

## **Sustainable Partnership in Action Research: The Role of Mentorship in the World of Work**

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### **Abstract**

*At Kyambogo University, graduate students are engaged in participatory action research that considers mentoring as an inspiring professional activity towards effective knowledge development and sharing. Mentorship empowers students with skills to solve real workplace challenges through action research; thus achieving a sense of collective responsibility with participants. This paper presents findings from a study conducted on mentorship during Future Workshop (FW) activities in participatory action research under the Master of Vocational Pedagogy Programme, in the Faculty of Vocational Studies, Kyambogo University. The study was premised on a theoretical concept of “learning by doing” that guaranteed mentors, graduate students and study participants full participation towards the development of professional competences in research problem identification. The core issue was to establish whether mentorship in technical and vocational education and training (TVET) contributed to sustainable partnerships between the academia and the world of work. A Participatory Action Research Model was used to carry out this study using qualitative methods of data collection and analysis. Data was collected from ten (10) academic staff who participated in the mentorship field work exercises on graduate students conducting research in the world of work. Observation and active participation methods were used to provide descriptive data for content analysis. The article presents experiences encountered by mentors in understanding students’ situation analyses or work process analyses in establishing core workplace challenges; problem development through a democratic process; the research environment and the relationship between the researcher, participants and the mentor from the academic institution. In conclusion, it was revealed that mentorship during future workshop activities in TVET research contributed to professional competence development and change management processes. Further, competency-based training cannot be effective without a collaborative initiative with the World of Work in ensuring realistic outcomes in TVET. As a recommendation, efforts need to be made in ensuring that there is maintained stakeholders’ engagement throughout the research processes by both the academic mentors and student researchers.*

**Key words:** *Mentorship, competency-based training, sustainable partnership*

### **Introduction**

The Masters in Vocational Pedagogy (MVP) at Kyambogo University is engaged in action based research studies in collaboration with the World of Work. The academic programme is in line with, the Uganda Vision 2040 (Government of

Uganda, 2007) that highlights the need to establish globally competitive skills development programmes that promote equal opportunities for its citizens. Further, the Business, Technical and Vocational Education and Training (BTNET) Strategic Plan 2011/2020 (MoES, 2011) emphasizes the need to strengthen linkages between TVET and research institutions including industry. In line with this, MVP advocates for the linkage between training, research and innovation with the world of work. This is also in relation to UNESCO programme (39/C5), lifelong learning opportunities, health and wellbeing, gender equality, decent work and economic growth, entrepreneurship, responsible consumption, production and climate action (UN, 2015).

One of the core concepts for MVP is based on a framework and an understanding of the opportunities and challenges in fostering work-based learning programs and mentorship. Engagement with communities and stakeholders in the world of work have reverberated thoughts on, 1) Innovative Learning; 2) New Innovative Skills Development Strategies in VET from the World of Work perspective; 3) Collaborative Research and Product Development-Practical partnerships of World of Work and Academia; and 4) Action Research: Experience at the Work place. The imperativeness of employers seeking workers that would employ and adapt to new changes in the global market continues to be expressed. In this case with the current trends, employability is more than the attainment of skills but the ability to market oneself through networking and contribute to social and economic sustainability. Matthias (2016) stresses that, given the increasing demand for skilled labor; a well-trained workforce is believed to be central to a productive and competitive economy. Currently, in many countries, governments and individuals invest heavily into vocational training and action-based research schemes for the production of a skilled workforce (UNESCO-UNEVOC TVET Learning Forum, 2018). This therefore calls for an intervention strategy of preparing individuals on how to “learn to learn”, based on their interests and abilities either in their workplaces or through mentorship work-related processes.

Given the pace at which technology for production is advancing, it is critical for various communities and institutions to have flexible skills-oriented programmes that encourage trainees to “learn to learn” through engaging with industry practitioners in skills training and implementation to effectively meet the unemployment crisis and job creation strategy through hands-on training. The MVP programme continues to uphold the idea of taking the field to a learning context and bringing the learning context to the field as a justifiable move to effectively close the existing skills acquisition and applicability gaps.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Mentoring as a capacity building strategy implemented in skills training through participatory action research activities of the MVP programme, aims at addressing TVET challenges through creative, intelligible and desirable developmental

processes that are from a more informed and democratic undertaking. Based on a work process analysis of experiences encountered from research supervision of conventional research, academic mentors indicated that there was minimum engagement of stakeholders and academic mentors during the establishment of a research gap and implementation of the intervention strategies in various workplaces. This potentially affects the quality of mentorship, ownership and sustainability of change initiatives in research projects conducted. In view of such circumstances, one finds it imperative to establish whether or not mentorship in TVET during action research activities contributes to sustainable partnership between the academic institutions and world of work.

### **Methodology**

The study used a Participatory Action Research (PAR) Model towards achieving tangible results that validated the research process. This research design upholds the concepts of “learning by doing” as the theoretical model that underpins all the practices adopted in action-based research approaches. The dual commitment in action research enabled participants to study the research process within a workplace environment and to concurrently collaborate with mentors in all research activities towards a desirable outcome. This exhibited the importance of co-learning as a primary aspect of the research process. Further, Herr (2015) stresses that, action research is best done in collaboration with others who have a stake in the problem under investigation and are involved with relevant skills or resources even though the perceived need for change comes from within the setting. In this case, researchers, mentors and participants interested in workplace change worked collaboratively.

A work process analysis of mentors’ experiences was conducted through a focus group discussion guided by an open-ended questionnaire. This provided a point of departure for the activities to be engaged in during the research students’ future workshop processes. It was during these future workshops that mentors were to guide research students in identifying the research problem, intervention strategies and evaluation of the research implementation processes. Through participatory observation, activity trends during the implementation of the intervention strategies were put into consideration. Triangulation of information from various research tools used in the study contributed to the validity and reliability of the data collected. The use of, photos, video recordings, document analysis, observation checklists and interview guides provided relevant primary and secondary data during the research process. Data was systematically analyzed using the triangulation techniques in order to gain confirmation of data obtained from the different sources. Getting reliable data on the same aspect from different mentors as participants strengthened the findings of the study. The rationale for triangulation was also to cross check and cross-breed information gathered from different categories of mentors as research participants to make a final deduction.

## **Findings**

All the ten (10) academic mentors and twenty-three (23) student researchers participated in the study and findings were presented under themes after triangulation of data. Areas addressed in this study included: responsibilities of the academic mentor during the problem identification process; research problem identification, the mentors' role during research Future Workshops (FWs) in participatory action research, and participation of MVP students

### ***Responsibilities of the Academic Mentor***

Academic mentors sought to establish a number of aspects pertaining to the procedure involved in conducting an Action Research (AR) situation analysis with stakeholders. This included: i) establish whether the student/researcher conducted a situation analysis in order to arrive at the gap to be addressed by the Action Research's interventions; ii) understand how the problem was developed during the FW's discussions; iii) ascertain whether the researcher involved stakeholders in the change processes through the FW's discussion; iv) ascertain whether attention was also drawn to the research environment and its contribution towards the achievement of the overall aim of the research; v) establish the involvement of MVP students who attended the workshop; vi) and monitor the development of a work plan to implement the proposed Action Research interventions.

The academic mentors were able to establish that student researchers did conduct situation/ work process analyses as initial steps during the research processes. This was evidenced from the background information that was shared by the student researchers during the future workshop (FW) sessions. For example, during the work process analysis one of the student researcher established that the learning experiences in engineering were "*mainly theoretical*". This negates the highly recommended vocational education pedagogy linked to a competency-based form of education and training approach Sigua, Tuga, Bautista, and Aggarao (2014). This meant that by then the processes of teaching the course did not consistently amalgamate theory and practice. In this case, the training processes affected the acquisition of skills in the engineering domain. Therefore, the "limited hands-on and field learning experiences in the production processes of engineering entrepreneurs" was identified as an area that required in-depth deliberations at the FW.

On the other hand, one academic mentor established that regardless of a student researcher having claimed to conduct a situation analysis, there was no evidence to ascertain the *truth*. In this case, the academic mentor was left with no option but to follow and be more critical with the FW processes. It was observed by the academic mentor that "the area of concern was identified by some of the administrators, fellow teachers and not all stakeholders". Within the context of this study, Munoz and Husel (2008) description of a situation analysis quoted from the American Marketing Association (2005) as "the systematic collection and study of past and

present data to identify trends, forces and conditions with the potential to influence the performance of the business and the choice of appropriate strategies” (p.28), justifies the use of documentary analysis, one-on-one discussions using interview guides with persons in the workplaces and logbooks by the student researchers in establishing the workplace performance. This seemed to have been identified as a gap by the academic mentor during the above mentioned field experience. In other incidences, reflective written overviews from student researchers revealed the positioning of the area of concern and understandings of the work processes where the studies were to be conducted.

Academic mentors were able to guide the student researchers on ways of involving stakeholders during the change management processes. This they did by ensuring that clear explanations on the research areas of interest established by the student researchers were given. One of the academic mentors had this to note “initially, participants were briefed about the purpose...central was the notion of democratically generating areas of concern”. In this case, discussions held with the stakeholders exhibited well-grounded research concepts that could potentially influence the performance of the identified workplaces for research.

### ***Research Problem Identification***

The problem identification process required collaborative interactions between the student researcher, stakeholders in the workplace, and available resources to enable the research processes be conducted in a conducive environment. This is affirmed from the following statements from the academic mentors:

The process of arriving at the research problem was participatory in nature whereby, the student together with the participants agreed on ground rules guiding the procedures...the rules included; democratic participation, transparency, collective decision making, equal power and rights to generate views...taking turns to speak and listen to others...students’ attitude encouraged full participation...there was ownership of the process.

From observations during the research processes, academic mentors witnessed the democratic clustering of the established challenges into short, medium and long term by the participants with guidance from the student researchers. A pairwise ranking matrix of short term challenges was made and it enabled participants identify outputs that could be achieved within the stipulated research activity timeframe. One of the academic mentors had this to say: “participants generated the opinions, possible interventions, sorted the interventions in respect of time limits and decided on the priority intervention...all the researcher did was to facilitate the workshop proceedings”.

Russell (1997) considers pairwise ranking matrix as a prioritizing list prepared by communities with common interests. Comparing of each problem with the other was considered paramount in order to avoid biased comparisons. In this case, with

the guidance from the academic mentors, student researchers in collaboration with the stakeholders were able to identify realistic and achievable challenges through a collective responsibility approach. The participation gesture of the stakeholders and the student researchers with continued guidance from the academic mentor affirmed Alzheimer Europe Office (2009) observation that researchers who use participatory approaches engage in processes of obtaining acceptance into communities and groups that they study or have common interests with the groups they study.

### **Academic Mentors' Role in Participatory Action Research**

In establishing a research environment that contributed to the achievement of the research processes, a future workshop was conducted within the various workplaces for purposes of reliability and validity of the research data collected. A Future workshop was therefore considered an effective data collection method and tool in participatory action research. This is supported by Luttamaki (2014) who affirms that, Future workshops are a good tool for tackling complex problems where many, often seemingly contradicting views, have to be fitted together. From a participant observation point of view academic mentors ensured that participants in the research owned the research processes by adhering to the concepts of “learning through participation” and “learning to learn”. This is supported by one of the participant’s quest in a future workshop who stated that *“we want to go away from here when we can make and market marketable projects”*.

It should be noted that not all future workshop processes were successful with challenges. In one of the Future workshops conducted, a student researcher was guided by the academic mentor when a pairwise ranking matrix was being developed before the clustering of all identified challenges from the participants; and this is what she shared *“I would recommend that before the pairwise matrix is done you do engage the participants in identifying what the short, medium and long term challenges are and then use the short term challenges for the pairwise matrix”*. This statement reflects on how important it is for the mentors to always be attentive and reflective of all actions taking place during action research processes. This ensures that systematic procedures are adhered and reliable, and therefore valid research data is obtained.

Further, the language of communication between the academic mentor and student researcher determines their effective engagement during the research processes. This promotes team spirit, transparency, dialogue, positive criticism, democratic participation and collective decision making as key concerns during the development of a research work plan that finally addresses intervention strategies collaboratively generated. Mentorship as a benefit for team collaborations is further supported by UNICEF (2017), when it affirms that group learning is considered a driving force for creativity, in regard to solving problems and generating new forms of knowledge. It should be noted that groups may comprise of more than a single

individual hence a greater avenue of resources to exploit and solicit information from various experiences.

For the research processes to be effective, it was observed that feasible steps, actions and time frames were developed during the workshop to which detailed work plans were collaboratively generated by all participants. The following statements from the academic mentors affirm the shared experience:

Together with the stakeholders the researcher came up with an implementation action plan. At this stage, stakeholders were assigned responsibilities in order to ensure that the set goals are achieved within the agreed time...The time to conduct the research activities is realistic...together with stakeholders, timelines were discussed and harmonized to the researcher's availability...

This exercise provided the student researchers with opportunities of taking into account the time available for the research as well as the activities embedded within the University academic structure.

### ***Participation of MVP Students***

Although mentorship was linked to the academic mentors, it was observed by all of them that group mentoring from the Master in Vocational Pedagogy students to fellow student researchers during their future workshop sessions was conducted. Academic mentors noted the following from the MVP student researchers:

Chipping questions that focused the discussion; writing stakeholders' responses on flip charts; offering guidance on the pairwise implementation procedure and offering tips on time saving during the discussions; offer extra information where clarification of an idea or procedure was needed; evidence of teamwork before, during and after the workshop. This was demonstrated by the researcher and the colleague interchanging roles and helping each other in different ways throughout the processes

Utilization of individuals' expertise was therefore evidenced during the research processes in form of readiness to listen, management of the whole process and involvement of all key participants. Such experiences on the relevance of group mentorship were confirmed by Deforge, Colquhoun, Richmond, Emberly, and Newman (2018). The authors stated that group mentorship reflects individual availability and openness; respect and empathy, and reciprocity during research activities, thus, contributing to the development of skills and professional competencies as affirmed by Gagliardi et al (2009).

### **Conclusion**

The study sought to examine mentorship in research during competency-based training for sustainable partnership with the world of work. The experiences

encountered during mentorship in research processes contributed to the creation of professional relationships between the academic mentors, student researchers and the world of work. Management of change and development of new knowledge in areas of skills competence was achieved. It should further be noted that there was joint establishment of the research problem by the stakeholders as participants during the research processes; evidence of participatory engagement; participants' ownership of the research processes; confidence building within the lead researcher was achieved; effective communication amongst all participants and development of research work plans democratically done. Conclusively, every experience was a learning platform for both the academic mentor, researcher and workplace participants.

### **Recommendations**

Mentoring as a universal activity executed during the research process revealed that as long as there is collective involvement and ownership of action from all stakeholders, a sustainable partnership could be realized during developmental processes. With such initiative, the relevance of TVET with the world of work is evidently and satisfactorily recognized. As a recommendation, efforts need to be made in ensuring that there is maintained stakeholders' engagement throughout the research processes by both the academic mentors and student researchers.

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