

STUDENTS' PERCEPTION OF FACTORS THAT INFLUENCE COMPLETION RATES OF DOCTORAL STUDIES IN PUBLIC UNIVERSITIES IN KENYA

Dr. Joyce M.A. Lugulu
Moi University ,Eldoret-Kenya

<https://doi.org/10.54922/IJEHSS.2022.0366>

ABSTRACT

This study addresses students' perception of factors that influence completion rates of doctoral studies in public universities in Kenya. The study adopted qualitative research with a retrospective design. The target population, selected through purposive sampling was thirty (30) respondents, composed of 60% males and 40% females. 19(63.3%) of the respondents were on duty full-time, and the rest on study leave. Instruments for data collection included questionnaire, Focused Group Discussion (FGD) for students, document analysis and interviews for Deans of schools. The objective of the study was to examine students' perception on completion rates of doctoral studies in public universities. The findings indicated that causes of delay included students not only on full time duty with minimum time for studies, unaddressed social and academic challenges but also financial constraints, unsupervised supervisors with many duties but take responsibilities in other institutions, inadequate provision of quality resources and poor working environment by public institutions. It was concluded that public universities need to implement effective mechanisms to, monitor and evaluate supervision process of doctoral studies, train and re-train supervisors to adopt best practises in their duties, and establish counselling units at school level to meaningfully deal with students' various issues. It was recommended that for public universities to retain their role in national development through production of high skilled labour, adequate quality services have to be provided, strengthen monitoring and evaluation of doctoral supervision, and encourage students to get study leave for quality study time.

Key Words: Supervision, doctoral studies, completion rates, public universities.

1. INTRODUCTION

In providing postgraduate education, public universities in Kenya play a major role of releasing to the job market, high skilled labour force, with the ability to think critically, innovate and create. It is upon this pool of labour that national development is sustained, not only in Kenya but worldwide (Lee, 2018, Maphalala & Nhlanhla, 2018, GOK,2014, MOE, 2012). Focus on desired goals by Kenyan institutions is achieved through specified performance targets listed as to;

- I. Enhance students' completion rates
- II. Improve quality and relevance of learning and research for national development
- III. Attract and retain high calibre human resource (GOK, 2014), pg 105

Doctor of philosophy study in public universities in Kenya is generally divided into two major segments, namely, coursework and thesis writing. Supervision of proposal development through

to thesis writing is a critical determinant of completion rates of students, after coursework. This process is a daunting task, complicated, lonely journey that entails a scholarly rigour, patience and focus that puts a lot of demands on students and supervisors. Roles of supervisors are clearly defined as indicated in numerous literature, giving an impression of a focused and determined team, ready to tackle these duties ((Rensburg, Lec,2018, Mayers, James & Baldwin, 1999, De Gruchy & Holness, 2007, Oliver, 2008, Clearly et al, 2011, Kiley, 20011, Shahzad, Shabbir, Ayub, 2017). Some of their duties are listed as;

- i. Teach undergraduate and postgraduate students
- ii. Guide students from proposal development to thesis writing
- iii. Set realistic expectations
- iv. Link students to resources
- v. Set up a professional relationship guided with mutual respect devoid of any prejudice
- vi. Strive to understand and respect students as adults and professionals in their own field
- vii. Guide students to nurture information seeking skills
- viii. Establish healthy communication link that facilitates timely feedback by both parties
- ix. Maintain mutual respect for co-supervisor
- x. Be available
- xi. Committed
- xii. Supportive

These roles are many and demanding, as supervisors are also involved in administrative and managerial duties (Kimani 2014), however, some apply and take part-time responsibilities in other institutions, making such roles a none issue. The fulfilment of goals of public universities of enhanced completion rates of students, quality research outcomes, attraction and retention of high qualified labour- force remains an uphill task, as students overstay in the system.

2.FINDINGS, DISCUSSION & CONCLUSIONS

The following are some of the perceived factors by students that tend to cause delay of study completion.

2:1 Background information

A total population of thirty (30) respondents, 60% males and females 40% were involved in this study. The majority 13(43.3%) were aged over 45 over years, out of which 24(80%) were married with families. 16(53.3%) had concurrent members of family ranging from children, spouses, relatives or siblings in either undergraduate or postgraduate studies. Majority of the respondents ,19(63.3%) was on duty full-time, while others were on study leave. This background information indicated that respondents were mature professionals in their own field, with family financial obligations, whose employer were reluctant to release them for studies but agreed to give them weekly time off to attend lessons but remain on duty full-time. 17(57.0%) of the respondents agreed that family, especially whose members had attained degree certificates remained significant support system during study period, financially and morally (23(76.6%).

2:2 Dishonesty

Commitment to supervision process is among the most important factors that determine whether students graduate on time or not. Dishonesty as perceived by respondents among some supervisors was a significant vice that caused delay. Experiences of some of the respondents confirmed that this is a weak link in the process, one narrated that;

she gave me an appointment at 12 noon, on arrival, i met a classmate who also waiting for her. she rang her and postponed the meeting, citing hospital admission due to a medical emergency. Surprisingly, she rang shortly afterwards, informing me that she was on the way coming, unknown to her that we were together. Upon arrival, she lamented how her employer was unfair, she had been overlooked in promotions, suffered delayed or non-supervision payments for long she perused through my document in a foul mood, complained about page usage, font size, spacing.... as she bad mouthed other lecturers in the department whom she termed as half baked. I felt I had wasted valuable time; although she kept the appointment, there was no supervision that took place, for me it was lack of commitment and honesty on her side

..... (Participant, 2019).

It appeared the supervisor had unresolved issues with her employer, that needed to be addressed by management not students. Clearly, the working environment did not appear worker-friendly. She was not motivated to work, and handled her duties casually to the disadvantage of the student. This is an example of supervisors who are present but absent in terms of their output. Others in this group chose to mark on each page without any comments, and forward or return the document. Another form of dishonesty emerged as a respondent noted that;

he rang to break an appointment as he was out of the country for official engagement, two hours afterwards, i descended down the stairs from my office to buy credit, i clearly heard his voice and saw him buying groceries from the same shop where i was going. I turned back, i did not want to embarrass him.

(Participant, 2019)

2:3 Stereotyping supervision

This is when students are supervised through tribal lenses, any milestones covered or lack of the same is summarised into tribal bias of the supervisor, reducing their self-esteem. A participant noted that;

I requested for two days off duty to meet my supervisor on agreed on appointment, I travelled 90km from another county for her to sign my thesis before binding in readiness for graduation. When I arrived at the appointed time, she was not in her office or anywhere in the institution. Her mobile phone was off. i asked her colleague where I could find her. He laughed and told me to check at her local school in the village, where she was presiding over an event. Upon arrival, she was surprised to see me and remarked, "you..... (name of my tribe) can anybody ever hide from you.... you are everywhere in

this country like safari ants” it became clear that never intended to keep the appointment (Respondent, 2020)

These experiences explain response of participants when asked how much they trusted supervisors in keeping agreed upon appointments, majority 16(53.3%) perceived them as dishonest. Supervisors should be role models of students under their supervision, but when trust issues set in, it interferes with the relationship between the two, making interactions less productive, causing delays coverage of set milestones. These are cases of supervisors who keep appointments of supervision but no supervision takes place and those who never show up at all.

2:4 Undermining students' capabilities

One of the key skills acquired by students from supervision process is reviewing , writing and presentation. It important that students are encouraged to learn through regular practise. By constant motivation from supervisors, students are able to review literature and present critically, but when this encouragement is not forthcoming through feedback, it impacts negatively on completion rates. This was evident when respondents were asked whether they believed supervisors trusted their capabilities to carry out research, a significant number 13(43.3%) said no, and one of them observed that,

When I took my first draft, she checked the title, number of pages, frowned and remarked, is this really your work? Did you accomplish this on your own or you paid people in town to do it for you? she demanded for raw data as evidence but upon presentation, she casually dismissed me, saying i misunderstood her. When I shared my experience with a friend, he confirmed the same happened to him the previous year. Was it possible that we misunderstood her, at different times and places? For me, it was a clear signal that mistrust of my capabilities to write a thesis..... (Respondent, 2019)

Mistrust by supervisors make students suffer from self-doubt, which undermine meaningful efforts to refine their review, writing and presentation skills, delaying completion rates. It also weakens relationship between supervisors and supervisees which should be friendly , receptive to create a working relationship between them(Crasswell, 1999).

2:5 Supervisors differences

Students stand to benefit from supervision by two supervisors, it enriches thesis from different perspectives. However, this is only realistic when there is mutual working relationship between the two, but when it is lacking, it becomes one of the reasons for delayed completion rates. This was confirmed when respondents were asked to rate perceived relationship between their supervisors in relation to their theses writing. The majority 14(46.7% indicated that the interaction was mildly significant, which made some, 12(40%) seek for a private person to supervisor them at a fee. This was echoed by one of the participants who stated that;

my first supervisor, was a doctor and head of department, while the second one a professor, there appeared to be stained working relationship between them. whenever i made corrections based on the advice by one of them, it was not well received by the other. But acted friendly and respectful when

we would meet face to face at the same venue for joint supervision. In my ignorance, I requested the second superior to sign my thesis first since the first one was out of the country. Upon arrival, he refused to sign his part saying that it was unprocedural for the second supervisor to sign before the first. He termed my draft as a ----- document (name of my tribe) affair since i belonged to the same community with the second supervisor. I had to provide fresh declaration forms for he accepted to sign..... (Respondent, 2020).

2:6 Delayed feedback from supervisors

Some supervisors who experienced delayed completion of studies tend to get even with students, habits unless checked, can easily become culture. When respondents were asked whether they received feedback from supervisors on time,18(60.0%) said no, communication was long and discouraging, and feedback if any, delayed or no response, causing further delays. This was summarised by one respondent that,

I complained to the head of department about one of my supervisors who delayed with my proposal draft, citing misplacement or simply marking on each page with no comments. She brushed complains aside and acknowledged that supervisor's behaviour is well known, that i had to make use of the other one. When i finally met him, he showed me several copies of proposals and thesis awaiting his attention, mine was at the bottom. He advised me to go home and stop complaining, that her husband delayed to graduate on time but he did not complain (Respondent, 2021)

These two incidents point to the need to have mechanisms of monitoring supervision of students in place. Laid down guidelines on supervision without monitoring and holding supervisors accountable, is not meaningful. Respondents' experiences depict a picture of supervisors available for supervision appointments but do not supervise at all, or those who act like forwarding agents, by ticking on each page of a research proposal without s reading the content at all.

3.STUDENT FACTORS

3:1 Mental block

Universities have an obligation to release high skilled labor force to the job market, with the ability to think critically, innovate and create. Such values give them a favourable competitive edge market (Cleary, Hunt, & Jackson, 2011). All this is a function of quality literature review skills, critique and ability to present information logically in persuasive, language ((Mouton, (2007, De Gruchy and Holness ,2007, Rensburg, Mayers & Roets (2016, Wray, & Wallace, 2011). When asked how much time they assigned for study weekly, majority 17(57,0%) agreed less than four (4) hours. Pressure of work was cited as the main reason for inadequate study time by respondents, and unwillingness of employer to grant study leave. The background information confirmed that the majority 24 (80%) were on duty full time. This compromised quality time which is critically required for study at this level. This pressure from study and work can easily result into mental blocks, that need clinical counselling(Lee,2020) and health services to prevent unfavourable outcomes, as reported by media,

Work is killing me.....so difficult are working conditions

that I had to close people's abdomen under a spotlight or

I had to let three babies to die in the afternoon because I didn't

have what I needed to save them..... (Osen, 2021)

When asked how they felt when under work-study pressure, respondents listed burn-out, fatigue, stress, frustration and low self-esteem among others. Others were not even aware of symptoms of stress/depression until informed. Respondents 20(66.7%) who experienced burn-out confirmed they sought medical intervention from external facilities, as available ones at the institutions were either ill equipped or understaffed to extend counselling services to ph.d students. To address such issues early, there is need for adequate counselling services at school levels, create awareness of what constitutes stress/ depression, and where services are available.

3:2 Fear of failure

Students at this level have a history of having passed previous examinations and are successful professionals in their own fields. Poor academic performance in examinations, hit them hard and some may not be willing to accept it. Some defer studies severally, to re-think which causes delay in study completion. On the item of how many deferred on academic basis, a significant number 10(33.3%) confirming that it is a major reason for delayed completion. This was well expressed by a respondent as,

I have never failed in my entire examination life, i was surprised that my name did not appear on the pass list, it was a shock for me. Once at home, i had a serious conversion with myself, that this degree is not life and death affair. Why should i subject myself to such embarrassment of failing? How do i go back to school and tell my staff and students, family, friends? That i failed examinations? How? I came to a quick conclusion, deferment, and re-deferment. It helped think, refocus, although it caused me delay, I graduated anyway, (Participant, 2021)

3:3 Financial and social challenges

Failure to plan for the entire program, stoppage of sponsorship or salary emerged as some of the causes of delayed completion. Sponsors expect study to be completed within the stipulated time, some may be unwilling to extend study leave. In situations where students fund themselves and source of income fail, it brings financial uncertainty, as witnessed by one of the respondents,

I had a vibrant business, i had no problem paying for my studies, in addition i was a part-time lecturer, at one of the public universities, which strengthened my financial base. When covid 19 pandemic broke out, my business dried up and payment from the university was never done, I was unable to go to the field to collect data, I had no option but defer, as i waited for the situation to improve. (Respondent, 2021)

Respondents ,19(63.3%) indicated that the family remained the most significant source of moral and financial support when faced with ups and downs of studies. Any disruption of financial sources impacted negatively by delaying completion rates. Document analysis indicated that

getting involved in differences arising from new intimate relationships or family conflicts caused delays students.

4.INSTITUTIONAL FACTORS

4:1 Inadequate resources

On the item of whether the following resources were available to support their studies, the response indicated that, universities did not adequately provide enough resources for ph.d studies. Majority of respondents, 23(70%) confirmed inadequate equipped library for post graduate use, mainly stocked with outdated basic books, internet service was unstable 20(66.7%), health facilities 03(10.0%) laptops and 0(0.0%), caused delay in study completion. While respondents were aware the forementioned services would be available at entry point, in reality, they were very basic or non-existent, indicating that institutions planning process for ph.d studies is weak. The students did not have funds to buy what was thought was available.

4:2 Graduate seminars

These seminars are meant to prepare students for defence for thesis in future, giving them a feel on how to face crowds and respond to raised concerns. Of the respondents, 19(63.3%) said that such seminars were very rare. Faced with a panel which decides whether you fail or pass, releases all manner of emotions and students need to be assured in advance. They felt they were not adequately prepared for defence, which caused a lot of fear, as summarised by one of the respondents,

We all waited for our turn, when our friend came from the defence room,

It was clear from his appearance, that he was shaken, when asked how

it was, he response brief and discouraging, tough, hell. Many left one

by one, to re-think about our level of preparedness for defence

(Respondent, 2020)

Asked how they would summarise the whole process of defence, responses were.... firing squad, court of law where you had to prove your innocence, getting even with one another....., I felt academically undressed in public..... This made majority 11(36.7%) describe their experience on a scale of five as moderately informative. Students' thesis defence should be done in a friendly environment of sharing new knowledge in their respective areas, not intimidation.

5.CONCLUSION

Public universities play key role of producing high skilled labour force for national development, however, when students delay to graduate as expected as a result of key institutional factors to a larger extent, it is time to review the whole process. Universities have an obligation to provide student-friendly learning environment, train and motivate supervisors, provide counselling services, monitor and evaluate the whole process and hold individuals them accountable.

REFERENCES

- A.C. Lessing, and S.Schulze (2003). *Postgraduate Supervision: Students & Supervisors Perceptions*. Acta Academica, 35(3) pp 161-1840
- [A.Wray ,Wallace, M \(2011\). *Critical Reading and Writing Skills for Postgraduates*. Sage, pp 29-64](#)
- A, M, Lee (2007). *Developing Effective Supervision Concepts of Research*. SAJHE 21(4)2007, pg 680-693
- Bøgelund , P(2015). *How supervisors perceive PhD supervision – And how they practice it*. International Journal of Doctoral Studies, 10, 39-55.
<http://ijds.org/Volume10/IJDSv10p039-055Bogelund0714.pd>
- De Gruchy, J. W.&Holness, L. 2007. *The Emerging Researcher. Nurturing passion, developing skills, producing output*. Cape Town: Juta & Co
- Eley, A, R & Jennings, R (2005). *Effective Postgraduate Supervision: Improving the Student/Supervisor Relationship*. Open University Press, pp 7-69.
- Government of Kenya (2014). *Sessional Paper no.14 of 2012; A Policy Framework for Education and Training: Reforming Education in Kenya*. Government printer
- H, G, Van Rensburg Mayers,P& Roets ,L (2016). *Supervision of Post-graduate Students in Higher Education, Trends in Nursing*. <https://doi.org/10.14804/3-1-55>
- J, Mouton (2007). *Post-graduate studies in South Africa: Myths, misconceptions and challenges*. South African Journal of Higher Education: Postgraduate Supervision 2007: Special Edition 8(21): 1078-1090.
- James, R, & Baldwin, G (1999). *Eleven Practises of Effective Postgraduate supervision centre for the study of higher education*. pp 7-52 <http://www.icad.icmc.usp.br/-buscagalia/links/sistcient/11practices.pdf>
- Kimani Elishiba Njambi (2014). *Challenges in Quality Control for Postgraduate supervision*. International Journal of Humanities Social Sciences and Education, vol11, Issue 9, September 2014, pp 63-70
- Kiley (2011) *Developments in Research Supervision Training: Causes & Responses*. *Studies in higher education*, 36(5)585-599
- Lee Shannon (2020). *Healthcare Professionals & Suicide: Awareness, prevention First Steps to Help*
<https://www.edumed.org/resources/suicide-awareness-and-prevention-guide .pg 1-8>
- M. Cleary Hunt & D. Jackson (2011) *Demystifying PhDs: A review of doctorate programs designed to fulfil the needs of the next generation of nursing professionals*. *Contemporary Nurse: A Journal for the Australian Nursing Profession* 39 (2): 273-280.
- Osen,G (Thursday, June, 17, 2021). *3 dead babies broke a doctor's heart and she killed herself*. The Star, pg 3
- P. Craswell (1996). *This unfathomable Thing Called Supervision: Negotiating Better Working Relati*
Relationships with Supervisors, a paper presented at Quality Educationin Quality Postgraduate It is
happening? <Http://digitalcollection.anu.edu.au. /handle/1888/41410>
- [P. Oliver \(2008\). *Writing Your Thesis*. 2ndedn, Sage Publications, pg 42-5](#)

Shahzad Shumaila, Ali Muhammad Shabbir and Ayub Umair (2017). *Perceptions of Supervisors and*

Supervisees about Supervisors' Roles and Responsibilities in Students' Research Work.

Global Sciences Review pg 356-364