Examiners' Comments on Masters' Dissertations at the Islamic University in Uganda

Maimuna A. Nimulola
Islamic University in Uganda
Lecturer, Department of Educational Psychology, Faculty of Education
Email: m.a.nimulola@iuiu.ac.ug

Abstract
This study aimed at exploring the prevalence and nature of examiners' comments on the appropriateness of draft M. Ed dissertations at Islamic University in Uganda. A total of 530 reports were stratified according to specialisations and examiners from which a sample of 300 reports were randomly selected. Content and thematic analyses were conducted on the reports whose findings were interpreted using Bourke and Holbrook's (2013) indicators for assessment of Masters' thesis quality. Findings reveal that under Contribution, 'originality' attracted few comments which tended to be neutral, while 'substantive' and 'advancement of knowledge' tended to be inappropriately done. The Literature Review 'accuracy' and 'application' categories were among the most highly commented on, with most of them tending to be inappropriately done, while relatively few comments were made on 'literature coverage'. Under Approach/Methodology, 'research design' tended to be appropriately done while 'sampling', 'validity', and 'reliability' tended to be inappropriately done. In Analysis/Findings, 'quantitative data presentation' tended to be appropriately done, while 'qualitative data analysis' and 'interpretation' tended to be inappropriately done. Throughout the dissertation components, concerns on Presentation: 'communicative competence' and 'expression' were common. It is recommended that the university should engage Masters' students more in seminars and workshops on research methods and scholarly writing.

Keywords: master's dissertations, quality indicators, dissertation examination

One of the key defining elements of a Master's programme is the conduct of academic research by students, and the extent to which it is published and relevant to society is one of the criteria for assessing the quality of a university (IUCEA, 2010; IUCEA, 2014). In Africa, the inclusion of research as one of the three missions of universities was realised in 1943 by the Channon Commission of the British government (Andoh, 2017). Since then, a number of conferences were held including those in Tananarive and France in 1962 and 1998 respectively where research as a key mission of African universities was re-emphasised. However, due to military dictatorship (Andoh) and prioritization of elementary education (Jowi et al., 2013), research in African universities did not witness progress after the 1970s and it was not until the 2000s that universities begun to invest more in research-related activities such as enhancing postgraduate studies. Africa's higher education faces the challenge of a weak research base

(AfriQAN, 2014; Jowi et al., 2013; Kigotho, 2013) in that the conduct of research that benefits national governments and communities and that contributes to development and the knowledge economy is still minimal (Andoh).

On admission at the university, M. Ed students are required to attend coursework – including that on qualitative and quantitative research methods – for 3 semesters (Mukasa, 2012, NCHE, n.d.). They present synopses of their research at graduate seminars for vetting. After which, they are allocated supervisors with whom they closely work to write proposals, which are then presented to the Faculty Higher Degrees Committee for further vetting. Students then work on their projects under the guidance of their supervisors. The Centre for Postgraduate Studies (CPGS) in conjunction with the Faculty of Education (FOE) organize workshops on the conduct of research for students, lecturers and supervisors, and CPGS also published a guide to research for students and supervisors (Mukasa, 2012). As a measure of quality, the Centre and Faculty monitor students' research through regular correspondences, meetings, and progress forms. On completion of research, students' dissertations are subjected to internal and external examination before being approved for presentation in viva voce examination, which are then revised basing on the recommendations.

Statement of the Problem

M. Ed students are expected to demonstrate sound scholarly research skills exhibited in quality and relevant dissertations. However, at a number of workshops (e.g. Kasule, 2014) and meetings, the Centre expressed concern at the low levels of published studies from students' dissertations, students' delay to complete research, low dissertation scores, and poor oral defence by students during viva voce. Quality research not only inspires graduates to publish their findings, but also increases the possibility of communities benefitting from their studies. This study aimed at exploring the prevalence and nature of comments contained in examiners' reports regarding the appropriateness of M. Ed dissertations, so as to identify strong areas that needed consolidating and weak ones that needed to be addressed by students and supervisors.

Relatively few studies have been conducted on postgraduate research in African universities (Mulinge & Arasa, 2013) in general and Ugandan universities (Barifaijo & Karyeija, 2016; Muriisa, 2015; Rwothomio, 2016) in particular. Muriisa focused on the challenges and experiences which social science students in Africa underwent to complete the PhD programme. He held one focus group discussion with 7 PhD students and 1 PhD graduate at the Faculty of Development Studies – Mbarara University of Science and Technology, reviewed literature and some of the external supervisors' reports. Challenges identified included isolation, the nature of the program and the overall learning environment, i.e. lack of supervisors, resources and motivation of supervisors. The above study focussed on PhD programme and was mainly interested in the processes involved in supervision and assessment, rather than output.

Barifaijo and Karyeija analysed the dynamics in doctoral external examination at the then School of Education, Makerere University. They

reviewed 21 reports from seven external examiners and doctoral theses for those candidates that had been failed and those that had been passed by same examiners. They also interviewed the Director of Graduate Studies, the Dean School of Education, Heads of Department, doctoral candidates, supervisors, some members of the Graduate Board, and some external examiners. They found some of the external examiners' reports to be self-contradictory, inconsistent and unethical. Their study focussed on PhD programme and their analysis of dissertations was holistically done by comparing external examiners' scores with their recommendations, while the current study analysed both internal and external examiners' comments on specific components of Masters' dissertations.

Rwothomio (2016) assessed managerial factors influencing students' completion of M. Ed programme at Islamic University in Uganda. He used questionnaires and interviews on a sample of 45 students, 5 academic staff and 5 management staff and found timely payment of research supervisors, allocation of supervisors according to discipline, availability of supervisors and their cooperation with students to be the major factors. The study was process oriented and managerial, while the current study was on output.

Mulinge and Arasa (2013) investigated the quality of postgraduate research by analysing reports of one of the authors as external examiner on 92 Masters' and 8 PhD dissertations and theses across several disciplines from 10 universities across the sub-Saharan regions of Africa. Their theoretical framework was based on three attributes of quality: original contribution to knowledge, logical packaging and structuring of documents, and inclusiveness and length of dissertation/ thesis content. They found 63% of dissertations and theses to be of low quality characterised by inability to contribute original knowledge; poor presentation; and lack of clarity; sequencing and coherence. Their study was cross-sectional and based on reports of one external examiner, while the current study is a case based on internal and external examiners' reports and analysed using Bourke and Holbrook's 12 indicators of thesis quality.

Research Question

What is the prevalence and nature of comments contained in examiners' reports on the appropriateness of the major components of Masters' dissertations?

Scope of Study

This study was limited to assessing examiners' comments on the appropriateness of draft dissertations' preliminary, introduction, literature review, methodology, data presentation and analysis, interpretation, discussion, conclusions and recommendations components. Examiners' reports for students who defended between 2013 and 2017 were analysed because this is the period when the Faculty of Education registered an influx of students across the departments, raising concerns of quality.

Theoretical Framework

The current study used Bourke and Holbrook's (2013, p.410) indicators for holistic assessment of Masters' thesis quality. The authors identified 12 indicators cutting across 5 areas: Contribution of Thesis; Literature Review; Approach and Methodology; Analysis and Results; and Presentation, having varying levels of importance, and categorised into 5 groups as indicated in the first three columns of Table. 1. The last column of the table indicates the corresponding dissertation components that were analysed in the current study.

Table 1

Indicators for Assessment of Masters' Thesis Quality by Dissertation Components

Rank	Indicators of Quality for Masters' Theses	Group	Dissertation Component
1st	Approach/Methodology: appropriate	One	Research Design Population Sampling
2nd	Analysis/Findings: effective interpretation	Two	Quantitative Analysis Qualitative Analysis Interpretations
3rd	Analysis/Findings: appropriateness		Quantitative Presentation Qualitative Presentation
4th	Approach/Methodology: effective application		Instruments Validity Reliability
5th	Literature Review: accuracy		Referencing
6th	Presentation: communication competence	Three	Cross-cutting
7th	Contribution: originality		Title Originality Abstract
8th	Contribution: substantive	Four	Background Problem Statement Significance Objectives Research Questions Hypotheses
9th	Literature Review: use/application		Conceptual Framework
10th	Literature Review: coverage		Theoretical Framework Scope Literature Review Discussion
11th	Presentation: correct expression	Five	Cross-cutting
11th	Contribution: advance knowledge		Conclusions Recommendations

Note. Adapted from "Examining PhD and research masters theses" by S. Bourke and P. Holbrook, 2013, *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, 38 (4), pp. 407-416. Copyright 2013 by Taylor & Francis Group.

According to Bourke and Holbrook (2013), Contribution to new knowledge has three indicators which include originality, making substantive contribution and advancing knowledge. Originality occupies a higher rank of importance than its counterparts. The Literature Review area has the indicators of accuracy, use/ application and coverage. Accuracy is where references are omitted, misreported, or used inconsistently in referencing, citation or quotation, and is more highly ranked than the other two. Literature use and or theoretical application which falls in the ninth position is subdivided into coherent and substantive use. Coherent use involves the ability to select literature and position it in a way that advances an argument, and to use adequate sources. Substantive use involves: working understanding of the literature, critical appraisal of the literature, connection of the literature to findings to support interpretation, and demonstration of awareness of and engagement with the literature according to one's discipline (Holbrook, Bourke, Fairbairn, & Lovat, 2007). Coverage, which is in the fourth group of importance involves the amount of relevant information cited

The Approach/ Methodology area is the most important and consists of two indicators: appropriate, i.e. being well-justified, sound and clearly described; and effective application i.e. having a high level of perceptiveness and acumen in using the materials to draw out appropriate and interesting insights and conclusions. The Analysis/Findings area consists of appropriateness and effective interpretation indicators, while that of Presentation consists of communicative competence (spelling, punctuation, mechanics, coherence and clarity) and correct expression indicators belonging to groups three and five respectively.

Consequently, the dominant criteria of importance for judging thesis quality are Approach/Methodology, Analysis/Findings and Literature Review: accuracy, while the least dominant are Presentation: correct expression, and Contribution: advance knowledge.

A Review on Assessment of Dissertations and Theses

Studies on dissertations and theses assessment have tended to focus on candidate, candidature, and examiner information (Bourke, 2008; Bourke & Holbrook, 2008; Holbrook & Bourke, 2004); report organisation, accessible areas covered, dialogic and evaluative elements (Holbrook, Bourke, Lovat & Dally, 2004); identification of quality indicators (Bourke & Holbrook, 2013); major (Mulinge & Arasa, 2013) and specific (Holbrook et al., 2007) components of dissertations and theses; and process (Muriisa, 2015) and dynamics (Barifaijo & Karyeija, 2016) of assessment. The review is presented under the themes of contribution, literature review, approach/methodology, analysis/findings, and presentation.

Assessment of dissertations and theses begins right from the preliminary sections which have to be written in an acceptable format, followed by a convincing introduction. Mulinge and Arasa (2013) found a majority of dissertations and theses to be characterised by: poorly formatted tables of content; inconsistencies between headings and content; incomplete or too detailed

abstracts, backgrounds and problem statements; a failure to indicate gaps; unmeasurable objectives, and a failure to conduct rigorous testing of hypotheses.

Still under contribution, significance of a study holds a key role in research as evidenced by Bourke (2008) who analysed the content of 2121 reports for 804 theses in eight Australian universities with the purpose of identifying indicators of thesis quality. He found significance and contribution of the thesis to be the third most common area of examiners' comments. Similarly, Holbrook et al.s' (2004) textual analysis of characteristics in the written reports of doctoral thesis examiners for 101 PhD candidates in an Australian university found comments about contribution and significance to be in 70 per cent of reports. However, despite its importance, this component of research had major weaknesses characterised by being irrelevant and incomplete (Mulinge & Arasa, 2013).

A critical review and analysis of the literature plays a fundamental role in all stages of research including the introduction, methodology and discussion. This component was commented on by about one half of examiners of selected Australian universities theses (Holbrook et al., 2004), where comment on literature coverage (71.3%) tended to be more than those on error & accuracy (27.9%) and utilisation (28.7%) (Holbrook et al., 2007). However, comment on coverage had weaker links with quality theses, instead, positive examiner comment on literature use and application was the most closely linked with higher quality theses while comment on inaccuracy was most closely linked with lower quality theses (Bourke, 2008).

Comment on inaccuracy was characterised by: in-text references not being listed in the reference section; inconsistencies of years of publication between text and references; repetitions in reference listing or omission of a reference source; and a failure to interpret the literature and to provide a personal perspective (Holbrook et al., 2004). Other comments include: references being crowded with unused sources; inconsistencies in surnames; incomplete; limited use of current journal sources; unrelated statements and paragraphs; lack of critical analysis; inappropriate use of concepts; abuse of punctuation marks and conjunctions; failure to acknowledge sources; not adhering to referencing style; and inappropriate use of et al (Mulinge & Arasa, 2013).

Appropriateness and applicability of research methodology are key defining features of high quality theses (Bourke, 2008) and were found to have been commented on in 60% of the examiners' reports in an Australian university, although very briefly – the authors suggesting that because examiners enter the thesis examination beyond the proposal stage, they comment primarily on elements they feel they can influence (Holbrook et al., 2004). The methodology chapter tended to be the weakest in many dissertation and theses reports, characterised by: incomplete and irrational designs; unclear profiling of data collection methods and processes; and inability to differentiate between sampling techniques (Mulinge & Arasa, 2013).

In their assessment of data presentation, examiners consider communicative competence, clarity, adequacy, and logical structuring (Bourke, 2008; Bourke & Holbrook, 2013; Holbrook et al., 2004; Mulinge & Arasa, 2013). Poor presentation of data was characterised by: inadequate interrogation; information overload; repetitiveness; poor structure; lack of flow, inappropriate sequencing; inadequate coverage of study objectives; poor integration of quantitative and qualitative data; misleading and incorrect findings; poorly formatted tables and/or figures; crowded with tables, figures and diagrams; improperly numbered tables; failure to introduce tables and/or figures; inappropriate use of statistical terms; not testing hypotheses presented; and inappropriate statistical techniques of hypotheses testing (Mulinge & Arasa).

Analysis of data can be challenging where the necessary skills have not been mastered by a researcher. Examiner comment on analysis and reporting of findings appeared in 95% of the reports in Australian universities and these were negatively related to examiner recommendations (Bourke, 2008). In some African universities, weaknesses included lack of interpretations of results; discussions being crowded by lengthy summaries of the study results; and failure to make reference to the empirical studies (Mulinge & Arasa, 2013). The authors also found most of the conclusions to be a repeat of summary of findings, inconsistent with study objectives, and not data driven. The recommendations were also too abstract.

Scholarly work ought to be written using proper grammar and sentence construction since poorly written work one tends to distract examiners from looking at the substantive components. Comments on communicative competence, a correlate of thesis quality (Bourke, 2008) were found in 73% of examiner reports in Australia and these included grammar, spelling, punctuation, mechanics, coherence, clarity, style, sentence structure, and paragraphing (Holbrook et al., 2007; Mulinge & Arasa 2013).

Methodology

Research Design

In order to conduct a detailed analysis of examiners' reports on M. Ed dissertations at the Faculty of Education – Islamic University in Uganda, a case-study research design was deemed appropriate (Creswell, 2007). The population constituted 530 reports examined by 13 and 6 internal and external examiners respectively, for 265 M. Ed candidates who defended their dissertations between 2013 and 2017 (IUIU Library, 2018).

The reports were stratified according to specialisations: Educational Management and Administration (EMA), Instructional Technology (ITC), Counselling Psychology (CPS), and Educational Psychology (EPS); and examiners: Internal Examiners (IE) and External Examiners (EE), from which a sample of 300 was selected as indicated in Table 2.

Table 2
Population and Sample of Dissertations by Specialisation and Examiners

Speciali sation	Population of candidates	Population of dissertations	Sample of candidates	Sample of dissertations	
				IE	EE
EMA	178	356	141	99	105
ITC	40	80	27	20	21
CPS	27	54	22	18	18
EPS	20	40	14	12	07
Total	265	530	204	149	151

Data Collection and Analysis

Examiners' reports obtained from Centre for Postgraduate Studies were retyped and the content formatted according to 28 research components as reflected in Table 3. Content analysis of each component in the reports was done by identifying key concepts, coding and categorising them into appropriate, inappropriate and neutral. Where the comments predominantly reflected appropriateness or inappropriateness, they were coded accordingly. Neutral coding was used where there was a combination of comments about appropriateness and inappropriateness, and where comments were non directional like 'available'. Frequencies and percentages were also used to summarise the data.

Prevalence of Examiners' Comments in M. Ed Dissertation Reports

This section provides results on occurrences and ratings of examiners' views on the various components of research dissertations, and on their appropriateness. Table 3 reveals that the most commented on component was Literature Review, followed by Background, Quantitative Data Presentation, Abstract and Research Design. The least commented on was Theoretical Framework, followed by Qualitative Data Presentation, Qualitative Data Analysis, Hypotheses and Significance.

Almost two thirds (17of 27) of the components in the reports were rated as inappropriate, with Referencing having the highest percentage (83.4%), followed by Qualitative Data Analysis, Reliability, Interpretation, Sampling and Quantitative Data Analysis. Relatively higher percentages of ratings being appropriate were found to be in only four components of the dissertations, with the highest being Research Design (46.7%), followed by Objectives, Quantitative Data Presentation and Abstract.

Table 3
Occurrence and Ratings of Examiners' Comments

Dissertation Component	Occurrence		Appropriate		Neutral		Inappropriate	
	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%
Title	75	25.0	36	48.0	0	0.0	39	52.0
Originality	61	20.3	50	9.8	6	82.0	5	8.2
Abstract	244	81.3	72	29.5	107	43.9	65	26.6
Background	273	91.0	36	13.2	76	27.8	161	59.0
Statement of Problem	234	78.0	28	12.0	50	21.4	156	66.7
Objectives	206	68.7	88	42.7	48	23.3	70	34.0
Research Questions	62	20.7	11	17.7	13	21.0	38	61.3
Hypotheses	52	17.3	13	25.0	4	7.7	35	67.3
Conceptual Framework	153	51.0	18	11.8	80	52.3	55	35.9
Theoretical Framework	20	6.7	3	15.0	11	55.0	6	30.0
Scope	116	38.7	9	7.8	49	42.2	58	50.0
Significance	57	19.0	2	3.5	13	22.8	40	70.2
Literature Review	295	98.3	32	10.8	118	40.0	145	49.2
Referencing	163	54.3	12	7.4	15	9.2	136	83.4
Research Design	240	80.0	112	46.7	60	25.0	68	28.3
Population	111	37.0	21	18.9	50	45.0	40	36.0
Sampling	218	72.7	37	17.0	22	10.1	159	72.9
Instruments	161	53.7	23	14.3	77	47.8	61	37.9
Validity	106	35.3	23	21.7	17	16.0	66	62.3
Reliability	116	38.7	18	15.5	11	9.5	87	75.0
Quantitative Presentation	245	81.7	86	35.1	80	32.7	79	32.2
Qualitative Presentation	31	10.3	4	12.9	8	25.8	19	61.3
Quantitative Analysis	174	58.0	17	9.8	33	19.0	124	71.3
Qualitative Analysis	51	17.0	6	11.8	5	9.8	40	78.4
Interpretations	97	32.3	12	12.4	14	14.4	71	73.2
Discussion	117	39.0	14	12.0	21	17.9	82	70.1
Conclusion	199	66.3	47	23.6	40	20.1	112	56.3
Recommendations	168	56.0	39	23.2	41	24.4	88	52.4

Nature of Examiners' Comments in M. Ed Dissertation Reports

This section presents findings on the occurrence and nature of examiners' comments on specific components of the dissertations and discusses them with reference to Bourke and Holbrook's (2013) indicators for holistic assessment of Masters' thesis.

Contribution of Thesis

The components of Originality and Title received little attention from examiners and the comments tended to indicate inappropriateness and neutrality respectively. The Abstract received substantive attention and was also dominated by neutral comments (Table 4).

Table 4

Illustrative Comments on Title, Originality and Abstract

Appropriate	Inappropriate
Title	
Intriguing; reflects variables; appropriate; contemporary; clear	Vague; unclear; modify; verbose; rephrase; incomplete; repetitive; not aligned with objectives
Originality	
Original; meaningful contribution; significant; own work	Did not discuss implications; lost track of question; no/ minimum contribution
Abstract	
Excellent; fine; comprehensive	Unclear: variables, methods, sample, findings, and recommendations; missing key items: objectives, hypotheses, validity, reliability, findings, conclusions, and recommendations; not aligned with content; irrelevant information; mixed-up concepts; not well ordered; statistics reporting not in accordance with APA

Table 3 above revealed that the Background and Problem Statement received considerable attention from examiners, and these were largely inappropriate (Tables 5 & 6). This is in line with Mulinge and Arasa (2013) who found backgrounds to be unnecessarily long.

Table 5

Illustrative Comments on Background, Problem Statement and Significance

Appropriate	Inappropriate
Background	
Good; conceptualised; linked variables; clear; comprehensive; meaningful; adequate; relevant; appropriate; evidence presented; situation analysis given; gap presented; extensive; adequate: geographical, conceptual, historical, and contextual backgrounds; key variables introduced; proper citation; policy indicated; justified; motivating	Not critical; unclear/ inconsistent/ wrong/ unfocussed concepts; confused the concepts; undiscussed variables; poor sentence construction; incomplete and sweeping statements; repetitions; jumbled information; incoherent paragraphs; hanging/ isolated/ unbridged ideas; too lengthy; no transition; no logical flow; verbose; citations-references author mismatch; uncoordinated literature; no/ scanty/ mixed-up: contextual, geographical, historical, and conceptual backgrounds; unconvincing data; lack of/ inappropriate/ outdated empirical evidence and sources; not aligned with topic; lack of gist/ magnitude/ implication in problem; prejudged/ pre-emptive; needed policy; inaccurate statistics; redundant data; more of literature review; no gap; incomprehensive; unestablished/ conflicting allegations; inarticulate justification; poor: grammar, formatting and organisation; simply cut-and-paste; typographical errors

Contrary to Bourke (2008) who found Significance and Contribution to be among the most common area of examiners' comments, this study found it to be among the least commented on, probably because its conceptualisation is usually limited to the anticipated contribution component. A sample of comments is given in Table 6.

Table 6

Illustrative Comments on Problem Statement and Significance

Appropriate	Inappropriate
Problem statement	
Fine; clear; core concern identified; appropriate; phenomena reflected; problem manifested; reality, ideal and consequence scenarios clear; well captured; succinct; concise; articulated; well substantiated; case given; rooted in background	Unconvincing; absence of/ outdated empirical evidence; sketchy; self-contradictory; unsubstantiated/ speculative/ baseless allegations; lack of sources and justification; no gap; no magnitude; made independent variable (IV) the problem; dependent variable (DV) not captured; repetitions; judgmental; hard to measure concepts; not aligned with topic/ background; repeat of background; vague, too general; unlinked variables; sweeping, contradicting statements; unfocused; lengthy; confusing terms; not contextualized; poor language/ grammar; problem not underpinned; major components not spelt out; not articulate; ideal-reality scenario mismatch; core not touched; pre-emptive
Significance	
Acceptable; good	Beneficiaries not highlighted; explain how; not objective-based; insufficient data; not clear; unrealistic; none for researchers and participants; inadequate; inappropriate; wrong tenses; specify categories/ stakeholders; misleading; break down categories; deterministic

Two thirds of the reports had comments on Objectives, which were predominantly appropriate, while 20.7% and 17.3% had comments on Research Questions and Hypotheses respectively – which were largely inappropriate. Table 7 gives a sample of comments, and these are in line with those of Mulinge and Arasa (2013) who found some of the objectives to be unmeasurable. They also observed that very few candidates had conducted rigorous testing of hypotheses.

Table 7
Illustrative Comments on Research Objectives, Questions and Hypotheses

Appropriate	Inappropriate
Objectives	
Good; clear; realistic; appropriate; synchronized; reflected/ derived from variables; excellent; adequate	Inconsistence with research topic/ questions; subject to change with new topic; poor punctuations and grammar; qualify the verbs; repetitions; inappropriate verbs; poorly/ over worded; monotony verbs; lack of specialization element; vague; mixed-up verbs; incongruence between general and specific; general objective being similar to title; poorly sequenced; lack of flow; unclear, hard to measure concepts; inappropriate for approach; double-barrelled; missing DV/IV; not linked to variables/ conceptual framework; overlap of IV and DV concepts; too verbose; very complex; broad, unspecific constructs; overloaded; poorly unpacked variables; lack of supporting theory.
Questions	
Appropriate; derived from/ covered/ aligned with objectives; clear; smart; highlighted / identified variables; variable links shown	Inappropriate for design; should begin with descriptive ones; not conceptualised in background; needed hypotheses; yes/no type; to adjust accordingly; vary phrasing; vague concepts; not smart/ measurable; double-barrelled; mixed-up verbs; too long/ wordy; need fine tuning; out of scope; incongruent with objectives; edit; poor grammar and punctuation
Hypotheses	
Well stated; appropriate; clear; testable	Not aligned with objectives; omitted yet required; not presented as claimed; not called for; poorly stated/ worded; mixed-up verbs; used wrong verbs; unclear variables/ wordings; no evidence for accepting or rejecting; testing not explained; none for regression; incomplete; poor punctuations

Although the components of Conclusion and Recommendation come last in dissertation writing, they are presented and analysed under 'Contribution: advance knowledge' as per Bourke and Holbrook's theory. Comments on these occurred in two thirds and 56.0% of the reports respectively, more than half of them indicating inappropriateness (Table 8). Holbrook et al. (2004) found examiners' recommendations on suggesting and anticipating publications of aspects of candidates' theses to occur in 27% and 11% of reports respectively. Such recommendations however were not common in the current study given the fact that immediate publication is not usually prioritised at Master's level.

Table 8

Illustrative Comments on Conclusions and Recommendations

Appropriate	Inappropriate
Conclusions	
Well written/ structured; clear; suitable; systematic; based on variables/ findings; appropriate; relevant	Not aligned with objectives/ findings; not clear; mixed with discussion; improper; repeat of findings; no key findings; based on: wrong premises, variables, data, and interpretations; none for regression; research questions not answered; smuggled in concepts; no summary of findings; unfocused; questionable; not conclusive enough; no statistical values; no new knowledge
Recommendations	
Consistent with conclusions; clear; genuine; achievable; viable; appropriate; based on: data, findings and conclusions; practical; applicable; systematic	Not in line with objectives/ findings; not clear; based on wrong data and inadequate findings; not relevant; not practical/ action oriented; over exaggerated; not precise; did not address gaps; contradictory; superficial; unrealistic; repetitive; not succinct; no implications; vague; scanty; theoretical; abstract; justify

Literature Review

The Scope, and Conceptual and Theoretical frameworks fall under the working understanding component of Literature Review: use. About one half of the reports had comments on Conceptual Framework, 38.7% on Scope and less than 7% on Theoretical framework. Majority of the comments on Conceptual and Theoretical Frameworks were neutral while one half of those on Scope indicated inappropriateness (Table 9). Still under Literature Review: use, comments on Discussion of findings were found in 39.0% of the reports with more than 80 percent being rated as inappropriate.

The findings concur with those by Holbrook et al. (2004) who found a relatively low percentage (24%) of examiners' comments on literature utilisation and or theoretical application. This could be attributed to the fact that because candidates tend to opt for quantitative or mixed-method approaches, their use of theory is limited as it is usually associated with the qualitative paradigm.

Table 9

Illustrative Comments on Scope, Conceptual and Theoretical Frameworks

Appropriate	Inappropriate
Scope	
Well written/ done; clearly delineated; OK; adequate	Poor: content, geographical and time scope; not consistent; unclear; inappropriate; sketchy/ scanty; not specific; clarify variables; questionable/ improper time scope; mistook time scope for duration of study; not elaborate; inadequate; too long; explain; confused concepts; missing content/ geographical/ time scope; smuggled in concepts; conflicting information
Conceptual Framework	
Highlighted DV and IV; well explained; well-articulated variables; clear; variable link shown; drew on studies; explicit variables; good flow	Qualify concepts; clarify/ highlight variables; incongruent with objectives/ background; missing moderating/ extraneous variable; no/ poor/ mixed-up/ contradicting/ inadequate/ inappropriate/ immeasurable indicators for variables; explanation incongruent with figure; mixed-up indicators; wrong diagram; hanging and confusing arrows; confused concepts; variables not conceptualized; overlap of variable indicators; incongruent with operational definitions; not based on theory and literature; did not account for extraneous/ moderating/ intervening variables; no/ poor explanation; no title; variables links not explained; some variables not called for; scanty; inappropriate intervening variable; omitted key concepts; pre-emptive; unpacked variables not consisted with objectives; variables/ concepts not operationalized; not informative
Theoretical Framework	
Well explained; suitable; guided/ underpinned study; rationale given	Justify/ show relevance; contradictory; not well explained; not reflected in analysis; plagiarized; not related to model; poorly presented; so many variables; explain how theories weave; inappropriate concepts; not compatible; poor grammar; not clear; omitted yet required to support conceptual framework
Discussion	
Cross-referencing done; very good	No implications; not robust; theory used not explained before; scanty; focused on one variable; not referred to theory; no evidence from literature; limited literature; repeat of findings and literature; not reflective of findings; influenced by errors in previous chapters; descriptive no discussion; sloppy; off point; irrelevant comments; mixed up; concocted; not clear; not indicative of gaps filled

Almost all reports in the current study had comments on Literature Review, with nearly one half of them being rated as inappropriate (Table 10). Similarly, cases of suspected plagiarism were found in some of the reports analysed by Holbrook et al. (2007). Comments on Referencing were found in

slightly more than 50% of the reports of which 83.4% of them indicated inappropriateness, being similar to those found in Mulinge and Arasa's study (2013), albeit more detailed. However, although Holbrook et al. (2004) found more comment on coverage than error & or inaccuracy, this was not the case in the current study.

Table 10

Illustrative Comments on Literature Review, References and Referencing

Appropriate	Inappropriate
Literature Review	
Current; well aligned; followed APA; rich; adequate; systematic; extensive; objective-based; covered variables; gaps identified; well-referenced; critiqued; cited authors; relevant studies; empirical; clearly identified; appropriate; comprehensive; detailed enough; well-structured; variety	Unreferenced authors; missing/ inarticulate/ unclear/ poor justification of gaps; no gaps; narrative/ mere reporting; plagiarism; lacks flow/ links in paragraphs/ variables; confused concepts; not logically organized; outdated sources; largely policies and acts; not aligned with objectives and variables; weak; wrong use of: et al; ampersand, parenthesis, 'recent studies', and 'several studies'; repetitions; no/ limited local and national studies; key studies not described; over-citing an author; global to local flow lacking; edit; no source; unfocussed; needed policies; no studies/ explanation on other variable; scanty / sketchy; not critical; no critique/ views; one-sided argument; no link to design; not synthesized; unsynchronized; incoherent; one- page and one-sentence paragraph; no empirical studies; no sources from URL; typographical errors; disjointed information; impolite; unclear, vague concepts; no reports; not exhaustive; no indication of how gap will be addressed; replica of concepts/ conceptual framework; irrelevant; contradictions in years and authors; incongruence in heading and content; messed up; unacknowledged authors; unsubstantiated, baseless, inconsistent claims and critiques; cut and paste; chunking; poor grammar and punctuation; unclear role of theories; padding; postponed gaps; misplaced sections; long/ incomplete/ hanging sentences; unnecessary quotations and inclusions like discussion of results; beginning sentence with digit; writing full authors' names and use of initials; lack of/ poor: introduction, summary and conclusion
Referencing and References	
Followed APA; good outline; properly referenced; authors cited; appropriate	Uncited authors; few titles highlighted; incongruent years and authors' names; inconsistencies in style; incomplete references; not alphabetical; too many "… cited in …"; citing current studies in old ones

Approach / Methodology

Eighty percent of the reports had comments on Research Design, 37.0% and 72.7% of them on Population and Sampling respectively. A relatively high proportion (46.7%) of comments on Research Design indicated appropriateness, while majority of those on Population were neutral, and almost three quarters of those on Sampling indicated inappropriateness (Table 11). Bourke (2008) also found the methodology component to be highly commented on, although very briefly arguing that examiners' influence on research beyond the proposal stage was limited (Holbrook et al., 2004). However, it is not uncommon for examiners at Master's level to recommend overhaul of candidates' research in cases where the methodology is completely inappropriate, necessitating them to go back to the field, and this accounts for the detailed comments under this research component in this study.

Table 11

Illustrative Comments on Research Design, Population and Sampling

Appropriate	Inappropriate
Research Design	
Appropriate; justified; well explained; well-articulated; systematic	Not explained; inappropriate; unclear; not as stated/ claimed; ignored one method, no evidence on second approach; not aligned with objectives; contradicting; unclear clusters; mixed up designs; inadequate methods; confused: instruments and methods, methods and approaches, methods and design; no methods, lumped ideas; too sketchy; no authority; wrong justification; poor language
Population	
Well explained; appropriate; justified; well described; relevant	Missing; mistook sample for population; omitted crucial category; wrong category; not clear; not aligned with problem; no totals; lumped categories; conflicting figures; discrepancies; not specific; based on outdated statistics; unrealistic/ incorrect population; justify; describe
Sampling	
Good justification; clear; representative; appropriate; well explained	Explain procedure/ criteria; unclear strata; unrealistic / wrong/ inadequate/ unproportional sample size; inadequate/ inappropriate techniques, show formula, mistook one technique for another; contradicting samples; unrepresentative; justify 2 formulas; questionable; confusing; no sample size; smuggled techniques in table; categories not aligned with population; not scientifically determined; no / wrong justification; mistook census for sampling; no sample for interviewees

Corresponding to Approach/Methodology are data collection instruments, and their validity and reliability. Slightly more than one half of the reports had comments on Instrument, while 35.3% and 38.7% of them had comments on Validity and Reliability respectively. A majority of the comments

on Instruments were neutral, while majority of those on Validity and Reliability indicated inappropriateness (Table 12).

Table 12

Illustrative Comments on Instruments, Validity and Reliability

Appropriate	Inappropriate
	Instruments
Well explained/ written/ described; appropriate	Inappropriate instrument/ items/ scale; did not collect relevant data; not aligned with concepts; generic/ vague/ poorly stated items; not applied as indicated; confused with methods; no/ unclear/ poor DV items and indicators; none for participant observation; omitted some aspects of variable; subjective; measured wrong construct; not described/ explained; mistook open-ended items for interview; wrong order of Likert scale; non-uniform scale; loaded items; similar items for different sections/ variables; unavailable; unclear usage of achievement scores; no/ unconvincing justification; same questionnaire for different categories; inadequate
	Validity
Well explained/ established; appropriate; high	Not well explained/ interpreted; improper reporting of content validity index; inappropriate method; questionable; confusion between types of validity; conflicting number of items; no evidence of expert look; invalid items; mismatching items; confused with reliability; none for qualitative
	Reliability
Well established; high	No alpha coefficient; wrong procedure/ explanation; unexplained; unclear; confused different reliability tests; wrong interpretation of correlation alphas; formula not applied; concept tested out of scope; questionable number of items; mismatching items; inaccurate; unjustified; confused with validity

Analysis/Findings

Under Analysis/Findings are qualitative and quantitative data presentation and analysis.

Data presentation. There were 81.7% reports with comments on Quantitative Data Presentation and only 10.3% of them on Qualitative Data Presentation, probably because of the high emphasis institutions place on Quantitative and Mixed-Method approaches rather than on pure Qualitative. There was an equal distribution of appropriate, neutral and inappropriate among ratings on Quantitative Data Presentation, while the majority of comments on Qualitative Data Presentation reflected inappropriateness (Table 13). These findings agree with those of Mulinge and Arasa (2013), but rather more comprehensive.

Table 13
Illustrative Comments on Data Presentation

Appropriate	Inappropriate
Quantitative Data Presentation	
Statistically/ adequately/ orderly presented; relevant data; consistent with instruments/ objectives; clear language/ tables; followed APA; appropriate; systematic; extensive	Not followed APA tables; mixed up/ confusing table entries; overlapping figures in class intervals; mismatch between tables/ data and analyses; no DV data hence forced relationship; inappropriate/ irrelevant data; mix-up of concepts; inconsistencies in frequencies and percentages; misleading percentages; variations in totals; unjustified hypotheses; results based on wrong population; poor/ weak explanations for statistical data; no/ poor analysis for background data; not addressed objectives/ focus of study; no data/ explanation for statistical tests like: correlation, regression and effect; no evidence of numerical data; missing data in tables/ for some categories; lumped findings of different categories; no explanation on variable measurement; no/ incomplete/ questionable SPSS output; poor inferential presentation; smuggled in data/ categories; misguided remarks; incongruences with questionnaire scale; varying sample sizes; use of qualitative terms: most, many, and few; similar explanations across a data set; no hypotheses for inferential; unsubstantiated statements; reproduced data in prose; unintroduced tables; mixed-up statistical measures
Qualitative Data Presentation	
Well presented; supported by verbatim; aligned; analysed defiant cases	No findings on: interview, observation, and documentary; findings not integrated with quantitative; inaccurate; no explanations; not well presented/ clear; voice of main category missing; isolated poorly presented quotes; merely prose; not aligned; mixed personal opinions with observation

Data analysis. Reports with comments on Quantitative Data Analysis constituted 58.0% while those on Qualitative Data Analysis constituted only 17.0%. About one third of the reports had comments on interpretation. More than 70% of comments on all three components indicated inappropriateness (Table 14), being in agreement with those of Mulinge and Arasa (2013).

Table 14

Illustrative Comments on Data Analysis and Interpretation

Appropriate	Inappropriate
Quantitative Data Analysis	
Appropriate techniques; based on objectives; clearly explained; well done	Unclear; merely descriptive; necessitated inferential/ qualitative; claims on non-existent data; inappropriate techniques and tests; not in line with data/ objectives; intervening variables not explained; no critical analysis; findings not on: effect, relationship, influence, and extent; similar explanations throughout; statistical output and models not explained; ignored other variable; no explanation for statistical output/ values; mistook one technique for another one; justify techniques; wrong computations; incorrect results; specify unit of analysis; data for some categories/ variables not analysed; no legend; lumped analysis for different categories/ schools; incongruent with scales; based on assumptions; ambiguous terms: few, many; contradictions; focused on only one variable; no rigor; incongruent with conceptual framework; confusion between cause and effect; combined IV and DV items; instruments not exhausted; test of statistics not explained/ inappropriate; unclear level of significance; smuggled in techniques; why accept or reject hypotheses; reproduced tables; SPSS not technique
Qualitative Data Analysis	
Good; well aligned; excellent; verbatim quotes; highlighted extremes	Explain documentary/ observation; isolated rather than relative; no triangulation; repetitious; not supported by evidence; no source for quotations; not aligned with objectives; too scanty/ inadequate; improper/ wanting; contradictions/ inconsistencies; no application of theory; qualitative data missing; based on wrong items, no explanation of data analysis management; using same wordings for different people; perceptual; no analysis;
Interpretations	
Good; well interpreted; accurate; fine predictions; followed research objectives/ questions; appropriate	Off point; wrong claims of influence; no/ misinterpretation of: SPSS output, descriptive, direction, magnitude, f-values and significance values; none for descriptive; not clear; integrate data; baseless, speculative, contradicting assertions; not aligned with topic/ questions/ variables; none for model; based on wrong data; demographic out of scope; wrong acceptance or rejection of hypotheses; no supporting data; no interpretation of ratings; not made sense of low values; wrong implications; inconsistent with statistics test; inadequate; disintegrated; attributed causation to correlation; poor for tables; misleading; necessitated statistical testing; sweeping judgments; no reference to professional stand/ theory; no triangulation of conflicting results

Presentation

Presentation is all about communication and expression. In this study, substantive components of this indicator were not isolated, and instead examiners' comments which cut across the various components of the dissertations were highlighted. These comments largely focussed on: grammar, punctuation, language, clarity, sentence construction, coherence, logical flow, contradictions, tenses, wording and sequencing.

Conclusion

Basing on the trend of examiners' comments on dissertations, the contribution of M. Ed research is minimal due to low levels of originality and inability to advance knowledge. The literature reviewed had issues with accuracy and application where errors in citations and referencing were common. Research designs were generally appropriate although sampling, and validity and reliability of instruments were inappropriately done. Quantitative data presentation was also appropriately done while qualitative data analysis and interpretation were inappropriately done. Throughout the dissertation components, concerns on communicative competence and expression were common. It is recommended that universities should engage Masters' students more in seminars and workshops on research methods and scholarly writing.

References

ADEA policy brief (2015) Assuring Quality, Excellence and Relevance in African Universities. Retrieved from http://www.adeanet.org/en/policy-briefs/assuring-quality-excellence-and-relevance-in-african-universities

Andoh, H. (2017). Research – The lost mission of African universities. *University World News*, *474*. Retrieved from https://www.universityworldnews.com/post.php?story=20170915092645683

AfriQAN. (2014). (2014). Background to the 6th international conference on quality assurance in higher education in Africa meeting of the African quality assurance network. Bujumbura, Rwanda.

Barifaijo, M. K. & Karyeija, G. (2016). Dynamics in doctoral external examination: Is it quality or formality at play? "An Evidence-Based Paper". *International Journal of Business, Social Sciences and Education*, *2*(1), 17-43.

Bourke, S. (2008). *PhD thesis quality: The views of examiners*. Keynote address: Stellenbosch University, South Africa. Retrieved from https://www.researchgate.net/publication/271275970_PhD_thesis_quality_the_view_of_examiners

Bourke, S., & Holbrook, A. (2008). PhD theses quality: Predicting examiner recommendation as one measure of thesis quality. In M. Kiley & G. Mullins (Eds), *Quality in postgraduate research: Research education in the new global environment. Conference Proceedings*. Canberra:

CEDAM, ANU. Retrieved from http://www.qpr.edu.au/Proceedings/QPR_Proceedings_2008.pdf

Bourke, S., & Holbrook, A. P. (2013). Examining PhD and research masters theses. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, *38*(4), 407-416. Retrieved from http://www.tandfonline.com

Kasule, U. A. (2014). Challenges in research teaching and supervision. In *Graduate Research Supervision and Evaluation Workshop*. Centre for Postgraduate Studies, Islamic university in Uganda, Uganda.

Creswell, J. W. (2007). Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches 2nd ed. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications.

Holbrook, A., Bourke, S. Lovat, T. & Dally, K. (2004). Qualities and Characteristics in the Written Reports of Doctoral Thesis Examiners. *Australian Journal of Educational & Developmental Psychology, 4*, 126-145. Retrieved from https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ815558.pdf

Holbrook, A., Bourke, S., Fairbairn, H., & Lovat, T. (2007). Examiner comment on the literature review in Ph.D. theses. *Studies in Higher Education*, *32*(3), 337-356. doi: 10.1080/03075070701346899

Inter-University Council for East Africa/DAAD. (2010). Roadmap to quality, *Handbook for quality assurance in higher education* (Vol. 3): *Guidelines for self assessment at institutional level*. IUCEA/ CHE/ NCHE/ TCU/ DAAD.

Inter-University Council for East Africa. (2014). Principles and guidelines for quality assurance in higher education in East Africa. Kampala, Uganda: IUCEA.

Islamic University in Uganda Library Department. (2018). *List of B. Ed research reports (2011 – 2017) & masters dissertations (2005 – 2017)*. Islamic University in Uganda.

Jowi, J, O., Obamba, M., Sehoole, C., Barifaijo, M., Oanda, O, & Alabi, G. (2013). Governance of higher education, research and innovation in Ghana, Kenya and Uganda. Retrieved from https://www.oecd.org/sti/Governance%20of%20higher%20education%20research%20and%20innovation%20in%20Ghana%20Kenya%20and%20Uganda.pdf

Kigotho, W. (2013). Pan-African quality assurance and accreditation moves. *University World News*, *276*. Retrieved from https://www.universityworldnews.com/post.php?story=20130614161617828

Mulinge, M. M. & Arasa, J. N. (2013). Investigating the quality of postgraduate research in African Universities today: A qualitative analysis of external examination reports. *International Journal of Arts and Commerce*, *2*(2), 174-193. Retrieved from https://www.ijac.org.uk/images/frontImages/gallery/Vol._2_No._2/16.pdf

Mukasa, N. Z. (Ed.). (2012). *Guidelines for graduate research at IUIU* (2nd ed.). Centre for Postgraduate Studies, Islamic University in Uganda.

Muriisa, R. K. (2015). The state of doctoral education in social sciences in Uganda: Experiences and challenges of doctoral training at Mbarara University of Science and Technology 2003 – 2010. *Journal of Education and Practice, 6*(10), 204-213. Retrieved from https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1081707.pdf

National Council for Higher Education. (2014). Quality Assurance framework for universities and the licensing process for higher education institutions. Kyambogo, Uganda: NCHE.

National Council for Higher Education. (n.d.). Benchmarks for conducting masters degrees and postgraduate diploma programmes. Kampala: NCHE.

Rwothomio, F. (2016). Research supervision factors influencing students' completion of masters' of education degree programs in Islamic University in Uganda. (Unpublished Master's dissertation). Islamic University in Uganda, Uganda.