CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY AND RESEARCH DESIGN

3.0 Introduction

This chapter tells us about the empirical base of this report in that it resides in a case study approach, where it has utilized the interview as a data collection instrument. The doctoral students, supervisors and coordinators of the program of the Consortium were all asked questions by the researcher and their responses were recorded in audio-tapes and thereafter they were all transcribed. Important secondary data was obtained from institutional, program documents and other, relevant literature. The study sought respondent views on the program of the Consortium and the degree to which it had been conceptualized at the universities. It also attempted to understand the degree to which this program had impacted on higher education research, curriculum practices and student lives. These were all done through the interviews and this chapter highlights how this study was carried out and why.

3.1 Research Approach

Qualitative research describes and analyzes people's individual and collective social actions, beliefs, thoughts and perceptions (McMillan & Schumacher, 1997). This is in contrast to quantitative research which assumes that social facts exist with the single objective reality that is divorced from feeling and beliefs of an individual. This project begins with the assumption that 'multiple realities are socially constructed through individual and collective definitions of the situation' (McMillan & Schumacher, 1997:16). It could be argued that the choice of a subject and the problem area for a research project suggests a choice of approach (Angus, 1989:24) as well as a range of potential methodologies in that 'assumptions have direct implications for methodological concerns' (Cohen and Manion, 1994:3). In this project, the research set out to understand the educational social phenomenon of how the program of the Consortium of South African Universities address the training of postgraduate researchers through the doctoral students, the supervisors and the co-coordinators of the programme. However, this study was not an attempt to establish tight causal relationships between measured social facts and the

researcher, but the researcher was an interviewer and participant. On the other hand, in quantitative research, the researcher would have been much more detached from the study.

A qualitative research was chosen for its appropriateness and feasibility in conceptualizing and analyzing the data that was collected through semi-structured and unstructured interviews, telephone interviews and documentary analysis through descriptive means (qualitatively) (Booyse, 1999; Marshal & Rossman, 1989). Furthermore, Glaser and Strauss (1967) have argued that the most effective means of examining social life is through qualitative methods, giving opportunities to personalization while at the same time utilizing individual stories to bring about richness, complexity and density within the context (Glaser and Strauss, 1967:32).

3.2 Case Study

This research work has utilized the case study approach to investigate the research question. The case study approach has been found to be appropriate for studying specific phenomena in context. It is generally hailed for its strength in enabling an in-depth understanding of the complexities of a situation or processes, because of its "heuristic, inductive and descriptive nature" (Merriam, 1994: 226-28 cited in Anderson, 2002: 37). Furthermore, in a case study, data analysis focuses on a singular phenomenon, which the researcher chooses to get deep insight into the point of investigation (Cohen and Manion, 1994; Macmillan & Schumacher, 2001). This method has helped in highlighting the practices, experiences and implications of the Consortium because according to Yin (1998) a case study is good at making people understand complex issues or objects and can widen experience as well as add to what already exists through previous research. Moreover, it relies on multiple sources of evidence, with data needing to converge in a triangulation fashion and as another result, benefits from the prior development of prior development of theoretical propositions to guide data collection and its analysis (Yin, 1994: 13).

In addition to that, qualitative case study approach does not prescribe method, but allows for the use of a combination of multiple sources of information, such as interviews, documents, observation and many others, adds to its usefulness and together with all the mentioned strengths of case study constitute the basis for my choice of this approach for this research. However, no matter how strong the case study is, it is not free from inherited problems. Merriam (1994) has described three central drawbacks of this approach, "First, limits on time and other resources may mean that the 'thick' description, which is the central aim of the case study, is unrealistic. Secondly, case studies may oversimplify or exaggerate certain factors. Thirdly, case studies, (like most qualitative approaches), are dependent upon the researcher's sensibility and integrity" (Anderson, 2002: 37).

A further, but related problem of case studies in research is described by de Vaus, (2001: 237) where he asserts that, "while case studies may achieve excellent internal validity by providing a profound understanding of a case, they have been widely criticized as lacking in external validity. A profound understanding of a case, it is argued, provides no basis for generalizing to a wider population beyond that case." Both de Vaus and Merriam's criticism views on case studies are vital criticisms, but it is generally important to recognize that not all case study research aims at making generalizations. This research, for instance, has explored the typicality of a particular case (the Consortium of South African Universities). However, de Vaus (2001: 237) explains the relative irrelevance of the above-mentioned criticism by differentiating between statistical generalization and theoretical ones by arguing that; "theoretical generalization involves generalizing from a study to theory. Rather than asking what the study is telling us about the wider population…"

As a response to the first drawback the researcher has maintained a high degree of focus on issues pertaining to the practices, experiences and the implications of the Consortium. This was due to the time limit I had to carry out on this study. As for the second drawback, I argue that my single case study has not mentioned everything about the Consortium of South African Universities nor did it make generalizations from my findings. It stayed focused on the research question, and that has helped the researcher to avoid

oversimplification and exaggerations about the study. The third criticism, which made a mention of sensitivity and integrity, presented a serious challenge, which, however, was avoided by sticking to research ethics while conducting this study.

3.3 The Interview

In the case study interview, the researcher ideally avoided strong framing through formal questioning on the grounds that it would constitute interference and as a result open-ended questions were preferred. The semi-structured and unstructured interviews were used in order to enable the subjects to talk freely about their experiences and practices of the program of the Consortium. The subjects were occasional probed and this prompted them to comment freely on these contextual issues. Cohen and Manion (1994) describe a research interview as a process that is initiated by the researcher with sole purpose of getting relevant information with four possible types, in semi-structured, structured, non-directed and focused (pp273).

The first interview was important and crucial for analysis. The researcher only interrupted the informant to clarify certain issues that were not clear. The interviewer put forward many contextual issues which when recorded set the scene. Other interviews followed in subsequent days for coding to be done immediately after the first interview gave a prompt and basis for the other upcoming interviews. In qualitative analysis, abstractions are built from grouped particulars and theory from the bottom up in a funnel-like process (Bogdan and Biklen, 1992: 31-32).

The Researcher recorded ten interviews on audiotapes with willing doctoral students both full time and part time in the education policy studies, their supervisors and coordinators of the program of the Consortium of South African Universities. The participants had an interest in the study as they thought they were helping with its review and appraisal, and at the time were in the final stages of their writing to complete their thesis. Five of the selected interviews were with doctoral students who are either approaching the end of their thesis writing or have since completed collecting data for their

thesis. Where-as three of them were supervisors of some of the doctoral students in the program. The other two were conducted with two coordinators of the program. The interviews were unstructured and based on the following question; 'how does the program of the Consortium of South African universities address the training of postgraduate researchers?'

The sample was roughly one of convenience but also considered appropriate to the topic under investigation. The interviewer made telephonic contact with the prospective interviewees to arrange a time and a venue for the interview. The Spencer Foundation informed intended interviewees that the research was about their experience, practices and implications of the program they were currently involved with and mainly funded. Interviews were carried out either at the informant's office or at any other convenient place chosen by both the researcher and the informant. The duration of interviews was between twenty minutes and thirty minutes.

The interviews were unstructured and phenomenological in the sense that they would start from being structured and as the interview progressed, they would change to the probing nature of the unstructured. The phenomenological research was used because this study did not rely on measurement, statistics or other things associated with scientific methods. The phenomenological paradigm is opposed to the positivism paradigm in that it is an approach that emphasizes on subjectivity rather than objectivity and therefore it is descriptive rather than being analytical (African Intellectual Resources (AIR), 2005:45). This choice of an unstructured interview was in keeping with the aim of understanding the complex, subjective experience and behaviour of individuals, without limiting the inquiry by the imposition of any a priori categorization (Fontana & Frey, 1994). Further responses were obtained from using non-directive probes.

3.4 Triangulation

Cohen and Manion (1994) argue that, all research methods select certain aspects of reality and leave out others. The case study method of data collection utilizes other methods of data collection such as interviews, telephone interviews and documentation and this were employed to collect data. . The need for triangulation comes from the ethical need to

confirm validity of phenomena (Tellis, 1997). I have used the triangulation method of data collection in this study to validate my interview instruments so as to come up with 'logic' instead of stories. On the other hand, Cohen and Manion, (1980: 208) define triangulation as, "…the use of two or more methods of data collection in the study of some aspect of human behaviour". They, therefore, also conclude that triangulation is used to offer a balance between logic and stories.

According to Cohen and Manion, (1980) through triangulation, advantages of each research method complement the other, and this result in a stronger research design and more valid and reliable findings. They further argue that inadequacies of a single method get to be minimized and hence threats to internal validity are taken note of and addressed. I have used this method of data collection to make my study more reliable and valid.

3.5 Data Analysis

The data was interpreted by combining individual perceptions in a way that revealed meaning and coherence, while at the same time looking out for issues that could relate to policy as a contextual frame for this particular program. Interactive mechanisms such as assumptions, conventions and practices were noted and then linked to the literature. However, it was difficult to locate some of the subjects who were situated far away from where the researcher was. In most cases they did not respond as expected and telephone interviews proved to be ineffective for this exercise.

The method of Thematic Content Analysis was used to interrogate the data obtained. This involved formulating four theme categories for each group of subjects, namely, postgraduate students, supervisors and coordinators. The Researcher then systematically classified the interview information according to the theme categories. Thirdly, the categories themselves were analyzed and examined in relation to the findings. In cases where the categories could not account for the interview data, these were discarded and extended where appropriate. The Researcher then reformulated several of the categories. The final stage of the research involved using these findings to answer the main research question of whether the program of the Consortium of South African universities was addressing the training of postgraduate researchers.

3.6 Ethical Considerations

Ethical issues, such as voluntary participation, informed consent anonymity and confidentiality, as argued by de Vaus, (2001) were privileged in this research. It is true that voluntary participation may mean that people whose participation is essential may choose not to participate and by so doing compromise the validity of the findings. However, I feel that those that participated were equally important for this study. The participants were shown the usefulness of participating in this research and all of them consented without a problem. This was done through giving them full information on the reasons for the research and their role in it. They were further told that all information from them was going to be treated with strict confidentiality and anonymity. This is true because de Vaus (2001: 87) asserts that, "providing assurances of confidentiality is important for methodological as well as ethical reasons. If participants are confident that their responses are truly confidential (or even better if they are anonymous) we can expect that people are more likely to participate in the study… we can also expect frank and honest answers." All participants consented to their responses being included in this study.

3.7 Limitations of the study

It could be argued that the research is limited by it being carried out on a small sample of ten interviewees. However, as generalizability is not one of the aims of qualitative research, this is not a substantive limitation to the project. In addition some may argue that a further limitation potentially lies in the fact that the majority of the interviewees, were from the same institution as the researcher, but this was due to their willingness to participate in the study. This suggests that, in the main, the group of interviewees was not representative of the average number of the member institutions in the Consortium. However, the theory would predict that even extensive knowledge of the works of consortia it would not affect the quality of the experience of those who participated in the study as this was revealed in practice.