

Partnership for African Social and Governance Research (PASGR) - National University of Science and Technology (NUST) Research Methods Training June 18-28, 2018, Bulawayo, Zimbabwe

“The best workshop I've ever attended has come to an end. Many thanks to the instructors and my Co-learners. The engagements were awesome and I am confident interdisciplinary research will thrive from now onwards”

Those were sentiments from a participant in the just concluded PDT's premier institutional-based research methods training at the national University of Science and Technology (NUST) in Bulawayo, Zimbabwe. The training was the response to a request from the university to train their faculty. It began with a telephone call early February from Mrs. Nonsikelelo Ndlovu, the Senior Assistant Registrar in charge of the University's Training and Staff Development after realizing that more and more faculty members kept going to her for sponsorship to attend PASGR's regular Nairobi-based methods training. She concluded that “... since the course seems to have generated a lot of interest in our staff members, we would like to come to some arrangement where more of our staff members studying towards doctoral degrees or post-doctoral studies or indeed any doing research can benefit.”

As our strategy incorporates partnerships with institutions to co-deliver this type of training, we accepted the request and immediately started planning for the delivery with three instructors drawn from our pool of very able and passionate instructors. We also drew in two of the NUST faculty members who had attended our past training to join the team as assistants. This was going to be a 9-day training of the Advanced Research Methods, commonly referred to as ARD which is comprised of four short modules, that is, Designing Social Inquiry, Mixed Methods Strategies, Critical Policy Engaged Research, and Ethics in Social Science Research. As is our approach, we also planned a week-long pre-training online engagement to prepare and familiarize participants with the course content. This was to be supported by WhatsApp facilitation.

All the prep work proceeded well and the registrar's office received an overwhelming list of applicants. However, as we commenced the online engagement, we noted dismal actual engagement. Unknown to us, this activity coincided with the examination marking process which meant that participants were prioritizing marking over online participation. We were therefore forced to delay this online engagement and instead start with a “warm up” session of self-introduction. This turned out to be a useful way of identifying areas of common research interests among participants and at the same time it familiarized them with the online engagement platform. A second hitch which we encountered was that this being a predominantly STEM university, some participants from Natural and Applied Sciences thought that this was a social science programme. When we realized this, we planned to start the training by demystifying the social orientation of the training programme. Once everyone understood that research can be social research, whether from the natural/applied science or social science as long as it is relevant to the society, their interest and engagement increased. It was so gratifying to see participants with engineering, architectural and DNA research questions highly engaged along with those from the disciples of business and commerce.

The workshop was opened by the Acting Pro-Vice Chancellor, Dr. N. Phuthi. Designing Social Inquiry module immediately kicked in and ran for four days as participants were introduced to foundations of research designs, descriptive versus causal designs, development of causal research questions and hypotheses, concept formation. One participant comments that “*the quadrant on Theory and Data Environment was a very useful tool in explaining the application of descriptive and causal studies*”. This

was followed by a one-day module on Ethics in Social research. After participating in this module, another participant reflected *“I have come to understand that the way I view and conduct research must be fair and unselfish, causing no harm to others at the expense of achieving research”*. Participants were then introduced to the strategies of mixing research methods and analyzing mixed data. The final module, that is, Critical Policy Engaged Research, showed participants how to engage with policy throughout the research process from conception to dissemination. They were also introduced to important tools of engagement such as the ‘message box’ and the Alignment-Interest and Influence Matrix (AIIM).

We benefitted from the presence of the Dean of Commerce, Dr. Peter Nkala who had been very instrumental in ensuring that NUST faculty received this training and had been the chair of the in-house organizing team. Director of Research and Innovation, Prof. Yogi was a regular observer who also provided us with useful feedback. One thing that stood out was commitment to co-learning among participants. To conform to our peer-learning pedagogic approach, we had at the start of the training encouraged participants to co-learn with us. It was humbling to see even very senior academics, some with PhDs learn together with junior colleagues who were at the beginning stages of embarking upon their PDs and supported each other in group-work sessions.

On the last day, I led the instructors to pay a courtesy call to the Vice-Chancellor, Prof. Mqhele E. Dlodlo. Word had already reached him about the positive output of this training and therefore he expressed his appreciation of this partnership. I also had the privilege of witnessing him sign the MOU between NUST and PASGR, in the presence of Prof. Samson Sibanda, the Pro-Vice Chancellor and Mrs. Nonsikeleo Ndlovu.

The training was heralded as one of the best the university has held as evidenced in the following participants’ comments:

“The program really opened me to critically examine the whole process of research, beyond just going thru the usual”

“My plan was to submit my PhD proposal to the panel but this workshop has changed my thinking and I will have to re-work my proposal before I can submit”.

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