, supervisor's knowledge of research process as a variable has no significant contribution ( $\beta = .124$ ,  $t = 0.667$ ,  $p > 0.05$ ) to poor quality of undergraduate research work. The values of the standardised regression weight associated with the four significant variables show that “student factor (student knowledge of research process) is the potent contributor to the causes of poor undergraduate research followed by supervisor's factors (Supervisor’s workload and attitude to supervisees), and students' attitude to research respectively.

**Research Question 3:** What are the major ways of improving the quality of undergraduate research report?



**Table 4:** Showing descriptive analysis of Students’ and Lecturers’ suggestions on ways of improving quality of undergraduate research quality in Benue State University

<b>Suggested ways of Improving Research</b>	<b>No. Students</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>No. Lecturers</b>	<b>%</b>
Increase in the time for teaching and conducting undergraduate research	325	54.17	200	33.33
Provision of free internet Access to students on university campus.	295	49.17	180	30
Monitoring of supervisors’ attitude to supervisees by their employers.	358	49.67	-	-
Empowering Lecturers with internet facilities to check plagiarism by students.	180	30	200	33.33
Using publication of undergraduate research findings as part of requirement for graduation.	108	18	182	30.33
Reduction of supervisors’ workload by their employers.	362	60.33	200	33.33

Table 4 shows that 325 (54.17%) Students and 200 (33.33%) Lecturers suggest that increasing time for teaching and writing of undergraduate research work will help to improve students' knowledge and understanding of the research process. Also, 295 (49.17%) students and 180 (30%) lecturers suggest that provision of students with free internet access on university campus is one of the ways to improve the quality of undergraduate project in Benue State University. More so, 358 (49.67%) Students suggest that monitoring of supervisors' negative attitude to their supervisees by their employers is another way to improve quality of undergraduate students' research work in the University. Also, 180 (30%) Students and 200 (33.33%) Lecturers suggest empowering lecturers with internet facilities to check plagiarism by students. 108 (18%) Students and 182 (30.33) Lecturers suggest that the use of publication of undergraduate students' research report as one of the requirements for graduation will help to improve the quality of their research. 362 (60.33%) Students and 200 (33.33%) Lecturers suggested reduction of supervisors' workload by their employers as another way to improve the quality of undergraduate students' research work in the University.

**Discussion of Findings**

The research finding on research question one reveals that students’ factors (poor knowledge of research and attitude to research) combined with supervisors' factors (knowledge of research, workload and attitude to supervisees) contribute significantly to poor quality of undergraduate students' research in Benue State University [F (4,595)

= 9.003,  $p = 0.000^*$ ]. Nevertheless, when these factors are considered on a relative stand, only four of the five predictor variables (students' knowledge of research process, students' attitude to research, supervisor workload and supervisors' attitude to supervisees) have significant contributions to the present poor quality of undergraduate students' research in Benue State University. Supervisors' knowledge of research process is not statistically a significant predictor of poor quality of undergraduate research report in the University. The combined causes of poor quality of undergraduate research imply that undergraduate students are not properly taught the research process and are not properly guided by their supervisors. This makes students to develop negative attitude towards searching for relevant research materials, being creative in writing research and avoiding plagiarism. Also, the overbearing workload of lecturers (too many supervisees per supervisor) and poor supervisor-supervisee relationship have hindered proper mentoring of research students for good quality research writing. This finding corroborates Utulu (2013) who observed that the causes of students' poor academic performance in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is multidimensional; involving students' study habit, the quality of teachers to inculcate knowledge and skills, adverse effects of modern technology and home environment.

Findings relating to research question two reveal that Student's poor knowledge of research process is a significant cause ( $\beta = .150$ ,  $t = 1.745$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ) of poor quality undergraduate research work in Benue State University. This implies that the quality of undergraduate research in the university is poor due to students' inability to identify researchable topic, start up good research introduction, to set up good research purpose, carry out literature review, employ appropriate procedure (methodology) and carry out data analysis as well as to report findings that has significant contribution to the failing quality of undergraduate students' research work in Benue State university. This finding agrees with Westhuizen (2014) who state that poor quality of research among university students is caused by lack of research knowledge and research self-efficacy. Most undergraduate students lack basic knowledge and skills required in research process. The lack of research knowledge has made many students embark on issues that are not researchable, and the supervisors sometimes find it very difficult to guide such students to achieve success.

The study findings also reveal that supervisor's workload is the second significant cause of poor quality of undergraduate students' research in Benue State University ( $\beta = .082$ ,  $t = 2.810$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ). The study reveals that many lecturers from Faculties of Education and Social Sciences are supervising over 30 project students per session. This means that lecturers have heavy or excess workload that hinder them from giving adequate time to properly guide and direct their research students in the research process. The study further reveals that most lecturers spend time both in office and at home preparing for lectures, assessing students (marking and recording continuous assessment) and

carrying out some administrative responsibilities assigned to them by their employers. Such responsibilities have hindered them from fully examining, guiding and directing their research students to produce good quality research works. Many supervisors allow students to go bind and submit their project report at the last minutes hence they cannot give them the needed attention due to too much workload. This finding corroborates Houston, Luana, and Paewai, (2006) who state that excess workload of the university lecturers has greatly hindered their job performance and students' learning outcome.

More so, the study discovers that Supervisors' Attitude to Supervisees is one of the significant causes of poor quality of undergraduate students' research – ( $\beta = .055$ ,  $t = 2.911$ ,  $p < 0$ ) in Benue State University. The study also discovers that most lecturers (supervisors) are not accessible or friendly with their research students and it takes many of them long period of time to treat and return student's project file for onward research process. Some supervisors are said to be unfriendly with their supervisees that they do not answer phone calls when research students are calling to seek appointment or get explanation concerning research work. This finding agrees with Moskvichevaa, Bordovskaiab, & Darinskayac, (2015) who posit that the nature of interaction between supervisors and students in the research process is one of the major driving forces for any effective research work. The supervisors who are more accessible, friendly and willing to guide and direct students exhibit positive attitude that serves as motivational factor to research students (supervisees) for high quality performance.

Also, students' attitude to research process is discovered to be a significant cause of poor quality of undergraduate students research work in Benue State University ( $\beta = .078$ ,  $t = 2.201$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ). The study findings reveal that many undergraduate students develop negative attitude to research process. They normally like to copy the past research reports that have been documented by other authors. Most students are not interested in carrying out literature search to identify problem/issue for investigation. Even when properly guided by the supervisor, many students are not interested to go to the field and collect the needed data during the research process. Some students are also discovered to contract their research work to other people and this could have been discovered if their supervisors are not too busy to read through their research report. This finding supports that of Papanastasiou (2005), who observed that ignorance of the usefulness of research, anxiety and negative feelings about research by university students have affected their attitude towards research work in Nigerian universities. However, the study reveals on the other hand that supervisor's knowledge of research process has no significant contribution to poor quality of undergraduate research work in Benue State University ( $\beta = .124$ ,  $t = 0.667$ ,  $p > 0.05$ ).

The study findings on research question three also reveals the following suggestions by the respondents as the possible ways to enhance the quality of undergraduate research

work in the State: increase in time for teaching and conducting undergraduate research in the university. This suggestion was made by 325 (54.17%) Students and 200 (33.33%) Lecturers. It implies that the time given by the University for the teaching of research related courses and the duration for students to conduct and write their research report is not enough to achieve quality research. Also, 295 (49.17%) Students and 180 (30%) Lecturers identify provision of free internet access to students on campus as another way to improve the quality of undergraduate research in the university. It therefore means that if free open internet access is provided for students on campus, it will enhance their research activities. The study also discovers that 358 (49.67%) students suggested monitoring of supervisors' attitude to supervisees by the university management as another way to correct lecturers' unacceptable behaviours and enhance good quality research in the university. Also, the use of publication of undergraduate research finding as requirement for graduation was suggested by 108 (18%) Students and 182 (30.33%) Lecturers as a way to enhance good quality undergraduate research work in Benue State University. Also, 362 (60.33%) Students and 200 (33.33%) Lecturers suggested reduction of workload given to supervisors in the university as another way to enhance good quality of undergraduate research work. The finding confirms the assertion by Bezuidenhout and Alt (2011) who lament that excess workload given to lecturers in the developing Nations hinder effective supervision of scientific research at all levels of university programs.

### **Conclusion**

Based on the findings of the study, it is concluded that the poor quality of undergraduate research in Benue State University is caused by the combination of student's factors (knowledge of research process and attitude to research), and supervisor's factors (knowledge of research, workload and attitude to supervisees). All of these factors should be given proper attention in the effort to improve the quality of undergraduate research in the university.

### **Recommendations**

Based on the research findings, the following recommendations are made to enhance good quality of undergraduate research:

- Benue State university management should employ more professionals in the area of research to properly teach undergraduate students the basics of research. The employment of more professionals will enable students to acquire sound knowledge and skills in research writing.
- Students should always carry out literature search by themselves in order to boost their understanding of the research process. Student's self discovered knowledge

of research process will ensure higher quality of both undergraduate and post graduate research report in universities.

- University management, individuals and Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) should organise scholarship awards to students who have best research work for different undergraduate courses or programmes in the university. This will motivate students to be more committed to their research work.
- University Authority should reduce workload given to individual lecturers to enhance their effectiveness in guiding and directing project students. The university can achieve this by reducing the number of candidates or applicants to be given admission for a session. Admission of students should be done based on the available academic staff strength to avoid over population of research students per Lecturer or supervisor.

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