**Situational Barriers affecting Postgraduate students in a private university in Kenya**

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**Abstract**

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

**Key words: situational barriers, postgraduate students**

**1.0 Introduction**

The number of students enrolling in postgraduate programmes in Kenyan universities has been growing steadily over the years. This applies to both private and public universities. The reasons for the increased enrollment in postgraduate programmes is the expansion of the number of universities in the country and the institutionalization of the Privately-Sponsored Students’ Programme (PSSP) (Module II) in the universities. These programmes enabled adult learners to enroll in large numbers in undergraduate and postgraduate degree programmes of their choice to acquire competencies needed in the ever competitive job market. According to Mukhwana et al (2016) 11.8% of the total student enrollment in Kenyan universities was made up of postgraduate students. Kehide (2016) adds that in total, Kenya has 53 universities, nine constituent colleges and five private universities.

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

Habibah (2006) categorized barriers in learning as (1) personal challenges, (2) professional challenges and (3) academic challenges. The situational barriers comprise personal challenges and they are related to various tasks and activities at personal level-family, children and domestic responsibilities (Cross, 1981). Academic barriers relate to the skills that are essential to successful learning. Literacy and computer-related skills, the ability to access and understand information, critical and reflective thinking skills, and skills in writing essays, examinations and tests are among the many types of academic barriers (Amira, Baharudin, Murad & Mat 2013). MacKeracher, Suart & Potter, (2006) say that dispositional barriers also known as attitudinal barriers includes low self-esteem, negative attitudes about being an adult learner for instance being too old, too busy, too tired, too sick, not smart enough, being not rich enough, don't have enough time, don't need any more education, don't have adequate language skills, and being not interested in the programme. All these factors are known to affect postgraduate students in one way or another. However, the degree to which each factor hinders postgraduate student progress has not been exhaustively investigated in Kenyan university research.

Previous studies investigating the challenges experienced by postgraduate students have emphasized one or the other of the institutional, dispositional, situational or academic barriers. Amira et al (2016) while investigating challenges of adult learners in a Malaysian University found that the biggest challenge faced by the student is challenges within themselves. Most of the students have the anxiety towards their learning. These includes fear of not completing assignment on time, fear of having lower grades as their expectation is very high, fear of not meeting the lecturers’ expectations and also fear to be isolated and neglected in the group or sometimes they tend to feel small to compare themselves with other members of the group. Golde, Chris,Dore, Timothy (2000) found out that research training is not comprehensive for postgraduate students. Students are not well-informed about all aspects of research and are therefore ill prepared for rigors of research. Moreover, they established that many students were not well informed about the doctoral process and reported that they did not have a clear understanding of advisors' expectations, time to degree, or how to obtain research funding.

Golde (2005) found several possible causes of attrition in postgraduate studies including: (a) poor matches between disciplinary research practices and students' strengths, (b) disconnects between student and departmental expectations, (c) advisor and student incompatibility, (d) students' perceptions of a weak job market, and (e) feelings of isolation. Ezebilo (2012) while investigating challenges in postgraduate studies in a Swedish University found out that the major concerns raised by the respondents include problems associated with designing data collection methods, data analysis, writing publishable research papers and oral presentation skills. They also raised concerns regarding inaccessibility of associate supervisors and sometimes the main supervisors were relatively inaccessible. This view is echoed by Wadesango & Machingambi (2011) who found out that the most common problem that post graduate students face in South Africa is having a supervisor whose extensive commitments make them too difficult to get hold of.

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

**1.2 Statement if the Problem**

The motivation for this study was based on personal observation as an administrator of postgraduate studies in a private university. It was noted that though the university provided adequate support and facilities for postgraduate studies, the progress of the students was found wanting as few students in the postgraduate programmes completed their studies within stipulated period. Omanga (2017) confirms that in Kenya students take an average of three to four years to complete a two-year master’s degree course in most African countries- Kenya included. Similarly, depending on the specific field, it takes an average of nine years to complete a three-year doctoral degree. Of note also is the fact that many Kenyans join graduate studies when their lives are full of distractions and many social and economic obligations which could contribute to the delays in their studies. This prompted the researcher to investigate the extent to which situational barriers could be the main challenge that hampered students’ progress.

**1.3 Objective of the Study.**

The main objective of the study was to establish the situational barriers affecting postgraduate students in a private university in Kenya.

**2.0 Materials and Method**

The study utilized a survey design. A questionnaire was designed to capture information on the situational barriers affecting postgraduate students. The questionnaire depicted statements reflecting the challenges on which the respondents were required to indicate their choice on a 5 point likert scale. The study sample was 20 postgraduate students who were on their second year of their studies. This is the period when they are required to write their thesis after completing the mandatory two semester coursework session. This period is considered the most arduous where most students experience the most challenges. Too et al (2016) affirm that it is at research stage which is less structured, requires better personal time-management and greater one-on-one support from faculty supervisors that the majority of post-graduate students begin to lag behind, and some actually drop out. All the postgraduate students were studying on a part time basis in the university.

**2.1 Limitation of the Study**

Though the study provided insights into the challenges facing postgraduate students in their studies, there were some limitations to the study:

i) The sample size was small

ii) This was a case study hence the results may not be generalized to a larger population

**3.0. Data Analysis.**

The data collected through questionnaires was first coded manually. The data was then organized under variables and the frequencies established. The generated frequencies were expressed in percentages to create statistics to be used in descriptive analysis of data.

**3.1 Results and Discussion**

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

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

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

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Cross (1981) pointed out that the situational challenges arise from one‘s situation or environment at a given point. The study participants endured these challenges which ranged from busy work schedules, lack of motivation; long distances to see supervisors, lack of motivation and thesis/ proposal challenges. Majority of the respondents (75%) agreed that they were too busy at work while 25 % disagreed on the same. Postgraduate students combine work and study and enroll as part- time students and the demands of the workplace may overwhelm the students to the extent that in terms of prioritization, their studies may take second place to their jobs. In agreement, Fairchild (2003) characterized adult students' “palette of life experience as being colored with older age, full-time employment, and the roles of spouse and parent” (p. 11). More than any other single consideration, challenges related to managing multiple, and often competing, roles, responsibilities, and expectations may be the most universal and defining characteristic of graduate student life (Benshoff et al 2015). Havenga et al (2018) also report that the postgraduate students’ experiences of high workload at their place of employment affected their study performance. Amira et al (2013) in a study on challenges facing postgraduate students in Pakistan also reported that several students in the class stated that commitment in career as one of the reason for them to frequently miss the class. Other than that, commitment to family members such as spouses and children and also long journey from home or office to the class was among the problems faced by the adults.

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

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

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

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

**4.0 Conclusion**

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

**5.0 Recommendations**

The university should provide adequate infrastructure such as online learning mode to enable the students to interact with the supervisors on line rather than travelling long distances to meet them in the university campus. Student counselling services should be provided for postgraduate students on balancing work and studies and dealing with personal issues that can hinder their studies.

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