Conducting academic research for a dissertation: the perspective of a graduate on available tools and difficulties encountered

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In the field of higher education, academic research is an integral part of acquiring a university degree, since students engage in some form of research both during their studies and in the completion of their dissertations. During the course of their studies, reviewing literature for each module or course sets the basis for enabling the students to develop a critical stance towards the course content as well as completing written assignments successfully. Furthermore, during the final part of their studies, when students have to complete their dissertations, conducting academic research to review the relevant literature and field research to acquire the necessary data are pivotal steps in the process; nonetheless, they may frustrate and overwhelm students if not organized properly. The present article provides a description of the process of doing research in the context of the post-graduate programme for the Master's in education (M.Ed.) in The Teaching of English as a Foreign/International Language offered by the Hellenic Open University (HOU). The process is described from the perspective of a graduate and focuses on the relation of academic research to technology, the role of the tutors and the difficulties encountered, while it also provides some suggestions to assist students/ researchers.

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Στον τομέα της ανώτατης εκπαίδευσης, η ακαδημαϊκή έρευνα είναι ένα κομμάτι συνυφασμένο με την απόκτηση ενός πανεπιστημιακού πτυχίου, εφόσον οι φοιτητές εμπλέκονται με κάποιο είδος έρευνας τόσο κατά τη διάρκεια των σπουδών τους, όσο και κατά την ολοκλήρωση της διατριβής τους. Κατά τη διάρκεια των σπουδών τους, η ανασκόπηση της σχετικής βιβλιογραφίας σε κάθε θεματική ενότητα ή σειρά μαθημάτων θέτει τις βάσεις ώστε να καταστούν οι φοιτητές ικανοί τόσο στο να αναπτύξουν κριτική στάση απέναντι στο περιεχόμενο του κάθε μαθήματος, όσο και στο να ολοκληρώσουν επιτυχώς τις γραπτές τους εργασίες. Επιπλέον, στο τελευταίο μέρος των σπουδών τους, όταν καλούνται να γράψουν τη διπλωματική τους εργασία, η διεξαγωγή ακαδημαϊκής έρευνας για την ανασκόπηση της σχετικής βιβλιογραφίας και η έρευνα πεδίου για την απόκτηση των απαιτούμενων δεδομένων είναι βασικά βήματα στη διαδικασία. Εντούτοις, τα βήματα αυτά είναι πιθανό να αποθαρρύνουν ή να πιέσουν τους φοιτητές αν δεν οργανωθούν σωστά. Το παρόν άρθρο περιγράφει τη διαδικασία της διεξαγωγής έρευνας

στα πλαίσια του προγράμματος μεταπτυχιακών σπουδών στην εκπαίδευση (M.Ed.) στην Διδασκαλία της Αγγλικής ως Ξένης/Διεθνούς Γλώσσας που προσφέρεται από το Ελληνικό Ανοιχτό Πανεπιστήμιο (ΕΑΠ). Η διαδικασία περιγράφεται από τη σκοπιά μιας αποφοίτου και εστιάζει στη σχέση μεταξύ ακαδημαϊκής έρευνας και τεχνολογίας, τον ρόλο των Καθηγητών-Συμβούλων και τις δυσκολίες που αντιμετωπίστηκαν, ενώ παράλληλα παρέχει κάποιες προτάσεις για να συνδράμει τους φοιτητές/ ερευνητές.

Key words: distance education, written assignments, dissertations, academic research, technology.

1. Introduction

Research is defined as 'a process of *systematic inquiry* that is designed to collect, analyze, interpret, and use data [...in order] to understand, describe, predict, or control an educational or psychological phenomenon or to empower individuals in such contexts' (Mertens, 2010: 2). In educational contexts, particularly in the field of higher education, research is a *sine qua non* factor when it comes to completing a university degree, since in most cases a dissertation needs to provide the results of original research.

Most research projects, irrespective of the type of research they include (field, action, small-scale or large-scale) follow the hourglass model in terms of structure (Trochim, 2006). According to this model, the researcher initially starts with a broad area of interest and then narrows this area down by determining the research questions or hypothesis. After the research has been designed and conducted, the researcher uses the collected data and analyzes the results in order to come to conclusions, thus broadening the area of interest once again. In this process, academic research is vital in the initial stage, since it is only through reviewing the relevant research that the student can decide on the research questions or hypothesis to focus on. Subsequently, the design of the research will dictate the way the research will be conducted. At this point, the student needs to be knowledgeable about research design, the tools and methods s/he can employ not only to collect, but also to analyze the gathered data.

Needless to say, technology is a very useful tool for the researcher in all of the stages mentioned above. Nonetheless, the assistance and guidance of tutors should not be underestimated, as they often help students overcome the various obstacles that arise and provide the moral support the students need.

This article aims at describing the process of completing a dissertation at a post-graduate level, focusing on academic research and its relation to technology, the difficulties encountered and ways in which they can be overcome. However, the fact that no quantitative or qualitative research was conducted to research the practices of other students in the process of writing their dissertations is a limitation, since there is no formal way to confirm the writer's views.

2. Academic research in Distance Education

During the last thirty years, the evolution of distance education and the popularity it gained has changed the scene of higher education (Bers, 1999). The rapid advances in technology

and the development of the World Wide Web made it possible for a vast number of people to access courses in educational institutions from all over the globe.

Following global trends, a number of institutions in Greece have started using distance education techniques in order to organize educational and vocational courses in recent years. Apart from the development of ICT technologies, the amelioration of the infrastructure regarding telecommunications has resulted in the participation of many higher education institutes in information networks about open and lifelong learning. An example of such a network is the Greek Universities network (GUnet), whose aims include "the participation in developmental, educational and research programmes with regard to network technologies, services and applications aiming at the maintenance of the academic network at the peak of technology" (GUnet website). Apart from these first attempts to support distance education, it was the foundation of the Hellenic Open University in 1997 that established distance education in the Greek educational context (Lionarakis, 2008).

In some distance educational institutions, 'Research Methodology is a fundamental module for the structured master's degree in education' (Schulze, 2009: 997), yet this is not the case at the Hellenic Open University. There are tools, presented below in detail, to assist students in their research. However, since research is required for the completion of the master's degree under discussion in this article, it is the writer's view that the inclusion of such a module in the HOU would be welcomed by students.

2.1. Available online tools

The students of the Hellenic Open University (HOU) are provided with various tools which make academic research easier and faster. Firstly, HOU offers online library services (www.lib.eap.gr), with numerous titles – physical and online- available for loan and interlibrary loan through the ILSaS collaboration scheme, which includes 26 academic libraries. Furthermore, through the Hellenic Academic Libraries Link, better known as HEAL-Link (https://www-heal-link-gr.proxy.eap.gr) as well as an ever-expanding list of affiliations with other universities, HOU students have the chance to access various publications, such as academic journals, as well as e-books and dissertations. Finally, a specific website (https://apothesis.eap.gr) has been established for students to be able to access, among other papers, other HOU students' dissertations. All these tools offer opportunities for "anchored instruction" (Fried et al., 2005), making students more autonomous in their research. However, there have been instances of online links not working, or certain books not being available in multiple copies at the HOU library. Instances like these test the students' trust in the library services and prevent them from using them.

The World Wide Web can assist students in conducting academic research in various ways. To begin with, there are numerous online journals nowadays which offer articles free of charge on practically every aspect of education. In this way, students can explore different perspectives and keep up with the latest developments in their field. Even search engines, such as Google, provide researchers with custom search tools, i.e. Google Scholar, which allows users to access a wide range of sources. In addition to that, the Hellenic Open University makes use of the World Wide Web by establishing an online Yahoo group for each module on a yearly basis. Needless to say, students make frequent use of social media platforms, such as Facebook, where they establish groups, thus connecting learners with the same research interests and needs. All these features create an online community of learning (Darabi et al., 2013), through which students and tutors can communicate, upload

and share useful links and files, with a view to opening a window to more materials and broadening the students' research potential.

There is no doubt that the World Wide Web has opened new horizons to researchers. Compared to the traditional educational contexts of the past, the amount of sources and materials available nowadays is significantly larger and easier to access (Giossos, Mavroidis & Koutsouba, 2008). Yet, the luxury that is the Internet does not come without drawbacks. The volume of available information may sometimes overwhelm students, since they usually have limited time to conduct their research. On top of that, they have to look through, evaluate and assess the relativity of the sources they encounter, which is rather difficult and time-consuming, especially for students who are not computer-literate to a great extent. Last but not least, some of the online journals mentioned above require the users to pay for subscription in exchange for the articles, excluding the majority of researchers from accessing certain sources and cancelling one of the fundamental concepts on which the World Wide Web was created, that of free exchange of ideas.

2.2. The role of tutors

The role of tutors in distance education is not confined to academic counseling. Tutors provide 'learning support about and through the on-line environment' (Nunan, George, & McCausland, 2000: 91), fostering student independence, as well as the development of self-pacing and self-regulated learning skills (Bernard et al., 2014; Schmid et al., 2014, among others). What is more, the feedback with which tutors provide their students exerts significant influence on their learning progress (Peroukidou, 2017). As regards academic research, tutors play a key role in assisting the organization and the implementation of the students' research.

To begin with, at the beginning of the academic year, tutors provide students with a list of relevant bibliography for each module. This helps students familiarize themselves with the course material and allows for further exploration of sources based on their individual needs and preferences. In addition, HOU tutors frequently use the Yahoo groups to share relevant resources with their students. An extra step that could be taken is for tutors to utilize these groups to organize team research involving more than one student, in line with socio-constructivist principles about learning (Schulze, 2009). In this way, students will develop collaboration skills and researching sources may become less daunting for them.

When it comes to dissertation writing, the tutor may assist the student in identifying or narrowing down the research field. This can be done in two steps; first, the tutor may –and usually does so – provide the student with a list of relevant bibliography, so that the latter is able to choose the area they wish to research. Once the student has looked into prior research on the field to ensure that their research will be original, the tutor may assist the student in forming or finalizing the research questions or hypothesis. This is a crucial step in the process, since it has long been established that using a hypothesis prevents a blind search and indiscriminate gathering of masses of data which may later prove irrelevant to the problem under study (Young & Schmid, 1966). Furthermore, while the student reviews the relevant literature, they may encounter certain difficulties, as mentioned above, for instance unavailable sources. The tutor can then facilitate the process by providing access to certain sources if possible, or providing the student with resources such as articles and books.

Last but not least, the moral support provided by the tutors should be stressed. The tutor may sometimes become the main supporter of a student in distance education, especially when the latter feels overwhelmed, either due to the materials and processes, or even due to pressing deadlines, all of which can be the cause of serious stress (Östlund, 2005). Studies have shown that when tutors take on the extra role of mentor to provide students with motivation and psychological support, the drop-out rate is kept at a minimum (Mason, 2003; Mills, 2003).

3. Writing a dissertation: the role of technology

It has already been established that technology plays a major role in academic research. It also holds the key to organizing the research and writing of a dissertation in the context of a post-graduate programme. As soon as the field of research has been refined and the research questions or hypotheses have been posed, the student enters a complex process involving the interaction with a great amount of literature including printed and online sources, outlining a sound research design and the use of various research tools in order to achieve the desired goal: to answer the research questions while making a contribution to their academic field.

The first step in the process of research design is determining which research tools to use. Depending on the kind of research and the expected outcomes, quantitative or qualitative data needs to be collected[1], although in the majority of cases a combination of both is the researcher's choice, so that 'the quantitative and qualitative components are mutually illuminating' (Bryman, 2007: 8). For the collection of quantitative data, a questionnaire is a widely used research tool in order to collect large amounts of data (Dörnyei, 2003; Dörnyei & Csizér, 2012; Hatch & Lazaraton, 1991), usually selected due to being easy to construct and complete, as well as providing a functional way to analyze the results in a way which is both precise and convenient to illustrate. The abundance of online applications such as Google Forms, SurveyMonkey and Surveygismo to name but a few, makes it easier not only to construct a questionnaire, but also to distribute it to potential respondents through social media. What is more, such applications provide the researcher with the necessary tools to check the questionnaire for reliability and present the results using visual prompts which are automatically generated, saving invaluable time and effort.

A special note should be made at this point on the importance of piloting the questionnaire, should a student decide to use it for the data collection process. Although piloting is a crucial element in a good study design (De Vaus, 2013), the process is sometimes neglected, perhaps under the pressure of time, overlooking the problems which may arise due to this negligence. For instance, at the piloting phase the researcher is able to determine if certain items are not designed properly, resulting in unclear or unusable results. With the use of software packages, such as *SPSS Statistics*, access to which is offered to HOU students, the piloting of a questionnaire is a rather simple process, which, in retrospect, will save students from unnecessary frustration at a later stage in the writing of their dissertation.

Apart from that, technology can assist students during their dissertation phase in a number of other ways. It goes without saying that storing articles and books in the hard drive of a computer saves a lot of money and space compared to printing materials and storing them in folders. Note-keeping on a computer is also more efficient, as it keeps the notes organized

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[1] According to Nunan (1992), quantitative data is concerned with the measurement and analysis of defined variables, whereas qualitative data compiles subjective knowledge, aiming at enriching the data.

as well as available through a simple search. This is very important for a student organizing their materials while writing a dissertation, simply because the amount of literature a student is called to interact with can be overwhelming. To the same end, using a bibliography and citation tool, such as EasyBib, BibMe or Citation Machine, will rid the researcher of the fear of plagiarism.

4. Conclusion

The present article describes the realities of conducting research in the context of a master's degree at the Hellenic Open University. Although no form of organized research has been conducted on the subject, the article is a compilation of the writer's experiences while she completed her dissertation at the HOU. Yet, a suggestion can be made at this point for relevant future research to be carried out. Surveying the *modus operandi* of post-graduate students in the final phase of their studies may facilitate future students in conducting academic research and completing their dissertations while dispelling their fear and anxiety. The article focuses on the available tools the students/researchers can use to organize their research, the role of technology in all the phases of the process and the importance of tutor support. Summing up the content of the article, some recommendations can be made which may prove to be useful for post-graduate students. First and foremost, it is vital that students utilize all the available online tools which will turn out to be of valuable assistance. Nowadays, there are online libraries to help students locate materials, tools to help them keep track of their bibliography, and applications to assist with the organization, creation, piloting and distribution of research tools. Furthermore, students are urged to connect to other researchers through online applications offered by the HOU as well as social media platforms, not only to exchange views and materials, but also to broaden the pool of perspective participants in their own study.

Last but certainly not least, the students should seek advice from their tutors. At the initial phase when the students try to define their field of research, the tutors' assistance in refining the field and the research questions/ hypotheses is invaluable. Needless to say, students may turn to their tutors for assistance regarding various matters ranging from further reading material and academic writing skills to administrative issues and moral support. And it is exactly this kind of moral support that can make or break students in that final part of their studies, when they may feel bewildered and overpowered.

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