National Council for Higher Education

Ensuring Quality for Excellence

REPORT ON THE STAKEHOLDERS CONSULTATIVE WORKSHOP FOR ONLINE SUPERVISION AND ASSESSMENT GUIDELINES HELD AT THE NATIONAL COUNCIL FOR HIGHR EDUCATION ON 25TH JULY 2023

JULY 2023

Acknowledgments

The Taskforce takes this opportunity to appreciate the European Union for proving funds that facilitated the development of the online supervision and assessment guidelines of research degrees. The Team also thanks the Executive Director for the confidence vested in them to carry out the task. The Team also appreciates Dr. Nora Mulira for the Technical guidance and oversight provided. The Taskforce also thanks Mr. Arthur Muguzi Babu, Ms. Hanifah Namanda and Ms. Faridah Nairuba for the financial and administrative support during meetings.

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Executive summary

The National Council for Higher Education (NCHE) is mandated by the Universities and Other Tertiary Institutions Act, 2001 as amended (UOTIA) to among other things set standards governing the performance, operations and general conduct of Universities and Other Tertiary Institutions.

Whereas NCHE in pursuing its mandate developed research and graduate training, minimum standards for postgraduate studies in 2015, the online component is missing. Also, the existing standards do not guide on the smooth integration of online supervision and assessment. The lack of well-thought-through guidelines can result in unintended consequences such as plagiarism, impersonation, cyber-attacks and general research misconduct.

In the effort to bridge the existing gap, the Executive Director, NCHE, appointed a Taskforce of six (06) people who were tasked to propose national guidelines relating to online supervision and assessment of Masters Research degrees.

The Taskforce proposed guidelines on online supervision and assessment of research degrees pending feedback from stakeholders of degree awarding institutions in Uganda. The Taskforce intended to host a consultative workshop to obtain stakeholders' feedback.

Objective

The objective of the Workshop was to obtain feedback from stakeholders of degree-awarding institutions on the proposed online supervision and assessment of research degrees.

Method of Work

The proposed guidelines were sent to all degree awarding institutions in Uganda and were tasked to provide feedback within two weeks. Several institutions provided written feedback. In addition a one-day stakeholders' workshop was organized on Tuesday 25th July, 2023 and was attended by over 120 participants from across the country.

Key highlights of the Workshop

a) Stakeholders appreciated NCHE for developing guidelines for master's research.
b) Stakeholders urged NCHE to develop guidelines for PhDs and other levels.
c) There was a concern that the online research supervision would take away the opportunity for student-supervisor physical interaction.
d) Uganda still has a challenge of digital penetration and the cost data and electronic gadgets is high.
e) Some HEIs such as Makerere University Business School and, Mbarara University of Science and Technology already have online systems and were urged to support others.
f) Observed that already some HEIs such as Makerere University Business School and, Mbarara University of Science and Technology were already doing online supervision and assessment following their own guidelines. The developed guidelines will serve as official guidelines for all HEIs.
g) There is need to continuously train and mentor all users on the aspect of online supervision and assessment.
h) It is advisable that HEIs continue with the blended approach but once in a while students interact with the online supervision and assessment platform to iron out a few things.

1.0 Introduction

The struggle to realize SDG 4 [to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all] remains a priority globally (Ritchie, Roser, Mispy, Ortiz-Ospina, 2018; United Nations Economic and Social Council (2020). That is, the aspirations to attain it have attracted financial, technical, and infrastructural commitments from development partners and bilateral agencies. However, in Sub Saharan Africa, particularly in Uganda, the efforts to realize this SDG has since 2016 faced unprecedented challenges. Jointly, these challenges were grouped into: (i) Policy and Practice of Research, (ii) Innovations, and (iii) Management of research by the Africa-EU strategy (2021-2027), the AU-EU-UNICEF trilateral partnership, African Network for Internationalization of Education (ANIE) and OECD – program on Higher Education and Research for Development (IHERD), EU Multiannual Indicative Programme (MIP) for Sub-Saharan Africa 2021-27, and the EU Commission and Regional Economic Communities in Sub-Saharan Africa.

Specifically, OECD IHERD report on 'Governance of higher education, research and innovation in Ghana, Kenya and Uganda,' observed that, the level of coherence within and among the existing policies, programmes, and institutions remains relatively weak. Policymakers in sub-Saharan Africa (Uganda inclusive) require greater awareness and capacity building to ensure that national Science, Technology, and Innovation (STI) policies and programs capture the national development priorities and are internally and externally consistent to promote policy complementarity, coherence, and effectiveness.

COVID-19 has escalated the HEIs sector challenges cited above. For example, university education in Uganda has been devastated to an extent that over 400,000 university students were (and are still) left without physical contact with their facilitators and university administrators, including over 20,000 masters' students who must undertake a supervised research project. This lack of contact has affected the relevancy of masters' research, the quality of the supervision process, the quality of students graduating and those yet to graduate in the next over 5 years. Hence, greatly deteriorating the masters' research processes and research policy relevancy in Uganda's HEIs which has hampered realization of SDG 4 particularly target 4A Target 4.3, and subsequently SDG 5 (target 5.1) and SDG 9 (target 9c). This problem is partly explained by weaknesses and gaps in HEI research policies (at national level and university level) to respond appropriately to this devastation caused by COVID-19 with respect to Master's students research journey. Additionally, facilitators' (university academic & administrative staff) research methods skills and knowledge require refreshing to cope with these devastation effects.

The proposed online supervision and assessment research guidelines will strengthen quality and relevance of masters' students research at Uganda's HEIs through improved regulative / policy mandate of Uganda's National Council for Higher Education (NCHE). Also, the guidelines will involve integration of ICT usage into managing the students' research journey i.e. student enrolment into the research project, research idea generation, supervisor allocation, supervision records management, up to post assessment / viva-voce.

In the effort to bridge the existing gap, the Executive Director, NCHE, appointed a Taskforce of six (06) people who were tasked to propose national guidelines relating to online supervision and assessment of Masters Research degrees. The Taskforce was constituted as follows:

1.	Dr. Vincent A. Ssembatya	Team Leader
2.	Prof. Mukadasi Buyinza	Member
3.	Rev. Dr. Cyrus S. Ssebugenyi	Member
4.	Mr. Cosmas Muhumuza	Member
5.	Mr. David Ssebulime	Member
6.	Dr. Betty Bukenya Nambuusi	Member

The Taskforce proposed guidelines on online supervision and assessment of research degrees pending feedback from stakeholders of degree awarding institutions in Uganda. The Taskforce intended to host a consultative workshop to obtain stakeholders' feedback.

1.1 Funding

The development of the guidelines was funded by a European Union funded Project (no. 101083105), which is a consortium of eight (8) institutions (Makerere University Business School, Mbarara University of Science and Technology, Makerere University, National Council for Higher Education, Uganda Chapter for Corporate Social Responsibility Initiatives Ltd, Kyazze, Kankaka and Co. Advocates, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam and University of Lisboa Portugal).

1.2 Objective

The objective of the Workshop was to obtain feedback from stakeholders of degree-awarding institutions on the proposed online supervision and assessment of research degrees.

2.0 Method of Work

2.1 Stakeholders' engagement

The proposed guidelines were sent to all degree awarding institutions in Uganda and were tasked to provide feedback within two weeks. Several institutions provided written feedback. In addition a one-day stakeholders' workshop was organized on Tuesday 25th July, 2023 and was attended by over 120 participants from across the country.

The Workshop involved presentations, plenary, discussion and way forward. During this workshop, more feedback was provided by the stakeholders.

The members of the Taskforce synthesized all the feedback and reviewed the draft guidelines accordingly in order to produce this final report.

3.0 The Workshop

3.1 Participants

The Workshop was held at the NCHE Secretariat and started at 9:30am with an opening prayer by the Senior Personal Secretary, NCHE, Ms. Namusoke Harriet. The Workshop involved both physical and online participants including vice chancellors of Universities, principals of other tertiary institutions, other degree awarding institutions as well as NCHE staff. The attendance list of participants is attached as **Appendix I**.

3.2 Official opening of the Workshop

The Workshop was opened by Dr. Nora Mulira, Director Information Research and Innovation (IRI) who represented the Executive Director, NCHE. She made the official opening remarks of the Executive Director, NCHE as follows:

a) Welcomed participants to the Workshop and appreciated them for responding to the NCHE invitation.
b) Appreciated NCHE for organizing the Workshop.
c) Called for active participation of all stakeholders and urged them to share their experiences and expertise in improving the proposed guidelines.
a) Mentioned that what differentiates a university from a secondary school as the ability to generate new knowledge. A school just transmits knowledge while a university must generate knowledge it transmits.
b) Stated that a number of our institutions have not yet put a premium on research. Institutional research budgets are often small.
c) The NCHE is mandated by the Universities and Other Tertiary Institutions Act as amended to set any provision necessary for setting good standards in Universities, Other Degree Awarding Institutions or Tertiary Institutions that value the importance of research as drivers for social and economic transformation of any community.
d) Appreciated the Taskforce who developed the first guidelines on online supervision and assessment for research degrees for NCHE.
e) Dr. Nora Mulira declared the Workshop officially open.

3.3 Presentation on guidelines for online Supervision and Assessment of research degrees

3.3.1 Background

Dr. Betty Bukenya Nambuusi, a High Education Officers at NCHE, gave the background of the presentation. She highlighted the following:-

a) Development of guidelines for online supervision and assessment was already on the NCHE research agenda.
b) NCHE lacked funding to develop the guidelines. However, NCHE had requested for funds from government.
c) During that time, NCHE in collaboration with seven (7) institutions won a European Union funded grant on ICT usage in HEIs. The Project will last for 3.5 years.
d) The institutions included Makerere University Business School, Mbarara University of Science and Technology, Makerere University, Uganda Chapter for Corporate Social Responsibility Initiatives Ltd, Kyazze, Kankaka and Co. Advocates, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam and University of Lisboa Portugal.
e) Developing guidelines for online supervision and assessment of research degrees was one of the deliverables of the Project.
f) NCHE used funds from the Project to develop the guidelines.
g) Outlined gaps that led to the development of the proposal. These included effects of COVID19 where a big number of Master's students lost physical contact with their supervisors.
h) Concluded by stated that the guidelines will address several issues including frustrations of master's research resulting from pandemics such as COVID19.

3.3.2 Guidelines for online Supervision and Assessment of research degrees

Mr. Cosmas Muhumuza, a High Education Officers at NCHE, made the presentation on online guidelines for supervision and assessment of research degrees. He highlighted the benefits, challenges, cyber-security, guidelines for online supervision and assessment.

Benefits of online supervision

a) Enabling research supervisors to carry out their supervision responsibilities anywhere in the world where there is relevant technical infrastructure.
b) Facilitating access to research programmes for candidates who might not otherwise have the opportunity, enabling them to remain in their communities, families, and jobs.
c) Enhancing diversity by enabling the recruitment of under-represented groups.
d) Promoting collaboration amongst institutions.
e) Reduced education cost.

Challenges of online supervision

a) The cost of data in Uganda and in developing countries in general is still a big impediment to online activities.
b) No or limited access to fast internet making electronic communication nearly impossible.
c) Navigating different time zones and the technologies that are needed to communicate and collaborate about research processes at a distance.
d) Students often feel isolated online and may hesitate to initiate contact with their supervisor, and thus lack a sense of connection with the supervisor.
e) Sometimes communication online is challenged by technological failure
f) Lack of knowledge and expertise in appropriate use of technologies.

Guidelines of online supervision

a) Every institution intending to engage in online supervision of Masters research degrees shall:
    - Have an Electronic-supervision system.
    - Make readily available and easy to access electronic library resources including databases, journals, and electronic books for research students in their respective areas of research.
    - Put in place an enabling policy for online supervision.
b) There shall be an online portal for all institutional policies, guidelines and other necessary resources relating to research.
c) There shall be a mechanism to track progress of students.
d) There shall be student support services.
e) There shall be in place a communication strategy to aid effective communication and interaction between the student and supervisor.
f) Students and staff shall be trained on the use of various technologies.
g) The supervisor and the candidate should agree on the communication technology they should use for online meetings.
h) The supervisor should initiate and lead online communication in the early stages of the online supervisory relationship but should gradually consider transferring the responsibility for communication to the candidate.
i) There should be an agreed upon schedule of meetings.

j) Supervisors should value the importance of timely feedback in the supervision engagement.
k) Supervisors should value the importance of timely feedback in the supervision engagement
l) Where an online research student has to undertake practical sessions, a blended approach may be adopted.

Cyber-security

There is need to protect the institutional data and users from any risks associated with online engagement including protection from cyber-attacks.

Guidelines for cyber-security

a) Put in place a cyber-security risk management framework
b) Create a cyber-security policy.
c) Ensure proper storage and retrieval of stored data.
d) Identify and appoint designated officers who are responsible for implementing security requirements, assessing institutional security risks, conducting regular security audits, checking
e) Establish robust user monitoring mechanisms.

Guidelines for online assessment

a) Every masters Degree candidate irrespective of the mode shall be subjected to an oral defense (viva voce).
b) Every institution intending to engage masters students in an online oral defense shall put in place an appropriate policy
c) Online oral defenses shall be permitted only where there is appropriate technology to support audio and video facilities
d) The decision of the panel shall be communicated to the candidate immediately after the panel has taken that decision.
e) There must always be technical support during the duration of the online oral defense.
f) The online oral defense shall only be open to intended participants and should have options of permission of intended participants and expulsion of non-intended ones.

3.5 Discussion and Plenary

A discussion and plenary were held and the following were the issues raised.

i) Stakeholders appreciated NCHE for developing guidelines for master's research.
j) Stakeholders urged NCHE to develop guidelines for PhDs and other levels.
k) There was a concern that the online research supervision would take away the opportunity for student-supervisor physical interaction.
l) Uganda still has a challenge of digital penetration and the cost data and electronic gadgets is high.
m) Some HEIs such as Makerere University Business School and, Mbarara University of Science and Technology already have online systems and were urged to support others.
n) Observed that already some HEIs such as Makerere University Business School and, Mbarara University of Science and Technology were already doing online supervision and assessment following their own guidelines. The developed guidelines will serve as official guidelines for all HEIs.

o) There is need to continuously train and mentor all users on the aspect of online supervision and assessment.
p) It is advisable that HEIs continue with the blended approach but once in a while students interact with the online supervision and assessment platform to iron out a few things.

4.0 Way forward

The Taskforce will synthesize the raised issues and finalize the guidelines and submit to the NCHE Management for consideration.

5.0 Closing remarks

The Workshop was closed by, Rev. Dr. Cyrus S. Ssebugenyi, the Principal Standards, Recognition and Equation of Qualifications, NCHE. He made the following closing remarks:

a) Thanked members for attending the Workshop in big numbers
b) Appreciated members of the Taskforce for developing the guidelines for online supervision and assessment.
c) Informed members that an attachment of the draft of the report by the task force had been sent earlier to all participants and therefore institutions that had not sent in their feedback were requested to do so.
d) Requested stakeholders to always respond to NCHE communications for better planning.
e) Promised to respond to the emails of all the stakeholders because all opinions matter.

The closing prayer was led by Fr.Dr. Jino.O. Mwaka and the Workshop ended at 2:17p.m.

6.0 References

1. Ritchie, Roser, Mispy, Ortiz-Ospina. "Measuring progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals." SDG-Tracker.org, website (2018).
2. United Nations Economic and Social Council (2020) Progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals Report of the Secretary-General, High-level political forum on sustainable development, convened under the auspices of the Economic and Social Council (E/2020/57), 28 April 2020
3. Build and upgrade education facilities that are child, disability and gender sensitive and provide safe, non-violent, inclusive, and effective learning environments for all as stipulated in 4(a) under SDG4.
4. Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all as SDG4 stipulates.
5. Target 4.3 By 2030, ensure equal access for all women and men to affordable and quality technical, vocational, and tertiary education, including university.
6. Target 5.1 End all forms of discrimination against all women and girls everywhere.
7. Target 9.c: Significantly increase access to information and communications technology and strive to provide universal and affordable access to the Internet in least developed countries by 2030

Signed by Rapporteurs:

1. Ms. Rebecca W. Mwanja .....
2. Ms. Susan Nanyombi .....

Project Coordinator, NCHE

Dr. Betty Bukenya Nambuusi: .....

APPENDIX 1

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STAKEHOLDERS CONSULTATIVE WORKSHOP ON THE DRAFT MINIMUM STANDARD FOR RESEARCH

DATE: TUESDAY 25TH JULY 2023

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