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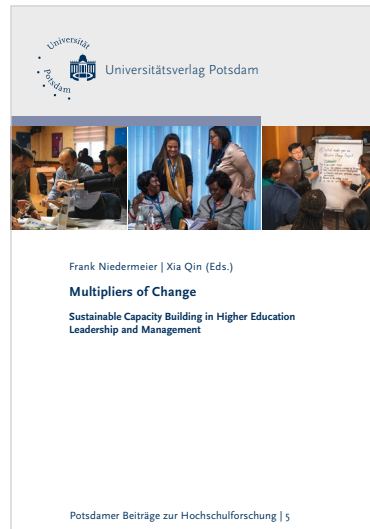
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Enhancing Completion Rates through Structural and Operational Changes in the Management of Postgraduate Programmes in Kenya's Public Universities

ABSTRACT: During the National Multiplication Training in Kenya in 2018, participants raised concerns about attrition, completion rates and quality of PhD programmes in Kenya's public universities. This led the authors of this article to further examine the question of PhD completion rates. Available data underlined that PhD students across various disciplines in Kenya's public universities take unnecessarily long to complete their studies due to a myriad of factors that are related to their super-

visors, university guidelines for post-graduate studies, or the students themselves. This article examines inertia areas along the PhD training pathway at three public universities in Kenya and provides suggestions on structural and operational changes universities must make to shorten completion periods.

KEYWORDS: doctoral studies, completion rates, structural and operational changes, public universities in Kenya

1. Introduction

1.1 Background

The importance of investing in higher education and particularly in PhD training for both the student and national development cannot be over-emphasised (Beaudry et al., 2018; MacGregor, 2016). Rare cases however exist where high completion rates are observed. In the Netherlands for instance, PhD candidates are often successful in completing their doctoral trajectories within the pre-set period (van de Schoot et al., 2013), overall doctoral attrition and poor completion rates have become a topic of pressing concern in higher education around the world, with an estimated 40% to 50% of candidates failing to finish their studies (Bair & Haworth, 2004; Litalien, 2015).

Not completing a doctoral programme is an expensive venture because students invest substantially in terms of time, intellectual resources, and finances coming from different sources. A delay in PhD completion also undermines a university's overall ranking besides creating long term staffing shortages in academic institutions. Low completion rates in postgraduate studies are equally pressing challenges in Kenya's public universities. Contrary to the expected three-four and two-three years for PhD and Master's degrees, respectively, internal self-evaluation reports indicate that most students take at least twice the design period to complete their studies and graduate (Kenyatta University, 2011; Maseno University, 2017).

On the other hand, when students complete their studies and graduate, they join the labour market as experts in various fields. Their professional accomplishments become a reflection on their universities' academic and research acumen, whilst society and sponsors get a good return on their investments.

Although Kenya has set its national benchmark for doctoral completion rate at 20% for every cohort admitted at this level, the national average from the higher education institutions indicates that only about 11% of students complete their studies within the stipulated period of three years. The average time to complete a PhD seems to be six years (Barasa & Omulando, 2018). According to Nganga (2019), Kenya's vision to release at least 1,000 PhDs every year to drive the country's economic ambitions risks failure because of persistent deficiencies in postgraduate training and research. Only one out of 10 PhD students in Kenya completes his or her studies (Mboya, 2019). When the age at which most people earn their

PhDs and the current retirement age that ranges from 70–75 years for university faculty is considered, it is plausible to indicate that higher education, and by extension, Kenya's national development does not reap maximum benefits from this critical human resource (Amutabi, 2017). The returns on investment in higher education could be worse should the retirement age of university faculty be standardised to the mandatory 60 years as is the case for other public servants. Currently, article 70 (1) (c) of the Public Service Commission Regulations (2020) stipulates that lecturers shall retire at such age as may be determined by the Commission for lecturers and research scientists serving in public universities, research institutions, or equivalent institutions, as determined by the Commission in consultation with such institutions.

Whilst completion rates should be enhanced, doubts on the quality of the degrees are also raised. A recent case in point is the unprecedented high number of PhDs that were awarded in one graduation ceremony at Jomo Kenyatta University of Science and Technology (JKUAT) in 2018. Inquiry into this matter was launched by the Commission for University Education, findings of which are meant to streamline postgraduate studies across all universities in Kenya (Commission for University Education, 2019). Essentially, attritions, long completion durations, and poor quality of PhD studies are attributed to multiple factors that are related to the university environment, the academic supervisors, and the students themselves (Bednall, 2018).

1.2 Rationale

The extended time it takes to complete PhD studies is a reflection of deficiencies in the governance of postgraduate programmes, which calls for transformative organisational development and change management in higher education. To regain their reputation as quality hubs and to benefit from the ripple effects thereof, post-graduate students need to finish their studies within the stipulated time and be able to quickly fit into the labour market. Although public universities in Kenya were taken through the Rapid Results Initiative (RRI) model wherein components of various initiatives or projects were supposed to be realised within 100 days (Rapid Results Institute, 2003), they appear not to have institutionalised this model as a culture. Instead, every effort is made to be certified based on the International Organisation for Standardisation (ISO) and, in particular, the ISO 9001 series that focuses on the requirements for quality management systems (The 9000 Store, 2020). The long

time it takes to complete PhD studies undermines the essence of such certification.

This paper was motivated by the need to re-invigorate the culture of quality assurance based on the experience the authors have gained through their participation in the Dialogue for Innovative Higher Education Strategies (DIES) National Multiplication Trainings (NMT) 2017–2018. This project was initiated by the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) and Rectors Conference (HRK) with funding from the German Federal Ministry for Economic Development and Cooperation (BMZ). As DIES alumni, the authors won a grant under this framework to train Kenyan deans and directors on quality leadership and management as a driver for positive change in higher education. During the NMT training, concerns about low completion rates and quality of PhD programmes in Kenya came out strongly from the Project Action Plan (PAPs) in which 25% of the participants focused on improving postgraduate programmes from various dimensions, such as curriculum review and rationalisation, proposal writing and funding, plagiarism and academic integrity, and the increasing importance of Information Communication Technology (ICT). Face-to-face discussion singled out low completion rates as cutting across study disciplines.

1.3 Hypothesis and Research Question

Whilst PhD completion rates and attrition are caused by various factors whose relative importance is different across universities, this paper was guided by the hypothesis that there is a significant relationship between prolonged PhD completion durations and postgraduate structural and operational procedures of universities. The statutory bureaucracies involved in processing proposals and the final theses can be very long and often stressful to students. It was, therefore, necessary to identify inertia areas along the postgraduate studies pathway and propose ways of shortening them or removing them altogether. This would be actualised by answering the question, “What structural and operational changes must universities make to mitigate the challenge caused by poor completion rates?”

2. Methodology

To analyse the key research question, a social survey study was conducted on randomly selected faculties from the three universities in Kenya where the authors work. Respondents were restricted to faculty who had completed their PhD degrees during the last five years. For confidentiality purposes, their names are not used in this paper.

Primary data were collected using a survey questionnaire, which contained both closed and open-ended questions. The content focused on respondents' age on completion, the length of time it took them to complete their studies, the length of time it took to process proposals and the final theses, timelines to the oral examination, and study challenges and suggestions for improvement.

The survey targeted 30 respondents. The response rate was 53% (i.e. 16 respondents) with males accounting for 60% and females, 40%, based on valid data on this gender variable. Based on the near homogeneity of postgraduate programmes and procedures in Kenya's public universities, this response rate was considered sufficient in providing a snapshot of the situation in the country.

Barnett and Sisson (2018) observed that taking small samples from large populations is a valid statistical technique for getting accurate information about the wider population for a fraction of the time and cost. The data yielded by the questionnaire were subjected to descriptive statistics using SPSS to provide general trends on completion rates and factors influencing the same. Secondary data were obtained from both the university and the Commission for University Education documents. The authors' insights obtained during their participation in the Dialogue for Innovative Higher Education Strategies (DIES) and National Multiplication Training (NMT) programme proved very useful in the discussion of results.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 Master's and PhD Completion Rates Based on Secondary Data

This section presents data from secondary sources that point to lengthy PhD studies and the need for structural and operational procedures to remedy the situation. Records in Kenyatta University indicate that only 3% of master's students completed their studies in two years whilst 8%

did so in three years during the period ending 2010. The majority took 4–7 years. Similarly in the same period, only 8% completed their PhDs in 3 years. The majority took 4–7 years (see Table 1). These apparent low completion rates were attributed to the following reasons: (a) students having limited financial recourses for tuition and research, (b) unavailability of supervisors due to heavy workloads, (c) supervisors taking too long to review drafts and to communicate with their students, (d) inter-supervisor conflicts, (e) conflict of interests between students and supervisors in the context of the research focus, and (f) student-related factors that are outside the mandate of the university.

Table 1: Postgraduate Statistics for December 2010 Graduation

Number of years taken to graduate	Master's programmes	PhD programmes
	Percentage of students	Percentage of students
2	03	–
3	08	8
4	22	29
5	25	22
6	21	22
7	13	7
8	05	3
9	2	4
10	1	–
11	0	2
> 12	–	3

Note: For benchmarking purposes, students who enrolled in 2006 should have graduated in December 2010 (Source: Synthesised from Kenyatta University, 2011).

The burden of postgraduate supervision and its potential to cause delays have been cited by Beaudry et al. (2018), among others, who observed that cases exist where one supervisor is assigned up to 70 master's and PhD students to supervise, alongside teaching loads and undertaking own research. In such circumstances, the supervisors end up giving postgraduate students little attention. According to the guidelines of the Commission for University Education (2014a), postgraduate supervision workload per faculty member should be three PhD and five master's degree students, alongside their other roles in any given academic year. It is plausible to assume that most universities do not implement these

guidelines for a variety of reasons. In terms of work instructions, the three universities where the authors are employed do not differ significantly when it comes to the time taken to process submitted theses and the time given to external examiners to review them (see Table 2).

Table 2: Work Instructions for Processing PhD Theses (Source: University Documents)

Variable	Kenyatta University	Masinde Muliro University	Maseno University
Time allotted to process submitted thesis for examination	4 days	Upon receipt and approval by the board of examiners ²	Within 4 weeks
Time allotted to external examiners	6 weeks	4 weeks	4 weeks
Time allotted to invite students for the oral examination	not standard ¹	3 weeks if there is no backlog ³	≤ 1 month from receipt of the last project

¹ It depends on the number of students on the queue.

² No timelines are specified.

³ Backlog of pending defences due to other occurrences gets cleared first.

Delays appear to be introduced when it comes to invitations for defences. Backlogs as a source of delays depend on operational gaps that can easily be resolved. At Kenyatta University, students who successfully defend their PhD theses in oral examinations can end up being delayed if they fail to submit the final corrected and signed version of the theses within the prescribed time limit. For instance, candidates who passed with minor corrections are supposed to correct the work within three months after the oral examination. Should these candidates fail to meet this deadline, they are required to resubmit the theses afresh as if they had never been examined before. This is an example of statutory procedures or guidelines that are self-defeating when viewed from the equally important goal of timely completions.

3.2 Primary Data Output on Completion Rates

3.2.1 Respondents' Age on Completion of Studies

A majority of respondents (53.3%) completed their studies at middle age status (i.e. between 40 and 49 years). Those who completed their studies within 39 years of age were 20%. The rest (26.7%) completed their studies when over 50 years of age. Fifty percentage of those in this category were above 60 years old. In essence, about 70% of PhD graduates have the possibility of working for 20–30 years based on the retirement age that ranges from 70–75 for university faculty. Whilst a good number complete their studies when they are below 50 years, their effective contribution to higher education is constrained by their inability to immediately secure jobs in universities. This has implications on the net returns to investment in higher education when the cost and time taken are considered.

Table 3: Respondents' Age on Completion (% Frequency) (n = 16)

Age category	Frequency	% Frequency	Valid % frequency	Cumulative % frequency
≤ 39	3	18.8	20.0	20.0
40–49	8	50.0	53.3	73.3
> 50	4	25.0	26.7	100.0
No response	1	6.2	–	–
Total	16	100	100.0	–

3.2.2 Proposal Development and Approval Timelines

Universities vary in proposal development and approval requirements. Some do not even have course work at PhD levels. Where course work is a requirement, a majority of the respondents (56.3%) indicated developing their proposals before the end of the coursework (see Table 4). It is good to note that 37.5% develop their proposals before admission to the university since it is a requirement. Only 6.3% indicated embarking on proposal development six months after course work. Since proposal development requires ample time, delays in completion are caused by other factors along its value chain, which demand structural and operational changes in the context of rapid results initiative or ISO 9001 certification, which most universities have acquired. Results on how long proposals

took to be approved showed that most (43.8%) were approved after one year and 25.0% were approved after a year-and-a-half. Together this is a very considerable 68.8% of respondents whose proposal approval was delayed. Only 12.5% had their proposals approved after three months and 18.8%, after six months. The apparent inertia in the approval process requires structural and operational changes at departmental, school and postgraduate directorate levels to solve the problem of long completion times.

Table 4: PhD Proposal Processing Timelines (% Frequencies)

Period	Proposal development		
	Frequency	Valid % frequency	Cumulative % frequency
Pre-admission	6	37.5	35.7
Before course work	9	56.3	93.8
After course work	1	6.3	100
Time	Proposal approval		
	Frequency	Valid % frequency	Cumulative % frequency
After 3 months	2	12.5	12.5
After 6 months	3	18.8	31.3
After 1 year	7	43.8	75.0
After 1.5 years	4	25.0	100.0
After 2 years	0	0	

3.2.3 Thesis Submission and Defence Timelines

Concerning how long it took to develop and submit their theses for examination and be invited for defence (oral examination), 43.8% of the respondents indicated having submitted their theses before three years were over. Those who submitted within the conventional expectation of 3–4 years were 18.8%. The rest of the respondents (i.e. 37.6%) submitted their theses outside of institutional timelines as detailed in Table 5. With 62.5% of respondents having developed and submitted their theses for examination within four years, any delays to completion should have been caused by either the examiners overstaying with work or graduate schools taking long to invite the candidates for the oral examination. Data, however, appear to exonerate the latter factor as the majority of

the respondents (56.3%) indicated having been invited for the defence in good time (i.e. within 6 months of submission). About 38% were invited within a year and none was invited after two years. In essence, total delayed defences accounted for 43.8%. This calls for an audit of procedures and guidelines to remove bottlenecks along the entire processing chain.

Table 5: PhD Thesis Submission and Timelines to the Oral Examination

Likert scale-based timelines	Thesis submission for examination		
	F	% F	Cumulative % F
In the 3rd year (Timely)	7	43.8	43.8
3–4 years (Standard)	3	18.8	62.5
4–5 years (Late)	4	25.0	87.5
5–6 years (Very late)	1	6.3	93.8
6–7 years (Extremely late)	1	6.3	100
After 7 years (Unacceptable)	0	0	–
Timelines	Oral examination		
3–6 months (Timely)	9	56.3	56.3
6–12 months (Late)	6	37.5	93.8
1–2 years (Very late)	1	6.3	100
After 2 years (Extremely late)	0	0	–

3.2.4 Respondents' Reasons for Prolonged Completion Durations

Respondents were asked to express the extent to which selected factors contributed to the extended time it took them to complete their PhD studies. The respondents felt that the most prevalent reasons for low completion rates taken as the sum of 'very frequently' and 'frequently' ratings were supervisor-related challenges at (81.3%), student private challenges (56.3%), financial constraints (37.5%), and non-adherence to rules and guidelines at 30.5% (see Table 6). Another 12.5% of the respondents identified and rated sexual harassment and lucrative job opportunities as other challenges that were not listed yet very frequently slowed down the completion rates.

Supervisor-related challenges emanate from weak administrative policies and practices that allow faculty to keep supervising candidates regardless of their thematic relevance, workloads, and, in some cases, questionable intellectual acumen and supervisory competences. When professors across public universities cannot be plausibly rated as peers

and equivalents based on their capacities and competences, the quality of PhDs they supervise is similarly likely to be different. The Commission for University Education attempted to solve this problem through its harmonised promotion criteria (CUE, 2014b). Its implementation has, however, been halted by the court.

Other factors responsible for delayed completions include unfriendly and unsupportive bureaucracies; poor communication between graduate school, postgraduate committees, supervisors and the graduate students; and non-adherence to rules and guidelines of the PhD process. Cases of sexual harassment are often very intrinsic and difficult to prove. A remnant of students simultaneously takes up lucrative jobs, which eat into their study period. The impact of financial constraints for self-sponsored students cannot be overemphasised. Some university guidelines make it more difficult for not allowing completed work to be processed when a candidate has fee balances.

Table 6: Respondents Opinions on Reasons for Long Completion Rates

Reasons	Statistics	Most frequently	Frequently	Sometimes	Rarely	Very rarely	System	Total
Financial constraints	F	4	2	3	4	2	1	16
	% F	25.0	12.5	18.7	25.0	12.5	6.3	100
Supervisor-related issues	F	4	9	0	3	0	0	16
	% F	25.0	56.3	0	18.7	0	0	100
Student-related issues	F	5	4	3	2	0	2	16
	% F	31.3	25.0	18.7	12.5	0	12.5	100
Bureaucratic university procedures	F	1	3	4	5	1	2	16
	% F	6.3	18.7	25.0	31.3	6.3	12.5	100
Poor student-supervisor communication	F	1	5	2	3	3	2	16
	% F	6.3	31.3	12.5	18.7	18.7	12.5	100
Non-adherence to rules and guidelines	F	2	3	4	2	2	3	16
	% F	12.5	18.8	25.0	12.5	12.5	18.7	100
Sexual harassment by supervisors	F	2	0	0	0	0	14	16
	% F	12.5	0	0	0	0	87.5	100
Availability of lucrative job opportunities	F	2	0	0	0	0	14	16
	% F	12.5	0	0	0	0	87.5	100

Note: F: Frequency

3.2.5 Most Significant Supervisor and Student-related Challenges

Respondents' opinions on the most significant supervisor-related challenges, which undermine completion rates, are summarised below:

1. Limited capacity and competence were evident in research methods, statistics, and students' research thematic focus.
2. Low emotional intelligence is manifested through strained interpersonal relationships and poor communication between supervisor and student.
3. Supervisors' heavy work overloads, including in some cases, administrative responsibilities render them unavailable to their postgraduate students.
4. Unprofessional practices such as losing students' theses or overstaying with them.

Similarly, the most significant student-related challenges were the following:

1. Financial constraints are often been exhibited by self-sponsored students. In all the universities, theses are not submitted for examination until all fees are paid.
2. Inadequate grounding in research methodology and statistics was evident.
3. Poor planning and time management were exemplified by procrastination tendencies, lack of focus and target setting, inability to multi-task, and not consulting widely.
4. Students embarked on research themes where they had limited theoretical knowledge and technical know-how.
5. A culture that consistently dislikes investing time in review of journal literature was evident.

Although the relative importance of these factors varies across universities, this paper agrees with Zhao et al., (2007) who observed that the choice of supervisors and the nurturing of good student-supervisor relationships are very critical in enhancing completion rates.

4. Structural and Operational Changes toward Enhanced PhD Completion Rates

When it comes to improvements that universities must make, the following structural and operational changes in universities merit consideration in enhancing completion rates in postgraduate programmes.

1. Admission into PhD programmes should be restricted to the departments that have qualified faculty to train at this level and universities that have appropriate and accountable protocols to monitor and track the progress of students.
2. Critically, research methods and statistics should be taught by faculty with proven proficiency, with statistical computer applications being key components. Further, these two units should be taught during the last phase of course work based on the competency-based learning model, whereby a student develops and delivers a complete proposal for grading as part of university examination and direct processing by respective directorates of postgraduate studies.
3. A more democratic way of allocating supervisors to students that considers area of specialization and students' preferences should be encouraged. This will reduce delays caused by poor working relationships between students and supervisors.
4. When students and supervisors can no longer get along, mechanisms to expedite the 'divorce' without leaving the student vulnerable should be readily available.
5. To afford supervisors adequate time to mentor their students, universities need to adhere to workload guidelines provided by the Commission for University Education. Further, faculty on staff development need to be freed from teaching workloads.
6. Regular mentoring forums for both students and their supervisors should be encouraged. Critical mentoring aspects should include competences in planning, time management, target setting, multi-tasking, public relations, and publishing.
7. For self-sponsored students, a symbiotic mechanism that allows them to first complete their studies then afterwards sort out their financial obligations merits some consideration.
8. For not being a refereed document, which is equally subject to continuous changes as the thesis is developed, a proposal should be handled as an idea and not be subjected to "endless demands on rubrics" checks that only serve to delay students.

9. The merit of causing students who defended and passed the oral examination to re-defend their work for not finalizing the required corrections within certain time frames, thus causing them to waste another one year, merits re-evaluation.

5. Conclusions

The prolonged time it takes to complete postgraduate studies is a change management challenge that universities in Kenya need to pro-actively solve. Although not refereed documents, approval of proposals takes unnecessarily too long. Supervisor re-tooling in research methods and statistics should be a routine practice. Supervisors should neither be imposed nor force themselves on students. Their areas of specialisation and the students' feelings should be considered. Universities should create and nurture a culture of research excellence and delightful student mentoring. This calls for collective adherence to progressive structural and operational procedures and sanctioning of non-adherence to them. Ultimately, study completion rates will improve thus benefitting students, the universities, and the wider society.

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