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Analysis of Doctoral Students' Preparedness for Dissertation Completion in Kenya's Public Universities

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Abstract

There is a great demand internationally and locally for a workforce with high-quality knowledge, skills, and attitudes in all economic sectors. Studies reveal low completion rates and delays in completion of doctoral studies experienced globally and in Kenya. This study aimed to evaluate the extent to which doctoral students in selected public universities in Kenya are prepared for the completion of their doctoral dissertations. The objective of the study was to assess the preparedness of doctoral education students for the completion of the doctoral dissertation. The study used Tinto's Doctoral Persistence Theory and Graduate Socialization Framework. The study employed a convergent parallel research design framed within a pragmatic philosophical view. Purposive, quota, and simple random sampling strategies were utilized in selecting 87 participants (55 doctoral students and 32 supervisors). Data was gathered using semi-structured questionnaires with a five-point Likert scale. Descriptive statistics: frequencies, mean and standard deviation were used to analyze quantitative data, while qualitative data were coded and analyzed thematically. The study established that public universities in Kenya face significant challenges while attempting to achieve timely completion of doctoral studies. Doctoral students were often unprepared for dissertation completion; they struggle with limited digital skills necessary for data collection and analysis, have a poor research background, and experience various personal and professional obstacles such as work-related pressures, psychosocial difficulties, insufficient academic and institutional support, and financial constraints, all of which hinder dissertation progress. To address these challenges, the study recommends: strengthening student-supervisor collaboration, enhancing institutional support mechanisms, strengthening student mentorship, and securing additional research funding. By implementing these measures, public universities in Kenya can foster a more supportive research culture, improve doctoral completion rates, and the overall quality of post-graduate education.

Keywords: Preparedness, Doctoral Students, Completion, Dissertation, Public universities

Introduction

A doctoral degree is perceived as the peak of educational achievement in the 21st-century knowledge economy because it is a key pillar in establishing the human capital required for economic, social, and political development nationally and globally (Itegi, 2020). Internationally,

doctoral studies are characterized by low graduate output and delay in completion (Rooij et al., 2019). Doctoral candidates in African universities navigate through numerous obstacles that dictate persistence and duration to study completion (Amutabi, 2018). Despite the current increase in doctoral student enrolment and expansion of doctoral programmes in many universities today, research reveals that there is still a concern about the high level of non-completion, low rates of completion, and extended duration for completion in many institutions in Kenya and internationally (Itegi, 2020). The findings of Hugo et al. (2023) suggest that doctoral candidates' preparedness for the production of research outputs for the academia arena is a factor of self-direction, experience, and supervision terrain.

Doctoral student preparedness entails candidates' understanding of expectations and the rigors of the research program; this facilitates candidates' motivation and perceived competence, as a consequence, it affects program completion (Matheka et al., 2020). As the completion of doctoral studies maintains undesirable levels, stakeholders are faced with identifying the contributing factors for non-completion and developing corrective measures for improvement (Levitch & Shaw, 2014). Studies have been conducted on the importance of doctoral students' preparedness for the completion of doctoral studies; however, a few inquiries have focused on the extent of doctoral student preparedness for the completion of doctoral dissertations in the context of selected public universities in Kenya. Therefore, the study's guiding objective was to assess doctoral education students' preparedness for the completion of their doctoral dissertations.

2.0 Literature Review

There is a global demand for a workforce with high-quality knowledge, skills and attitudes that can boost transformation in all life spheres and achieve Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (Michubu et al., 2019). It is a concern that students use substantially more time than initially planned to complete a doctoral degree (McBrayer et al., 2018). In the year 2017, The United States graduated 67,000 PhDs, South Africa graduated 2000 PhDs recording the highest in the African continent while Kenya graduated less than 400 PhDs during the same period (Amutabi, 2018). Doctoral degree completion rate in Kenyan universities is estimated at 11% national average within six years Barasa & Omulando (2018) and approximately 20% of doctoral candidates drop out after completion of coursework. Amutabi (2018) reiterates that a majority of doctorate candidates studying in Kenyan universities complete their PhD at an advanced age, ranging between 40 and 50 years, this implies a shorter duration to contribute to innovative ideas.

In the comparative global ranking of universities, Kenyan research output is low as it graduates few doctoral candidates yearly (Amutabi, 2018; Khamala et al., 2018). Dropout or delay in completion of doctorate studies poses a challenge to doctorate students and universities competitively and financially as a large portion of university research output rest on PhD students (Horta et al., 2018). Universities are now challenged to push doctoral students to completion while attempting to produce scholars who are sufficiently grounded in content and research in the (Obeng-Ofori & Kwarteng, 2021). Each doctoral candidate has a unique attitude, ability and management of their study however, writing a doctoral dissertation requires competencies such as efficient absorption of knowledge, integration, well-organized tool deployment, and ultimately, creation of quality knowledge output (Matheka et al., 2020). Successful doctoral programs

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provide research resources, incorporate program mentorship and student research engagements in order to increase chances of program completion and produce effective researchers in the field (Bagaka's et al., 2015). Doctoral students therefore need to express a minimum threshold of motivation and competence for success.

Gardner (2008) argues that the lack of socialization in doctoral programs increases the risk of attrition among doctoral students. Overdependence of doctoral students on their supervisors and their autonomy in designing and executing their research is closely linked to their success and satisfaction (Lovitts & Wert, 2023; Levecqueet et al., 2017; Ali et.al., 2016). According to Hadi & Muhammad (2019) and Matheka et al. (2020), students' characteristics such as their competencies in learning skills and their motivation towards accomplishments of research project influences completion.

Obstacles leading to non-completion are: inadequate supervision, psychological and emotional issues, lack of communication and understanding between research students and supervisors, doctoral candidates' lack of knowledge and poor skills and inadequate training and experience in research methods (Momanyi, 2022; Zuber-Skerritt & Fletcher, 2007; Weidman et al., 2001). The findings of Lake et al. (2018) Kyvik & Olsen (2014) and Ampaw & Jaeger (2012), cite lack of preparedness, unclear expectations, and feelings of isolation amongst doctoral students as some of the hindrances negatively impacting on time to doctoral degree completion. Majority of the students who enrol for doctoral programs possess the academic ability to complete their studies, but systemic issues at the faculty may exacerbate attrition and mental distress among graduate students (Wilson & Cutri, 2019; Peterson, 2016). However, in some cases, programs enrol students who do not demonstrate capabilities of success in a doctoral program but pressured by the university's objectives of increasing enrolment (McConnell, 2015). According to Skakni (2018b) and Mulinge and Arasa (2013), clear policy on effective postgraduate supervision process enhances quality of postgraduate research, satisfaction and timely completion. The process entails monitoring the student's progress, providing timely, constructive and effective response to the student, emphasizing ethical standards and academic practices and preparing candidates to adhere to the institution's program codes and policies on quality and standards (Ali et al., 2016).

External support of doctoral students by cohort members, family, friends, and other PhD students is vital in meeting the challenges of doctoral programs (Byers et al., 2014). The scholarly community plays an important role in the socio-psychological well-being of a doctoral student and thus institutions should improve doctoral student support, understand doctoral students' socialization and incorporate enabling environment, positive social experiences and structures for doctoral candidates (Jairam & Kahl, 2012; Stubb et al., 2011; Gardner, 2010). The provision of appropriate support and capacity building and training opportunities to supervisors through a structured and formal training may also impact on supervisors' ability to prepare PhD students appropriately and thus encouraged in most universities (Halse, 2011; Halse & Malfroy, 2010).

While individual doctoral students in various fields of study have different experiences and varied norms and socialization Maddox (2017), doctoral students should be independent, self-motivated, self-managed, autonomous, and intrinsically motivated (Choi, 2019). Nearly half of PhD students

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experience psychological distress and some level of depression in the course of their doctoral study, causing some students to abandon the program and others to delay in completion (Levecque et al., 2017; Panger et al., 2014). According to Rockin-son-Szapkiw et al. (2014), student resilience, their capacity to manage their psychosocial well-being and coping skills, thinking or learning styles influence their ability to persist in a task. Satisfaction of doctoral candidates strongly correlates with motivation, amount of time students spent on task, students' ability to work independently and placing doctorate as a priority (Maddox, 2017). Students with high degree of self-efficacy are therefore show resilience, commitment, and a sense of calm that accelerates completion of study tasks.

One of the missions of higher education is to build collaborations, partnerships and engagement with the institutions' alumni for mentorship of post-graduate students (Obeng-Ofori & Kwarteng, 2021). Alumni are vital for fund mobilization and placement opportunities for students Drezner & Pizmony-Levy (2020), they also promote research through facilitation of university entry into local and international networks for mutual benefits (Veluvali & Surisetti, 2023). According to Veluvali & Surisetti (2023) and Chase (2019), it also shapes the academic and professional life of students by facilitating useful forums for the students to share knowledge and experiences and enlighten them on new research trends in their society and respective fields. Alumni engagements also contribute to the quality of students' learning experience and academic success, reduce dropout rates, and enhance the students' life diversity (Obeng-Ofori & Kwarteng, 2021). Engaging doctoral students in research activities that include publishing manuscripts is also critical to research knowledge and productivity and the development of research self-efficacy (Grady et al., 2014).

Processing of doctoral students from the time of initial enrolment to graduation is too long and the quality of preparation and supervision is quite weak (Mukhwana et al., 2016). Mental health problems such as anxiety and depression among PhD students are related to being behind in study schedule (Evans et al., 2018; Levecque et al., 2017). Brill, et.al. (2014) attribute attrition of doctoral students and extension of study to student personal issues, the nature of the doctoral program, financial challenges, emotional stress, and work and family responsibilities. Since students invest in pursuit of a doctorate, there is a need to investigate factors leading to success or hindrance of the doctoral degree with an aim of addressing them both from the faculty and student perspectives (Lake et al., 2018).

3.0   Materials and Methods

The study employed a mixed-methods study as a convergent parallel research design framed within a pragmatic philosophical view. A purposive sampling strategy was used to select 32 supervisors, and a simple random sampling strategy was utilized in selecting 87 doctoral student participants from four purposively selected public universities in Kenya. The selected universities were well-established in doctoral studies in education departments of Educational Psychology, Educational Foundations, Curriculum Instruction and Educational Media, Educational Administration, Planning and Management for more than ten years. The study sample comprised of; doctoral education students from the four selected departments who enrolled between the years 2016-2018, who by the period of data collection of the study were in their fifth and sixth

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years of study respectively and eight education academic staff in the four selected departments who had supervised at least two doctoral students to completion. The four universities were given acronyms A, B, C, and D. The supervisors and students were given acronyms L and S, respectively. In the four characters used to identify a participant, the first letter represents the university (A-D), the second letter (S or L) represents student or supervisor respectively, the third letter (C, P, A, or F) represents the education department, and the fourth is the number of the respondent.

A semi-structured questionnaire with a five-point Likert scale, where Very Small Extent (VSE), Small Extent (SE), Moderate Extent (ME), Great Extent (GE), and Very Great Extent (VGE) was used to get the quantitative responses from doctoral students and supervisors. A section of the questionnaire had unstructured questions that gathered qualitative data from both students and supervisors. Quota sampling was used to select eight supervisors who responded to a questionnaire in each of the four selected universities; two from each of the four selected departments. The research employed descriptive statistics in the analysis of quantitative data and the research results were displayed using frequencies, mean, and standard deviation. Qualitative data was coded and analyzed thematically according to Elliott's (2018) method of qualitative analysis.

4.0   Results and Discussion

4.1 Response rate for doctoral students

A total of 59 questionnaires were self-administered to doctoral students. Response was received from 55 questionnaires which comprised 93% of the sampled participants. The details of student response rates in each university and department were summarized in the table that follows.

Table 1: *Students' response rate*

Department /University	University A	University B	University C	University D	Total
Curriculum Instruction and Educational Media	4	3	3	4	14
Educational Psychology	3	4	4	3	14
Educational Administration and Planning	3	3	4	6	16
Educational Foundations	4	2	2	3	11
Total	14	12	13	16	55

Source: Research data 2022

In the case of the supervisors, a total of 32 supervisors responded to the study questionnaire; two from each of the four departments in each of the four universities.

4.2   Data presentation, analysis, and interpretation

Quantitative data from doctoral students and supervisors are first presented, followed by qualitative data presentation from both the doctoral students and supervisors, and finally, a discussion of findings is done.

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4.2.1   *Extent of doctoral students' preparedness for completion of doctoral dissertations*

The percentage, mean and standard deviation of each construct used to measure doctoral students' preparedness for completion of a dissertation are presented in the table

2.**Table 2: The extent of doctoral students' preparedness for completion of doctoral dissertations**

	VSE%	SE%	ME%	GE%	VGE%	Mean	Std Dev
Background research knowledge	7.3	52.7	10.9	29.1	-	2.62	.991
Knowledge and skills on academic writing and publishing	16.4	58.2	12.7	12.7	-	2.22	.875
Writing skills matching doctoral studies	36.4	36.4	20.0	1.8	-	1.87	.817
Social skills	9.1	41.8	27.3	20.0	1.8	2.64	.969
Pro-activity; initiate and maintain communication with supervisors	14.5	50.9	18.2	14.5	1.8	2.38	.972
Promptness in reporting progress	32.7	49.1	9.1	7.3	1.8	1.91	.853
Independence in research	7.3	65.5	16.4	10.9	-	2.31	.767
Financial preparation; pay fees on time	47.3	29.1	3.6	1.8	-	2.30	2.826
Meet research expenses	23.6	60.0	9.1	7.3	-	2.00	.793
Motivation to perform research tasks	12.7	56.4	21.8	9.1	-	2.27	.804
Flexibility; adapting to research dynamics and technological change	5.5	58.2	27.3	9.1	-	2.40	.735
Resilience during research challenges	16.4	52.7	27.3	3.6	-	2.18	.748
Innovation; devise new ways of solving problems	10.9	56.4	25.5	7.3	-	2.29	.762
Digital skills for research	49.1	30.9	14.5	3.6	-	1.72	.856
Meeting deadlines when responding to supervisors' feedback	47.3	30.9	16.4	1.8	-	1.72	.818
Meeting deadlines when submitting research work to supervisors	49.1	32.7	14.5	1.8	-	1.69	.797
Overall Mean and Standard Deviation						**2.16**	**0.961**

Source: Research data (2022)

The analysis of doctoral student responses (Mean = 2.16, SD = 0.96) indicated that students generally felt poorly prepared for dissertation completion. Out of 16 questionnaire items, 12 reflected limited readiness in key areas such as background research knowledge, academic writing

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and publishing, and writing skills appropriate for doctoral studies. Students also reported low levels of preparedness in social and communication skills, including networking, proactiveness in engaging with supervisors, and promptness in reporting progress. Most students expressed challenges with research independence, managing research-related expenses, and maintaining motivation. Flexibility, resilience, and innovation were similarly rated low. Critical skills such as digital competence for dissertation writing, financial preparation, and meeting deadlines were reported to be developed to a very small extent. These findings reveal notable gaps in both academic and personal competencies required for successful dissertation completion.

4.2.2 Supervisors' perspectives on the preparedness of doctoral education students in the completion of doctoral dissertation

The percentage, mean and standard deviation of each construct used to measure supervisors' perspectives on the extent of doctoral students' preparedness for completion of a dissertation are presented in the table that follow.

Table 4.3: *Supervisors' perspectives on doctoral students' preparedness*

	VSE %	SE%	ME %	GE%	VGE %	Mean	Std dev
Background research knowledge	34.4	-	34.4	28.1	3.1	3.00	.880
Knowledge and skills on academic writing and publishing	50	-	25.0	25.0	-	2.75	.842
Writing skills matching doctoral studies	21.9	37.5	28.1	9.4	3.1	2.26	.930
Social skills	3.1	18.8	59.4	18.8	-	2.94	.716
Pro-activity; initiate and maintain communication with supervisors	28.1	37.5	31.3	3.1	-	2.09	.856
Promptness in reporting progress	37.5	31.3	25.0	3.1	3.1	1.94	.892
Independence in research	25.0	43.8	25.0	6.3	-	2.13	.871
Financial preparation; pay fees on time	40.6	56.3	3.1	-	-	1.63	.554
Meet research expenses	25.0	68.8	3.1	3.1	-	1.84	.628
Motivation to perform research tasks	31.3	21.9	37.5	9.4	-	2.25	1.016
Flexibility; adapting to research dynamics and technological change	31.3	37.5	31.3	-	-	2.00	.803
Resilience during research challenges	28.1	37.5	31.3	3.1	-	2.09	.856
Innovation; devise new ways of solving problems	21.9	43.8	34.4	-	-	2.13	.751
Digital skills for research	56.3	37.5	6.3	-	-	1.50	.622
Meeting deadlines when responding to supervisors' feedback	50.0	31.1	18.8	-	-	1.69	.780
Meeting deadlines when submitting research work to supervisors	56.3	31.3	12.5	-	-	1.56	.716
Overall Mean and Standard Deviation						**2.112**	**0.7945625**

Source: Research data (2022)

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The analysis of supervisors' responses (Mean = 2.11, SD = 0.79) indicates that doctoral students are generally prepared to a small extent for completing their dissertations. Supervisors noted that students show very limited readiness in several critical areas. These include background research knowledge, academic writing and publishing, digital research skills, promptness in reporting progress and the ability to meet deadlines when responding to feedback or submitting research work. For example, 56.3% of supervisors reported that students were poorly prepared in digital skills and in meeting submission deadlines, while 50.0% indicated limited preparedness in academic writing. Additionally, students were perceived to be inadequately prepared in essential soft skills such as independent research, proactive communication, flexibility, resilience, and innovation, with 37.5% to 43.8% of supervisors expressing concerns in these areas. Financial preparedness was also identified as a significant challenge, with up to 68.8% of supervisors indicating students struggled to meet research-related expenses. However, a moderate level of preparedness was observed in social skills, such as networking (59.4%), and in maintaining motivation amidst distractions (37.5%). These findings highlight substantial gaps in both academic and personal readiness, pointing to the need for comprehensive support systems in doctoral education.

4.2.3 *Qualitative data analysis on the preparedness of doctoral students in the completion of doctoral dissertation*

Qualitative data from semi-structured questionnaires administered to doctoral students and supervisors were thematically analysed and the results are presented under the following themes; background on research knowledge and skills, psychosocial preparedness, financial preparedness and doctoral student motivation to research tasks.

4.2.4 *Background research knowledge and skills*

The majority of doctoral students from universities C and D (those that offer doctoral studies by coursework and research) perceived that a PhD in education with coursework is rigorous and gives a foundation to the research phase of the study. Acknowledging that the courses taught during coursework were very relevant and prepared candidates for application in thesis writing, participant ASC2 said *"if taken seriously, courses like 'research methods and proposal development' enable a student to understand research approach, design, and methods to use in their research writing".* Almost all student respondents from university C and D concurred that course work prepared them for the research phase of the study however, they raised concern that the research knowledge and skills acquired is lost due to delay in application to research work and if they are not committed to reading widely. Most of the students from university A and B on the other hand explained that they applied limited research skills acquired during their master's study for PhD thesis writing participant DSF3 said that *"you have to supplement your research knowledge from master's studies with further reading and guidance by supervisors. If you took long to enrol for PhD from the time you complete masters, you experience a challenge in research".*

The majority of student respondents across the four universities under study affirmed that enrolling for a PhD shortly after a master's degree gives a prerequisite research knowledge and

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skills to candidates and enhances the ability to progress in research. Almost all student respondents from all the four universities raised concern on the level of doctoral students' digital literacy and skills, arguing that most doctoral students get to the research phase of the study with insufficient practical skills to develop research instruments, organize and analyse data, affirming that participant CSP2 said that *"digital skills affects the ease at which students access, use and work on data and research resources for the completion of a PhD, if students are handicapped in digital skills and took a long break after masters, progressing to completion is a challenge"*. Expounding on students' digital literacy, participant BSP1 reiterated saying *"I used other parties to analyse my data. It was expensive and I think it also compromised the quality of the results of my study. It has taken me a long time to correct it. Even using the online survey tools would be easy, but without the digital skills, it is difficult to manoeuvre through"*.

It was also a common view amongst most student participants from the four universities that the journey to doctoral dissertation completion is lonely and demanding in terms of both time and resources and that completion on time calls for goal setting, commitment, digital literacies and resilience at all times. Participant CSA2 said *"...during coursework students interact, create and share knowledge and check on each other. Lecturers meet and guide students regularly. During research, a student is isolated and busy with many other things, when one gets stuck, she can last that stage for long if not in communication with supervisors"*.

The responses of the majority of the supervisors concerning the doctoral students' background research knowledge and skills were congruent with the views of the doctoral students. Most of the supervisors highlighted that students with a strong research foundation stay focused and are independent. All the supervisors pointed that most students do not follow the established schedule for proposal development, data collection and writing the dissertation with most of them defending their proposals very late close to the end of the expected completion year of the degree. Respondent ALC1 said, *"Many students score good grades in coursework but as they begin research, they fail to apply the knowledge to develop their research, most of those who finish course work without a topic or an area of study in mind stagnate for many years"*.

Majority of the supervisors rated most of the doctoral students to be fairly prepared with research knowledge and skills for dissertation completion however they pointed that a doctoral student requires continuous effective preparation through studying and consulting at each stage, a demand that most students fail to maintain because of other work and family responsibilities as well as social involvement. A respondent BLF1 said; *"Prerequisite knowledge is crucial as it helps the student to identify a manageable topic; do research with minimum supervisorial support; access the right and relevant research resources. It also gives the student confidence however; supervisors should nurture and guide doctoral candidates at all stages."*

4.2.5 Psychosocial preparedness

Majority of doctoral students pointed out that thesis writing phase of a doctoral study is critical and requires focus and coherence but more often doctoral students experience a lot of interruptions from psychosocial issues which derail completion on time. Doctoral students highlighted lack of social support from faculty members, unconducive family and work environment, health and

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mental issues, lack of resilience, anxiety and other competing responsibilities as psychosocial issues that frequently affect PhD students. Affirming to this participant ASF2 claimed that *"a student you may get sick or a close kin member causing anxiety and frustration, the nature of your job may also engage you to an extend that you cannot get time to concentrate on your research. If one does not develop resilience, one gets mental disturbance that even worsens the situation"*. Most students from across the four universities cited a lack of social support and delay in giving feedback from some supervisors. Almost all students cited difficulty in balancing the job and study demands, frustration at work place and lack of resilience to be the leading cause of dropout and delay in completion of a doctoral dissertation with a few students attributing it to lack of family support.

All doctoral students working on permanent terms across the four universities under study stated that they fail to meet deadlines and their input to the study is minimized by work commitments. A respondent, ASF2, affirmed saying *"my subject is understaffed, workload is very high, I am always occupied with lessons and administrative responsibilities. I find no sufficient time to focus on my research. My study leave was not recommended; this paralysed my dream to complete this dissertation"*. Expounding on the issue of job commitment, participant ASF2 also added that; *"I prepare lessons, teach and mark students' work from 8.00 am to 5.00 pm in addition to other school responsibilities…these leave me with little time to concentrate on the study apart from only the weekends, which are also full of school events most of the time"*.

Most of the students expressed experiences of anxiety and disappointment when they are not supported by supervisors. Respondent CSC2 said, *"sometimes you can get stuck, run out of ideas and the supervisor is offering no advice. This may discourage a student for months"*. A supervisor CLC2 also expressed concern about the quality of supervision when a supervisor is overwhelmed with psychosocial issues, saying *"supervisors also experience mental health issues that constrain effective supervision, causing delay in completion of dissertation writing"*. A few students cited delay in completion of research as a result of experiencing chronic illnesses and family challenges that limit productive student supervisor interaction and guidance. DSP2 attested that; *"The dissertation phase requires a healthy and peaceful mind. Sickness and unconducive environment at home, work and society poses a challenge"*.

4.2.6 *Financial preparedness*

Most of the self-sponsoring student respondents in the four universities argued that fees and research costs of doctoral studies are expensive to doctoral students. Students pointed that the development of research instruments, purchase of data collection equipment, data collection, data analysis and publishing may pose a financial constrain during the research phase of the study, which consequently leads to failure to complete field work and complete the research work on time.

Citing doctoral students' financial constraints, respondent BSA2 said*, "doctoral students without scholarships strain to finance doctoral studies, notwithstanding data collection and analysis expenses. High publishing fee in many publishing firms further increases the cost"* Supporting the issue of financial demands another student participant CSC3 reiterated that; *"I did an experimental*

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study; I spent a lot of resources that after collecting data I was not able to pay fees on time. Research can exhaust student finances causing a delay in completion".

The supervisors' views on the students' affordability of research fees and other expenses were similar to students' views; most of the supervisors attested that doctoral research is costly to self-sponsored students, the majority of whom have other financial responsibilities. Most supervisors agreed that financing PhD research is a factor of completion, some heads of departments claimed that outstanding fee arrears may cause doctoral students not to submit or defend their dissertation. A supervisor from the department of psychology at University D attested that *"a students could not defend her thesis because she owed the university. Insufficient funds to pay fees and meet research expenses bar students from thesis submission, oral presentation of thesis and publishing"* the above students' and supervisors' views imply that students experience financial constraints and require support if timely completion is to be realised.

4.2.7   Doctoral student motivation for research tasks

The majority of the doctoral students from the four universities opined that the energy to progress at every stage of doctoral dissertation writing, despite challenges, makes a difference in the completion of doctoral studies. According to most students, motivation compels one to complete research assignments on time and respond to the supervisor's advice accordingly. All student respondents lamented that most supervisors do not set timelines when assigning research tasks to candidates and fail to meet deadlines when giving feedback, leading to student demotivation. Almost all student participants noted that a formal supervision structure is not fully implemented, and follow-up on doctoral students' progress is minimal in their institutions. The majority of the students attested that most of the time, doctoral students and supervisors do not meet deadlines while giving feedback in the supervision process, and the department may not know. Respondent ASC4 expressed her view, saying *"After coursework, we are left on our own. ...as to when my proposal should be ready, fieldwork completed, submission for examination is left for student hyperactivity...if supervisors and the department track the student's progress at all times, the student would be motivated to achieve.*

Most of the doctoral students employed by the universities pointed out that they were motivated by the ultimate goal of a promotion and pay rise that comes with the doctorate qualification; however, they lamented that they are occupied by other job responsibilities. Respondent CSP1 shared her experiences that, *"...I signed a contract with the university and I might lose my job if I do not complete the study before the contract ends... my colleagues also struggle to finish their studies in order to get promotions. I am demotivated when I do not get feedback on time or when I am assigned too much work that consumes most of my research time at place of work".*

The supervisors' and students' views on motivation to dissertation progress were consistent; nevertheless, in addition, most faculty members commented that the need for timely completion calls for motivation of faculty members through better remuneration, facilitation of supervision, balancing teaching and research workload, and offering a conducive working environment. Emphasizing that, ALF2 explained that *"...the university is unable to facilitate supervision. A high number of teaching units and exam marking is also overwhelming, deterring supervisors from*

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giving efficient guidance to doctoral students". Respondent BSA2 also said that *"The University does not implement a formally designed framework of supervision where the supervision communication between the student and supervisor can be tracked for progress. Policies should be reviewed so that individuals take responsibility for the delay in the completion of the study.*

The research results imply that both doctoral students and supervisors lack motivation. Most supervisors have high workload causing inefficient supervision, facilitation of supervision is also poor and the supervisors are supervising students whose motivation to the study is inconsistent.

4.3   Discussion of findings

The extent of doctoral students' preparedness based on the supervisors' results is to a small extent. The quantitative results illustrated that both doctoral students and supervisors had a common view that doctoral students are inadequately prepared for dissertation completion on critical research aspects which included background research knowledge and writing skills. Respondents' views agreed with the findings of Momanyi (2022) who point out that poor research skills amongst students is a common experience due to poor mentorship of doctoral students. Doctoral students' social integration and preparedness is critical to completing doctoral studies (Lovitts & Wert, 2023). However, demanding research activities at the graduate level, coursework, and publication pressure can create a feeling of anxiety, inadequacy, burnout, a stressful environment, and a desire to abandon the program (Choi, 2019). Consequently, there is a need for students' integration into academic communities through the development of a sense of belonging, connection, and engagement, as well as striking a balance between academic and personal responsibilities (Ampaw & Jaeger, 2012). Lack of preparedness among the doctoral students may delay dissertation completion, decrease persistence and increase attrition. Grady et al. (2014) emphasize that doctoral students' program persistence and early completion may be improved by offering effective mentorship from faculty members, administrative support, and access to institutional resources such as research support services, writing centres, and counselling services. Participants also described the preparedness of doctoral students qualitatively. The four themes that emerged: *background research knowledge and skills, psychosocial wellbeing, financial support, and motivation* are discussed in the next section.

The results from both supervisor and student respondents established that doctoral students have inadequate research skills; the participants outlined that there is a missing link between research knowledge acquired and practical application in the project, suggesting the need for continuous training of doctoral students. This is in agreement with the views of Wilson & Cutri (2019) who notes that many researchers experience scholarly writing-related anxiety, a struggle that can be compounded by lack of explicit training in writing. Participants also expressed that doctoral students have poor digital and innovative skills, which affects the quality of research, an argument supported by the views of Choi (2019) and Kyvik & Olsen (2014), who cited poor research skills of doctoral candidates as a critical reason for candidates' failure to timely complete their doctoral degrees. Studies by Momanyi (2022) and Matheka et al. (2020) affirmed the respondents' claims that doctoral students portrayed a weak research background, pointing out that completion of doctoral dissertation is a factor of teaching methodologies, knowledge content, learning environment, and outcomes, and research knowledge, skills, and attitudes. Although prior

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academic preparation is a major factor in doctoral persistence, respondents portrayed a weak prerequisite research skill, this notion is supported by Weidman et al. (2001) graduate socialization framework which points that socialization in graduate school is the process of gaining knowledge, skills and values essential for success in a career demanding a higher level of specialised knowledge.

Doctoral students described the dissertation writing phase of a doctoral study as a lonely journey. Respondents perceived that lack of support can lead to isolation and dissatisfaction among graduate students, ultimately contributing to their decision to leave the program. This was in line with the findings of Lake et al. (2018) and Tinto (2017), who pointed out unclear expectations and feelings of isolation amongst doctoral students as hindrances to progress and degree completion. In addition, Wilson and Cutri (2019) assert the notion, stating that the academic lifecycle for PhD students can be a journey of loneliness, which arouses feelings of insecurity and isolation. Respondents described experiences of lack of support from family, supervisors, faculty, and an unconducive working environment as psychosocial issues frequently experienced by doctoral students, hindering progress. It was also clear that students lack resilience, are faced with health and mental issues, and also experience anxiety. According to Ampaw & Jaeger (2012) these psychosocial issues are caused by students' struggle to strike a balance between work and study demands.

Participants' responses showed that doctoral students face financial challenges when meeting the costs of developing research tools, travel expenses, data analysis, course fees and publication fees. The findings of Sowell et al. (2015), and Grady et al. (2014) consistently identified a major cause of dropout among postgraduate students as financial issues stating that most students are unable to meet high tuition costs with insufficient financial aid. This is also congruent to the views of Barasa & Omulando (2018), who cite students' personal life and work, circumstances and funding constraints as the cause of low completion rates in doctoral studies. Respondents' views corroborate the findings of a study by Grady et al. (2014) and Ampaw & Jaeger (2012) who cite financial difficulties, lack of funding opportunities and accumulation of substantial debt as a primary reason to withdraw from a PhD program. These financial pressures may lead to high stress levels, poor academic performance and high quitting intentions (Sowell et al., 2015).

Based on the students' and supervisors' views, doctoral students expressed a lack of consistent motivation during dissertation writing. It was clear that most student participants who were government-employed teachers were demotivated by the fact that a post-graduate degree was not recognised for promotion by their employer. It was also evident that supervisors and faculty members do not follow up on doctoral students' progress, this made students relaxed and unaccountable. Responses from participants also revealed that supervisors are not sufficiently motivated, due to experiences of poor remuneration and inadequate facilitation of supervision, poor working environments and a high teaching and research workload. The students' and supervisors' concerns on low motivation are affirmed by Hadi & Muhammad (2019), who point out that successful completion of doctoral research is influenced by motivation towards the accomplishment of the research project.

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The students' expression of poor link between doctoral students and faculty members and weak student support system is supported by Skakni (2018b) and Matheka et al. (2020) who attribute delay in completion of a dissertation to: poor communication links between doctoral students and the broader university community, heavy workloads, diverse student culture and background and complex student supervisor relationship.

5.0   Conclusion and Recommendations

The study conclusions drawn from the study findings discussed above are: Doctoral students and supervisors perceived that doctoral students were not adequately prepared for dissertation completion; doctoral students had limited research skills, and there is a need for continuous mentorship and training during the dissertation phase. The findings established that doctoral students are faced with psychosocial issues, which include: lack of social support from family and or faculty, an unconducive work environment, health and mental issues, lack of resilience, anxiety, and other competing responsibilities which derail student focus and coherence in writing a dissertation. It was also clear that when doctoral students are not independent, they lack motivation and are not open to their advisors concerning the challenges they face in their studies. The findings also highlighted that the journey to doctoral dissertation completion is lonely and demanding in terms of both time and resources and that timely completion calls for goal setting, commitment, continuous training on research skills, and resilience. The study recommends an efficient student tracking system and institutional implementation of accountability policies for delays in completion. Findings also revealed that academic staff perceived that efficiency in supervision can be achieved by motivating supervisors through offering better remuneration schemes, improving the working environment, adequately facilitating supervision, and balancing supervisors' workload to ensure quality and productive supervision. It was also clear that doctoral students struggle to meet research costs and fees, and suggested that institutions need to explore more scholarship opportunities for doctoral students.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors have no conflict of interest to declare.

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