

## **An Examination of Delayed Doctoral Completion**

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### **Abstract**

*Most postgraduate students report delayed doctoral completion times. It is therefore necessary to examine the factors that contribute to the delay of postgraduate studies in their dissertation completion process. Delayed doctoral completions are undesirable to universities and to students as it leads to higher attrition and termination rights. Delays in PhD studies is attributable to a loss of valuable time, resources and individual stress. In other instances, students who overstay in their doctoral programs could lose a competitive advantage in the marketplace as they are unable to deploy their skills in their careers. Studies indicate that doctoral completion is influenced by many interacting factors. Some of the factors that affect doctoral completion rates include the relationship between the supervisor and the student, personal factors and PhD characteristics.*

*The relationship between a supervisor and students is important as it determines whether students are able to receive feedback in a timely manner to make required corrections. In many cases, doctoral students who report delayed completion rates lament that they are not able to integrate supervisor feedback in good time thereby resulting into delayed progress. In other cases, PhD students select projects that are different from the research specialization and the research focus of their supervisors. Ideological and research differences make it challenging for supervisors to provide relevant feedback to improve the overall research argument. In some universities have understaffed graduate departments due to the shortage of lecturers with a PhD attainment.*

*Moreover, delayed doctoral completion rates could result from personal factors. Most PhD students have to balance between their family life, their social life, their professional lives and their academic life. In the unfortunate event that students face unemployment, they are likely to defer their projects. In other cases, PhD students could report delayed completion rates particularly if the workload is high. Additionally, students could face a crisis in confidence in completing their doctoral projects. Doctoral completion rates could also be adversely affected by PhD characteristics. Students who choose projects with a high workload often find it difficult to cope with the resultant academic pressures. At the same time, doctoral students who work on standalone projects could face a crisis in confidence as compared to those who work in joint group projects. It is therefore important for all factors to be extensively explored in determining how effective solutions can be adopted to reduce improve doctoral completion rates.*

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### **I. Introduction**

The length of time taken to complete PhD studies has social, psychological and financial effects on doctoral students. Delayed doctoral completion also affects different stakeholders within the education industry. Mbogo, R. W., Ndiabo, E., Wambua, J. M., Ileri, N. W., & Ngala, F. W. (2020) makes the case that some of the major issues that are evident where doctoral students report delayed completion are supervision challenges. Personal aspects, environmental factors as well as PhD project characteristics also affect doctoral completion rates. Jiranek, V. (2010) outlines that the analysis of contextual factors could be used to develop strategies that can be employed to increase doctoral completion rates. Low completion rates of PhD are increasingly becoming a major concern to stakeholders within the education industry due to the extensive psychological, social and financial implications that students face. Overtime, delayed doctoral completion rates affect the quality of teaching and research in universities which suffer from understaffing due to delayed completion rates.

Personal factors could also result to delayed doctoral completion rates. This is especially the case where doctoral students lack time, commitment and exhibit a deficiency of research skills. Personal factors could also be evident where doctoral students have to defer their studies or fail to complete them due to personal challenges such as financial difficulties or bereavements that could have a high emotional toll on them. Mbogo et al. (2020) posits that project characteristics are related to the scholarly satisfaction rates of doctoral students. Granted, completion rates are interrelated to the workload that doctoral students are required to undertake in the course of completing their projects. Doctoral students could opt out of their studies before completion if they feel that the project workload is higher as compared to what they had expected. Mbogo et al. (2020) observes that the relationship between the supervisor and the PhD candidate is also important as a determinant of doctoral completion rates. It is equally important for a student to have a sense of belonging as well as an amount of

freedom in developing the core argument of the project. Moreover, project satisfaction could also be achieved if the project is closely related to the supervisor's research.

## **II. Body**

### **Supervision challenges**

The quality of supervision of doctoral students is one of the major contributors of delayed doctoral completion. Supervisors play a pivotal role in the lives of students pursuing doctoral studies as they offer guidance, individualized support as well as mentorship in the completion of dissertations. Mbogo et al. (2020) outlines that supervisors also have a critical role to play as they provide critical input in guiding students on the theoretical and methodological approaches that they should take in the course of their writing research projects. One of the crucial issues that doctoral students face from supervisors is the lack of timely feedback from their supervisor. Some doctoral students report that the feedback provided by their supervisors is not timely and instrumental in aiding them to complete their projects in a timely fashion. In some universities there is no proper system to address delayed feedback from supervisors. Van de Schoot, R., Yerkes, M. A., Mouw, J. M., & Sonneveld, H. (2013) notes that even where these systems exist, they are often ineffective due to the lack of clear policies which can be used to discourage a deviation in set policies. On the other hand, some supervisors have raised concerns that some doctoral students give up too easily, fail to make a follow-up and implement provided feedback in a timely fashion.

Granted, a shortage of qualified supervisors in universities is also attributed to delayed doctoral completion rates. This is especially the case in newer universities which lack a sufficient number of PhD holders to supervise doctoral students. In some cases, supervisors lack sufficient knowledge of the research topic selected by the student thereby making them unable to provide meaningful and quality feedback to assist doctoral students in completing their projects. As a consequence, supervisors and students engage in back and forth encounters which are often fruitless and often prolong the time taken by doctoral students to complete their projects. Mbogo et al. (2020) posits that conflicting feedback from different supervisors could result into a situation where doctoral students are frustrated and confused thereby resulting in poor and broken-down interpersonal relations between students and supervisors due to ideological and personality differences. A shortage in supervisors could also result in unnecessary tensions between students and their supervisors leading to the emergence of prejudices and biases which further derail the completion of doctoral studies.

Notably, institutional factors also play a critical role in dissertation supervision. These factors include high work overload placed on faculty members in the Graduate department who are meant to supervise doctoral students. Work overload is a consequence of insufficient resources for staff development and a weak structure of doctoral supervision. Ndayambaje, I. (2018) demonstrates that institutional challenges are interrelated with weak supervision of doctoral students. Continued feedback delays from supervisors occurs are occasioned by the non-enforcement of supervisory regulations and policies set by the university. In spite of the fact, that most universities have clearly set the number of meetings that should take place between students and supervisors there is no enforcement when students and supervisors fail to meet set timelines and deadlines. Pitchforth, J., Beames, S., Thomas, A., Falk, M., Farr, A., Gasson, S., ... & Mengersen, K. (2012) explains that most universities in developing countries do not have elaborate schedules and milestones to ensure that progress reports are not delayed. As a result, the lack of enforcement continues to exacerbate laxity in the supervision of doctoral students resulting to delayed doctoral completion.

### **Personal or Environmental Factors**

Extenuating factors such as the balance between work and family have a critical role to play in doctoral completion. It is necessary for environmental and personal factors to be mitigated to ensure student progress. This is particularly the case where a doctoral student occupies a position of multiple responsibilities. Lim, H., Li, X., & Jung, H. (2019) makes the case that a common challenge which affects doctoral students is usually balancing the needs of their families with the needs that their academic studies demand. This is mainly because doctoral students have to balance their finances to ensure that they have sufficient funds for their doctoral studies. Insufficient financial aid and fellowships for doctoral students also affects doctoral completion rates. Furthermore, unemployment and layoffs of doctoral students in the course of their studies also impedes their progress thereby resulting in delayed doctoral completion rates.

Moreover, doctoral students could suffer from the impostor syndrome where they feel inadequate to complete their doctoral studies. This is especially the case with high-achieving individuals who often struggle with internal affairs and self-esteem feeling that they are not able to complete their dissertation. Lim et al. (2019) reveals that this is the case particularly where doctoral students come from first generation professionals or where their parents and siblings are high achievers. Doctoral students could also experience debilitating feelings of self-doubt when they anticipate failure making it challenging for them to fully exploit their abilities. As a consequence, self-doubt is likely to create fear as doctoral students delay their projects as they strive for

perfection. Jiranek, V. (2010) highlights that it is common to find doctoral students suffering from burnout anxiety and depression. The Imposter syndrome that results to delayed doctoral completion commonly affects students admitted to prestigious universities and students who have secured notable fellowships.

In some instances, delayed doctoral completion is a repercussion of poorly developed research skills among doctoral students. Some doctoral students face challenges in completing their projects especially because they have inadequate skills to write their publications. In most instances, students feel overwhelmed when they are provided with feedback from their supervisors. Wamala, R., Oonyu, J., & Ocaya, B. (2011) posits that in the unfortunate event where the students are advised by their peers who lack sufficient academic research skills, they are likely to develop their projects on the strength of grammatical structures instead of strengthening the overall research argument. Many doctoral students fail to realise that the feedback revisions provided by their supervisor's act as a catalyst for resolving areas of their research weaknesses. It is not uncommon for supervisors to insist that doctoral students improve expression fluidity before their projects can be accepted. Chidi, N., & Sylvia, O. A. (2020) observes that doctoral students who are unable to take constructive criticism end up feeling frustrated and opt to defer or abandon their projects instead of seeking to improve their research skills by researching further.

### **PhD project characteristics**

Studies conducted in different universities show that doctoral students value a certain degree of autonomy in their project writing process. PhD students have often expressed that they should have a degree or freedom in the execution of their project and in its design. This freedom is important to keep them motivated in researching and in keeping with set timelines. Students who have a greater degree of freedom are more likely to complete their projects as they feel motivated as compared to students who are strictly required by their supervisors to follow prescribed methodologies and ideological frameworks. van Rooij, E., Fokkens-Bruinsma, M., & Jansen, E. (2021) reports that more than 30% of the students who report delayed completion rates are forced to work in a project direction which they clearly object. As such, there is a positive association between the freedom that students have in expressing their opinions and planning their projects and their completion rates.

Another important aspect in doctoral projects is the workload. To a large extent, the number of PhD students who finish according to the scheduled time and according to the set schedule is considerable low. In some cases, this is because of high workload particularly where PhD students feel that they have to conduct extensive research within a short time frame. van Rooij et al. (2021) demonstrates that where doctoral students feel that the workload continues to increase by the day, they are more likely to be dissatisfied with the research project. As a consequence, some doctoral students have to work in their social time thereby resulting to higher degrees of frustration. In many cases, doctoral students who feel that they have a heavy workload often consider quitting the program midway as they feel that the workload of their thesis is interfering with their personal lives. Matheka, H. M., Jansen, E. P., & Hofman, W. H. (2020) argues that in some universities doctoral students are required to be part of the teaching faculty to complete their PhD studies. Decreased levels of satisfaction and increased workload could result into a situation where students could resort in dropping out or deferring their studies.

Granted, PhD students who work in groups are more likely to report favourable doctoral completion rates. This is different from PhD students who work on standalone projects as they are more likely to be overwhelmed by the emotional burden of completing these projects. Waheed, S. A., Gilani, N., Raza, M., & Ahmad, F. (2021) elucidates that students who work on standalone projects are more likely to drop out and report lower completion rates since they face fewer opportunities to receive support from members of the faculty and from their peers. Dissatisfaction among doctoral students who work on standalone projects emanates from the feeling of alienation as these students may not feel part of the academic and scholarly community in a university. Chidi, N., & Sylvia, O. A. (2020) records that doctoral students that work in standalone projects are also unable to benefit from group processes such as peer learning. Students who feel a sense of intellectual isolation are more likely to report higher dropout rates particularly because they fear that they received insufficient support from the academic community.

### **III. Conclusion**

Doctoral students face multiple challenges in the completion of their studies and ensuring that they report positive completion rates. One of the major challenges that PhD students face is a supervision challenge. In many universities, the graduate faculty tends to be understaffed due to low completion and graduation rates. Supervision challenges also arise where there is lethargy among faculty staff result resulting into delayed feedback thereby impeding the ability of doctoral students to integrate this feedback in their work and complete their projects in a timely fashion. Personal and environmental factors are also important considerations in determining the doctoral completion rates in universities. Due to the overwhelming workload that PhD students

face, most of them tend to feel inadequate and unable to complete the projects that they have selected. This is especially the case among high-achieving students who may have performed exemplary well in undergraduate studies and in their master's degrees. Moreover, personal and environmental factors could be exacerbated by the fact that students face low peer support particularly where they have to remotely pursue their PhDs and work on standalone projects. Increased financial obligations or the lack of funds could also result in unemployment and act as an impediment to their studies. Evidently, PhD project characteristics are also an important consideration in evaluating delayed doctoral completion rates. Some doctoral students select projects with a high workload that they are unable to manage. There are different instances where doctoral students have opted to abandon their projects and select new ones while others have abandoned their doctoral projects altogether. High project workload is also a challenge of doctoral students who have to fulfil university requirements especially where the department of postgraduate studies requires that students accumulate a considerable amount of teaching hours and supervisory hours before they are allowed to graduate.

#### IV. Recommendations

Multiple strategies have been proposed to deal with supervisory challenges which affect doctoral completion rates. Some of the proposed solutions have been a wider adoption of technology such as video conferencing technology and other technologies that allow supervisors and students to meet remotely to achieve project milestones and increase their doctoral completion rate. Further, stakeholders in the education industry have proposed the use of experts from other research institutions and organisations to assist students to develop theoretical and methodological frameworks provided that prior authorisation is granted by the university senate and the board of postgraduate studies. Ultimately stakeholders propose that delayed doctoral compilation can only be resolved if research organisations and universities enter into strategic partnerships that allow for the sharing of human resources.

Though there are many personal and interpersonal factors that affect doctoral students, it is necessary for peer support to be encouraged in post postgraduate studies. Interpersonal relationships during the program aid in the development of academic skills associated with publishing, writing and teaching. Moreover, faculty mentors should be assigned to provide emotional and social guidance as well as academic support for doctoral candidates. Marshall, S. M., Klocko, B., & Davidson, J. (2017) recommends that it is equally important for universities to develop research support programs that provide fellowships and scholarships to aid doctoral students to complete their studies particularly because their contributions increase the research repository of the university.

To assist doctoral students, complete their projects in time, it is necessary for academic counsellors to be provided as a way of educating PhD students on the workload that they are likely to expect in the selected projects. This would enable students to either select another project at the outset or plan accordingly to cope with the workload. Students who are able to plan accordingly are able to seek social and academic support mechanisms prior to embarking on their doctoral studies. Doctoral students should also be encouraged to pursue social, work, study and family balance. As such, it should be emphasized that weekends and holidays should not be used as the primary study times for doctoral studies. At the same time universities should protect doctoral students from excessive workload. An important area of consideration for doctoral students is to ensure that they select project which are in line with the research specialisation of the supervisor.

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