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Assessment of Factors Which Contribute to Graduate Students' Delays in Completing their Degrees in African Universities: A Critical Retrospection from Perspectives of Students

By

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Abstract

The purpose of this article is to address factors which contribute to graduate students not completing their studies on time in African universities, based on views and perspectives from students and supervisors. Using qualitative research approach and descriptive design, the article examines student-based factors which cause delay. The study is based on secondary sources, and primary sources such as interviews, observations and experiential views by a practitioner in higher education. The article is a sequel to an earlier article I wrote titled “Need to address Supervisor Menace for Graduate Students in Kenyan Universities” which raised great responses from supervisors and students. In this article, I demonstrate that there were many expectations when I announced to the world that I would do a “tripartite” on the role of supervisors, students and university structures on why graduate students do not complete their masters and doctoral degrees on time in African universities. I believe that it is part of my outreach as a professor at the Technical University of Kenya to share knowledge on why there is high attrition and low graduation rate in graduate programs in African universities. I regard myself as a public intellectual, prominent academician and author of repute and veteran university administrator, with capacity to use my experiential knowledge on some of the problems that bedevil our African universities. It is based on the above and the conversations I have had with stakeholders, such as university academic staff members and students that I have made the following remarks. As Issa Shivji says, public intellectuals, are political intellectuals. They comment on everything political but also on matters not so political as events in social and economic realms. Ali Mazrui said that public intellectuals are those who love knowledge and do so with passion that educates the public on social, economic, political, cultural and all other realms of knowledge. I dare add that public intellectuals are factual, articulate and admired by young aspiring intellectuals and have many followers on social media. Public intellectuals are knowledgeable and sought after by society, even the media to comment on anything and everything. Their works and deeds are in the public domain and they do not shy away from publicity which, occasionally, puts them on the firing line of politicians and social commentators and academic rivals. I was encouraged to publish and also write in the media by my friends the late Prof. Ali Mazrui, Prof. William Ochieng and Prof. Chris Wanjala because their articles influenced me. They wrote about issues affecting ordinary people. I write many dispatches on many issues and they often receive great accolades and trend in many forums, while others become viral and spread across the globe. Using political economy theoretical framework, the article shows how students sometimes contribute to their own downfall. Findings reveal that many factors contribute to students delays, and must be looked at holistically because they are intricately intertwined with structural and institutional challenges as well. It recommends the need for stakeholder evaluation and need of involving students in decision making especially in the choice of supervisors. African governments need to invest more in high education especially in research by graduate students.

Key words: graduate training, university students, supervision, advising

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By

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Introduction

The purpose of this article is to unearth the factors which lead to delay of graduate students in completing their courses in African universities. In 1981, David Sternberg published a book titled *How to Complete and Survive a Doctoral Dissertation* (Sternberg, 1981) which became a best seller and very successful in universities. Reality dawned on many that one needed to survive the rigors of doctoral dissertation and there were many factors that came into play, especially relations between students and their supervisors as well as funding. There are many studies which have examined the problem of delays for students in doctoral and masters programs in Africa (Amutabi, 2018, 2017 and 2011; Anne 2008; Gardner, 2009; Barasa and Omulando, 2018). Many of the studies have identified student and faculty contributions to attrition in high and low-completing doctoral programs in many parts of the world. It is against such studies that I present responses to my article titled “Need to address Supervisor Menace for Graduate Students in Kenyan Universities” which received a lot of support from scholars all over the world. There were many students, going to hundreds, who sent me long messages asking to join the Technical University of Kenya where I teach, as a result of their frustrations in their present universities. They agreed with most of the issues I raised. There was some little push back from some conservative professors who felt that my article was one sided as it presented professors as villains without pointing out that some students also failed in their role. The impressive fact was that the article was widely circulated and majority of those who responded seemed to suggest that we needed to improve on our student supervision in Africa. I was impressed with the accolades and many positive voices that concurred with my research and sentiments and agreed that we need to improve on how we handle our students. Having said that, there is no doubt that some students contribute to the problem of lack of completing their degrees on time. I promised to write on this subject, from the position of some of the mistakes students make in graduate school which contribute to their delay in completion of their studies as well as the problem of high attrition or dropout rate in African graduate schools.

The article titled “Need to address Supervisor Menace for Graduate Students in Kenyan Universities” was received very well. The following day after posting the article in social media such as Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp, Instagram, Academia.edu, LinkedIn, and various Blogs, I received over 1,000 email messages from scholars from Nigeria, Ghana, Kenya, South Africa, Tanzania, Uganda, United Kingdom, United States, and many other parts of the world praising the article for being objective, incisive, insightful and spot on. Majority of those who wrote said the article applied to all countries in the world.

Some of the email messages I received were depressing because the authors shared their frustrations and traumatic experiences in the hands of their supervisors. Some were clearly excited that someone was seeing what they were going through. Each praise was accompanied by a lamentation. I received one lamentation after another stating that the article applied to their own situation. I received many application requests for masters and doctoral

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degrees at the Technical University of Kenya where I teach, which indicated there are many good graduate students out there who need a university which is interested in their welfare. I was told to ask my colleagues to create degree programs in masters and doctoral studies in gender, development studies, global governance and management, business administration, psychology, social work, geography, geoscience, applied science and technology, engineering and Law. I received accolades about my boldness in tackling the issue.

Many supervisors agreed with me while others said students were also to blame in delays in graduate schools in Africa. Some called for the need for a balanced and deeper analysis of the whole question of delay in graduate studies in Africa. There were also those who called for better reflections that involved opinions of supervisors than relying on students' narratives and accounts about their supervisors. Three university vice chancellors outside Kenya sent me invitations to their universities to speak about delays in graduate studies and what needed to be done to make matters better. I received invitation as keynote speaker at five conferences, two in 2022 and three in 2023. The article had unintentionally made me famous.

The article went viral and I received hundreds of invitations to listservs, blogs and WhatsApp groups where my article was under discussion. The Kenya Social Science Forum blog where the article was first posted received over 2,000 hits per day for seven days, the highest number of hits since the site was established in 2009. My Facebook page was inundated with requests for friendship while my LinkedIn page received over 500 requests per day for connection. I was impressed. Some newspapers asked me to allow them to publish the article in part, but I demanded that it is published in whole, the entire 4,000 words or five pages. Many admitted that it was a long essay but worth reading, and was published in the *Journal of African Interdisciplinary Studies*. It is against the above background that I would like to share the article on the role of students in delaying completion of degrees in universities in Africa, as a sequel.

Statement of the Problem

Many doctoral and masters students are not able to complete their studies on time leading to many problems of anxiety, trauma and failure to meet projections and expectations in development and strategic plans of universities. Many universities are not able to meet their obligations in contributing to national and global development due to the depressed and reduced number of those completing their studies. For example, Kenya has a shortage of 10,000 doctoral degree holders but produces less than 2,500 doctoral and masters students annually. The highest number produced by a single university is less than 200 post graduates. Great efforts have been put in place to increase the number but this has not helped as numbers remain depressingly very low. Many students are frustrated by poor supervision, harsh study environments where supervisors differ with each other, with students at the receiving end. The quality of theses and dissertations has gone down due to students using proxies to write their theses and dissertations. We need to find out what ails graduate programs in African universities.

Many African universities experience massive attrition in graduate school emanating from frustration by supervisors as well as unintended structural and institutional obstacles. The attrition has reached a point where many of the universities are not meeting their goals in graduate training and institutional and national level. African universities suffer from low funding and most of their graduate programs produce very little impact in global output in

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training, of less than 1%. African universities contribute less than 5% in global publishing due to low publication rate as a result of self-inflicted inhibitions, professional hurdles, envy and lack of institutional support in conducting research or paying publication fees. Although bodies in charge of higher education have improved the situation slightly by demanding that masters students publish one article and doctoral students publish two article before graduation, this has not helped much because there has been reduction in publishing by lecturers given massive teaching loads and lack of funding for research.

Objective

To Assess Factors Which Contribute to Graduate Students' Delays in Completing their Degrees in African Universities

Research Question

What factors Contribute to Graduate Students' Delays in Completing their Degrees in African Universities?

Presentation and Discussion of Findings

No student goes to graduate school expecting to delay in their graduation, or even drop out. The greatest excitement for many people who enter university is the graduation day, but greater excitement comes when one joins graduate school for masters or doctoral degree. To enter graduate school is prestigious and comes with many controversies, hardships and satisfaction on successful completion. Although success eventually comes to majority of those who make the critical decision to join graduate school, there are many controversies and hardships which people rarely reflect upon. The focus of this article is on the challenges faced by students in graduate schools in African universities and why we seem to have such high attrition at this level. There are multiple factors which contribute to masters and doctoral degree students not completing their degrees on time.

First, research findings have revealed that some graduate students in African universities do not take their work seriously. They do not consult their supervisors and take long to work on their corrections. Some do not do their assignments on time and spend many hours partying and bar-hopping and attending birthday parties, weddings and funerals and think that they can just move through graduate school, forgetting that there are no emotions in graduate school. They often come to a late realization when they fail to pass one or two papers and which prevent them from proceeding to the next level. Others take long to effect changes on their proposals or chapter drafts and expect their supervisors to give them comments on the same day, not knowing that there are other students being supervised by the same supervisor. The work of Glatthorn and Joyner (2005) has provided insights into proper writing of a good thesis but laziness and procrastination is not one of the topics covered in the book. Students must address this issue of delays and not just blame their supervisors.

Second, I have received information that some students are rigid and never accept to change their topics or delete a word from their work. They come to graduate school with a fixed mind on what they want to study and how they are to do it regardless of the rules and regulations on the ground. They are unwilling to receive instruction or guidance. They are not willing to shift where they want to conduct their research and are fixated on this. They get married and wedded to certain topics and areas and are not willing to change them despite supervisor guidance. They may pretend to take advice but almost immediately go back to

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their previous topics and this can sometimes rile supervisors who are forced to abandon them. There is evidence that some students usually do this because they have a complete thesis from elsewhere which they want to plagiarize and is the reason they remain rigid. Some students want to study issues in their own villages. This is unacceptable and contributes to delay of some of the students in Africa. Studies on supervision preparation and challenges they face are many. They include Haksever and Manisali (2000) who have assessed supervision requirements of PhD students and what comes out is that the supervisors are limited in what they can do. They cannot force students to do what they are not interested in. Some supervisors have raised red flags on work of students based on anti-plagiarism software but this makes them unpopular and are helpless to see colleagues pass work of weak students.

Third, some graduate students use proxies to write their theses, often from cybercafes, where the work is done for them by people, sometimes by school dropouts. They end up having cut and paste contraptions in the name of theses and dissertations. They end with fake and dubious theses written by semi-literate cyber cons pretending to be professional writers. There are usually many give aways and the work can never go beyond a vigilant supervisor. The signs of plagiarism are usually all over the place. The fronts are often different, with diverse fonts such as Calibri, Garamond, times new roman, bookman old style, arial narrow, etc. Usually the sentences are sharper, logical and articulate, with unusual vocabulary and almost perfect sentence construction. Sometimes you will get that some words are still in hyperlink. When the work is run against 'Turn It In' and other anti-plagiarism software, the similarity index is often above 80% because they have plagiarized from various sites. This is worse in countries which do not have central repositories.

In the US, the University of Michigan is the authorized central repository where all theses and dissertations are stored and this has minimized plagiarism. Many African countries do not have such repositories and students simply change the area of study, say from Kisumu to Mombasa and retain everything else. This type of 'cheating' is on the rise and such students end up being suspected or expelled from graduate programs when discovered. A study by Jiranek (2010) has demonstrated that there are certain predictors of timely completion among dissertation research students, using Australia as a case study. The study indicates that lack of adequate preparation and use of proxies can delay students. This is because in doctoral oral examinations, mastery of content is always very important and there are cases where students have well written theses and dissertations but weak on oral presentation which can invite suspicion of outside assistance.

Fourth, some students do not respect their supervisors. They are rude and even when genuine and valid reasons for delays in getting feedback from their supervisors are explained, they issue threats of instant dismissal and reporting to head or deans or directors of graduate school. Some of the students engage in bad-mouthing and backbiting their supervisors and words get to them. Some abuse their supervisors through proxies while others do it directly through emails and text messages and even on the phone and expect to pass. Some students write signed petitions which they send to management and the supervisors receive show-cause letters and warning letters while others are called into disciplinary committees to respond to students complaints. The supervisors are often hurt, have their egos bruised and get angry and engage in revenge mission and enlist their colleagues in blacklisting some students as bad and ensuring that such students do not graduate. Students need to learn to respect supervisors. Kabeer (2005) and Lee (2007) have written about the importance of negotiating the supervisory relationship between lecturers and students. Students fail to

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realize that doctoral and master's degree are political and social degrees and many factors come into play compared to undergraduate studies where only marks and grades matter. For masters and doctoral degrees, the supervisors are looking for academic leaders, future colleagues and mentors of others. They would like to see better social skills and excellent negotiation and team work. If they do not see good qualities they make it almost impossible for such a person to graduate, as they are the gatekeepers to academic excellence in the world and would never welcome one to the 'club' if not satisfied.

Fifth, some graduate students are too much in a hurry and want to complete master's degrees in six months and PhD in one year. Such students arrive with the intention of completing their studies in a short time without putting in the required work. They arrive in graduate school with an attitude and threatening to break records. Usually they arrive in their 20s and promise to have PhD by the time they are 30. The problem is that such students do not realize that they need to do coursework and work on a research proposal before the thesis. Where they are supposed to take 8 courses, they take 10, and begin work on the thesis proposal before even completion of coursework. The problem is that taking many courses makes them to underperform, and then they blame this on their supervisors. Others overwhelm their supervisors with too many demands and blame them on delays. They demand to change supervisors and eventually supervisors begin to reject them due to their impractical approach to issues. They eventually drop out or come to their senses on realizing that Rome was not built in one day, and that two years are allocated for Masters completion and 3 years for PhD completion for good reasons. A massive study by Sowell, Zhang, Redd and King (2008) has shown some of the reasons why there are many challenges on PhD completion and attrition, many of which are student based. Students need to play by the rules of engagement and understand that they have an obligation to satisfy their supervisors, internal and external examiners and university examination boards. Some of them ignore simple rules of engagement and begin to imagine that they are better than their supervisors and everyone around them, which becomes a recipe for their failure.

Sixth, many students in African universities lack research funds. They struggle through programs because graduate funding has been declining in many African countries. This is a structural problem which cannot be blamed purely on the students. It is a major contributor to drop out or attrition. Funding challenge is one of the factors that Wanzala (2018) has mentioned in his article titled "Why Masters, PhD students take long to graduate in Kenya" and which remains a thorny issue up to this day. The students are not able to adequately fund their field data collection activities which lowers the quality of their work. The supervisors are usually keen to assist but cannot pass work that is not up to standard. The problem is that the students are not to blame for lack of finances for they are victims of the declining fortunes in research funds.

When I was admitted into my master's degree program at the University of Nairobi in 1989, I was granted a Full 2 year government scholarship which catered for my tuition and living expenses. My stipend was KES 5,100 per month, more than the salary paid to a middle level civil servant at the time. I was able to live comfortably and work on my masters as a full time student. When I was eventually employed as an administrative officer in the civil service my basic salary was KES 3,600 and house allowance of KES 1250. In 1989 you could rent a one-bedroom house at Umoja for KES 1,200 and two bedrooms at Buru Buru for KES 2,500. As graduate students, we shared houses, and we lived well, with TV and best music system in the neighborhood. We were highly respected and helped in teaching tutorial groups at the

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university and marked all the CATs of students in our tutorial groups, accounting for 30% of coursework. When the stipend arrived by 30th of each other, we went to the Senior Common Room accompanied by a senior member of staff and ate and drank. One could not get served if not accompanied by a senior member, and there was a counter clerk there (apparently from my native Bunyore) who ensured that non-members especially graduate students were not served when not accompanied. In the Senior Common Room (Senior Staff Lounge), things were subsidized, with the cost of most items much lower than the surrounding areas.

I studied for my PhD at the University of Illinois under Fulbright Scholarship with a monthly stipend of USD5,000. I lived in a duplex, paying monthly rent of USD400 per month at Sunnycrest in Urbana, USA. Life was comfortable and manageable and I saved at least USD3,500 per month. As a full time student, I delivered my assignments on time. I was given one-time payment of USD1500 allowance by the Fulbright Scholarship to buy a computer and printer and software subscription. I was also given allowance for books per semester. I received USD25,000 for my research from Rockefeller Foundation and from my assistantship for my field research in Kenya. This is different from many graduate students in Africa who reside in informal settlements, own old laptops and have no hope of getting funds to conduct field research. This is an issue that should be attended to urgently by African governments.

Seventh, part time students sometimes want to be as fast as full time students in completing their graduate studies, without knowing and understanding the difference. Some students are busy working full time, are married with children, engage in association, welfare group and religious activities and are too busy to make any progress. In their study on delays in completion and attrition, Bair and Hawort (2005) provide some insights on why students do not make a balance. Working full time is okay but the problem is wanting to make progress like a full time student. Such students sometimes suffer from burn out and are not able to complete their studies which sometimes even affects their performance at their work place. The problem is that part time students are not able to fulfil class attendance requirements for one reason or another. In face to face classes, they are not able to attend class 100% and for online classes, they do technical logging in and disappear. They are not able to perform well on exams and get challenges raising a research proposal and writing a thesis and blame this on supervisors.

Eighth, some graduate students lack moral restraint, decadence and direction and seek to date their supervisors. There are women who get into graduate school with the idea of 'sleeping' through their masters or doctoral degrees. There are also men who enter graduate school and imagine that they can charm their way and sleep with any female supervisor who comes before them. Similarly, there are students who think that they can bribe their way through their studies by giving money to supervisors at every stage. They quickly realize that one cannot 'sleep' through or pay their way through graduate school. One must work for it. Sometimes this comes as a great awakening to some who imagine that they are too beautiful or handsome or rich to pass through graduate school without working hard for it. This is reality that affects some graduate students which makes them delay or drop out. Some students don't realize that sex and money are useless in graduate school, and offer no advantages. Like Gordon Rugg and Marian Pitre (2008) have noted, there are unwritten rules of PhD Research which students need to be aware of in order to succeed in their work. Students need to be taught how to do defenses where admitting to make corrections as recommended by senior scholars and supervisors is not a problem. During defenses, some begin to argue with senior scholars on things on which they are obviously wrong and end up

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failing. There are positions one can take as a graduate student based on field research but there are factual errors one must admit when they are detected in one's work.

Ninth, some students compete colleagues, as if they are back in high school and sabotage each other. The students hide essential books in the library. Others gossip about their colleagues before their supervisors, out of envy. The tendency is usually where weak students feel envious of their more endowed colleagues and put all manner of obstacles on the way. Sometimes those who are intellectually more astute come against their superiors at work or those much older than them. There are also cases where beautiful ladies are looked at with great envy by their less beautiful colleagues. The mistaken notion is that the beautiful ladies may be excelling due to their beauty. Envious colleagues generate schemes and all manner of rumors, which sometimes end up affecting their colleagues. The issues raised above are in consonance of those of Manathunga (2005) where there are some of the early warning signs in postgraduate research education. Graduate students should know that their colleagues are their peers and first line of defense and must relate to them positively in order to be successful in graduate work.

Tenth, although some students are victims of poor supervision, they usually fail to use the laid down mechanisms in addressing their grievances or for supervisor change. They instead take to defaming and spoiling the names of their supervisors, which can end up causing more trouble for them. Most of the time, the bad things they say about their supervisors end up reaching them. The students become victims of their own words. They ruin relations with any potential supervisors and get tagged as bad and troublesome. Worse still, some get blacklisted by senior scholars on campus and only transfer to another university can save such. They may appear before defense panels and fail through and through without knowing the reason for failing. For such students, the reasons for failing usually have nothing to do with their academic prowess but social relations, politics and lack of proper social skills, required at this level. There are many writing tips out there which can assist students in writing their theses and dissertations in a socially acceptable manner. They include the work of Joan Bolder (1998) who has provided strategies on writing a dissertation by committing fifteen minutes a day. Similarly, the work of Dale (2001) provides insights on how to avoid thesis and dissertations pitfalls, using sixty one (61) cases of problems and solutions. There is need for graduate students to be strategic in what they say and how they say it. They must be very careful in dealing with supervisors and fellow students. The understanding is that they are being trained to be leaders and must be mature, focused and responsible and not engage in cheap gossip and non-issues.

Eleventh, some graduate students are weak and lack proper background in their respective areas of specialization and refuse to be guided. Some students are not exposed to research until they get to graduate school, while others may have been exposed to little research. Such students often lack basic requisites on content and are not patient enough to read and study hard in order to catch up. During class discussions, they are not able to follow because they lack certain minimum levels of knowledge. Such students are not able to catch up and leave in frustration. Rodwell and Neumann (2008) point out that predictors of timely doctoral student completions may involve students who lack proper background in their disciplines. They need to be patient and willing to be guided.

Twelfth, some students believe that only a person from their own ethnic group can supervise them. They are ethnic in their thinking and wrongly believe that only people from the same ethnic group like them can assist them. Some of the students base their arguments

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on past history of some particular departments. Apparently this problem ranked highest in Nigerian, Kenyan, South African and Tanzanian universities. In Tanzania, some students had changed their names to only Christian names such as John David, or James Charles or Jane Amos or Judith Jeremiah in order to hide their ethnic identity, basically doing everything to hide their ethnic identity. This is a thorny issue in Africa. We need to cure and heal African universities from this problem of ethnicity. We need to address the problem of lack of trust in some university departments in African universities due to ethnic favoritism. Universities are universal entities and ethnicity and race should not come up in teaching, evaluation and supervision. Like John Swales and Christine Feak (2004) have noted, students need to focus on ways of acquiring academic writing skills for graduate students which are useful in tackling graduate school tasks instead of focusing on non-issues such as ethnicity and racism.

Thirteenth, some students hate young supervisors, especially those much younger than them. They feel demeaned to go to class and find a Dr or Prof far much younger than them and begin to impose the African cultural rules in university where age matters. They expect to be revered and respected because they are advanced in age, or have grandchildren or have titles from their local areas, and expect to be respected on account of this. They wear and speak age at every opportunity to let the lecturer know that they have been around longer and that experience of life should count. Unfortunately, the experience of life or being chief or king of a local area never counts at the university in graduate school but rather what new knowledge one has potential to create. This is the truth many of them miss and for which they crucify innocent lecturers who refuse to make age a factor in class. The study of Sara Delamont; Paul Atkinson and Perry Odette (1997) faults the manner in which some PhD supervision has been done in the past and provides a guide to success. There is need to make such students unlearn some issues such as age and come to the common understanding that they are students and nothing else counts at that level.

Fourteenth, many supervisors think plagiarism is to blame for delays by students in graduate school. There were reports where some students had very high similarity index in their work revealed by anti-plagiarism software such as Turn-It-In. Lecturers gave evidence of alarming levels of plagiarism among graduate students. There were cases where graduate students could not reduce their work to admissible percentages which range between 15% and 30% in many African universities. There were also cases where students used ICT experts to manipulate similarity index results in order to make them pass. It was evident that some students were taking advantage of lack of an Africa-wide database for University theses and dissertations which is now being worked on by the Association of African Universities but to which not many universities in Africa are members. This is a loophole which students are exploiting. Universities need to be encouraged to create online repositories of their theses and dissertations so that universities can use search engines to unearth cheating in such matters. Innovation is necessary in order to complete doctoral studies in good time. A study by Kearns, Gardiner and Marshall (2007) has shown why innovation in PhD completion is important. Students who are not creative and innovative are likely to be caught in cheating scandals and not be able to graduate on time.

Finally, allow me to share some of the messages I received from stakeholders on my earlier article, titled “Need to address Supervisor Menace for Graduate Students in Kenyan Universities” which was widely circulated. A senior scholar (Scholar B) in a highly respected Nigerian University wrote:

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Prof. Amutabi, your article was spot on and it is true that some of the issues you raised are true in almost all our universities in Africa. We need to do better and this must begin from amongst us so that we improve the situation. It is unfortunate that we continue to delay students and many are forced to run to the West where they are able to complete their studies on time. We must really put our act together and your article is [the] beginning in addressing the gap. We discussed your article as an agenda in our Senate meeting at my university which means that the problem is legitimate.

The views in the above quote suggest that the issues I raised in the previous article [Need to address Supervisor Menace for Graduate Students in Kenyan Universities] are germane and seem to cut across the entire African continent and other parts of the world. His suggestion that we need to put our act together is admissible of the possibilities we have in improving graduate training in Africa.

The views I received from scholars in other African countries and elsewhere allowed me to do realize that students go through similar challenges regardless of where they were located. Another senior scholar (Scholar C) from a university in Ghana had this to say:

You have identified some of the problems that cause student delays while focusing on the role of lecturers. We need to see another article addressing the role of students in the delays. We seem to believe that only lecturers are to blame for delays, but Prof. Amutabi I would like you to know the students of 1980s and 1990s where I can see you also belong worked hard. Our students do not want to work hard. For assignments they do cut and paste and also hire people to write for them. When you invite them for oral examinations, they read PowerPoint slides word for word. During our days, you were not allowed to walk in with any paper except a blank notebook. We are spoon feeding this generation and the earlier we address this issue, the better.

I totally agree with Scholar C, above. The above views are representative of many scenarios that happen in many graduate schools in the world today. There are many articles in the popular press and social media which demonstrate that the above direct quote is accurate. There are many accounts of students who are not able to own their purported research and cannot speak to specific details in in their work because they have been assisted in writing them.

A Kenyan scholar (Scholar D) while agreeing with ideas in my article, went further to point out that there were issues on the side of students which needed to be addressed as well.

Your article raises interesting points but we need to get one that also puts students on the spot. Yes, there are areas where our colleagues [supervisors] have made mistakes but we need to hold our students accountable as well. Your article seems to give them a clean bill of health but we need to point out that some of the students have not been committed and regard a PhD as a walk in the park, and realize much later that it is not. I look forward to reading your next article addressing students side of things as well.

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Scholar D is undeniably spot on. The above quote represents over 50 responses I received from lecturers claiming that students were equally to blame for delays. There is no doubt that students have some responsibility in causing delays but we cannot make it a blanket allocation of blame. The need to break down individual responsibility shows that there are multiple factors that cause delays, and indeed students are responsible for some of them. We need to address the challenges collectively, from supervisor and student side of things in order to arrive at amicable solutions.

A senior African scholar based in the US (Scholar E) suggested that the problems I had raised in my article affected graduate students across the world and not just in Africa. He said that in the US and Europe the situation was dire and some students shot and killed their advisers. It was life and death situation. He wrote:

Prof. Amutabi, the issues you raise do not just affect African students. The issues you have raised are global and they are worse in North America and Europe where advisors have been shot and killed by students. African universities are doing well according to their place in history and need just to improve in the area of making things electronic and digital because I am an external examiner in some universities on the continent which insist on sending me hard copies of theses and dissertations via FEDEX and DHL when this can easily be done digitally. You also need to work on keeping schedules which is a major problem on the continent for you are not sensitive to time. I have seen reactions to your article and the wide concurrence with your views suggests that we need to re-examine the whole question of lecturer-student relations with a view of making it more efficient and fairer in our universities.

The views of Scholar E made me realize that African universities share the same problems with European and American universities and we just need to address the issues that cause delays. Fortunately I am yet to come across cases where students in Africa have killed supervisors. I have come across cases where supervisors have been beaten up and badly injured by students but no death has been reported. Students and supervisors need to put their act together before things get out of hand.

Scholar F was concerned about inadequate period devoted to mentoring young supervisors to learn the art of successful supervision. The reader did not want to repeat to his or her students what he or she went through in the hands of his or her supervisors and had this to say:

I have read your article on Menacing Supervisors and I totally agree with you. I was a victim of supervisor brutality in my graduate studies in one way or another and wouldn't want my students to suffer in the same way. I am just wondering if I could gain from your wealth of knowledge in graduate students supervision. I am a young scholar and would like to grow. We have not received any training in supervision and yet we have all been allocated students to supervise immediately after we graduate. I am in the Department of Hospitality and Leisure Studies in an African University and need assistance.

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Scholar F is confessing that he or she was not adequately prepared to carry out student supervision. There is need to create synergies between junior supervisors and senior supervisors for mentorship. There is also need to hold regular workshops on campus to share experiences and best practices on supervision so that lecturers can learn from each other. Students and lecturers are supposed to work together as partners and not enemies. The negative energy that emerges between students and lecturers is often lack of understanding roles between the parties.

A supervisor (Scholar G) in a Nigerian University made very strong and disturbing claims. He suggested that there was no democracy for students in Nigerian universities where chairs, directors and deans allocate students to undeserving supervisors through nepotism and favoritism for financial gains and favors. He wrote that there were cases where committees gave students to their friends to fast track their careers, while others did so for financial gain. He said that such supervisors end up frustrating such students because their interests are different. He wrote:

I am elated for your write up on the above issue, and I am happy to see your e-mail included at the end of the write up. I pray and believe that the write up would heal our system in Africa, my country Nigeria inclusive. In fact some of the so called Heads, Directors, Deans, Provosts and antagonizing Postgraduate Committees Chairpersons collude with satanic (sic) supervisors in our higher education system. They give them more students in exchange for some rewards. They use the students to advance their careers, while others fleece money from students. May God help us. I hope to keep in touch with you because you have spoken my mind. As a testimony, I overheard in places through whispering voices and postgraduate supervision confidential assessments, that postgraduate students in my research areas of concentration/specializations, always want me to be their supervisor but they are often given to other people [supervisors]. Why? They have their reasons. The students end up frustrated under the hands of so-called senior supervisors. I will take your write up to places and keep contact with you Prof and thanks for the article.

There is need for transparency and accountability in dealing with supervision of graduate students in universities in Africa. Students need to be involved in choosing their supervisors. Mechanisms need to be put in place where students have a say on who is to supervise them. When I was pursuing my doctoral studies at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, my main supervisor Prof. Donald Crummey was appointed by the Department of History chair Prof. Peter Fritsche but I personally selected the other three members of my dissertation committee (Prof. Charles Stewart, Prof. Jean Allman and Prof. Fred Hoxie) in consultation with Prof. Crummey. I had powers to remove any member of the committee through writing to the chair of the department if I was not satisfied with their role on my committee.

The views of students on the article “Need to address Supervisor Menace for Graduate Students in Kenyan Universities” were not surprising. Majority of them agreed with the views expressed in the article, and some raised critical issues that cause delays, such as funding. The views were legitimate and need attention. Student A wrote:

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I can see that you received your PhD in America [University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, USA] where you probably had adequate resources in the library and perhaps good funding. Compare yourself with a student in an African university who works as a teacher or civil servant or junior lecturer and has no any other funding. She has a family and other responsibilities and needs to sit in class and pursue PhD. The world should stand and applaud all students who complete doctoral and masters studies in an African university because we go through a lot of obstacles including those you have addressed. Your problems multiply if you are young and beautiful because now every lecturer wants to have a piece of you. You become a limping antelope in the middle of hyenas, leopards and lions.

Student A above had legitimate concerns, especially the whole question of funding. The views of student A were generally representative of those from many others. It was apparent that many graduate students in Africa had multiple roles as fathers, mothers, workers and other responsibilities which undermined their focus on graduate studies. The views are legitimate because indeed I went to the US under a Fulbright Scholarship and my expenses were well catered for by my Fulbright Scholarship and I was a full time student. It is therefore true that a student without funding goes through many challenges including time. African governments should create funds for graduate research. For those engaged in many activities, this can be solved by adding such students more time to complete. The problem comes when part time students seek to complete degrees as fast as full time students.

There are also problems with conflicts between supervisors and students and which appears deeper in many African universities. There are cases where supervisors want students to pursue research topics in which students are not interested. Student B had this to say:

Dear Prof. Maurice N. Amutabi. I am from [Country A, in Southern Africa] and pursued my Masters degree in Kenya. I read the comprehensive piece you wrote as per the subject matter above. I had to read until the end as I ticked every point raised consequent to my own experiences. I wholly agree to everything and especially to the fact that the problem is across Africa. I graduated with an Honors degree at home with no supervision and managed to score well since my supervisor was not allowed to be one of the examiners. For me it was a racial problem. I applied for PhD but had to cancel because my potential supervisor (and only person in the field of my interest in my department) insists on changing my topic to one which cannot address any existing problem (no impact).

Student B above is clearly a victim of circumstances. The supervisor is to blame here and not the student. Supervisors should not impose their views on students. Student B continues:

To cut the story short, I currently assist many students with data analysis. As such I have received many requests to act as a supervisor, even for PhD students (I still hold a Masters degree). It is sickening to learn that many students continue to suffer in the hands of supervisors. I am really touched and

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I applaud you for sharing this truth. I pray that the rest of Africa reads it and consequently change the mindset and approach to this problem by university managements to the benefit of the region.

The above direct quote by a student B from country A [in Southern Africa] shows that the problem of supervisor menace is widespread in Africa. The student introduces a new problem where people with masters degrees are supervising masters and even doctoral students. This speaks to the issue of shortage of qualified staff at African universities. We must agree that African universities need to do better on staff development and training.

Despite the fact that lecturers needed to hear the student side of the story in delays, students seemed to insist that the higher portion of factors of delay were caused by supervisors. A sample case [Student C] is from Kenya. The student writes:

I am a graduate student taking PhD at one of the Kenyan universities. The article you wrote with above heading [Need to address Supervisor Menace for Graduate Students in Kenyan Universities] is spot on. I have taken ten years [pursuing my doctoral degree]. I am now [at] proposal presentation stage. It has taken a year just waiting to be called to make the presentation. Well, I hope that one day I will be able to complete my studies because I am a lecturer at a university in Kenya and PhD is mandatory for my job.

Surely, we must admit that taking ten years to complete doctoral studies is a terrible experience for student C. The above student C is clearly a victim of structural delays. There is need to ensure that schedules governing student progress make meaning and are reasonable in order to allow students to go through the system much faster. One can detect massive frustration in the reaction by student C who would have dropped out if PhD was not a requirement at his or her work place.

The problem of violence by supervisors emerged in many of the reactions. The reactions suggested that some supervisors were insensitive to the needs of their students. Student D wrote the following:

Hello, Prof. Amutabi. I have read your article “Need to address supervisor menace for graduate students in Kenyan Universities.” It is really interesting and touching. I am [name withheld], a junior scholar, working as an Assistant Lecturer at the Institute of Accountancy, Arusha in Tanzania. I intend to join PhD studies, and have just submitted a research concept note to one of our universities in Tanzania for consideration [for] PhD enrolment this year [2022]. However, I would like to get advice on how to complete my doctoral studies in a timely manner, at least within three years regardless of the pitfalls by supervisors. Could you please share with me some tips that can assist me to complete my PhD efficiently and in a timely manner.

I was personally touched by this message from the junior scholar from Tanzania. It was clear that he had not had a chance to meet someone from a Graduate School to guide him on how to complete his PhD in three years. Our universities lack capacity to hold doctoral and career guiding meetings with graduate students. They do not provide them with tips on how to

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prepare well for graduate studies. There are no guidelines, schedules and timelines on successful completion of graduate degrees. There is clear evidence that students need information which is not there. This is an area which needs further exploration by our universities, including short courses on the same and which we have proposed to do at our Centre for Science and Technology Studies at the Technical University of Kenya, to make the life of graduate students more meaningful and better.

I continue to receive many messages as a way of feedback on my article “Need to address Supervisor Menace for Graduate Students in Kenyan Universities” which has since been published as a peer reviewed article in the [Journal of African Interdisciplinary Studies](#) provided under the hyperlink above. The feedback has encouraged me to write the present article. We need to continue having the conversations to improve graduate training in Africa.

Conclusion

Based on views and perspectives from students, the article has confirmed that there are many factors which contribute to graduate students not completing their studies on time in African universities. First, some graduate students in African universities do not take their work seriously. They do not consult their supervisors and take long to work on their corrections. Second, some students are rigid and never accept to change their topics or delete a word from their work. They come to graduate school with a fixed mind, unwilling to change regardless of the rules and regulations on the ground.

Third, some graduate students use proxies to write their theses. They end up having cut and paste contraptions in the name of thesis projects, which fail through internal and external examinations. Fourth, some students do not respect their supervisors. They are rude and issue threats of instant dismissal and reporting to head or deans or directors of graduate school. This affects relations and they end up dropping out. Fifth, some graduate students are too much in a hurry and want to complete master's degrees in six months and PhD degrees in one year. They want to break records regardless of the quality of their work. They demand to change supervisors and eventually supervisors begin to reject them due to their impractical approach to issues.

Sixth, many students in African universities lack research funds. They struggle through programs because graduate funding has been declining in many African universities. Seventh, part time students sometimes want to be as fast as full time students in completing their graduate studies, without knowing and understanding the difference. They end up with frustrations and eventually drop out. Eighth, some graduate students lack moral restraint, decadence and direction and seek to date their supervisors. There are women who get into graduate school with the idea of ‘sleeping’ through to their masters or doctoral degree. They quickly realize that one cannot ‘sleep’ through or pay their way through graduate school.

Ninth, some students compete colleagues, as if they are back in high school and sabotage each other. This affects their life in graduate school and some eventually drop out. Tenth, although some students are victims of poor supervision, they usually fail to use the laid down mechanisms in addressing their grievances or requesting for supervisor change. They instead take to defaming and spoiling the names of their supervisors, which ends up causing more trouble for them. Eleventh, some graduate students are weak and lack proper background in the discipline and refuse to be guided. Some students are not exposed to research until they get to graduate school, while others may have been exposed to little

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research. Such students often lack basic requisites on content and are not patient enough to read and study hard in order to catch up.

Twelfth, some students believe that only a person from their own ethnic group can supervise them. They are ethnic in their thinking and wrongly believe that only people from the same ethnic group can assist. Thirteenth, some students hate young supervisors, especially those much younger than them. They feel demeaned to go to class and find a Dr or Prof far than younger than them and begin to impose the African cultural rules in university where age matters. They expect to be revered and respected because they are advanced in age, or have grandchildren or have titles from their local areas, and expect to be respected on account of this. Fourteenth, plagiarism is to blame for delays. There are many cases where graduate students could not reduce their work to admissible percentages which range between 15% and 30% in many African universities. They end up failing.

Recommendations

The study recommends the need for more democracy in higher education in Africa, by involving students in decision making especially in the choice of supervisors. Universities should expand supervision teams to at least 3 supervisors per student to open up more choices for students on whom to work with. African governments need to invest more in higher education especially in research by graduate students. African governments should create funds for graduate research, directly or indirectly. The UN recommends that countries invest 2.5% of their Gross Domestic Product in Research and Development (R & D) but most African countries spend less than 1% in R & D except South Africa which spends 1.8%. African universities need to create policies and structures that will eliminate delays and conflicts between supervisors and between supervisors and students. African universities and governments need to invest in fair and open staff development policies based on first come first to be trained basis in order not to hide behind merit and engage in ethnicity and nepotism in awards and selection for training opportunities.

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