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## **Social and Political Obstacles in Pursuing PhD Degree in Africa: Interrogating the Problem of Gatekeepers and Structural Obstacles**

By Maurice N. Amutabi

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### **Abstract**

Students pursuing doctoral studies in African universities have to negotiate against many obstacles in order to make it. They have to go through gate keepers and many structural inhibitions. The purpose of this article is to find out why students take so long to complete their PhD studies in universities in Kenya and how the problems can be overcome. Using Kenyan universities as case studies the article looks at both public and private universities and their approaches and plans in doctoral programs, and some of the factors that may be causing delay. The article looks at the causes of delays and they can be solved. Using both qualitative and quantitative methods of research, the article looks at the challenges facing doctoral programs in Kenya such as few PhD holders and lack of research funds in many universities. In 2017, the United States graduated 67,000 PhDs while South Africa which is the highest in Africa graduated 2,000 PhDs. Kenya graduate less than 400 PhD students in the same period. Doctoral candidates in Kenyan universities take an average 10 years to graduate. Kenya currently has a shortage of 25,000 PhDs and will need to graduate 2,500 PhDs per year in the next ten years to meet the deficit, with everything remaining at constant. Delay in graduating PhD students in Kenya is raising a lot of concern and anxiety among stakeholders, especially given the advanced age at which those who graduate have. The causes of delays are many and range from the fact that many students are part time, there are sometimes conflicts among supervisors; there are cases of favouritism, problems of supervision and issues of resources. Some universities have higher attrition rates than others. Older and more established universities tend to have higher attrition compared to new ones. Therefore, dynamics of doctoral programs in Kenya differ from one university to another. What are the causes of delays in PhD programs in Kenya? Why are some programs more affected than others? To what extent are students to blame in PhD attrition? Should supervisors be blamed in delays in PhD completion? These are some of the questions that this article will be addressing.

**Key words:** Doctoral studies, Kenya, completion rate, attrition in graduate school

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## **Social and Political Obstacles in Pursuing PhD Degree in Africa: Interrogating the Problem of Gatekeepers and Structural Obstacles**

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### **Introduction**

Doctoral research is important in providing needed manpower at the highest level in education. Kenya currently faces a shortage of 25,000 PhD holders and some universities are barely surviving and have serious shortage of staff. This article shows some of the reasons students delay graduating in some of the universities in Kenya and why the average age of PhD graduates is 55. The article will demonstrate that Universities need lecturers and PhD is the minimum qualification that one needs to teach at university. Research findings for this study demonstrate that Kenyan universities face numerous challenges in their doctoral programs. Many Kenyan universities are guilty of delaying graduation of PhD students (Wanzala, 2018). Kenyan universities have been accused by doctoral students for not doing enough to help them to graduate in appropriate time. Many of the Universities in Kenya advertise that students can graduate with their PhDs in 3 years, but this rarely happens (Amutabi, 2011). Majority take over ten years and very few complete studies in their 30s and majority graduate in their 40s and 50s. This is a point of concern because their active contribution to innovative ideas is shorter since they have less than 20 years to work actively. Many scholars such as Dale (2001) have addressed challenges of doctoral studies. Many Kenyan PhD students are dropping out of programs due to delays and waste of time by rude and bad supervisors. The high level of attrition is worrying with departments taking over ten years before graduating a single PhD student. Graduate students need to read the book by David Sternberg titled “How to complete and survive a doctoral dissertation” which makes one understand that one needs great skills in diplomacy in order to complete a PhD (Sternberg, 1981). They will know that there is need to develop a thick skin and also become good at negotiating.

In their book *The Unwritten Rules of PhD Research* Rugg and Pitre have identified some of the strategies students need to use to survive doctoral studies. Their argument is that there are unwritten rules that need to be attended to. Students need to understand the likes and dislikes of their supervisors. There are many professors who have not supervised a single PhD candidate successfully, meaning that they are not capable of mentoring. There are others who do not want to pass the baton and are not willing to supervise graduate students in fear of competition. These are people to be avoided. There are also supervisors who leave most of the work to their juniors and only appear at the end to sign off on the dissertation or thesis. Delay in graduation of PhD students causes a lot of suffering to students. They undergo stress and others even drop out completely. In 2001, I was still living in the United States when news broke out that a PhD student who had been in graduate for over ten years walked into the office of his PhD advisor (supervisor) and shot him dead. There is no doubt that this student saw his delay in graduating as being caused by the supervisor. There are also many cases where supervisors blame students for their delays.

Joan Bolder (1998) has discussed some of the strategies that PhD students can use in order to complete their studies in good time. However, some of the suggestions can only work in a system that works, where supervisors are sensitive and give feedback to students on time. For example in Kenya, conflicts between supervisors are also a problem in PhD programs in Kenyan universities. There are often tensions between younger and older scholars which affect graduate students. If you are below 40 and you are a doctor, you realise that in order to

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survive you have to be seen and not be heard otherwise you will never move beyond lecturer to senior lecturer position. The senior professors work as a cartel and act as gate keepers to any promotions because they dominate the promotion panels. Younger scholars are therefore scared of the dictatorship of age, and often watch helplessly as their students are massacred academically (Amutabi, 2011). In many university Senates, incoherent octogenarians dominate affairs and often support each by concurring on points raised by their age mates. They determine who passes and who fails.

Kenyan universities are performing very badly in global ranking due to few PhD students who graduate. There is a very low graduate rate in all Kenyan universities which is affecting global ranking and competitive edge. The role of PhD completion rate is very important in comparative global ranking especially when juxtaposed to universities in the West which have better completion rates. Completion of PhD students is also critical in measuring research output of universities and is the reason why universities without PhD and masters students often rank so long in global ranking because their research output is ranked close to zero. Van de Schoot, et al, has noted the importance of PhD programs in global ranking. They have noted that, “The Shanghai Ranking, one of the most recognized academic ranking systems ranks universities in part based on the number of successful PhD completions” (Van de Schoot, et al, 2013). Kenyan universities need to play a more proactive role knowing that PhD programs will affect their ranking. They need to do more in addressing attrition. They need structures in which progress of students in the system is monitored with the view of addressing any gaps and obstacles to successful completion of PhD degrees.

Sara Delamont, et al (1997) have outlined various steps and stages in successful supervision of PhD students in an ideal environment. Some supervisors in Kenyan universities have only completed their PhDs recently and therefore suffer from the problem of inexperience. They lack the necessary skills and knowledge that would give useful feedback to students. Many are still recovering from the trauma of having taken long to graduate and often pass the effects of their own frustration to their students. Some of the supervisors take so long with feedback and thereby discouraging PhD students (Amutabi, 2011). There are cases where some supervisors take drafts and never take them back to students. Others provide comments that are discouraging and make students to drop out. Some of them are overwhelmed with the amount of work and cannot engage students’ drafts appropriately. In many universities in the other parts of the world, one does not become first supervisor before working as associate supervisors for at least two years, learning the ropes and strategies of successful supervision. These are some of the issues that this article looks at against research conducted in Kenyan universities.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Doctoral candidates in Kenyan universities take an average 10 years to graduate instead of 3 years and this is alarming. There are students who registered for PhD studies in 2010 and by 2018 they are yet to graduate. Such chronic delays are alarming and raise serious challenges on why this has been allowed to go on for a long time. There is need to find out why many Kenyan universities are failing students and find ways to addressing this based on best practices from elsewhere. Why do students take long in graduate programs in Kenya before graduating? Such delays may be indicative of deep rooted and systemic problems that need to be investigated urgently.

Kenya has a serious shortage of PhD holders and the government and other stakeholders do not seem to be developing plans to address this. The country needs many PhD

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holders and delays in graduate programs are compounding this shortage. Kenya currently has a shortage of 25,000 PhDs and will need to graduate 2,500 PhDs per year in the next ten years to meet the deficit, with everything remaining at constant. There are fears that delays in graduate programs by supervisors who act as gatekeepers will make it hard for Kenya to meet its targets. To make this even worse, the attrition rate at which doctoral candidates drop out is also high and alarming. What are some of the huddles and frustrations that face graduate students in Kenyan universities?

The average age of a graduating PhD student in Kenya is 50 years. This is horrible compared to countries such as the US where the average age for PhD graduate is 28 years. There is need to find out why Kenyans take long before deciding to pursue graduate studies at PhD level. We need to find out why Kenyan universities are graduating old men and old women are doctoral level and not people in their 20s and 30s as is the practice in other countries. Delay in graduating PhD students in Kenya is raising a lot of concern and anxiety among stakeholders, especially given the advanced age of graduating PhD candidates. What are the causes of delays in graduate schools in Kenya? Why do some universities have higher attrition rates than others? Why are older and more established universities having higher attrition compared to new ones and private ones?

### **Objectives**

1. To find out why students take long to complete their doctoral studies in Kenyan universities
2. Identify challenges and huddles that graduate students encounter in Kenyan universities
3. Assess supervision dynamics in Kenyan universities so as to come up with best practices and solution to most of the challenges

### **Research Questions**

1. Why do students take long in graduate programs in Kenya before graduating?
2. What are the huddles and frustrations that face graduate students in Kenyan universities?
3. How crucial are supervisor dynamics responsible for delays in doctoral programs and what best practices and experiences can address concerns of delays?

### **Methodology**

The research project used qualitative method of research. The target population was all graduate students pursuing doctoral studies in Kenya. The study used interviews to generate data. In qualitative method of research, any percentage of target population ranging from as low as less than one percent is admissible. Informants and interviewees for this study were selected randomly and purposively to arrive at rational averages that would attend to geographical, age, ethnicity, gender and other sensitive demographics. Lecturers who supervise PhD students were interviewed as well as graduate students from randomly selected Kenyan universities. Care was put to ensure that most of the universities – public or private – were represented. There was deliberate effort to ensure that voices of the informants were carefully captured by keeping the information confidential, by not using names and location

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in the analysis and reporting in order to protect the identity of the students and prevent them from being victimized by their supervisors.

## **Findings and Discussion**

### **Bad Supervisors**

The research project revealed that causes of delays, frustration and attrition from PhD programs in Kenya are many but the one of supervisor problems ranked among the highest. Many scholars have attributed drop out to supervisor – student conflict where students are not able to work with a supervisor for various reasons. Some students or supervisors may blame each other for negative attitude, while others may blame them for lack of time conscience. Studies such as the one of C. Bair and J. Hawort (2005) entitled “Doctoral student attrition and persistence” has identified challenges by supervisors as important in causing delays in doctoral programs. Some supervisors take long before returning work to students while others give little feedback. There are also supervisors who give too much feedback to the point that they delay or discourage students. Some supervisors generate problems and ask too many questions but do not provide solutions.

My supervisor did not understand my topic and had no interest in it. Each time we met, he would ask me and what is your topic. He showed no interest and made me to work on the thesis alone. He was totally aloof and not interested in my work at all. Sometimes he would just look at the work and tell me to move to the next chapter (Student 1, 2017).

The above statement by a PhD student in a Kenyan university would not occur in a good university where there is effective processing of feedback from students. This is clearly a case of incompetence or incompatibility between student and supervisor. There is evidence of disinterest on the part of the lecturer and the good and ideal to do here is for him to step down as supervisor and give the student to someone else who has interest. The problem is that when such supervisors drop a student, they begin to influence other lecturer against such a student.

Research findings also revealed that there are also stubborn supervisors who are keen on trivial details that they end up delaying students. They address insignificant things that can easily take away from content. They look at students’ submission with a magnifying glass, so to speak, picking out small mistakes and errors and making big deal out of them.

I would take my work to my supervisor and he would spend a whole week correcting grammar and breaking my sentences into small sentences and putting commas and full stops. My supervisor was also lazy, and I had to ask for my work constantly so as to get it back in less than 3 months. He rarely advised me on what to include on content until I saw the second supervisor (Student 2, 2017).

Supervisors do not have same or similar strengths. Glatthorn and Randy (2005) have given some of the strategies of writing a winning dissertation or thesis but a close reading of what they suggest indicates that Kenya is lacking many of the ingredients such as the role of effective supervision. Supervisors need to focus on content and research issues, but some end up doing editorial work and experts in style manuals such as APA and Chicago style manuals. Many of them lack skills and like doing what is easy. Students should understand the

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differences in strength levels when putting together their teams. Supervisors need to be fair and diligent, but students also need to understand that PhD needs a bit of diplomacy and politics to get through successfully. It is the highest degree so one needs social skills, patience, dialogue and negotiation to succeed. V. Jiranek (2010) has indicted that there are some predictors that can make one know if a student would complete on time or not, and students have a significant role to play in this determination.

My supervisor demanded that we meet for lunch or dinner at expensive restaurants and would then pass the bill to me. He also invited us for his son's graduation ceremony and gave us roles and those who did not attend did not graduate. When his daughter was graduating, all of us went there and contributed heavily. That is how we graduated. But that was better than some of our classmates who were tasked to pick and drop the children of their supervisor from school or buy cement for construction (Student 3, 2017).

Many PhD students reported cases of extortion and some eventually dropped out. Some supervisors never read the work of students with the seriousness that such work demands. They are careless in their remarks and students are sometimes never able to make head or tail from their comments. Students reported getting comments such as "Move to the next chapter" or "This is good, bring the next chapter" and many were disappointed because it may indicate lack of interest or knowledge on the subject matter. The problem is that when they finally read, they take the students back to the first chapter or sometimes recommend total overhaul of the work.

### **Supervisor Conflict**

Data revealed that supervisor conflicts affected students. There are sometimes conflicts and disagreements between and among supervisors and students who are not smart often become victims of the crossfire and if they are not intelligent enough they may never graduate. Senior professors often to have their way and younger scholars who are often second or third or fourth supervisors may cede ground for many reasons. They may agree with the senior supervisor or disagree with them politely, by showing them evidence on behalf the student, in confidence. The problem is satisfying everyone and getting their nod.

I will not append my signature to shoddy work. Copies of Theses are put in the library and some end up online for everyone to see. I cannot put my academic name on the line by signing on poor work. If you cannot implement the corrections that I have recommended, let professor sign the work alone. You also free to choose another supervisor who will just be signing without putting her input. It is as simple as that, take it or leave it! (Supervisor 1, 2017)

Comments such as above are not useful and can mean the end of a student's project. It is good to reach a middle ground without escalating tensions. Students are often advised to choose supervisors who get along. All good graduate schools often ask students to participate in choosing their advisors or supervisors. Advanced students often tell new students those to work with and those who have a better graduation record. The previous record of supervisor is one of the predictors that V. Jiranek (2010) has discussed using examples from Australia.

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There are also generational tensions, between younger and older scholars which affect graduate students. If you are below 40 and you are a doctor, you realise that in order to survive you have to be seen and not be heard otherwise you will never move beyond lecturer to senior lecturer. Scholars are therefore scared for the dictatorship of age rules. In many university senates, incoherent octogenarians dominate and reminiscence about the past a lot, about their days at Alliance and Maseno under Carey Francis, their days at the University of Nairobi and Kenyatta University “when they were still universities” and ask tough questions during PhD defences which are meant to scare students away, arguing that PhD is for the tough and not for the faint hearted, and it is not for everybody.

Students who have the courage to remain and complete their PhDs are slowed down by problems of supervision with professors and doctors giving comments at their own discretion. If a student questions the speed of receiving feedback, he is labelled ‘trouble maker’ and may never graduate because the professors have formed cartels where they agree on who to graduate and whom to fail. The PhD students are therefore a scared lot and move around with a lot of fear. Some of the professor’s delay students because of their own differences. They intentionally fail students of their rivals. When they supervise the same student, they cannot agree on many issues, thereby impeding progress of their students. Some male professors make sexual demands on their female PhD students and those who do not cooperate are denounced as ‘weak’ and ‘uncooperative’ and not good team players.

When I arrived in graduate school at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign we were given a ‘graduate school survival kit’ in which there were hints on whom to take or not take as supervisor. It said that if someone has not graduated a student in three years, there is a good reason why they have not. It said, “Look around and see which professors are in many Theses’ committees and avoid those who have previously been left out because there may be a good reason why no one chooses them, and it comes from the past.” We were told in hushed tones whom to avoid and professors who did not like each other or incompatible. We attend staff seminars and we could tell nice and kind professors by the way they exchanged with their colleagues.

Kenyan graduate schools should have a schedule that spells out response time for the supervisor and student, for feedback and corrections. Many universities require that students submit corrections within two weeks, and supervisors to give feedback to students with the same period. I recall during my graduate studies my supervisor came up to my apartment when I failed to answer his calls because the two weeks had elapsed, and I had not completed the corrections. He told he needed the PhD just like I needed it and needed to work harder. We worked on the corrections together and after that I never failed to meet the two week rule.

### **Wrong Communication: Bad comments from supervisors**

After receiving my PhD, I was hired as an assistant professor and taken through training on how to supervise graduate students at master’s and doctoral level. I was taught how to advise a student and what kind of comments and about tones of messages and comments. I was told about what acceptance was and not acceptable. It is then that I realised many lecturers get away with a lot of abuse in African universities. One of my master’s lecturers at a Kenyan university wrote the word CRAP, in a section of a student’s master’s term paper. When I was being trained in the US, I was told that my work was to make the life of the student relaxed and manageable. I was told to avoid tensions and escalation in hostility. I was told that the hardest degrees to pursue are PhD and master’s degrees because students often work alone at this time and are also beginning to have families and other responsibilities. I was told the

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student is the customer and pays my salary and must treat them as my employers. I was told the student is the priority of the university and not me. In Kenya, some supervisors gave students bad comments which discouraged. Some were out rightly abusive. The comments are sometimes not insightful and lack the direction that is required. The comments are sometimes harsh.

I have not seen significant improvement in your work since the last draft and wonder what you have been doing for three months. The way you were calling and asking if I had received your work suggested to me that there has been improvement, but there is none. Do not bring your chapters for me to look at if you know that there is no significant improvement. The ‘turn it in’[anti-plagiarism software] shows that you still have a lot of external ideas, standing very high at 27 and this needs to come to 20 percent (Supervisor 2, 2017).

Some of the explanations are lacking in clarity and leave the students often more confused. Some may have no idea what makes percentages high or low. No one has told them how to reduce red flags in their work. They have no idea what originality and academic attribution mean. A good supervisor should tell the student to learn to write everything they know in their own words. A good supervisor should begin by pointing out what is good and what has improved before dismissing other aspects of the work of the student. Sometimes the percentage of original words can increase by simply paraphrasing and using direct quotes so that the words are not flagged as plagiarised. Students need to be guided that using other people’s words is not bad, but you must acknowledge them by citing them or indicating that you have borrowed them by quoting them. Sometimes students need to be told that you cannot end paragraphs with people’s ideas. You must end with your own words.

With this type of low quality work, I am beginning to doubt that you will ever graduate. Now I understand why other supervisors rejected you. I expect more commitment and you should perhaps note at this point that PhD is not a walk in the park and it is not meant for everyone. Next time, submit to me the revised draft and the corrected draft because it is beginning to look like you are implementing any of my corrections (Supervisor 4, 2017).

As S. K Gardner (2009) has pointed out in the US, sometimes supervisors are to blame. Supervisors need to give hope to students. Statements such as “PhD is not a walk in the park” should be discouraged because they often discourage students as they make getting a PhD sound like something impossible. The supervisor should not make the student feel bad and uncomfortable even if they have changed supervisors in the past because it shows bias and vindictiveness. The supervisor needs to become confidant and best friend of the student and earn their trust and confidence.

You took three months with this work and now after one month you start to make calls disguised as greetings. If you take so long to correct your own work, why do you think I should take shorter time? You need to know that you are not the only student that I am supervising. And kindly avoid calling me before 9 am and after 10.00 pm (Supervisor 5, 2018).

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Supervisors are human. Students need to understand this and be realistic. The above words may have been written after a long time of observation by the supervisor. The expectations laid out in the above should have been relayed out in their first meeting, between supervisor and student, where ground rules are established. When we were trained as graduate students' supervisors we were warned not to mark work of students when we are angry or under pressure for time. I have seen people marking theses on airplanes and social places. Someone may say that a student whose thesis has 7 hours attention on a flight from Amsterdam to Nairobi has a better time slot than one whose thesis is taken to a hotel and marked over a glass of wine in the evening under dim lights. This may not hold true, because what matters is the frame and state of mind of the person marking.

Some of my undergraduate students have mastered the art of writing better than you and yet you are a doctoral student. I don't want to blame the people who taught you research but I am requesting that you get three good research books and read them and tell me what non-probability and probability sampling are. Also make sure that you understand the difference between validity and reliability. You will be roasted in your defence and will not come to your defence because you are taking my comments for granted (Supervisor 6, 2017).

We are often tempted to compare students and scenarios and often we compare the best with average, from different worlds. My father often told us that in their days people wrote better English and had better handwriting until I got some old books in my grandmother's house of his siblings. He ended the comparison, knowing there are good and average people those days just like there are good and average people in the contemporary system. There is no doubt that some gifted undergraduates whom we call first class material'' would put to shame the writing of some PhD students, but one would be making a huge mistake to make a PhD student to feel that all undergraduates are better than him or her. It is bad generalization and dangerous homogenization of a complex situation.

I have sent you a copy of comments of our external examiner on previous candidates and wrote that you MUST have at least four objectives and the fourth objective must be on policy implications. I told you that in the statement of the problem he insists on a paragraph for each objective, as well as statement of the problem. One paragraph will NOT do for statement of the problem or significance. You need to re-write this and resubmit (Supervisor 7, 2018).

Good supervisors must always be ready to teach research in all their comments, and never get tired of doing it. It is good to give handouts, such as comments from external examiners and copies of good theses, but they can never substitute for guidance. I often look at the comments put in my PhD thesis drafts by my advisor Prof. Donald Crummey and appreciate how great he was as a teacher. Most research manuals recommend between 3 and 4 objectives. They recommend maximum four paragraphs for statement of the problem, as well as significance or justification or rationale. If a student does not get the title right (independent and dependent variables in the title), they struggle with objectives, general and specific.

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Who taught you research? Do you know how to state a problem? I don't see energy, emotion and enthusiasm in the statement. It is off colour and boring. You need to own the problem and make it appear as if it is the study is not done now, something bad is going to happen to the world. Kindly write for me in a sentence what this work is all about. Tell me in one sentence what is new in this work.... what are you going to contribute to knowledge which we do not already know? (Supervisor 9, 2017)

I doubt that the lecturer was keen to know who taught the student research. It is rhetorical question and is not meant to be answered, it is expression of frustration. Students may know what they want to research on, for their Thesis but often lack the language of expressing the statement of the problem. The supervisor needs to assist the student to make this clear. The example I give my students is how people with different problems report to a police station. The first comes in crying with blood all over and holding their hands on their head shouting the attacker is still at my house and I can take you there; another comes in and when at the report desk everyone knows they have a problem, but they cannot express themselves. I often ask which one you would attend to first. There is need for clarity so that people understand the problem.

### **Students with Challenges**

Many PhD students in Kenya and Africa often blame their supervisors for delays in their programs (Amutabi, 2011). They often go to graduate schools with a fixed mind that they will not complete on time. They listen to all kinds of rumours about PhD and master's delays and begin to look for the negative things from day one. S. K Gardner (2009) has identified some of the problems that afflict students in doctoral programs in his article, "Student and faculty attributions of attrition in high and low-completing doctoral programs in the United States" which shows that students are sometimes to blame. Students may delay in submitting work for corrections, fail to meet deadlines and fail to do corrections recommended by their supervisors.

Students come to us as part time students but want to complete their PhD in three years like full time students. Some of us went to universities as full-time students but were not able to complete PhD in four years leave alone three years. Our students do not work hard and want to be assisted to complete. I hate the mentality of seeing supervisors as the problem than the reverse (Supervisor 9, 2017).

There are many examples from many parts of the world such as V. Jiranek (2010) based on research in Australian universities where the study looked at potential predictors of timely completion of PhD degrees and where student's role played a key role in the rate of completion.

Some students choose to work with weak supervisors who are not as rigorous in demanding answers to many questions. They avoid you and from the blue they drop with copies of proposals or thesis for your signature and if you don't sign, they throw all manner of tantrums. They even fair very poor in defences

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and blame you for not siding with them. It is not fair to expect someone to defend you when you did not involve in the first place (Supervisor 10, 2017).

The blame game will always be there so long there are supervisors or advisors and students. Graduate students need to be responsible for their work. They need to consult widely, with their peers and teaching staff. Sometimes peers may be the best first stop for chapter drafts because some are ahead and have been through a lot and may notice things that will be picked out easily and can assist in the long run to reduce the number and amount of red marks in the Thesis chapter drafts.

Students take forever to make corrections and once they bring you corrections they begin to ask you when they should expect feedback. It gets very annoying when they begin to call you every day asking about their feedback and you have ten of them. My first instinct is to drop such students who lack courtesy and understanding (Supervisor 11, 2017).

Courtesy and decency demand that we do what is fair. It is wrong for students to make excessive demands on lecturers and there are some who even quickly move up the reporting ladder. There is need for reciprocity when it comes to lecturer-student relations on Thesis supervision. Lecturers reported that some lazy female and male students even begin to make claims that their supervisors are making sexual advances on them when it is them not doing the right thing.

### **Challenges of funding postgraduate research**

Problem of lack of finance ranked high in data for this study. NACOSTI which is responsible for funding research for PhD and master's Students in Kenya has limited funds and does not fund many students. In fact NACOSTI funds a very small percentage of graduate students in Kenya. Some are forced to engage in part time teaching and other gainful activities in order to raise extra income to pay tuition given that Kenyan PhD programs cost between 1 million (US\$10,000) for arts-based programs to 5 million (US\$50,000) for science-based programs. Unlike other countries PhD students in Kenya have no period of guaranteed funding.

I have applied to NACOSTI for funding many times without success. There are not many funding opportunities in Kenya and we end up relying on our own resources, which are not enough. We struggle to get to the field for data collection and then must do data analysis and spend many hours writing. It is not easy for students in this country.

The frustrations on funding as revealed in the data are real and affect completion rate in PhD programs in Kenya. We hope that the National Research Fund will spread funding opportunities to graduate students doing PhD and Master's degrees in Kenya so that they are to conduct quality research. There is also need for the Higher Education Loans Board (HELB) to provide loans to finance research. It does not make sense to fund tuition to the tune of 500,000 for PhD students and not fund research. Research is a more vital component in PhD than coursework.

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### **Changing Supervisors**

Data revealed that changing a supervisor was be tantamount to committing academic suicide and students in Kenyan universities feared doing this despite many frustrations they faced at the hands of their supervisors. In many Kenyan universities, students cannot change supervisors even when they are underperforming. There is always an unwritten law that once a supervisor has been assigned the students has to persevere and accommodate the supervisors. Those who request to change often suffer consequences.

A colleague changed supervisors and that became the end of her dream of getting PhD. The professors ganged up against her and no one wanted to take her. They all refused to supervisor her. They pointed fingers at her as difficult and uncooperative. She ended up dropping from the programme and we knew trouble started when she proposed to drop her supervisor who was arrogant and proud and delayed in giving feedback (Student 23, 2017).

Many graduate students felt that graduate schools in Kenya were not democratic. In many universities abroad, the choice of graduate supervision committee is selected in consultation with the student, but in Kenyan universities, the selection is often made by the heads of departments and graduate schools without regard to students. Even where the change happens peacefully, there is always a problem because change of supervisors sometimes affects students negatively. The new supervisors must make themselves familiar with the work of students and this can take the students back.

### **Mode of study**

The mode of study also affected completion rate of PhD students in Kenya. The mode of study for many doctoral programs in Kenya is part time. One important feature in relation to PhD completion and delay is the mode of study which is part time and where majority of Kenyan PhD students fall. Many of them are in full time employment and only study for their PhD programs in the evenings and during weekends or holidays. This complicates life for the students especially those with families and not earning enough.

If I had pursued my PhD as a full-time student without other engagements, I would have completed it within four years. I had to travel 200 kilometres every weekend to attend class. It was hard balancing my full-time job and working on my PhD studies. Sometimes there was not enough time to commit to the work because of my other roles as mother, worker and wife (Student 25, 2017).

In other parts of the world, Student 25 would have easily pursued her studies and engagement with the supervisor through online platforms. She did not have to travel long distances to attend class. Open and Distance Learning as well as online learning are not widely embraced in Kenya and may be contributing to the suffering of students and delays in their programs.

### **Challenging working loads for graduate students**

In some graduate programs, doctoral students are often engaged as teaching assistants or tutorial fellows. They are often forced to work many long hours teaching for their supervisors

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or marking for them. The challenging work makes it hard for them to focus on their PhDs. There are cases where supervisors pass their work load to their students and even send them for personal errands such as picking their children from school and collecting data for them from the field for research papers.

I was made to teach all my Supervisor's undergraduate courses besides mine. His name was on the timetable and not mine. He would then be paid for extra classes. He also went to teach on part time in other universities and engage in consultancy at my expense. I would dare not complain because he would drop me and pick someone else to do the tasks. I would not therefore complete my PhD and would be the loser. So, I persevered and completed, so that I can also do the same to those under me in future.

Many graduate students confidently revealed that they would have completed their doctoral programs in less than 4 years if they have not worked full time or taught for their supervisors. There was evidence to suggest that working full time and doing errands for supervisors delayed them. There were also cases where professors send their students to assignments that are clearly private and personal, and they dare not refuse. This affects progress for the graduate students.

### **Advanced age of PhD Graduates**

Data revealed that the age of students graduating with PhDs in Kenyan universities is worrying, because many of them are in their 50s and 60s and something needs to be done about it. This leaves them to work for about 20 years and they reach emeritus status compared to the west where the age of PhD graduates is about 28 and they expect about 50 years service from their PhD holders, and which gives them tremendous amount of advantages. One of the reasons is that most people in Kenya think about PhDs when they are about to retire and want to increase their working days by seeking to get PhDs, while others started their PhDs many years ago but have been walking the “corridors of recasting” and “corridors of frustration” for a long time that they end up taking over 10 years doing their PhDs.

The research revealed that some of the students are victims of a system that does not promote staff development and have worked as lecturers or tutorial fellows for over 20 years since they received their masters and cannot afford high fees charged in PhD programmes. There are those who completed coursework and cannot continue because they cannot afford costs of field research. Many stakeholders are bothered by the problem of graduating old students in many Kenyan universities. I received my PhD in my late 30s and was the oldest student in all my PhD courses at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, USA where majority of my classmates were in their 20s. Many of my professors were in their 30s and 40s and some were much younger than me. The age of Kenyan PhD graduates got me wondering whether late blooming is a Kenyan problem. I applied to begin my PhD in my 20s in 1991 in Kenya and was dismissed as being too young and “in a hurry” which really discouraged me. There were also many obstacles to getting PhD scholarships because the opportunities were given to those who were “known” by the big people on campus and the Ministry of Education at the time. I remember I applied for Commonwealth scholarship to UK and Canada but was always given India, which I was not comfortable with, until the USA government granted me a Fulbright Scholarship to study PhD after waiting for ten years.

Scholars are most productive between the ages of 30 and 50, and afterwards they begin to decline and move towards their sunset years. After 50, the human mind begins to

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slow down, and reflex actions begin to experience delays. The mind begins to forget, the body gets frail and easily tired and eyes begin to fail. Unfortunately, many Kenyan professors are above 50 years as well as many PhD holders which cause paralysis in the higher education sector. Students cannot get useful feedback and when they do it is often late (Amutabi, 2011). The other problem is that the few professors available end up in administration as directors, deans, deputy vice chancellors and vice chancellors at a relatively young age because salaries for classroom or research professors are depressingly low.

### **Overloaded supervisors**

Many Kenyan universities suffer from lack of enough staff. There are cases where many are supervising beyond the 5-limit given in the guidelines by the Commission for University Education (CUE). It is not unusual to find supervisors handling more than 10 PhD students and over 20 master's students. The problem is that Kenya currently has a shortage of 25,000 PhDs and will need to graduate 2,500 PhDs per year in the next ten years to meet the deficit, with everything remaining at constant. Universities are therefore scrambling for the few PhD holders as supervisors. There are cases where many of them are taking up supervision in more than three universities which compromises standards. There are cases where students are not able to get enough contact hours with their supervisors.

### **Writing theses and dissertations in Cybercafés**

There have been murmurs about the quality of postgraduate education in Kenya due to increasing reliance on Wikipedia as a source of information to among some of our graduate students. When we were undergraduates, we were told that we do NOT use Encyclopedia and dictionaries as sources of information at University level but instead should use authoritative books, journal articles, professional reports and periodicals. We were penalised for defining anything by citing dictionary or encyclopedia and told those should have remained in high school. I have been surprised to see some scholars and graduate students citing Wikipedia in their scholarly works leaving me utterly surprised. We are now producing “Wikipedia” and “Cybercafé” scholars, affecting quality of scholarly production and new knowledge in Kenya.

I have randomly run through some proposals, theses and articles by Kenyan scholars and have been surprised to see that very few conform to internationally acceptable levels of percentage of original work. Some lift ideas from the internet and do not care to acknowledge sources. This is becoming rampant because no one is telling them that they are infringing on copyright rights of other scholars. I recently wrote an article published in one of the dailies in Kenya only to see the same idea submitted elsewhere by a different person. It made me realise how blatant academic theft is becoming and need to be stopped.

Nowadays when you walk around Kenyan universities, you will find posters in various places, placed by people offering services to write theses and dissertations for you at a fee. They provide genuine telephone numbers which are answered if you call. The trend indicates dishonesty and says a lot about the quality of education in the country. I am told these services are consumed and some school drop outs and unemployed university students are making a living by doing assignments and writing masters and PhD theses for other people.

The assistance in writing theses may explain why the quality of some theses is wanting and some of them cannot stand the test of academic scrutiny because they may reveal non-original percentage above the recommended level of 25% without attribution of sources to non-original words, which is also a form of cheating. It is no wonder that some are taking over ten years to complete PhD because panels are rejecting their work as plagiarised or they

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cannot defend the proposals since they have not written them. I have been to a defence where one of the candidates could not explain points in a PowerPoint presentation. She could only read and not expound. Of course, she failed for lack of originality and ownership of the work.

There is evidence to suggest that some people go through masters and PhD programs but without really doing the actual work and do not therefore change qualitatively from what they were when they received their first degree. When you talk to someone who has been to school and one who has not, the difference is often not hard to make. Similarly, when you talk to a scholar of masters standing and above and one who stopped at first degree, the difference often comes out especially when you start to deploy advanced research terminology such as scoping, validation, target population, sample population, piloting, agency, voice, conceptual framework, theoretical framework and so on. One who has not gone through masters may not differentiate between a theoretical approach and a theoretical framework or between conceptual framework and conceptual model. It is therefore not hard to separate between an academic quack from an academic lumpen or academic proletariat from the academic petty bourgeoisie or bourgeoisie proper.

Data for this study revealed gaps in PhD training. Some students were not grounded in their work. Majority were confident and knowledgeable about their subject, but there were few who were very guarded and coy on details about their PhD research. There was one who could not confidently talk about his PhD in brief and all he could say was that it was in business. He could not remember the title for his PhD thesis despite having done it recently. I asked him about the thesis of his thesis, in other words, to tell me the problem he was researching in one sentence. There was unmistakable evidence of lack of mastery of his research and wondered how he could then contribute new knowledge. There is fear that Kenya may be quickly sinking into academic quandary through churning out dubious PhD degrees written by school drop outs and unemployed undergraduates working in cybercafés around university campuses. These academic quacks are engaging in rampant plagiarising and producing PhD and Masters term papers, concepts papers, proposals and theses without having stepped into masters and PhD classes.

The “academic mercenaries” or writers for hire are cutting and pasting contraptions and handing them to their clients who in turn pass them to unsuspecting professors and doctors as ‘original’ theses and dissertations. The problem is that many supervisors do not use anti plagiarism software such as ‘turn it in’ to flush out the cons. on realizing that universities do not have central data base on dissertations and theses, the quacks have become so brazenly bold that they are now changing only the area of focus or case study and leaving everything else intact.

Data revealed that the “Academic mercenaries” or “mercenary writers” in Kenya are paid handsomely to write PhD and Masters Theses and Dissertations for clients who are too busy. This academic crime started with Executive degrees in Kenyan universities where senior and rich citizens hired individuals to write projects for them because they were so busy. The offence spread to regular degrees and the trend is worrying. Next time you hear someone has master’s degree or PhD just engage them and you may find that some of them are products of cybercafés and have no idea what their theses are about.

Ideas of quacks and unqualified individuals may be taking over in some sections of Kenyan universities, and this is worrying. If the claims are true, then we are looking at a crisis that needs to be addressed as soon as possible. If you have been around universities for long, you can unearth an academic con as soon as one appears before you. You can tell someone who researched and wrote his thesis from a fraudster as soon as they open their mouths to talk

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about their research. There are many tips on how to tell between students who have prepared their own work and those who have been helped illegally. Just run their work through anti plagiarism. If one is keen, there will be somewhere in the work where the original case study will appear, say Siaya when they claim they are looking at Busia. They may also not be able to answer majority of the questions from panelists.

The trick is to begin at topic selection, concept, to proposal and thesis defence and at all times subject them to oral presentations with PowerPoint first and then without any paper or document before them, where they respond to questions and are not allowed to read from any script. Chances are that frauds do not have mastery of their work, even case studies. We need to promote genuine research among our students and take them systematically from selection of topic up to thesis, in person.

### **Supervisors, who retire, go on sabbatical and other leave periods**

The research revealed that causes of delays, frustration and attrition from PhD programs in Kenya is also caused by supervisors who retire or go on sabbatical and other leave periods leaving students stranded. In good universities, arrangements are usually made in advance to ensure that a supervisor who retires is given emeritus status until all his or her students complete. Similarly, arrangements should be made for suitable replacements for staff going on extended leave of absence. There is also need for Kenyan universities to be flexible to allow online supervision and not the rigid rules where students are made to submit hard copies to graduate school instead of both soft and hard copies.

### **Negative energy and loss of motivation**

Data revealed that some students get frustrated from negative energy from university staff, fellow students and supervisors, and they eventually drop out.

Secretaries begin to laugh at you wondering why it has taken you too long. They begin to wonder aloud whether you are material for PhD. Former classmates who are now doctors meet you in the corridors and wonder what you are still doing around. You feel frustrated and think that perhaps you have been around for too long and quit.

Some students revealed that they lost motivation to pursue PhD when they saw it taking long and gave up. Some had hoped to graduate before retiring and when they saw this not working, they took to other options and quit. There were no follow up efforts on the part of graduate schools to find out where these students disappear to. PhD is a rigorous degree and there is need to have counselors and experts assigned to students to keep them focussed and motivated. There is need to encourage them to remained focussed through regular phone calls, email messages and meetings. Swales and Feak have discussed why students need to be prepared well in academic writing in order to be successful in writing their theses and dissertations (Swales and Feak, 2004). This will reduce bad writing and make students be motivated.

### **Conclusion**

Delays in completion of PhD studies in Kenya are caused by factors which can be addressed and corrected. Graduate schools in Kenya need to be democratic in selection of supervisors. They need to allow students to choose supervisors whom they are comfortable with and not imposed on them. They should have degree completion plans agreed on between supervisor

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and student and adhered to by all parties so that students can complete their degrees on time. There is also need for government to be more involved in funding research of graduate students' research because this is where we find innovations, inventions and discoveries that can add to our inventory on patents and trademarks as a country. Graduate schools in Kenya need to have their own graduate handbooks which should guide students in pursuing their PhD and not leave students to refer to many thesis manuals, and which can be confusing. Many supervisors lack skills and knowledge about supervising and require training and mentoring by senior scholars.

There is need for excellent quality control measures where all graduate schools should ensure that they have anti-plagiarism software to which all theses and dissertations should be subjected. There is also need for rigorous training of graduate school supervisors to promote professionalism and ethics to promote democratic learning environment. Kenya needs a blue print by a way of policy guideline on how to narrow the gap in training at PhD level. The Ministry of Education through the Commission for University Education needs to set targets for various universities in postgraduate training and support them to ensure they meet the targets. There should be stakeholder collaboration on how to address the shortage of 25,000 PhDs and how the country can produce 2,500 PhDs per year in the next ten years to meet the current deficit. We all yearn for a time when Kenyan universities will produce majority of their PhD graduates in their 20s and 30s and not in their 50s as is currently the case. It is happening in the West where students who receive first class and upper second are groomed into future professors by being recruited as teaching or graduate assistants with good salaries and given tuition waiver into master's degrees and after two years of masters, they move to PhD degrees and after three years, they can graduate as Doctors.

Kenyan PhD holders should not act as gatekeepers and determined on keeping deserving students out. Some of them may have taken ten years to receive their PhDs but should not subject the same suffering to their students. Kenyan professors need to stop looking at the amount of grey hair on the student's head before granting PhDs but quality of the work of the students. PhD students need to understand the unwritten rules in graduate school such as outlined by Rugg and Pitre in their book *The Unwritten Rules of PhD Research*. They need to be knowledgeable on how to survive PhD and not give up at the slightest sense of frustration.

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