

THE INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF HUMANITIES & SOCIAL STUDIES

Relationship between Doctoral Students' Study Mode and Rates of Completion of Studies in Education in Public Universities in Kenya

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Abstract:

The purpose of the research was to investigate institutional factors that influence completion rates of doctoral studies in Education in selected public universities in Kenya. Informed by the study, this paper differences in the type of study programmes in terms of full-time or part-time affects the rates of completion of doctoral studies in education in selected public universities in Kenya. Descriptive survey design was used in the study. The participants comprised 115(62.09%) of a total of 184 lecturers/heads of departments in the three universities studied, namely Moi University, Kenyatta University and the University of Nairobi. The number of doctoral students who participated was 388(67.29%) of 579 doctoral students registered between the years 2009 to 2013 in the three universities. A questionnaire, document analysis guide and interview guide were used to collect data for the study. Quantitative data was coded and analysed using SPSS. Data from field notes was transcribed and organized to themes. Some data was coded and tallied based on their similarities and presented using descriptive statistics such as tables, percentages frequencies and graphs. The research established that different modes of study programmes do not influence completion rates of doctoral studies in education. Based on this conclusion, the departments of postgraduate studies in Education in the studied universities should put in place an active tracking system with a view of closely monitoring and evaluating student progress, for example, creating timelines for completion by putting in place mandatory supervisor-supervisee meeting schedule and regular reporting of student progress. The findings of the study will provide useful information to policy makers towards making informed decisions.

Keywords: *Students, study mode, completion rate, doctoral studies, education, public universities, Kenya*

1. Introduction

Effective learning and timely completion of thesis development and writing process is dependent largely on accessibility to relevant reading materials. With advancement in ICT development, many students are able to access quality reading materials necessary for their studies (Sarkar, 2012). However, development of ICT in most Kenyan institutions of higher learning is still far underway. This does not only affect the timely completion of thesis writing process but it may also compromise the quality of education. Prolonged doctoral studies or drop-out is attributed to supervision process, resources related challenges as well as student related factors. Key student related factors include socio-economic (inadequate financial support personal responsibilities and commitments) and inadequate study skills. Although many doctoral students enrol for doctoral study programmes with a determination for timely completion, many of them end up delaying or drop-out (CGS, 2009).

1.1. Academic Disciplines and Study Programmes Related Factors

Research findings indicate that drop-out and untimely completion in doctoral studies is not only costly to institutions but can also be devastating and demoralizing to students leading to financial, personal and professional consequences (Spaulding & Amanda, 2012). They noted that the delay among students in distance learning programmes is higher by 10 to 20 percent compared to those in residential programmes. Most of the students enrolling for doctoral programmes in education are typically education practitioners such as school principals, administrators and teachers. Thus, with academic responsibilities serving to intensify demands in their energy, commitment and time, they often experience prolonged thesis writing process (Jiranek, 2010).

A study undertaken by CGS (2008) to examine PhD completion rates of about 19,000 students from 24 North American institutions found out that there is a tendency for higher completion rates among students pursuing courses related to science, engineering and mathematics fields. Unlike graduate students in social sciences, those in natural and life science academic disciplines attracted external grant funding, more cohesive and competitive of research environment and a more frequent contact between students and supervisors. Generally, the students in the arts and education programmes experience not only delayed thesis completion but also higher attrition rates (45-51 percent) while the science observe rates of 30-40 percent (Nelson & Lovitts, 2008; Wright & Cochrane, 2000).

Woodrow National Fellowship Foundation (2005) observes that time to degree is longest in fields that academic job prospects are poorest. The researcher further noted that less than 20 percent of their doctoral candidates end up as faculty members at the research

university or selective small colleges. It is suggested that faculties ought to design programmes in such a way that students engage with the community for example as resource persons, discussion leaders or in partnerships. Students can work in small groups to imagine how their research might connect with the larger public. These kind of teams or partnerships outside the academy will serve as eye opener on how they can transfer the academic skills and scholarly expertise to new setting-thus minimize drop-out due to low optimism about job acquisition.

In order to improve completion rates and time-to-degree among graduate studies, some universities have developed innovative programmes. According to Kirton (2003), some innovative African PhD programmes already in place include research clusters chosen competitively on the basis of proposals from small but institutionally and disciplinarily mixed groups of faculties – including one from overseas to provide international comparisons and perspectives. Once the research cluster topic or theme has been selected, the managing board advertises widely for postgraduate students working on relevant issues and who would be interested in joining the cluster. The faculty then chooses a dozen promising students, again by prior agreement from an array of institutions and a variety of disciplines, and invites them to a series of workshops. When their home universities have approved their proposals and they have established a budget and a starting date, the students receive funding to assure that they can actually conduct their research.

The report by Kirton (2003) on the workshops further notes that students work on their own independent projects, but on closely related subjects, these workshops are proving extremely useful and energizing. A final “reporting workshop,” to include interested outsiders (other scholars, policy makers, practitioners, activists, etc.), sought to disseminate the findings and encourage individual and collective publication of the cluster’s research products. Given that the students interact, they are learning the value, limits, and relationships of their own interests and projects with those of the others. Their individual and collective products should be a distinct contribution to scholarship and knowledge. They encourage and accelerate the completion of each other’s degrees. Because they are fast becoming a cohort or community of collegially oriented young scholars, there are growing hopes that many will stay in academic or research careers.

The emphasis on bringing the students together in various workshops is both a means of assuring great efficiency in instruction. Equally important, it is a means of creating ongoing mutually supportive networks and communities of interest among these younger scholars that again, hopefully, will encourage them to remain in academic or research related careers in their home universities or countries. However, in such group based approaches, goals are only achievable based on an individual effort of the student. Interdisciplinary is another universally praised adventurous learning. This has gained popularity because the world outside academics needs something that crosses the academic boundaries. But how the university administers the interdisciplinary in relation to the academic disciplines remains one of the most fragile problems economically and academically (Golde & Dore, 2001). In their study, Golde and Dore report that out of every ten doctoral students they interviewed, six desired collaborations while only 27 percent believed that their departments were preparing them adequately for job market requirements.

2. Materials and Methods

The study adopted a descriptive survey research design. The design was appropriate because the study tried to find out the factors associated with delayed completion of doctoral studies in education at public universities in Kenya. The findings may be generalized to a wider representation of the population.

The study targeted all the students registered for various doctoral programmes in Education in Kenya’s public universities between the years 2009 and 2013, heads of departments and lecturers (professors, senior lecturers and lecturers) in the departments of education. The study involved the University of Nairobi, Moi University and Kenyatta University. The three institutions offer doctoral programmes in education and are also the oldest in the country. They are also well established in terms of the number of professors and lecturers with doctoral degrees. The findings may, therefore, be generalized to all education doctoral programmes in universities in Kenya.

To ensure that the minimum empirically acceptable number of respondents is achieved, the study target 80% of the target population. However, only 62.50% responded. The total number of professors and doctors (senior lecturers and lecturers) as at 31st December 2014 and the proportion of those who participated were as summarized in Table 1 below.

Staff establishment				Actual responses			
University	Professors	Doctors	Total	Professors	Doctors	Total	%
UoN	6	30	36	1	22	23	63.88
MOI	13	38	51	3	31	34	66.67
KU	20	77	97	8	50	58	59.79
Total	30	145	184	12	103	115	62.50

Table 1: Number of Lecturers and the Sample Size

A total of 115 participants was selected representing 62.5 per cent of the target population.

The sampling procedure for doctoral students registered in the three universities between the years 2009-2013 was as shown in Table 2 below.

Universities	Gender		Target (80%)	Actual response		Total	%	
				M	F			
Nairobi	90	76	166	133	62	54	116	69.88
Moi	77	90	167	134	74	61	135	80.84
Kenyatta	126	120	246	197	78	59	137	55.69
Total	293	286	579	464	214	174	388	67.01

Table 2: Student Enrolment, Target Size and Actual Respondents

In total, 67.29% of the students participated. In all cases, purposive and stratified sampling techniques were used. Under stratified technique, the study ensured that all the departments offering doctoral study programmes in Education at the three universities were represented. Under purposive sampling technique, the study targeted, among others, doctoral candidates who experienced prolonged time-to-degree (10 years or more) and those who had timely completion (five years or less of studies). With respect to HoDs, only those who had been in that position for at least two years were involved.

Data for the study was collected using questionnaires and interview guides. Questionnaires were used to collect data needed from doctoral students and lecturers. Heads of departments were interviewed. The lecturers interviewed were those who earned the degree within five years from the time they were registered for the programme. This category of respondents was identified from document analysis. Most of the students interviewed were those who had been in the programme for more than eight years and had not earned the degree.

Doctoral enrolment and completion records were analysed in order to study completion rate- line-trends and time-to-degree. The documents analysed were mainly policy documents, staff establishment records, student enrolment statistics and graduation booklets. The aim was to establish policies and regulations guiding practices in the institutions. Document analysis also provided the teaching staff establishment and the total number of students enrolled for different study programmes in the schools of education at the three universities. This was used to compute: (a) the overall lecturer/student ratio and (b) doctoral student completion- line-trends. The documents were obtained from HoDs, schools of postgraduate studies, the examination offices, official websites, admission offices and the universities' central ICT centres. The information derived from these offices and documents were student enrolment statistics, staff establishment, graduation statistics and policies guiding practices at each of the universities.

The data from closed-ended questions was coded and organized into themes based on the research variables investigated. It was coded and analysed using Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS). Data from open-ended questions and interview were reduced, coded and tallied based on their similarities and integrated with data from closed-ended questions as suggested by Miles and Huberman (1994). The analysed results were presented using descriptive statistics such as pie charts, ratios, tables as well as percentages.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. Different Study Programmes and Doctoral Completion Rates in Education

The study examined programme-related factors influencing doctoral studies completion rates in education. To achieve this objective, three items were presented to respondents to comment on based on a five-point Likert Scale of: 1=SD, 2=D, 3=U, 4=A and 5=SA. The quantitative summary of the findings was as presented in Table 2 and Table 3 below.

Statement on Study-related Factors	KU			MOI			UoN			Mean
	N	Mean	Std Dev	N	Mean	Std Dev	N	Mean	Std Dev	
Specific programme requirements like course work and written exams prolong thesis completion	58	2.88	1.36	34	3.00	1.37	23	2.09	1.20	2.65
Doctoral part time students lack adequate time for research work	58	3.38	1.28	34	3.47	1.21	23	3.35	1.23	3.4
Introduction of part-time study programmes limit time for supervision and therefore prolong time-to-degree	58	3.00	1.38	34	3.65	1.20		3.57	1.16	3.40
Valid N (list-wise)	58			34			23			3.16

Table 3: Different Study Programmes and Doctoral Completion Rates in Education (Lecturers' Responses)

Table 4 provides a summary of lecturers and HoDs responses to items presented under research objective four.

Different Study Programmes	KU			MOI			UoN			Mean
	N	Mean	Std Dev	N	Mean	Std Dev	N	Mean	Std Dev	
Specific programme requirements like course work and written exams prolong thesis completion.	148	3.50	1.45	114	3.56	1.45	125	3.71	1.31	3.59
Introduction of parallel programs limits time for supervision	148	3.50	1.44	114	3.81	1.20	125	4.09	1.27	3.8
Doctoral part time students lack adequate time for research work.	148	4.39	0.84	114	3.96	1.17	125	4.01	1.19	4.12
Valid N (list-wise)	148			114			125			3.84

Table 4: Different Study Programmes and Doctoral Completion Rates in Education (Doctoral Students' Responses)

Table 5 provides a summary of students' responses to items presented under research objective four. Table 4 and Table 5 provide summaries of responses to items presented under research objective four. The responses indicated that programme related factors do not influence doctoral completion.

The null hypothesis (that study programme related factors have no influence on doctoral completion rates) was tested to determine whether or not the independent variable (study programme related factors) have any significant influence on the dependent variable (doctoral completion rates). The results were as presented in Table 6 below.

Model	Unstandardized Coefficients		Unstandardized Coefficients		
	B	Std Error	Beta	t	Sig
1 Constant	2.569	0.349		7.366	0.000
Supervision factors	-1.024	0.214	-0.256	-4.779	0.000

a. Dependent Variable: Completion rate

Table 5: Regression Coefficient for Programme Related Factors

Table 5 interprets the standardized regression coefficients (Beta). In estimating the contribution of mode of study factors to completion of doctoral studies, it was established that programme and mode of study factors had no significant contribution to doctoral completion rates as ($p=0.160$) at 0.05 level of accepting the hypothesis. The null hypothesis was therefore accepted.

Although most students rated the three items high, lecturers did see them as a treat except the introduction of parallel study programmes. They noted that parallel study programmes created extra units to teach and therefore extra hours needed to attend to. This implies that they are additional responsibilities to lecturers and consume the time which should be spent guiding students on their research studies. However, many lecturers and doctoral students interviewed made positive comments regarding course work and examination. Majority was in support of course work and examination but most students wanted both coursework and thesis development and writing to run concurrently. Asked if they can afford it in terms of time to have the two runs concurrently. Majority argued that the coursework would keep students close to campus and therefore close to their supervisors and colleagues. The universities' policies on coursework is that doctoral students should complete all coursework and pass all the written and oral examinations before embarking on the long journey of thesis writing process. As such, students are assigned supervisors only after this policy has been observed fully.

The second item sort to know if part time studies constraint doctoral students' time therefore affecting their research. Both lecturers and students agreed ($m=3.40$) and ($m=4.12$) respectively. Most of them attributed this to students' divided attention. Job commitment, family responsibilities and university studies – all addressed concurrently – were said to be the main factors which constraint doctoral students in their research work.

The study sought to examine how different study programmes such as part-time or full-time affect completion of doctoral studies. The study did not find any relationship between different study programmes and doctoral completion rates in education at public universities in Kenya. Similarly, testing of the null hypothesis did not detect any significant relationship between different study programmes and doctoral completion rates (0.160) at 0.05 level of acceptance. The null hypothesis test was therefore accepted. The study concluded that different study programmes do not influence doctoral studies completion rates.

However, responses to research question three seem to have elicited mixed reactions more so among doctoral students. While they are in support of coursework, at another hand, they see it as a constraining factor. Working in isolation and probably at a distance from colleagues and the supervisors seems to scare doctoral students universally (Lovitts, 2001; Ali & Kahun, 2006). The issue of coursework and examinations is now a universally accepted practice after several empirical studies pointed out that the practice yield more merits than demerits – more so to the doctoral students (Shulman, 2010; Ray, 2007; Grover, 2007).

4. Conclusion and Recommendations

Different modes of study programmes do not influence completion rates of doctoral studies in education. Based on this conclusion, the departments of postgraduate studies in Education in the studied universities should put in place an active tracking system with a view of closely monitoring and evaluating student progress, for example, creating time – lines for completion by putting in place mandatory supervisor – supervisee meeting schedule and regular reporting of student progress. They should also design work schedules for supervisors to cater for their various responsibilities. These would afford them time to attend to their

supervisees. Moreover, the departments should strive to encourage students to form group discussions. This can serve as thesis writing support and mentorship groups. It will go a long way in minimizing the feeling of isolation as well as improve thesis writing skills.

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