

IN PURSUIT OF RELEVANCE: A TRACER STUDY OF MASTER'S IN DEVELOPMENT STUDIES (MADVS) GRADUATES FROM THE UNIVERSITY OF BOTSWANA

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Abstract

Universities are concerned about the relevance of their programmes and graduate tracer studies have been conducted to assess relevance. The University of Botswana (UB) is also concerned about the relevance of its programmes. Not many graduate tracer studies have been carried out to assess the relevance of UB programmes. This paper is based on a tracer study of the Master of Arts in Development Studies (MADVS) graduate programme in the Department of Sociology at UB. Data was collected through a survey questionnaire and a focus group discussion and analysed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) and thematic analysis respectively. The study found that the programme was relevant to employers: graduates had occupational mobility, salary increases and could change to better (paying) jobs. Although graduates had a good university experience, they also pointed out areas of improvement in the curriculum, namely, that the Department should market itself and its programmes more, students should be encouraged to do dissertations, the Department should review its courses to align them with current and topical issues and that the programme should have different specialisations.

Keywords: relevance, graduates, qualification, occupational mobility, programme

1.0 Introduction

The University of Botswana's Strategy (2020-2029) recognises that national and global changes in the tertiary education sector require, among other things, greater demand for quality and relevance. As a result, one of the priority areas of the strategy is to provide relevant and high-quality programmes. To this end, the University aims to ensure that the programmes and discipline areas it offers are relevant to a changing society locally and globally, that they meet market demand, and that its curriculum reflects the University's distinctiveness as an African University. The university is therefore committed to, among other things, "producing graduates with the relevant knowledge, skills and competencies to drive the human resource needs of an export-driven, knowledge-based economy, generating diversified, inclusive and sustainable growth and characterised by high levels of productivity" and "producing graduates with the

individual capacity and capabilities to achieve their true potential and personal fulfilment” (University of Botswana, 2020, p. 6)

The quest for relevance is not peculiar to the University of Botswana. Every country expects its universities to justify the usefulness of their programmes (Schomburg, 2003). Many higher institutions of education (HIEs) have used tracer studies to gauge the relevance of their programmes (Badiru & Wahome, 2016; Schomburg, 2016). Hazaymeh and Peña (n.d) emphasise that institutions involved in human resource development have a responsibility to keep track of the performance of their graduates in order to establish whether their programmes have had an impact on the graduates, the institution and the country. Mugwisi and Hikwa (2015) state that graduate tracer studies are necessary as a way of evaluating the curriculum and ensuring that the content of educational programmes remains relevant, of high quality and in tune with the demands of the labour market. For Schomburg (2003), graduate tracer studies gather information that may indicate possible deficits in a given educational programme and may serve as a basis for future planning activities. Graduate tracer studies are becoming a recognised practice worldwide (Badiru & Wahome, 2016) for understanding the relevance and quality of programmes offered by universities (Obando & Shisanya, 2012).

The Master of Arts in Development Studies (MADVS) programme is offered in the Department of Sociology, Faculty of Social Sciences at UB. It is a multi-disciplinary programme that was developed in response to the growing national demand for graduate training in development planning and management. Its first intake was in August 2000. The interdisciplinary nature of the programme resulted from the recognition that development is multifaceted and requires students to have a broad understanding of the theoretical and practical issues relating to the planning and implementation of development interventions. As a result, students are expected to take optional courses from any other department even outside the faculty. The programme is offered on both full-time and part-time bases. It can be completed by either of the two options, the coursework only or the coursework and dissertation options. Classes take place in the evening from five to eight o'clock. This is intended to enable students who are in full-time employment to attend classes after hours.

The aim of the MADVS programme is to contribute to the “production of knowledgeable and skilled human resources for managing the process of development and for addressing critical challenges pertaining to this process” (Department of Sociology, 2016, p. 1). Since its inception in 2000, the programme has trained graduates from Botswana, southern Africa and other regions of Africa and the world. Although intake has been fluctuating, the programme has a capacity to enrol an average of 20 students per year. However, no tracer study has been conducted to determine its impact. The purpose of this study was therefore to find out the relevance of the programme and graduates’ perceptions on the curriculum as well as their student experiences at the University of Botswana.

2.0 Aim and research questions

The aim of this research undertaking was to gather evidence on the extent to which the MADVS programme prepares graduates for the world of work. It sought to assess whether the students had a rewarding, satisfying and positive university experience, the relevance of the degree to professional requirements and how the current programme could be improved.

3.0 Literature review

Sociological studies on education have focused mainly on factors affecting academic performance and on the effect of class, gender, and ethnicity on educational attainment (Brown et al., 2013; Nazimuddin, 2015). Graduate tracer studies focus on the impact of education on society in general and also on the graduates. Graduate tracer studies aim to find out whether education pays (Schneider, 2013) and whether it leads to career and social mobility of graduates (Brown, et al., 2013). Senekal and Smith (2021) opine that graduate tracer studies are recommended for exploring employment destinations and employability and are important for enhancing the effectiveness of study programmes (Nudzor & Ansah, 2020). Graduate tracer studies are not new. Towards the end of the 21st century European universities had embraced the use of graduate tracer studies for a number of reasons including the accreditation of study programmes, establishing the link between study programmes and the job market, demonstrating their uniqueness and positioning themselves, enabling universities and institutions managing higher education in their respective countries to make informed and evidence-based decisions about improvements and quality education and services (Schomburg and Ulrich, 2011; Badiru & Wahome, 2016). The graduates advocated for the strengthening of the information technology aspect of the curriculum also. Shongwe and Acholla (2011) conducted a tracer study of graduates of Library and Information Science (LIS) at the University of Zululand. Results revealed that the graduates were happy with the skills and knowledge they had acquired from the programme, and that most of them were employed, mainly in the private sector. However, the graduates were not totally happy with the curriculum and made suggestions which the Department has since implemented. Hazaymeh and Peña (n.d) conducted a tracer study of engineering graduates from La Salle University in the Philippines and found that the graduates were employable as they got their first jobs within the first six months after graduation. The findings of the study also pointed to the need for the Department to review and revise its curriculum to meet the necessary market skills and competencies expected of their graduates.

Mugwisi and Hikwa (2015) studied graduates of the Master of Science in Library and Information Science from the National University of Science and Technology (NUST) in Zimbabwe. The study sought to establish where the graduates worked, what they did, their competencies, whether their education and training met the employers' expectations and how all these impacted on the existing curriculum. The study found that although generally happy with the curriculum, the graduates felt that the curriculum needed to be revised to include more ICT related and knowledge management courses. Noko and Ngulube (2015) studied graduates of the Records and Archives Management programme at NUST in Zimbabwe to establish where the graduates were and whether the skills they had acquired from their education placed

them in jobs that were relevant to their profession. The study found that 67% of the graduates were employed and that the skills acquired during their education were relevant to their jobs. The graduates were however unhappy with certain aspects of the curriculum especially limited industrial attachment, lack of exposure to practical training and sketchy coverage of information technology. Albina and Sumagaysay (2020) recommended a periodic review of the curriculum to ensure that graduates are equipped with the necessary knowledge and skills required in industry.

Samples for graduate tracer studies are often small (Kyaw, 1992; Shongwe & Acholla, 2011) despite graduate tracer studies being an established practice worldwide. For example studies by Zainab et al. (2004), Shongwe and Ocholla (2011), and Mugwisi and Hikwa (2015) used sample sizes of 26, 50 and 33 respectively. One reason for the small samples is that graduates often change their contact details including phone numbers, home addresses and email addresses (Toba, et al., 2017) after leaving the university. This makes it difficult to trace them and come up with big samples. Further, tracer studies commonly use self-administered questionnaire surveys for data collection. This data collection method has a natural weakness of producing low response rates (Noko & Ngulube, 2015). Another reason that has been suggested for the small samples of tracer studies is that only successful graduates or satisfied graduates may be willing to respond to survey questionnaires (Wibinoso, et al., 2012). Heidemann (2011) however argues that the statement that only successful or satisfied graduates are willing to participate in graduate tracer studies cannot be confirmed. In the current study the low response rate was compounded by the fact that the questionnaires were distributed by email.

Several graduate tracer or employability studies have been carried out in Botswana (Wamukoya et al., 2007; Ama, 2008; Setidisho & Sanyal, 1988; Aina & Moahi, 1999; Homegrown, 2010; Nyepi, et al., 2013; Maunganidze et al., 2016). The findings have so far been inconclusive. While some of the studies have for example concluded that the high rate of unemployment in the country could be attributed to a mismatch of graduate skills and the demands of the labour market, some have found the programmes relevant to the work of the graduates. For example, Aina and Moahi (1999) conducted a study of Library Studies graduates from the University of Botswana and found that they were generally employed in traditional library settings and that the training and skills they obtained during their university study were relevant to the work tasks. This study contributes to existing literature on the relevance of educational programmes offered by institutions of higher education in Botswana, especially their contribution to the knowledge-based economy towards which the country is driving.

4.0 Methodology

4.1 Research design

The study adopted a mixed methods research design. This necessitated the use of both a survey questionnaire and a focus group discussion as research instruments. Objective, quantifiable data from the survey questionnaire would enable the findings to be generalised

while qualitative data would enable the appreciation of the experiences of the graduates from their point of view.

4.2 Participants and sampling

There was no sampling frame for the study because there was no accurate record of all the students who had gone through the programme since its inception in 2000. While the capacity intake of the programme is 20 students per year, the intake has been fluctuating with about 10 students enrolled every year. This means that at the time of the study about 200 students had graduated. A total of 152 questionnaires were sent out and 41 graduates responded. This represented a significantly low response rate of 27.3%. The focus group comprised of eight participants who were graduates of the MADVS programme and had responded to the questionnaire. The participants had graduated at different times. Most of the participants were not in full time employment. Five of the eight participants were registered for PhD studies at the University of Botswana and various other universities mainly in South Africa. Two of the participants were in full-time employment and only one participant was neither full-time employed nor studying.

4.3 Demographic characteristics of the respondents

The ages of the respondents ranged from 23 to 55 years. The majority were between the ages of 32 and 33 years. The respondents were therefore predominantly young adults and those employed were in their early or middle careers. Out of the 41 respondents, 24 (58.5%) were male and 17 (41.5%) were female. This gender disparity in favour of men may be indicative of the constraints that women have in pursuing higher education especially at postgraduate level. Twenty-eight (68%) of the respondents were single while only 32% were married. This may also be indicative of the effect marriage has on the decision or chances of undertaking graduate studies. Single people are more likely to undertake graduate studies than married people because marriage comes with added family responsibilities. Marriage may present more challenges to women than men because of the cultural expectations on married women. Twenty-seven (65.9%) of the respondents were Batswana while the rest were international students. While there are more local than international students who enrol for the programme, a considerable number of international students have enrolled and graduated in the programme over the years. These come mainly from the southern African region although the programme has also attracted students from other regions such as East and West Africa and the United States of America.

4.4 Educational backgrounds

As a multi-disciplinary programme, the MADVS admits students with various academic backgrounds. The basic entrance requirement is a Bachelor's degree of the University of Botswana or any other recognised university or equivalent institution. The programme is truly multi-disciplinary in terms of its content and its student population. The sample shows that the graduates came from a wide diversity of academic backgrounds. Out of the 41 respondents, 21(51.2%) had Social Science background while 20(48.8%) had backgrounds in other disciplines.

4.5 Data collection instruments

Data was collected using survey questionnaire and a focus group discussion. The questionnaire contained 36 questions comprised of both open-ended and closed-ended questions. The closed-ended questions were yes/no and checkbox questions. The focus group discussion used an interview guide with five questions and was intended to obtain participants' views on whether the MADVS programme had added any value to their lives. This included the acquisition of new skills and competencies as well as occupational and social mobility. It further sought to gain participant insight regarding strengths and weaknesses of the programme, challenges that the participants encountered during the course of their study, the most interesting aspects of the programme, and their general university experience

4.6 Data collection methods

The survey questionnaire was distributed to graduates of the MADVS programme through email. The email addresses of the graduates were obtained from Departmental records. Email messages were then sent to 152 graduates requesting them to complete the questionnaire. The questionnaires could be filled in online or downloaded, filled in and sent back as an email attachment or posted.

Qualitative data were collected using a focus group discuss (FGD). Participants in the FGD had also participated in the questionnaire survey. Respondents to the questionnaire were asked to indicate their willingness to participate in a focus group discussion. As the focus group discussion was a face-to-face interaction, only respondents from Gaborone were able to participate.

5.0 Ethical considerations

Like all research, particularly that which involves human subjects, this research had ethical implications which were addressed. For example, some of the questions asked personal and confidential information such as the graduates' salaries before and after graduation. They were also asked to describe their university experiences and some of them felt uncomfortable to do so fearing that their comments about their former lecturers would reach the lecturers. The researchers ensured that the respondents read and signed the informed consent form that emphasised that participation was voluntary and that respondents had the right to withdraw from the study at any time. The respondents' identities were protected by presenting the results anonymously without mentioning their names.

7.0 Findings

7.1 Study mode

Most (68.3%) of the respondents had studied on a full-time basis and 58% of these had completed the programme by coursework only. Various reasons were given for the general preference of coursework only to coursework and dissertation option. One of the reasons was the perception that the dissertation takes a long time to complete and that it tends to delay completion. Respondents stated that they had been told stories of students who took years to complete their dissertations. Some of the respondents stated that they did not take the

dissertation option because they thought the dissertation was for the “academically minded”, those who were aspiring to do PhDs and become academics. Such respondents were typically established in their professions and had enrolled for the MADVS programme to enhance their skills or to obtain a qualification that would enable them to get a promotion or a salary increment.

7.2 Funding of studies

Graduate studies in Botswana are not government funded. Students enrolling for graduate programmes should therefore secure their own funding. The only scholarship available to graduate students in the Department is the very competitive and limited University of Botswana Foundation scholarship which students apply for after completing their first year. In the Faculty of Social Sciences an average of two students are awarded the scholarship each year. The observation by Schneider (2013) that higher education is the most important investment that people make is very applicable to graduate studies in Botswana. Out of the 41 respondents in the sample, majority (73.2%) were self-sponsored. Self-sponsorship meant paying from personal savings, being sponsored by parents, spouses, or relatives. It also meant paying through a personal loan. Of those who were self-sponsored, 58.5% funded their studies through their own savings, while 14.6% had taken bank loans to pay for their studies. The preparedness to sponsor one’s own studies either from own savings or from a loan indicates a high level of motivation by a student to undertake studies and the value the student places on the qualification. Generally, the students are motivated to make this sacrifice by the prospects of better jobs, higher salaries, and occupational mobility.

More than 17% of the respondents had benefitted from fees waiver given to the employees of the University of Botswana and their dependents. There were more respondents who had benefitted from this facility than those who had been sponsored by their employers, with only 9.8% of the respondents having been sponsored by their employers. This is a significant contribution by the University of Botswana towards its employees. Of those who had been sponsored by their employers, 75% indicated that the sponsorship was conditional on being bonded for varying lengths of time after completion of the studies. Remaining with the same employer after graduation is therefore not a reliable indicator of preference by the graduate. A graduate might remain with the same employer out of a commitment to a bonding agreement.

7.3 Completion rates

The study showed high completion rate of the MADVS programme. Out of the 41 respondents, 36 (87.8%) had successfully completed their studies. While evidence indicates high completion rate, a very low level of non-completion is still cause for concern and has to be addressed. Two reasons were given for failure to complete the programme: family commitments (60%) and work commitments (40%). Majority (60%) of the students who did not complete their studies attributed it to family commitments. Family commitments included having to spend a lot of time on family related activities such as marriages, pregnancies, child births and relocation. Work commitments included transfers to other places, promotion which came with more

responsibilities and frequent and unplanned travelling. Some students mentioned lack of support from employers as part of work commitments. Lack of support from the employer comes in different forms including denial of study leave, denial of sponsorship after being promised before enrolment and requirements to work long hours including after hours and weekends.

7.4 Most challenging aspects of the programme

Respondents were asked what they found to be the most challenging aspects of the programme and the responses are presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Most challenging aspects of the programme

Aspect of the programme	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Readings	9	22
Assignments	16	39
Tests	3	7.3
Examinations	2	4.9
Supervision	11	26.8
Total	41	100

As can be seen from Table 1, the highest proportion of respondents found assignments, 39%, to be the most challenging aspect of the programme. This is because assignments are very demanding and require students to be participatory in knowledge finding and acquisition. As a result, they spend a lot of time reading and seeking for knowledge as they prepare their assignments. Some of the respondents were employed and would spend the whole day at work, attend classes in the evening in addition to their other responsibilities at home and in the community. They therefore had very limited time to read and to prepare their assignments.

The second highest proportion (26.8%) of the respondents were those who felt that the most challenging aspect of the programme was supervision. This relates to those who were doing dissertations. The challenges included difficulties in meeting with supervisors, supervisors taking too long to give feedback, and being told to change things over and over again. The School of Graduate Studies has since developed a template for a memorandum of understanding (MOU) between graduate students and their supervisors. The MOU spells out the roles and responsibilities of both the students and the supervisors. It is envisaged that this will promote good working relations between supervisors and their students thereby enhancing the completion rates and reducing the time for completion.

7.5 Respondent's employment status before and after graduation

Most (73.2%) of the respondents were employed before enrolling for the programme and had enrolled for the programme mainly to enhance their knowledge and skills and their chances of occupational mobility. Of those who were employed before enrolling for the programme, 56.7% had changed employers after graduation. Of those who had changed employers, 70.6% stated that the change was a direct result of the acquisition of the new

qualification. Of those who stated that they changed their jobs because of the new qualification, 58.5% said that the change was to a 'better' job. A better job was described as one with a higher salary, more responsibilities, more authority, more influence, and more benefits. For example, 88.2% of those who moved to better jobs said the new jobs paid better salaries. Of those who did not change employers, 53.8% reported positive changes in their jobs. Of those who reported positive changes in their jobs after graduation, 85.7% said their salaries had been increased. Among those who neither changed employers nor had salary increments, 85.7% reported that their responsibilities were increased after graduation. However, only 14.3% of these felt their influence had increased. Influence involves the ability to make organizational decisions or decisions that in one way or the other carry a lot of significance and impact. Table 2 shows the salary ranges for the respondents before they enrolled for the programme.

Table 2: Salary ranges before graduation

Salary range (BWP)	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Below 5 000	7	25.9
5 000 - 10 000	8	29.7
11 000 - 15 000	4	14.8
16 000 - 20 000	4	14.8
21 000 - 25 000	2	7.4
26 000 - P30 000	2	7.4
Total	27	100

Table 2 shows that the largest proportion (29.7%) of the respondents earned between P5 000.00 and P10 000.00 before enrolling in the MA in Development Studies programme. The second largest proportion of respondents were those who earned less than P5 000.00 per month. Table 3 show the salary ranges of participants after graduating from the programme.

Table 3: Salary ranges after graduation

Salary range (BWP)	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Below 5 000	3	11.1
5 000-10 000	8	29.6
11 000-15 000	3	11.1
16 000-20 000	5	18.5
21 000-25 000	3	11.1
26 000-30 000	2	7.4
31 000-35 000	0	0
36 000-40 000	3	11.1
Total	27	100

It can be observed from Table 3 that although the largest proportion of respondents were still earning between P5 000 and P10 000, the percentage had slightly dropped from 29.7% (cf. Table 2) to 29.6%. The percentage of those earning less than P5 000 had significantly dropped

from 25.9% (cf. Table 2) to 11.1%. There was also an increase in the proportion of those earning between P16 000 and P20 000 from 14.8% to 18.5% as well as the proportion of those earning between P21 000 and P 25 000 from 7.4% to 11.4%. After graduation, there was an additional category of those earning between P36 000 and P40 000. This category constituted 11.1% of the respondents. The evidence indicates that the acquisition of the MADVS qualification enhanced the earning capacity of the graduates.

7.6 Competencies gained from the programme

Table 4 shows the skills that respondents gained from the programme.

Table 4: Competencies acquired

Competencies acquired	Percentage (%)	
	Yes	No
Time management	41.5	58.5
Presentation	68.3	31.7
Report writing	65.3	34.7
Research	65.9	34.1
Analytical thinking	80.5	19.5
Teamwork	31.7	68.3
Independent study	58.5	41.5

Table 4 shows that more than 80% of the respondents acquired analytical skills from the programme. This was gained through making presentations and getting constructive criticisms from course instructors and peers. This helped to develop critical thinking skills as the comments challenged them to think deeply about issues under discussion. The lowest proportion of respondents was those who stated that the programme had helped them understand and appreciate working as groups. This is because lecturers did not give a lot of group work or group assignments. Presentations and assignments were generally individually done and there was not much group work that would enable them to gain experience in teamwork. The ability to work in a team is a critical attribute in the world of work and educational and training programmes should contribute to the development of this attribute in the graduates.

7.7 Value of the qualification

The focus group discussion sought the respondents' views regarding the value of the programme, its strengths and weaknesses, the respondents' university experiences and their suggestions on what could be improved. The participants were asked whether they thought the acquisition of the MADVS degree had added any value to their lives. There was consensus among the participants that the qualification had added value to their lives. One of them stated: "All qualifications add value to one's life. You might not see it now but later on in life you will see their value."

Value addition included better jobs, higher salaries, more influence, and occupational and social mobility. It even granted others entry into PhD programmes either at the University of Botswana or other universities, mainly in South Africa. Besides enabling some to qualify for PhD admission, participants also stated that the multi-disciplinary nature of the programme made the curriculum so broad that it opened up their minds to a lot of possibilities. In addition to taking courses offered by the department, the graduates had taken courses from other fields including economics, social work, history, environmental science, political science, public administration, population studies, adult education, and business studies. They stated that because of its multi-disciplinary nature the programme offered them the opportunity to appreciate a diversity of subjects relevant to development.

7.8 Strengths of the programme

When asked about what the major strengths of the programme were, participants generally pointed to the multi-disciplinary nature of the programme. This allowed students to take up courses from other departments, thereby exposing them to various ways of looking at development issues. This also gave the graduates flexibility when applying for jobs. As a result of this exposure graduates were able to fit in and carry out duties required in different areas of work in the public and private sectors as well as in non-governmental organisations (NGOs). They expressed the view that the multi-disciplinary nature of the programme opened doors and prepared them to undertake various jobs. One of the participants who was employed as a part-time lecturer at one of the tertiary institutions in Gaborone explained how he was able to teach several courses by drawing upon knowledge gained from the different courses taken during his studies.

7.9 Weaknesses of the programme

While the participants hailed the multi-disciplinary nature of the MADVS programme, they also pointed out the downside of it. They pointed out that the programme did not develop specialists but exposed students to an assortment of courses which did not lead to a concentration in particular areas of expertise. Courses listed under the various programmes from which students could select options were not always on offer in any given semester or year. As a result, students often found themselves having to take courses that were not related to each other just to have the required number of credits. They argued that students graduate as generalists without a specific area of specialisation. During their study the students would have been exposed to different areas including social sciences, humanities, business, and education without developing deep knowledge in those areas. The participants also pointed out that the multidisciplinary nature of the programme made it difficult for graduates to describe who they were and what their area of specialization was. One of the participants added: “Imagine you are in an interview, and you are asked what your specialisation is and you say, ‘development studies.’ What would you say if you were to be asked, ‘what aspect of development do you specialise in’? The multi-disciplinary nature of the programme presents a problem of explaining what the interviewee is offering to the prospective employer based on their qualifications.”

Some of the graduates therefore thought the programme was too general. However, the original intention of the programme was to encourage and assist students to “develop areas of concentration which take into account their varied academic backgrounds and interests” (University of Botswana, 2000).

7.10 Relations with fellow students

Participants stated that they generally enjoyed good relations with fellow students. They described their interaction with other students as a “good experience”. One of them stated: “We interacted as a family. We worked well together and there was no attitude of survival of the fittest. We discussed our assignments and colleagues were always willing to share information.” This collegiality did not exist only among students enrolled in the MADVS programme but also among all graduate students in general especially those who shared working space in the graduate laboratory. The multi-disciplinary nature of the programme made it possible for them to meet and develop relations with students from different disciplines. Taking courses from other programmes brought them together with other students. Some of these relations have evolved into networks through which graduates have continued to interact and share information.

7.11 Relations with lecturers

Relations with lecturers were described as generally cordial. The respondents stated that they did not experience any problems with most of their lecturers except for a few. They described their lecturers as generally courteous, and treated students with respect and respected their students’ opinions. They stated: “Their criticisms on presentations and assignments were given in a respectful manner that respected the students’ opinions.” The participants, however, pointed out that some lecturers did not relate well with students. Despite having studied at different times the participants reported similar experiences with those particular lecturers. One of the problems with lecturers mentioned by participants was that of being “rigid”. These were described as lecturers who promote only one line of thinking and who do not encourage students to present their own views even when backed by readings from other sources. This created problems for students who felt that they were not allowed to think, or even think outside the box.

One lecturer is said to have used only one textbook throughout the semester. This is the only book students have been using in this course for many years. Participants mentioned instances where they felt students failed a course because they would have differed with a lecturer at some point. They stated: “I know someone who repeated a course three times because they differed with the lecturer.” When probed as to why they had not brought these experiences to the attention of the Department, the participants pointed out that they feared being victimised.

Another problem with the lecturers related to feedback on assignments. Some lecturers either delayed giving feedback or did not give feedback at all on the assignments submitted by students to them. Students stated that there were instances where they had sat for their end of semester examinations before they knew their continuous assessment (CA) marks. They also shared that some of the feedback given by lecturers was very sketchy, such as one big tick at the end of the paper and a mark without any comment justifying the mark.

Participants expressed the view that the way students are assessed is not monitored. There is no mechanism to monitor the performance of students, including how they are assessed. Participants also expressed concern about the failure rates in particular courses. The feeling is that in some courses it looks like there is a predetermined quota of those who are to fail and supplement or fail and retake the course.

The graduates described relations with lecturers from other departments as generally hostile, treating them as “aliens” or an inconvenience. For example, those lecturers would not consider that some of the students did not have the background to the material covered in their courses. They would not even listen when the students reported clashes in their timetables.

7.12 Relations with the Department

Despite there being very minimal interactions between graduate students and other members of the Department who were not their lecturers or supervisors, the graduates described their relationship with the Department of Sociology as “civil”. They felt that they were treated differently from undergraduates. They were treated as adults who were capable of making their own decisions. They however decried the absence of an arrangement through which students and members of the Department could interact and get to know each other better. They pointed out the only people they knew very well were their lecturers, supervisors, and the coordinator of graduate studies. Some of them never met the Head of Department until they graduated.

Participants were, however, aware of the programme regulations that provide for the appointment of an advisor for each student. They believed that the idea of an advisor for each student was good and emphasised that this should not only apply to students doing dissertations but to all students in the programme. They advised that for this to be effective, all lecturers should be more approachable.

The participants also felt that the lecturers’ research outputs were not very accessible to students. They suggested that besides making their publications available to students, lecturers should organise more seminars, workshops, and discussions where graduate students are invited. This would not only encourage graduate students to present their work but also provide a platform for lecturer-student interaction. The Department has since established “meet and greet” sessions between students and the Departmental staff. It is envisaged that these will enhance student-staff interaction.

The participants decried what they described as the “grading culture” of the Department. They pointed out that the lecturers in the Department of Sociology were generally too strict and that this is disadvantaging graduates of the programme in the job market and when they were looking for opportunities for further studies; their chances of employment and admission to further studies are adversely affected. Participants pointed out that their transcripts showed a pattern, where they consistently scored low marks in courses (especially those with DVS codes) offered by the Department and very high marks in courses offered in other departments.

One of the participants explained that he managed to meet the requirements for a scholarship he was applying for because of the high marks he had obtained from courses he took from outside the Department of Sociology. While the participants acknowledged the importance of maintaining high standards of performance, they also felt that the Department was too strict and that awarding low marks had just become the norm.

7.13 Emerging issues

Participants made various suggestions, some of which were specific to the programme and some more general, but which however could have a bearing on the impact of the programme and the student experience. These include marketing the department and its programmes, developing innovative courses, promoting research through encouraging students to do dissertations, and developing specialisations within the programmes.

7.13.1 *Marketing the Department*

Most of the respondents had obtained their undergraduate degrees from the Department of Sociology and were therefore familiar with the Department and its programmes. They expressed concern that the Department and its programmes were “not known outside the walls of the University of Botswana”. They felt there was a need for the Department to come up with a strategy to market itself and its programmes.

7.13.2 *Development of new courses*

The participants were of the view that some of the courses offered in the Department did not reflect the current development needs of Botswana and perhaps of those other countries in the region from where the programme draws most of its students. They suggested that the Department should be innovative and develop courses that reflect the current times and topical issues.

7.13.3 *Research*

The University of Botswana aspires to be a research-intensive university. This requires, among other things, intensifying research by graduate students. However, most of the students in the MADVS programme opt for the coursework only option. Participants believed that this was because students do not appreciate the value of research. That is why they opt to do course work only even if they qualify to do a dissertation. The participants stated that in many cases students later regret when they discover the importance of research at the workplace or when they embark on PhD studies.

7.13.4 *Specialization within the programme*

Some participants believed that the programme is too general. As both a concept and practice, development is very broad with several facets. The participants suggested that the programme should allow students to specialise in particular aspects of development. By the time they enrol for the MADVS programme some of the students are already working in particular fields of development and enrol for the programme to enhance their knowledge and skills in

those areas. Specialisation within the programme would enable students to choose their areas of concentration by taking into account their academic backgrounds and, more importantly, their areas of interest or areas in which they are already involved.

8.0 Discussion

Graduate tracer studies are generally conducted for three related reasons. The first is to get feedback on how students experience the university during the course of their study (Badiru & Wahome, 2016). This helps universities not only to improve their teaching and learning strategies but also to improve the general experience students have during their period of study. The other reason tracer studies are conducted is to establish the relevance of university programmes to society (Wibinoso, et al., 2012; Rupande, 2015; Senekal & Munro, 2019; Manchishi, et al., 2020). According to Rupande (2015), universities have to establish the relevance of their programmes because they provide skills to the manpower that is supposed to drive the economy of the country. The third reason tracer studies are conducted is to assess graduates' employability (Fongwa, 2018; Senekal & Munro, 2019). For Fongwa, graduate employability and actual employment outcomes have become key indicators of higher education success. Tracer studies are therefore critical to the existence of a university and must be carried out regularly. Their findings should influence decisions which are intended to strengthen the universities' effectiveness (Mubuke & Kiguli-Malwadde, 2014).

Like other universities, the University of Botswana is concerned about the relevance of its programmes to society. The perception of the relevance of a qualification enhances the employability of graduates. Most of the MADVS graduates had been employed before enrolling for the programme. Therefore, the extent to which the programme enhanced the employability of its graduates could not be ascertained. However, evidence shows that the qualification has led to occupational mobility for many of the graduates. Salary increases which have been attributed to the acquisition of the degree are also evidence of the contribution of the qualification to social mobility. Enhanced occupational mobility, assumption of more work responsibilities and salary increases as a result of the qualification are also indications of its relevance. It shows that employers find the knowledge and skills acquired by the graduates relevant and value adding to their work. Manchishi et al. (2020) made similar conclusions when they found that a significant number of the graduates in their sample had been promoted to senior positions after training. Universities are therefore not ivory towers but are playing an important role in developing the human resource that is required for national development. Relevance is however not a permanent state. It has to be worked on continuously as programmes and courses are aligned to the changes constantly taking place in the external environment.

Respondents generally had a good university experience. They generally enjoyed good relations with other students, their lecturers, the Department in general and the School of Graduate Studies. There are however areas that need attention in terms of staff-student relations. Giving students a good university experience is very important. Students who have a good university experience become its good ambassadors.

Conclusion

Alumni are important stakeholders of any university and their views about the relevance of university programmes and the university environment should always be solicited and taken seriously. Despite the challenges of locating them after graduating, alumni are an essential link between the university and the society at large. This study provides empirical evidence that university education contributes to graduates' occupational mobility. Although further evidence is required to establish the relationship between education and productivity, evidence from this study shows that there is a relationship between the acquisition of the MADVS degree with level of earnings which seems to support the human capital theory.

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