

FROM THE OPERATIONALIZATION OF BASIC CONCEPTS TO THE SUCCESSFUL COMPLETION OF A RESEARCH PAPER OR THESIS

Akimou TCHAGNAOU

University of Zinder (Niger)

Laouali TANKO

University of Zinder (Niger)

Nowenkâum Désiré POUSSOGHO

Institut des Sciences des Sociétés /CNRST (Burkina Faso)

akimou.tchagnaou@gmail.com

Abstract

The preparation of a thesis is a scientific activity that requires know-how on the part of the student. In order to do so, the student must master the basic vocabulary of research and their field of expertise, on which depends the successful completion of the dissertation. These basic concepts can therefore only be acquired by referring to specialized dictionaries or dictionaries of the research field.

This article aims to explore some basic concepts in the development of research work. These concepts are at the heart of all research work and whose understanding facilitates the rest of the work for the researcher.

Keywords: *Operationalization, concepts, research success, paper, thesis*

Résumé

L'élaboration d'un mémoire ou d'une thèse est une activité scientifique qui nécessite un savoir-faire de la part de l'étudiant. Pour se l'approprier, l'étudiant doit maîtriser le vocabulaire de base de la recherche et de son domaine de compétences. La réussite du mémoire ou de la thèse dépend de la maîtrise des concepts de base. On ne peut donc s'approprier ces concepts de base qu'en se référant aux dictionnaires spécialisés ou de la spécialité en question.

Cet article a pour objectif de clarifier certains concepts de base dans l'élaboration des travaux de recherche. Les concepts qui sont au cœur de tout travail de recherche et dont la compréhension facilite le reste du

travail au chercheur.

Mots-clés : *Opérationnalisation, concepts, réussite de la recherche, mémoire, thèse*

Introduction

The production of dissertations and theses is not an easy task. It is an arduous scientific task that requires intellectual investment on the part of the student. It mobilizes all the resources available to the student (Tchagnaou et *al.*, 2020). There is therefore a whole vocabulary linked to the elaboration or supervision of dissertations and theses that every researcher or apprentice researcher must know and master. These notions are so fundamental that mastering them facilitates collaboration between the thesis director and the student. In addition, the thesis supervisor must also be aware of the importance of this vocabulary, which guarantees harmonious supervision.

If the success of the dissertation or thesis depends on the combined efforts of the actors involved in the work, the student's ability to domesticate the conditions made available to them, and on how they rationally manage their relationship with the dissertation or thesis supervisor (Tchagnaou et *al.*, 2019a), it is also linked to the mastery of scientific vocabulary.

This article aims to elucidate the recurring terms related to the development and supervision of dissertations and theses on the one hand and to describe the conditions for their successful completion on the other.

1. Operationalization of Basic Research Concepts

Operationalization is about defining the key concepts related to research. These include the research project, the research dissertation, the research thesis, research

supervision, the supervisory relationship climate, the development of a research paper, the supervisory contract, the supervisory guide, and the dissertation or thesis supervisor.

1.1. What is a Research Project?

For M-F. Fortin (1996), a research project is a "preliminary stage of scientific research, during which it is necessary to establish the limits of the object of the study and to specify the way in which each stage of the research process is to be carried out" (M-F. Fortin, 1996: 367). In the same vein, Paul N'da (2006) writes that: "the research project is therefore not a simple work plan, it is more explicit, as it systematically justifies and presents the methodological choices made at each stage of the process [...Generally, it includes the following elements: analysis of the situation, critical analysis of the relevant literature, the population and sample, the research instrument, the research process, data processing, and analysis, funding and timing]" (P. N'da, 2006: 36).

Unlike the definition given by Fortin (1996), which did not address the details of the research project, Paul N'da's (2006) definition specifies its different components.

In short, the research project is a methodical work. It is the very foundation of a research paper or thesis. Its design should follow the methodology of the dissertation or thesis by partially addressing the following elements: the research topic, which should be precise and concise, a brief analysis of the situation, a justification of the choice of the research topic, the research objectives, a brief literature review, research questions, and hypotheses, as well as a brief methodological presentation specifying the study framework and population and the planning of the research activities. The research plan differs from one institution to another, from one department to another, or from one

specialty to another. Therefore, there is no standard plan for a research project.

1.2. What is a Research Paper?

According to A. Akrémi (2001), "The dissertation is an initiation to research that requires a personal contribution. The dissertation should enable the student to acquire a critical sense and a spirit of synthesis. A dissertation must be scientific in the sense that it must be based on theoretical foundations and a rigorous methodology" (A. Akrémi *et al.*, 2001: 6). For J-P Fragnière (2001), a dissertation "is a document of forty to two hundred pages (or more) produced within the framework of a training process by one or more persons, on a subject close to the chosen field of study and from a perspective that endeavors to take account of the rules of scientific activity" (J-P. Fragnière, 2001: 5).

Similarly, M-F. Fortin (2006) noted that "the master's thesis and the dissertation are written presentations imposed on graduate students. They are a condition for obtaining a university degree. The dissertation and thesis describe the steps that have been taken in the conduct of a project" (M-F. Fortin, 2006: 402). Moreover, P. Gaberan (2008) argues that a research dissertation must correspond to a project. Unlike school or university work in the Bachelor's degree, which is preferably descriptive and for which the knowledge acquired elsewhere constitutes the essential content, the dissertation must be the outcome of a project. This project is defined in agreement with the dissertation directors, who are teacher-researchers in the given field. The final project must correspond to one or more clear objectives. It must meet certain criteria: a personal and autonomous approach, an innovative work, and a work of quality.

The definitions given by A. Akrémi (2001) and Gaberan

(2008) tend to cover all that is needed, as they even specify the criteria for a good research dissertation compared to Fortin (2006) who only gave a simple definition. A research dissertation is, therefore, a scientific research document that is the result of studies graduate level in Higher Education.

1.3. What is a Research Thesis?

According to Umberto Eco (2016),

“a thesis is a typed work, which may vary in length from one hundred to four hundred pages, in which the student deals with a subject related to the studies they are completing. Italian law requires a thesis to be done in order to obtain the *laurea*, the university graduation diploma. Once the student has passed all the necessary exams, he or she must defend the thesis before a jury. Their thesis director (the professor with whom the thesis is done) and one or more rapporteurs present a report on the thesis and make some objections to the candidate. This gives rise to a discussion in which the other members of the committee also participate. The jury's assessment will depend on what the rapporteurs have said, pointing out the qualities and shortcomings of the thesis, and on the student's ability to defend the ideas expressed in his or her written work” (Umberto Eco, 2016: 17).

In the university environment, the thesis is a scientific document of an individual nature that the student writes under the direction of a teacher-researcher or researcher of magisterial rank and that they must defend before a jury, sanctioning the end of doctoral studies (A. Tchagnaou, 2021: 15). Similarly, the thesis summarizes the progress of the research work, at the end of which the doctoral student

may obtain a higher degree or diploma, after defending their research findings before a jury.

1.4. Supervision of Research Work

According to Geneviève (2007), framing is a difficult concept to define. He writes that: "framing is a concept that changes meaning depending on the context in which it is used, not to mention that it can take on several definitions depending on the actor involved in a given framing modality (manager, teacher, student)" (quoted by Loisier, 2010: 25). For C. Royer (1998), the supervision of research work is a dynamic and interactive process, which goes hand in hand with the stages of progress of the student's work, while orienting them in the light of scientific requirements. According to the author, supervision is divided into three types of practice whose intensity varies according to the stages of progress of the research. He distinguishes three stages:

“Meetings with the student and, occasionally, with the second reader: they are very regular during the conceptualization/planning phases when the student particularly needs to be reassured and guided in their choices. They are more sporadic when the fieldwork begins and become more frequent but shorter during the writing phase. Ongoing monitoring: this can take place outside the meeting times in the form of remote communication (e-mails, telephone calls, etc.) and covers the entire duration of the research. It sometimes takes place in response to occasional requests or urgent contingencies. Work on the texts: this takes place during the writing and evaluation period and may continue after the defense. It consists mainly of providing feedback on the texts produced by the student: chapters, articles to be published, posters, etc. It concerns the content and form of the

texts produced, with the utmost respect for the student's intellectual autonomy and freedom of expression" (quoted by Suzanne, 2011: 3).

Mentoring is an integral part of the professorial task. Like the student, the professor must demonstrate scientific integrity and respect the rules of ethics and conflict of interest as well as academic management.

Thus, the Université de Laval's policy on the supervision of theses and dissertations describes certain specific conditions that contribute to improving the supervision of master's and doctoral students. These include the collaboration plan, the supervision committee, and co-supervision, financial support for the student, support from the program director, and supervision training activities. It is written that:

“the collaboration plan sets out the stages of the study program, including those for the completion of the research or creative activities, or the production of a thesis, and is an essential instrument for ensuring that it progresses according to schedule. The supervisory committee (for the thesis or dissertation) or the co-supervision can be an effective support in the supervision of the student depending on the situation. In addition, the existence of a supervisory committee or co-supervision has the dual advantage of ensuring a broader, and often deeper, coverage of the student's research area and increasing the student's chances of success. An appropriate physical environment and adequate financial resources contribute to the success of Master and Ph.D. studies. This financial support may take the form of a grant from an external organization, a grant from the supervisor if the student's project is part of a funded research

program, course fees, research or teaching assistantship contracts, the Success Support Fund, in which bonuses are distributed according to the progress of studies. The program management is able to assist a student who is experiencing difficulties (e.g. integration or learning difficulties, financial difficulties, availability of the supervisor, feedback on assignments, etc.), provided the student informs the program management. Postgraduate mentoring requires specific knowledge and skills. The University recognizes the importance of mentoring as a factor for success by providing training in mentoring through the Teaching Enhancement Network and other training. Thus, teachers are encouraged to take advantage of training activities in order to develop or improve their skills" (Université de Laval, 2008: 3-5).

The definition developed and proposed by the Ecole Polytechnique de Montréal's Graduate Student Support Policy (1999) is relevant. According to this policy, supervision "consists of bringing together all the conditions (scientific, interpersonal, technical, financial, administrative and institutional) conducive to the success of studies and the development of the intellectual, scientific and professional autonomy required by the program of study in question. The collective organization of this environment is the responsibility of the directors of studies or research, the students, the department heads, the heads of graduate programs, and the Ecole Polytechnique" (quoted by R. Prigent, 2001: 6).

The supervision or monitoring of a research paper or thesis requires the presence of two main actors. On the one hand, the student who prepares their thesis and, on the other, the

teacher-researcher who supervises them throughout the process. Each of the two actors has responsibilities toward the other. It is this work between the student, as considered an apprentice researcher, and the professor, as a supervisor, which defines dissertation supervision.

1.5. The Relational Climate of Management

The relationship in the context of supervision can only be dual because it exclusively concerns the thesis director who is the supervisor and the student who is supervised. Doron and Parot (1991) refer to the relational climate of supervision as interpersonal relations. They write that: “Interpersonal relations result from a positive attitude towards others involving a cognitive and affective dimension (...), accompanied by a rewarding experience for both protagonists. Together with kinship relations, they constitute an important source of social support for the individual” (Doron and Parot, 1991: 620). A. Van Zanten (2008) considers the relational climate of supervision as a pedagogical relationship. According to A. Van Zanten: “the pedagogical relationship is conceived both as the dynamics of exchange and as a functional system of learning and education. It marks the deep link between human communication and knowledge” (A. Van Zanten, 2008: 578).

Indeed, a psycho-sociological approach sheds a different light on the mentoring relationship. We are interested in the various types of interpersonal relationships that develop between the student and their supervisor. These more or less personalized relationships are aimed at the success and achievement of the learner and are manifested in different types of interaction ranging from the normative to the empathetic, from the directive to the adaptive.

Thus, by supervisory relationship climate, we mean the type of relationship that exists between the student and their thesis supervisor. When the two actors work in a perfect atmosphere, in total harmony, or in perfect collaboration, we say that the supervisory climate is cordial and a fortiori favorable for productive work. On the other hand, when the supervisory climate between the student and his/her manager is conflictual, where the two actors live in a total misunderstanding with mutual criticism, the relationship is said to be not cordial. This can lead to a breach of the supervision contract. This can lead to sloppy or poor-quality work.

1.6. Developing a Research Paper

For M. Guidère (2004), “the preparation of a research dissertation must comprise three phases: the preparatory phase, which makes it possible to define a specific research object (') and to ensure its feasibility; the production phase, which involves drawing up a work plan and then a drafting plan (') and the final phase, which consists of submitting the work to the director for validation and quality control. It also includes any requests for adjustments, further development or simply clarification” (M. Guidère, 2004: 6-7).

By the development of a research project, we mean all the steps from the choice of the subject and the thesis supervisor, through the documentary research, the field survey, the analysis of the survey data, the interpretation of the results to the finalization of the thesis.

1.7. The Management Contract

For S. Daguet (2011), in order to validate the different roles of the student and the supervisor at the University of Fribourg, a contract or supervision agreement is signed between the two. The contract also allows for

accountability. It contains three parts: general information, what the student commits to, and what the supervisor commits to.

The supervision contract is an important step that marks the beginning of the collaboration between the student and their thesis supervisor. Two conditions make it concrete. Firstly, the choice of the research topic, and secondly, the choice of the thesis supervisor. Once the student chooses a research topic, he or she submits it to a teacher-researcher of the required grade and in accordance with their research field. The latter studies the relevance of the subject while analyzing the characteristics of the student in question, to see whether they meet the conditions for supervision. The teacher also looks at the student's level of motivation and competence. Once this analysis is completed, the teacher-researcher gives their answer. If the answer is positive, the teacher-researcher and the student set a work schedule. This is the culmination of the whole process, which we call the supervision contract. Following this contract, the teacher-researcher passes from the status of teacher-researcher to that of thesis director vis-à-vis the student. For theses, the supervision contract is most often finalized by the letter of agreement that the thesis director writes for the doctoral student and in which he or she undertakes to supervise the student until the end of the thesis.

Thus, the supervision contract is a process that marks the beginning of the supervision of a dissertation, from the choice of the research topic to the consent of the supervisor after any alterations have been made to the dissertation or thesis topic.

1.8. The Guide for the Supervision of Research Work

By guide, we mean a pedagogical document that explicitly

describes the conditions and organization of the supervision of research work. In this sense, the guide has a dual purpose: pedagogical and organizational.

On the one hand, through its pedagogical objective, the guide should enable both the student and the thesis supervisor to familiarize themselves with the rules related to the supervision of research work. On the other hand, through its organizational objective, the guide should enable the different actors to know their responsibilities. The thesis supervisor will know their prerogatives, as will the student. Once the conditions are met and the responsibilities are known, the thesis supervisor and the student sign the supervision contract.

Generally, there are two types of guides: one for students and another for thesis supervisors. As an example, we will present the outline of each of the guides in force at the University of Montreal. In the teacher's guide, we have the following headings: "introduction, why address teachers and researchers", "do you want to be my supervisor? Take time to think!" Université de Montréal, 2011b: 2). "In this guide, we have the following sections: 'Introduction, why approach professors and researchers,' 'Do you want to be my research supervisor?' 'Take time to think about it,' 'Modalities of supervision and the context of supervision,' 'Supervision outside the research structure,' 'Supervision within a team,' 'Supervision in an external environment,' 'Modalities of writing the dissertation and thesis,' 'Study plan,' 'Sponsoring committee,' 'Supervision and its many ramifications: some strategies,' 'What to do in case of serious problems,' and 'Conclusion'".

In the student guide, the plan is as follows: "introduction, from undergraduate to graduate studies: a qualitative leap, the choice of a supervisor and research topic, supervision

modalities and context of supervision, supervision outside the research structure, supervision within a team, supervision in an external environment, modalities of writing the dissertation and the thesis, the study plan, the sponsorship committee, moments of risk, what to do in case of serious problems? and the conclusion” (Université de Montréal, 2011a: 2).

In short, the guide helps to regulate the relationship between the student and the thesis supervisor in the supervision of research work. It helps to avoid a number of problems that can arise in the midst of supervision. In this respect, the guide remains indispensable for well-done research supervision. However, it should be pointed out that most universities do not yet have research supervision guides. This is not likely to facilitate the preparation of dissertations and theses by students and the supervision of such work by supervisors.

1.9. What is a Research Director?

A thesis supervisor is a teacher-researcher who is a specialist in a given subject and who supervises a thesis. They may be a university teacher as well as a member of a research institute or a research laboratory. As a required grade, a thesis director must be a teacher of magistral rank or rank A, namely a Master of Conferences or a Master of Research, a Full Professor or a Director of Research, which are grades recognized in the member countries of the African and Malagasy Council for Higher Education (CAMES), or an HDR professor (Habilitation to Direct Research) in France. In addition, the co-direction of Master's theses can be ensured by teachers of rank B, i.e. Assistants or Research Associates and Assistant Masters or Research Fellows. The latter may direct professional bachelor's theses alone.

In the policy for the supervision of master's theses at Université de Laval in Canada, two responsibilities of the research supervisor are described: “The primary responsibility of the research supervisor who supervises master's theses and doctoral students is to supervise their work, the main components of which are to guide the students, to support them in their intellectual development and to ensure that they can make steady progress in their learning. To this essential responsibility can be added others that are likely to be of great importance for the training and success of students: fostering contact between students and the research and professional communities, helping them to obtain financial support during their studies, and enabling them to acquire, as far as the training program allows, the knowledge and skills that are in demand in the job market” (Université de Laval, 2008: 6)

Moreover, the supervision policy specifies all the roles of the dissertation supervisor vis-à-vis the student. According to this policy, the dissertation supervisor

“assists the student in defining their program, taking into account the institutional context and legitimate external funding requirements, and possibly modifying it if unforeseen problems so require; establishes a collaboration plan with each student which is renewed or revised each year or more often, as necessary ; ensures that the dissertation project corresponds to the number of credits awarded but does not become too large in relation to the objectives of the training program and the time allocated; helps the student to plan the project and establish a realistic timetable; provides, where appropriate, the material resources required for the student to progress; provides a type of supervision

that leaves room for student autonomy, particularly at postgraduate level; meets regularly with the student to review progress; assists the student in reporting on the progress of their work in accordance with the terms of the program; establishes a plan of action to overcome any difficulties; discusses with the student and clarifies the conditions of their work, particularly in relation to intellectual property and financial support; advises the student in the preparation and writing of his or her thesis or scientific article; reacts within a reasonable time to the different versions of his or her writings submitted by the student, according to the agreement reached with him or her; evaluates the student's progress, advises the program director at least once a year and decides, if necessary, on appropriate measures; provides, if necessary, for supervision in the event of prolonged absence" (Université de Laval, 2008: 6).

Claude Morin (2003) from the University of Montreal defines the dissertation director as "an advisor, a guide" (C. Morin, 2003: 2). Furthermore, Morin described the duties of the dissertation director. According to C. Morin, "be interested in the subject and be competent to give an enlightened opinion on the subject in question, evaluate the relevance of a subject and the bibliography presented by the candidate, offer theoretical and methodological indications, facilitate access to sources and institutions, comment on the writings within reasonable time limits, be consistent in his or her opinions concerning the problematic and help the student when their opinion counts (application for a grant, submission of the subject, defense)" (C. Morin, 2003: 3).

In the North American context, graduate supervision is an

obligation for faculty. This obligation often conflicts, at least in terms of time management, with other obligations, including research and publication. The professor who wants to conscientiously carry out all the tasks associated with their position and status is usually overwhelmed. Not all candidates have the same needs and expectations of their supervisor. And not all teachers have the same conception of supervision. As mentoring is a contractual relationship, it is important that both parties agree on their mutual responsibilities, as the teacher also has expectations of the students they are mentoring.

In essence, the main responsibility of the research supervisor is to provide the best possible guidance to the student. As a resource person, he or she helps the student to define their program of study, formulate their research project, to plan their course of study, and find the financial support needed to pursue their studies. His or her supervision, therefore, includes sustained intellectual assistance at both scientific and technical levels, human support, and attentive supervision from the initial phase of the study to the final evaluation of the thesis. This being the case, it is the supervisor who must accompany the student throughout the research process. In this, he/she plays the role of a coach or mentor.

Thus, a well-chosen thesis supervisor promotes the timely and efficient completion of the degree.

2. Conditions for Successful Research

Not all students enrolled at the end of the cycle succeed in the same way. Some manage to succeed in time, others manage to succeed beyond the deadlines set by the institutions. Still, others abandon their dissertation or thesis, thus failing at the Master's or Ph.D. level. Students who succeed in their

dissertation or thesis have certain characteristics of their own.

L. Gérard and M.-J Gremmo (2008) consider that students who succeed in their dissertation are those who become familiar with the activity of scientific production. They postulate that the success of the Master's student depends on his or her familiarization with his or her new formative structure and these authors envisage success in the following way: “completing the dissertation and obtaining a grade that allows one to move on to the next university level, i.e. to enter the doctorate” (L. Gérard and M-J. Gremmo, 2008: 19). For their part, A. Tchagnaou et al. (2018) argue that only well-to-do and well-informed students succeed in their dissertation. Similarly, Tchagnaou et al. (2018) also believe that students who pass their dissertation are those who go through the endurance stage of the research development process. Furthermore, the rational and efficient management of supervisory relationships has something to do with this. According to A. Tchagnaou and colleagues (2019a), students who fare better in the process of producing dissertations are those who manage relationships with their supervisors rationally.

On the other hand, students who fail are those who are idle and demoralized (Tchagnaou et al., 2018), who are not familiar with the activity of research (L. Gérard and M-J. Gremmo, 2008) or who are not enduring or who do not manage their relationship with the dissertation or thesis supervisors well (A. Tchagnaou et al., 2019a).

According to A. Tchagnaou et al. (2020), the success of research work also depends on the scrupulous respect of institutional provisions by both students and supervisors, on the investment of students in their research, and also on their capacity to manage rationally and with efficiency and effectiveness their relations with thesis supervisors,

whatever their qualities or weaknesses (A. Tchagnaou *et al.*, 2020: 132).

Conclusion

In any case, the preparation of dissertations and theses follows a specific procedure. In scientific research, the student and the supervisor must master the vocabulary inherent in research. This would make it easier for the former to prepare and for the latter to supervise. A harmonized and mastered vocabulary allows each of the actors to play their role fully for a successful outcome of the thesis.

Since there is no end to learning, both teachers and students need to update their knowledge of research supervision and development. This is where the two main actors will work for hand in hand. For a successful dissertation, the student must follow the instructions of the supervisor, who must also be open-minded and not spare any information about the supervision of research work.

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