

## Evaluation of Doctorate Dissertation in Nigerian Universities: Do Faculties Provide and Use Explicit Criteria/Rubrics?

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### Abstract

*This study is an investigation into the availability and use of explicit dissertation evaluation criteria by supervisors and assessors in the doctoral programmes in Faculties of Education in the universities in south east, Nigeria. The work sought to determine whether there are implicit or explicit criteria for evaluation of doctoral dissertation and whether these are used by those supervising and assessing the students' dissertation at the various stages of the dissertation development. This study is a descriptive survey of 328 internal dissertation assessors and supervisors' usage of dissertation evaluation criteria for doctoral supervision, based on availability of such criteria. Questionnaire was used to collect data for the study while descriptive statistics was used to answer the research questions developed. It was observed that, though various faculties provide explicit rubric for PhD research work assessment, most supervisors/assessors assess their candidates' works implicitly. This indicates use of global rather than analytic form of assessment. Faculties, it was also observed, do not make extensive efforts to inform their PhD students about the rubrics. The outcome of this research will not only open up discussions within the education faculty on dissertation evaluation criteria but also serve as a preliminary step towards the development of a relatively standard dissertation evaluation framework to guide both students and supervisors/assessors in faculties of education.*

### 1. Introduction

Executing doctoral research, which can be an arduous task, necessitates the painstaking selection of supervisors and assessors to evaluate the research work of PhD students in most universities. Care is taken to avoid works that depict mediocrity being pushed forward before panels of research defense where they can expose the naivety of the student, supervisor and assessors of

the work. As a result, a doctoral research supervisor and/or assessor should have in mind that in supervising or assessing a candidate, he or she is equally being supervised and assessed by the discerning public.

Demand for doctorates in Nigeria was examined and found to have increasingly become high despite the fact that qualitatively, there seems to be little or no evidence of programme improvement [1]. This demand was heightened by the Nigerian Universities Commission's (NUC) decree that every lecturer in the universities in Nigeria must obtain a doctorate degree before rising to the rank of a senior lecturer. The increased enrolment into PhD programmes seems almost directly proportional to the increase in the need of supervisors, and the academic experiences with these support staff differ [2].

In doctoral supervision, a good relationship between the supervisor and supervisee is one of the most enduring relationships one can ever have [3]. Strong, regular contact between them is encouraged because it is a mentor-mentee relationship. The supervisee is expected to tap into the knowledge base of his supervisor, who should be more experienced in the field of study/endeavor. This implies that the student should be shown by the supervisor how to write and successfully complete a dissertation based on explicit guidelines (rubrics) which not only will be used in evaluating the student, but the student can also use to pre-evaluate his or her performance as the work progresses.

Some benefits of using rubrics include increased scoring consistency, the possibility of facilitating valid judgment of complex competencies, and promotion of learning [4]. The potential in rubrics rests on the fact that they clarify criteria and elucidate expectations; hence feedback and self-assessment are enhanced [4].

Doctoral supervisors play a critical role in doctoral education, and 'good' doctoral supervision is crucial to successful research education programmes [5] [6]. Supervision is crucial to the work of academicians and is in itself a social activity; hence supervision requires painstaking work with a student while simultaneously giving heed to the

broader scholarly community [2] [7]. Supervisors and dissertation assessors provide a PhD supervisee needed guidance in a doctoral journey to gradually move from being a novice to becoming an expert in a specialized field of study [8].

In the production of doctorate degree holders in different areas of academic venture, there should be explicit evaluation criteria or rubrics clearly outlined to indicate how such students are to be assessed and supervised [5]. PhD dissertation, being the ultimate academic product in a doctoral programme, showcases its author's training as well as the technical, analytical and writing skills he or she imbibed during the programme [5]. When a student successfully completes his or her research work and is ultimately awarded a doctorate, it is expected that such a PhD holder should be able to execute scholarly work independently and be seen as an authority at it [5].

### **1.1. Using Explicit Evaluation Criteria for PhD Dissertation Supervision in Nigerian Universities**

Of recent there has been increasing interest in the improvement of standards in doctoral research, much of which has focused on generic research skills training, albeit that other crucial supervisory aspects like welfare, mentoring and support arrangements need a cursory look as well [3]. In a study of 20 British universities' processes of awarding PhDs, it was found that although there was a high degree of inter-institutional consistency in terms of key criteria for doctoral awards, a cursory look indicated a variation in conceptualization and operation of supervision and examination among the studied universities [9].

The need for explicit assessment criteria among Nigerian universities is buttressed by the fact that many supervisors and assessors on being asked, often do not agree to be in possession of explicit summative and formative evaluation criteria for treating PhD work. At the Faculty of Education in one of the universities studied, a postgraduate student is usually given a manual stipulating how research work is to be carried out at programme commencement, which merely serves as a guide on dissertation writing, but does not go to show the evaluative expectations of the research work.

The National Universities Commission (NUC) in Nigeria enjoined all Vice Chancellors of Nigerian universities to ensure quality in doctoral dissertation via appropriate measures and by strict attention to dissertation supervision [10]. This is warranted by the fact that dissertation supervision has been generally viewed as a major determinant of the quality of dissertation. It is however not determinable, on demand, if this standard has been partially or fully implemented in most universities

in Nigeria due to the politicization of the educational sector, particularly at the tertiary level [7]. No one can assuredly say that there are nationally accepted criteria for supervising doctoral candidates in Nigeria, although scores of them are graduated from Nigerian universities annually.

Evaluation criteria, however, do exist, despite the fact that faculties often refuse to write them down (implicit criteria), and could help faculties develop informed measures of learning outcomes [4] [5]. These measures, Lovitts continued, would constitute reliable indicators of success in research training, provide an evaluative platform for doctoral programmes, and allow for greater objectivity in comparison among them in that such measures would also validate evaluative measures at doctoral level across candidates in a field of study

Due to the attention paid to the PhD programme in universities in terms of financial and administrative input, it is imperative to determine which criteria are in place for the assessment and supervision of PhD students in order to justify the inputs and the loftiness of the programme. One may then ask: how do we determine which dissertation is acceptable enough for the award of a doctorate degree? How do we know the one that met required standards, and how do we ascertain and determine these standards? These are some of the questions that come to mind after a dissertation has been certified good enough to lead its author to the award of a doctorate.

The thrust of this study is, therefore, the determination of the provision and usage of explicit evaluation criteria in the assessment and supervision of doctoral students in Nigerian universities. The study is guided by the following research questions: Do Faculties provide supervisors/assessors with explicit assessment criteria for evaluating doctoral dissertations?

1. Do PhD dissertation supervisors/assessors use explicit rubrics in grading students' research works?
2. Do faculties make the dissertation assessment rubrics known to the postgraduate students at the beginning of their programme?
3. Are explicit assessment rubrics used by defense panels to grade students' dissertation during viva?
4. Do supervisors/assessors find explicit rubrics relevant for evaluating PhD dissertation?

## **2. Method**

This work employed a descriptive survey research design in its study. Through simple random sampling

technique, five out of six universities in the South-Eastern geo-political zone of Nigeria, whose Faculty of Education run PhD programme, were selected for the study. All 328 Faculty members in these universities who are up to the rank of senior lecturer constituted the population of the study. This also covered heads of departments and deans of Faculties of Education in the various universities under study. All the population was used for the study.

A 10-item questionnaire schedule developed by the researchers was used for collecting field data for the study. The questionnaire has a reliability coefficient of .79. Of the 328 questionnaires distributed during data collection exercise, 213 were returned. This represents 65% return rate. The collected data was analyzed using percentages.

### 3. Results

**Table 1. Percentage Responses on Whether Faculties Provide Supervisors/Assessors with Explicit Criteria for Evaluating Doctoral Dissertation**

	Yes		No	
	N	%	N	%
Faculty has explicit rubric for evaluating PhD work.	171	80.3	42	19.7
Faculty gives every PhD supervisor/assessor the faculty rubric.	153	71.8	60	28.2
Faculty gives PhD supervisors/assessors clear defining features of quality PhD research work	153	71.8	60	28.2

Table 1 shows that greater proportion (80.3%) of the respondents agreed that that faculty has thesis evaluation rubric while 19.7% said their faculty does not have the rubric. This rubric is given to the PhD supervisors and assessors by the faculty as shown by the 71.8% of the respondents who agreed to this statement. Greater proportion of the respondents, accept that their faculty has clear defining features of dissertation quality which is given to the supervisors/assessors.

**Table 2. Percentage Responses on Use of Explicit Rubrics in Grading Students' Research Works**

	Yes		No	
	N	%	N	%
Faculty ensures use of assessment rubric to grade PhD research work	162	76.1	51	23.9
Assessment rubrics are used formatively	129	60.6	84	39.4
I often make a holistic judgement of a PhD student's work	147	69	66	31

Table 2 suggests that thesis supervisors/assessors use thesis evaluation rubric

to a large extent. Greater proportion of the respondents was of the view that their faculty ensures that: supervisors use the rubrics (76.1%); the rubric is used by supervisors to provide formative feedback to students (60.6%). However, close to 70% of the respondents also agree that the assessment of students' dissertation was based on individual assessors' judgment and not on the thesis assessment rubric.

**Table 3. Percentage Responses on Postgraduate Students' Awareness of Explicit Assessment Rubrics**

	Yes		No	
	N	%	N	%
PhD students are informed of the faculty rubric.	96	45.1	117	54.9
Assessment rubrics are discussed with the students in dissertation preparation courses.	126	59.2	87	40.8

Percentage responses in table 3 show that faculties do not extensively make the dissertation assessment rubrics known to the students as 54.9% of the respondents endorsed that their faculties do not give the rubric to the students and 59.2% noted that the assessment rubric is discussed with students in their these preparation courses.

**Table 4. Percentage Responses on Use of Explicit Assessment Rubric by Faculty Defense Panels to Grade Students' Dissertation During Viva**

	Yes		No	
	N	%	N	%
Faculty defence panel use explicit assessment rubric to score a PhD student's research presentation and defence.	144	67.6	69	32.4
During viva, assessment rubric is used to score a student's written work.	123	57.7	90	42.3

Table 4 shows that, although over 50% of the respondents agree that their faculty defense panel make use of thesis assessment rubric, a reasonable proportion (32.4% & 42.3%) were of the view that it was not used.

**Table 5. Percentage Responses on Relevance of Explicit Evaluation Criteria for PhD Dissertation**

	Yes		No	
	N	%	N	%
Is it relevant for your faculty to have explicit evaluation criteria for supervising/assessing PhD dissertation?	195	91.5	18	8.5

In terms of respondents' opinion on relevance of explicit evaluation criteria for PhD dissertation work, overwhelming proportion (91.5%) endorsed a positive option while only 8.5% were against the position.

#### 4. Discussion

During the process of doctoral dissertation work, students go through series of feedbacks, formative and summative, necessary to bring the work to expected standard. Lack of use of explicit evaluation criteria denies the students knowledge of what the expectations are for their work. They are, therefore, unable to undertake some form of self-evaluation using the assessment criteria. Supervisors, on their part, will not be able to give students clear feedback on their dissertation reports.

Majority of the research respondents (80.3%) as can be seen in Table 1 agreed that their respective faculties had rubrics in place for dissertation evaluation. This is indicative of the fact that a reasonable majority of PhD supervisors and assessors have, at least, an idea of what is expected of a doctoral candidate in research work, as well as how to go about meeting these expectations. With clearly defined rubrics stating the features of dissertations, it is expected that supervisors and assessors should be able to scaffold candidates into comfortable positions that would enable them carry out and defend their research work to the best of their abilities. This finding supports the assertion that universities should be able to ensure quality assurance in doctoral research supervision as enjoined by the National Universities Commission (NUC), because an overwhelming majority of the respondents in this study agree to have one or more rubrics in place for supervision of doctorate degree candidates at their respective faculties [10].

In terms of usage of explicit rubrics in grading students' research work (Table 2), respondents agreed that explicit rubrics are used in evaluating students' ongoing research work (76.1%). It was, however, surprising to find that assessors' individual judgments formed the bases of assessing dissertations, ignoring faculty-provided rubrics. This finding is similar to Lovitts' where faculty members in her study (N=276) agree that they often made holistic assessments of dissertations on dissertation quality after they had read it, not being in possession of a written checklist with which concrete evaluations of the research work can be made [5]. She could not identify a single model in place and as one faculty member told her regarding how to know a satisfactorily executed dissertation "You know it when you see it". Subjects in Lovitts' study concurred to a mental picture that requires from

the student originality, compelling consequences and high-quality writing to paint in the minds of supervisors; hence those factors become evaluative expectations and/or standards on the part of the assessors. The assessors thus evaluated doctoral candidates and their works based on a mental checklist of sorts, which is implicit in nature.

Extensive efforts, as was observed in Table 3, are not made by faculties to bring their students to the knowledge of rubrics guiding their research and its evaluation. This does not augur well for good supervision and eventual production of quality PhD dissertation as the ultimate aim of doctoral education is to train scholars to become independent (i.e. highly self-regulated) learners [8].

Table 4 indicates that 67.6% of respondents agreed that faculty-provided explicit assessment rubrics were used in scoring the student's presentation and defence of work done. Checking or circling level of performance demonstrated by a student in each dimension of the assessment rubric during viva by defence panel members, and providing a rubric to score the student's written work were agreed (59.2% and 57.7%) to be in place, albeit that a lesser but reasonable proportion assert that such are not in place (48.8% and 42.3% respectively).

Table 5 indicates that 91.5% of respondents are favourably disposed to the idea that it is relevant for faculties to have explicit evaluation criteria for supervision and assessment of doctoral dissertations. As such, one can infer that the dynamics of research have been fully understood by the respondents on an overwhelming scale, and that standardization of supervision criteria is absolutely necessary for uniformity and conformity to collective academic reasoning. This particular finding underscores the opinion shared by other researchers that supervision is important to the work of academicians and is in itself a social activity; hence supervision requires painstaking work with a student to reach the desired academic destination [2] [7].

In research, students are most often provided with instruction in form of oral or written feedback by one or more supervisors [11]. However, systematic and continuous assessment practices, including the deployment of rubrics was suggested as a way of helping doctoral candidates grapple with expectations and negotiate what should be the first major independent research undertaking [12]. Conducting a regular assessment helps faculty and students better understand or clarify initial goals as well as predict learning outcomes, albeit that assessing doctoral candidates continuously and systematically can be challenging [12].

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