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An analysis of Situational Barriers Affecting Postgraduate Students in Private Universities in Kenya

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Abstract

This study investigated situational challenges affecting postgraduate students in a private university in Kenya. It was motivated by the low completion rates in postgraduate studies, with many students completing their studies far beyond the stipulated time period. While many obstacles may hinder postgraduate student progress in their studies, it was found necessary to investigate situational challenges that could hinder students' progress. The study utilised a survey design. Using a sample of 20 postgraduate students, a survey was conducted using a questionnaire. Data analysis was done using SPSS. Frequencies and percentages were the statistics used to make related findings and interpretation. It was found that students experienced work-related challenges, and distance to consult supervisors were the greatest challenges. However, students reported high self-confidence that they could complete their studies on time and possessed adequate proposal/thesis writing skills. It was therefore concluded that student counselling services be provided by the institution to adequately guide the students in balancing work and studies. Online supervisory platforms should also be provided to address the time that students took to travel to meet with their supervisors.

Key Terms: situational barriers, postgraduate students

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1.0 INTRODUCTION

The number of students enrolling in postgraduate programmes in Kenyan universities has been growing steadily over the years in both private and public universities. According to Mutua (2020), the number of students pursuing Masters and PhD courses grew by 1.5 per cent to 44,657 from 43,988 in 2019. Mukhwana, et al. (2016) attribute the increased enrollment in postgraduate programmes to the expansion of the number of universities in the country and the institutionalization of the Privately-Sponsored Students' Programme (PSSP) (Module II) in the universities. These programmes enabled adult learners to enrol in large numbers in undergraduate and postgraduate degree programmes of their choice to acquire competencies needed in the ever-competitive job market. According to Mukhwana et al. (2016), 11.8 per cent of the total student enrollment in Kenyan universities was made up of postgraduate students. Kehide (2016) adds that in total, Kenya has 53 universities, nine constituent colleges and five private universities.

Despite the growth in the postgraduate student population, it has been noted that postgraduate student progression to graduation is markedly low. Too et al. (2016) observe that the time of initial registration to graduation process of students is too long, with the quality supervision and graduate preparation programmes the whole quite weak. They attribute this slow progression to universities not allocating adequate resources to the development of postgraduate programmes. Resources, in this case, refer to human (teaching), infrastructural and financial support needed to propel postgraduates to on-time completion of their programmes. The views of the above-cited authors seem to blame institutional-based challenges to slow postgraduate student progression. However, the literature reveals that postgraduate students often face many challenges that hinder the progress of their studies. Cross (1981) has identified three obstacles to adult learning which are applicable to university students as well. She has mentioned: Situational barriers, Institutional barriers and Dispositional barriers.

It has been observed that that though the private universities provided adequate support and facilities for postgraduate studies, the progress of the students was found wanting as few students in the postgraduate programmes completed their studies within the stipulated period. According to Nakwenya (2020), more students opt to enrol in private rather than public universities; the potential to finish studies in private universities is higher than in public university. However, Omanga (2017) confirms that in Kenya, students take an average of three to four years to complete a two-year master's degree course in most African countries- Kenya included. Similarly, depending on the specific field, it takes an average of nine years to complete a three-year doctoral degree. Of note also is the fact that many Kenyans join graduate studies when their lives are full of distractions and many social and economic obligations, which could contribute to the delays in their studies. This

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prompted the researcher to investigate the extent to which situational barriers could be the main challenge that hampered students' progress.

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

Habibah (2006) categorized learning barriers as; (1) personal challenges, (2) academic challenges and (3) professional challenges. The situational barriers comprise personal challenges, and they are related to various tasks and activities at the personal level-family, children and domestic responsibilities (Cross, 1981). Academic barriers are related to the essential skills to successful learning. Computer-related skills and literacy, accessibility and information understanding, reflective and critical thinking skills, and writing essays skills, tests and examinations are among the many varieties of academic barriers (Amira, et al., 2013). MacKeracher et al. (2006) say that dispositional barriers, also known as attitudinal barriers, include low self-esteem, negativity on being an adult learner, such as being too busy, too sick, too old, too tired, not rich enough, is not smart enough, don't need any more education, don't have enough time, inadequate language skills, and lack interest to the programme. All these factors are known to affect postgraduate students in one way or another. However, the degree to which each factor hinders postgraduate student progress has not been exhaustively investigated in Kenyan university research.

Previous studies investigating the challenges experienced by postgraduate students have emphasized one or the other of the institutional, dispositional, situational or academic barriers. Amira et al. (2016), while investigating challenges of adult learners in a Malaysian University, noted that the biggest obstacle faced by the student is challenged within themselves. Most of the students have anxiety about their learning. These include fear of failing to complete the assignment on time, fear of scoring lower grades than their expectation, fear of failing to meet their lecturers' expectations and as well as being neglected and isolated from the group or may sometimes tend to feel inferior comparing themselves with other group members. Golde and Dore et al. (2001) found out that research training is not comprehensive for postgraduate students. Students are not well-informed about all aspects of research and are therefore ill-prepared for the rigours of research. Moreover, they established that many students were not well informed about the doctoral process and reported that advisors expectations, time to degree, or obtaining research funding were not clearly understood.

Abiddin and Ismail (2011) notes that postgraduate students have various challenges to deal with such as family commitment, work commitment, finance which may affect their achievements since most of them are working and married st. Ezebilo (2012), while investigating challenges in postgraduate studies in a Swedish University, found out that the major concerns raised by the respondents include problems associated with designing data

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collection methods, data analysis, writing publishable research papers and oral presentation skills. They also raised concerns regarding the inaccessibility of associate supervisors, and sometimes, the main supervisors were relatively inaccessible. This view is echoed by Wadesango and Machingambi (2011), who found out that the most common problem that postgraduate students face in South Africa has a supervisor whose extensive commitments make them too difficult to get hold of.

It can be concluded that the common theme in research into postgraduate studies has been supervisor related challenges. The majority of these studies have also been done in developed countries where the level of postgraduate facilitation is higher than Kenyan situation. Not much primary literature could be found that focused on situational factors challenging students pursuing their master's and doctoral studies. It was, therefore, necessary for this study to be undertaken

3.0 RESULTS

Based on the main objective of the study and analysis of data, the results are presented as follows:

Table 1: Situational barriers affecting postgraduate students (figures in %)

Statement	Strongly Agree	Agree	Undecided	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Total
I am too busy at work	50	25	0	5	20	100
I suffer lack of motivation	10	10	5	35	40	100
I have thesis/proposal writing problems	5	20	15	25	35	100
I see no urgent need to complete my studies	-	-	-	15	85	100
Long-distance to meet my supervisors inhibit my studies	40	25	25	5	10	100

Cross (1981) pointed out that situational challenges arise from one's situation or environment at a given point. The study participants endured these challenges, ranging from busy work schedules, lack of motivation, long distances to see supervisors, lack of motivation and thesis/ proposal challenges. The majority of the respondents

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(75%) agreed that they were too busy at work, while 25 per cent disagreed on the same. Postgraduate students combine work and study and enrol as part-time students. The demands of the workplace may overwhelm the students to the extent that in terms of prioritization, their studies may take second place to their jobs. In agreement, Fairchild (2003) characterized adult students' "palette of life experience as being coloured with older age, full-time employment, and the roles of spouse and parent" (p. 11). More than any other single consideration, challenges related to managing multiple, and often competing, roles, responsibilities, and expectations may be the most universal and defining characteristic of graduate student life (Benshoff, et al., 2015). Havenga et al. (2018) also report that the postgraduate students' experiences of high workload at their place of employment affected their study performance. Amira et al. (2013), in a study on challenges facing postgraduate students in Pakistan, also reported that a myriad of students in the class stated that commitment to a career is one of the reasons for them to frequently miss the class. Other than that, commitment to family members such as spouses and children and also long journey from home or office to the class was among the problems faced by the adults.

In terms of motivation, the findings reveal that 75 per cent of the respondents disagreed that they suffered a lack of motivation to pursue their studies. This reveals a high level of self-efficacy in the students in setting the pace for their studies. This high sense of motivation could be explained by the fact that adults have spent money and time in their studies, an investment they are willing to protect. Tharp (1988) in Fairchild (2003) opines that generally, adults have embraced higher education interests having the determination of the return on their effort, money and time investment. They, therefore, protect their investment through achievement orientation. They attend class to fulfil their academic responsibilities, unlike the traditional aged learners whose sense of responsibility is not as urgent.

The findings also reveal that a majority of the respondents, 60 per cent disagreed that they had thesis/ proposal writing problems. These findings show that postgraduate students have confidence in their writing skills due to the fact that they may have been well prepared for this aspect during their course work. This is in line with Dethlof (1988), who observes that adult learners are likely to study more and to basically be more satisfied with their instructors and their classes than are traditional college students. Von der Embse and Childs (1979) add that adult learners generally exceed traditional students in achieving academics, and this is largely because of the greater dedication to learning, more self-directed aims, and concern with the immediate use of their newly gained knowledge mentioned above. Therefore it can be concluded that postgraduate students who are mostly adult learners are well prepared to write their proposals and theses and feel confident to do so.

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On being asked to respond as to whether they agreed or disagreed that they see no urgent need to complete their studies, the respondents overwhelmingly (85%) disagreed with the statement. This means that they had a sense of urgency to complete their studies within the stipulated period. However, a disconnect between the desire to complete the degree and actual completion rates exists if the literature review is to be believed. Addressing a similar contradiction, Ranguno (2016), in his research into institutional and student-related factors and doctoral studies completion rates in education at selected public universities in Kenya, wonders why most students who enrol for doctoral programmes with initial commitment and determination to earn the degree in a timely fashion and with a proven academic background withdraw later or fail to complete it in a timely fashion. In conclusion, this depicts that key factors affecting completion of doctoral include time –to- degree and rates but not limited to programme and policies requirements, an inadequate number of supervisors and individual student factors, including socio-economic and lack of thesis writing skills.

The majority (65 %) of the respondents agreed that long-distance meet supervisors inhibit their studies. Postgraduate students being part-time students, often live away from campus and would need to seek permission from employers in order to travel to meet their supervisors. The arrangements may pose challenges to students who are often caught in the middle of the employer and supervisor expectations with their studies more often than not being negatively affected. This concurred with a study by Mutula (2009), which revealed the following supervisor related challenges: delays in approving the topic (44%); unnecessary delays in getting feedback (36%); supervisors' unavailability (36%); problems balancing work/occupations and school (44%). Wadesango and Machingambi (2011) studied postgraduate students' experiences with research supervisors in South Africa and found that only a few students were satisfied with their supervisors, and the challenges they face include lack of supervisory support and supervisor's other workload as well as poor feedback in relation to their research work. It is, therefore, clear that related supervisory challenges inhibit postgraduate student progress in the university.

4.0 CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusion: The study found that postgraduate students experienced work-related and supervisor related challenges. However, it was found that their levels of self-efficacy and self-confidence were high. High motivational levels were also reported, with students believing that they had the ability to write their thesis and to complete their studies on time. This means that work-related and other family challenges could be the situational factors hindering the completion of their studies.

Recommendations: The University should provide adequate infrastructure such as an online learning mode to enable the students to interact with the supervisors online rather than travelling long distances to meet them on

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the university campus. Student counselling services should be provided for postgraduate students on balancing work and studies and dealing with personal issues that can hinder their studies.

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