



ÜNİVERSİTEPARK Bülten | Bulletin

ISSN: 2147-351X | e-ISSN: 2564-8039 | www.unibulletin.com

ÜNİVERSİTEPARK Bülten | Bulletin • Volume 6 • Issue 1 • 2017

Factors Influencing the Degree Progress of International PhD Students from Africa: An Exploratory Study

Almoustapha Oumarou Soumana and Mohammad Rahim Uddin

To cite this article: Soumana, A. O., & Uddin, M. R. (2017). Factors Influencing the Degree Progress of International PhD Students from Africa: An Exploratory Study. *Üniversitepark Bülten*, 6(1), 79-94.

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.22521/unibulletin.2017.61.7>

Almoustapha Oumarou Soumana, Cukurova University, Turkey. (e-mail: almoustaphoumarou@gmail.com)

Mohammad Rahim Uddin, Cukurova University, Turkey. (e-mail: mructg@gmail.com)

Factors Influencing the Degree Progress of International PhD Students from Africa: An Exploratory Study

ALMOUSTAPHA OUMAROU SOUMANA and MOHAMMAD RAHIM UDDIN

Abstract

In recent decades some countries of the Middle East have offered facilities to attract international students to pursue their higher education within their higher education institutions. The purpose of this study is to understand the difficulties faced by these students while conducting their studies abroad, and in doing so, to broaden the awareness of the challenges they face to complete their research. The participants of this qualitative study are international PhD students studying at a Middle Eastern public university. The university has reported increasing enrollment of international students, particularly from Africa in the last few years. Data were collected using a set of semi-structured interviews that drew out information on critical incidents that characterized the kind of difficulties students had faced in their studies. The data collected was further analyzed using a qualitative software package, NVivo (QSR International, 11). Six main themes came out from the content analysis of the interviews, which are the role of the adviser, student features, funding issues, family engagement, research and psychological obstacles which provide a holistic picture of student perspectives on the factors that influence degree progress. While these students might have faced difficulties mentioned in existing literature, this study argues that the participants have indicated experiencing psychological obstacles that were not described in earlier studies, such as the state of mind they were in as a result of being worried for family members due to war or violence in their home countries, and drop in currency exchange rates and difficulties in acquiring money due to international sanctions imposed against their countries. This study provides important thoughts on the factors that impact the degree progress of international PhD students from Africa, while at the same time revealing a serious gap in the advisers' role which can contribute to the problems experience during the study progress of doctoral students.

Keywords: writing-up doctoral dissertation, PhD degree progress, study completion impediment, African countries, Nvivo.



DOI: 10.22521/unibulletin.2017.61.7

UNIBULLETIN • ISSN 2147-351X • e-ISSN 2564-8039

Copyright © 2017 by ÜNİVERSİTEPARK

unibulletin.com

Introduction

Although empirical research addressing reasons for factors influencing students' academic degree completion might still be described as "charitably sparse" (Abedi & Benkin, 1987; de Valero, 2001), recent years have seen a more focused effort among researchers to identify factors linked to this outcome. Factors frequently affecting degree completion include the availability of funding resources, the nature of the advising relationship, the extent to which students receive research preparation, and individual student concerns about marital, family engagement, or health problems. Several studies have attempted to shed light on the factors that help or impede postgraduate and undergraduate students' academic journeys. Studies also reveal the nature of the relationship that a student develops with her or his advisor can also greatly impact the student's degree progress (Ho, Wong, & Wong, 2010; Ives & Rowley, 2005; Kam, 1997; Kearns, Gardiner, & Marshall, 2008; Manathunga, 2005; Seagram, Gould, & Pyke, 1998; Smith, 1995; Van Ours & Ridder, 2003; Wright, 2003), especially as the student moves through the dissertation stage and closer to the completion of research projects and thesis writing (Maher, Ford, & Thompson, 2004; Tinto, 1987). Among the variables students mentioned as important in determining their academic success are advisor engagement, frequency of consultations and duration of contact between advisers and students (Mohamed, Ismail, Mohd, & Mohd, 2012).

In a survey of doctoral candidates, it has been found that many students reported that conducting research was a relatively new experience for them (Kluever, 1997). This situation is problematic for several reasons, as lack of research knowledge and experience reduces opportunities for intellectual growth during doctoral coursework, and undermines the ability to conduct a dissertation study. Similarly, Ho et al. (2010) stated that the personal qualities of a supervisor have a profound influence in the student's ability to successfully complete a doctoral dissertation. Several studies have found Cook and Swanson's findings (Cook & Swanson, 1978) show that doctoral students actively involved in research projects have more interactions with faculty members, are more productive during their doctoral tenure, and complete their degrees at a higher rate. Besides, it is proposed that students who had topics that match the expertise of their advisors were more likely to complete their research without major problems (Ives & Rowley, 2005). The review of previous studies propose that the role of advisors has often been cited as an important contributing factor to the success of doctoral students, neglecting the possibility that advisors can be a major impediment to the degree progress of their students.

In others words, researchers have examined the characteristics that affect either doctoral student's success or failure. They believe that student relationships with faculty members are crucial to the student's educational and professional development and ultimately to the student's PhD degree progress. The PhD student's relationship with the faculty, particularly with his or her advisor, can determine success in the student's academic program as well as in the student's professional career. For example, studies show that positive student qualities (Ho et al., 2010), their commitment to research and writing research articles (Humphrey, Marshall, & Leonardo, 2012), involvement in academic conferences (Bolli, Agasisti, & Johnes, 2015), having good scientific discipline (Groenvynck, Vandeveld, & Van Rossem, 2013), and having good interpersonal working relationships with advisors (Ives & Rowley, 2005) can determine success in their academic program as well as in their professional career. Also, gender and language proficiency levels are sometimes

mentioned as reasons (Lebcir, Wells, & Bond, 2008; Rodwell & Neumann, 2008). They contend that “students with weak educational strategies and without persistence to achieve their aims in life” (Araque, Roldánb, & Salgueroa, 2009, p. 563) were likely to achieve low success rates. Studies also advocate that psychological obstacles that increase success rates give rise to the ability to work independently and develop self-efficacy (Abdullah & Evans, 2012).

Manathunga (2005) contends that doctoral students, who constantly alter their research topics, avoid meeting their advisors and keep themselves isolated from the school or other students will face challenges that are likely to slow their progress. In addition, change in a student’s career plans, and/or feelings of insecurity and anxiety have also been cited as being influential on students’ research progress. Previous studies have also supported the notion that students from different fields of study are likely to have different problems and challenges which contribute to the length of time taken to complete a thesis. This can also be a key predictor of whether doctoral students are likely to complete their research during the specified period of their candidature (Rodwell & Neumann, 2008; Wright & Cochrane 2000). Besides, studies have also pointed out that part time students who had full time jobs recorded higher stress levels, resulting in a longer period of time to complete their degree (Morton & Worthley, 1995). Seagram et al. (1998) contends “beginning the dissertation research early in the program, remaining with the original topic and advisor, meeting frequently with advisor, and collaborating with advisor on conference papers” (p. 319) are important contributing factors in completing the doctoral degree. Time management is also an issue with some while the length of time taken on writing the thesis has a great bearing on a candidate’s ability to complete a thesis (Kearns et al., 2008). Studies have also backed up the notion that a well laid-out time management plan can significantly contribute to students’ overall time management skills and subsequently contribute to the successful completion of their research in a given period of time (Abedi & Benkin, 1987).

An addition to the past studies, the ease of access to funding resources has been mentioned as a major contributing factor to degree completion. It has been repeatedly cited that financial backing, particularly scholarship, enhances PhD progress by involving the student more intensively in their research study and constitutes a major predictor of successful study completion (Girves & Wemmerus, 1988; Maher et al., 2004). In other words, inability to secure stable funding will become a major obstruction to students especially when they are required to carry out data collection for their research (Maher et al., 2004). Therefore, it is not astonishing that Research exploring scholarship options available to doctoral students has consistently found that students who rely on their personal earnings (e.g., gaining’s from an off-campus job or funding from a savings account) (Abedi & Benkin, 1987; Bolli et al., 2015; Bourke, Holbrook, Lovat, & Dally, 2004) take a longer period of time to complete their PhD degrees than students with significant financial support (e.g., fellowships, research assistantships, or teaching assistantships) (Bowen & Rudenstine, 1992; Jiranek, 2010).

At the other extreme, it appears that factors such as family engagement has been found to be a contributing factor of student degree completion. Furthermore, it should be noted that students who confront family or marital issues during their doctoral research often experience considerable additional limitations or even academic failure (Dante, Valoppi, Saiani, & Palese, 2011), regardless of impediment (e.g., disruption of family life due to bereavement or divorce or war in their country) (Maher et al., 2004). Emotional support

from family members is often cited as critical to those in the throes of the doctoral process, providing them with the encouragement needed to persist and succeed. Departmental characteristics are another contributing factor in students' degree progress rates. Bolli et al. (2015) states that the support offered to doctoral students, participation in graduate conferences and the availability of dedicated workspace have a strong influence on student's completing their theses. Similarly, Ho et al. (2010) claims that access to resources and a supportive and stimulating climate for thesis work can facilitate the degree completion process.

Finally, research obstacles have also been cited as major contributing factors affecting students' study progress. For instance, Ho et al. (2010) states 17 possible factors likely to pose difficulties to a doctoral student, with the first six having the greatest impact:

Distractions from thesis research, lack of understanding of thesis writing, difficulties in data collection, students' personal qualities, advisors' personal qualities, lack of external resources, lack of support from peers, family and advisors, scheduling difficulties with an advisory committee, a tense and uncomfortable environment, too many deadlines and restrictions, external pressures, interpersonal conflicts, financial needs, the length of thesis process, a lack of pressure from the department, negative peer influence and lack of plans. (p. 123)

On the whole, the critical review of previous studies suggests six main factors likely to affect the research progress of doctoral students, either positively or negatively. These are: the role of an advisor, student features, family engagement, availability of funding sources, departmental characteristics, and research obstacles. The role of advisors, however, is mostly emphasized as a facilitating factor for the research progress. The review of previous research also divulges that the majority of these studies have been conducted in the context of developed countries.

This current study concerns the increasing number of graduates pursuing doctoral studies in developing countries (Schofer & Meyer, 2005). Of particular importance to this is the increasing number of students from Africa who leave their countries each year to pursue their PhD abroad despite major issues such as war, currency fluctuation, political instability and government transition. The question that the researchers seek to answer is whether or not the factors that contribute to the degree progress of these students are similar (or different) to the findings of the previous studies discussed. They also scrutinize the students' perspective of how the critical issues in their country affect their studies while abroad. This will, in essence, provide a holistic picture on the impediments that foreign students face while pursuing their studies. This, in the researchers' view, is important as it provides important insights that will raise awareness among university administrators to better understand the difficulties that these doctoral students face. This paper also hopes to provide useful information on the possible difficulties that current and future PhD candidates may encounter which will help them make informed decisions. The results of the study are also expected to provide information to research advisors that, hopefully, will serve to make them more emphatic to their studies, especially for those who come from different political settings than their own.

Methodology

The main purpose of this current study is to examine the factors that negatively affect the degree progress of doctoral students from Africa pursuing their studies in a renowned university in the Middle East. As with many other studies pertaining to the issue of doctoral pedagogy, (e.g. Ho et al., 2010; Ives & Rowley, 2005) the current study is a qualitative research that looks into the critical incidents to understand the difficulties that doctoral students from Africa face while conducting their research. Ho et al. (2010) had also employed the same technique in their studies.

The main data collection method was semi-structured interviews with full time doctoral students from Africa studying at a university in the Middle East that sought to elicit information on the experiences of the respondents and the challenges they face/faced during their candidature period as full time doctoral students. The university was chosen because it had shown an increase in the number of international students pursuing a PhD degree in the last few years. Based on university requirements, the journey for doctoral students often starts with a research proposal that needs to be submitted along with their application to the university. However, they are allowed to change or tweak their proposal and/or their supervisor during their candidature. This is followed by research work, thesis writing and oral defense at the viva voce all within a stipulated period of time. The university also provides a fixed minimum and maximum duration of study for graduate students usually between three and five years. Opportunities to attend workshops to equip them with research skills are available but these workshops are not a pre-requisite.

The participants were interviewed individually between March and July 2016 and each interview lasted approximately between 25 to 45 minutes. The interviews were conducted with 40 doctoral students (24 male, 16 female) at varying stages of the candidature in which all volunteered to participate in the study. The students were asked the following questions but other questions were also asked as and when deemed appropriate: When did you enroll at the university? In which phase of the study progress are you up to? Are you able to estimate when you will submit your thesis? What are the problems you have faced that have negatively affected your study progress? How have the critical issues in your country affected your research progress?

All the interviews were audio recorded and later they were transcribed and analyzed. Some of the students also shared the experiences of their friends in relation to the impediments their friends had faced during their PhD study. To maintain confidentiality, pseudonyms are used in this research. An inductive content analysis approach was used to analyze the responses of the open-ended questionnaire and transcriptions of the interviews. Three steps, in the content analysis process, were proposed by Elo and Kyngäs (2008); preparation, organization and reporting as used in this study. The transcripts were imported to the qualitative software package NVivo (QSR International, 11). The data was subjected to coding which generated sub-categories, from which relevant themes were assigned based on the objectives of this study.

Findings

This study aims to investigate the perspectives of doctoral students from Africa on the kind of obstacles encountered during their candidature at a Middle East university. Similar to the aforementioned existing research, the following factors: student features, research obstacle, funding sources and family engagement were also the themes that emerged from the data analyzed using Nvivo. There was no indication of departmental characteristics as a contributing factor. However, two themes additional mentioned in earlier findings were observed, namely, advisers and psychological obstacles.

Adviser Engagement

The participants testified that the role of their respective advisers is crucial in determining their degree progress rate. While some advisers could mostly put their students at ease in their study, others negatively influenced their students' research progress. In relation to this, three main themes emerged as the most influential factors that had slowed their studies progress which are: adviser's inaccessibility and lack of engagement, adviser's weakness in the subject matter being researched, and the adviser's attitude and their relationship with the student.

Adviser's Inaccessibility and Lack of Engagement

The first subtheme that emerged from the data and considered a hindrance to research completion was the absence of engagement of advisers in helping their students to progress. Bassi, for instance, had to apply for a change of adviser after the first year because his adviser did not demonstrate much engagement to his studies:

He was busy with undergraduate students. It was difficult to make an appointment with him. I was frustrated to see a note on his door that said he was on vacation/leave several times. (Bassi)

It is clear that discussions between adviser and students on topics and constructive feedback for students' writings can speed up the research progress. The degree progress is greatly impeded when advisers do not pay adequate attention and set aside time to discuss their students' research because they are busy with other duties.

Adviser's Academic Weakness

The adviser's academic weakness came out as the second theme in this research. Several participants described advisers as careless and inconsiderate to degree progress.

I have a consultant adviser...He is committed, energetic, and timely in his advice and direction. There is no doubt that he is the most important single external factor in facilitating progression of my research. (Rachel)

My advisor is an incredible source of strength and a great role model for me. She is one of the people whom I feel really cares about my work and "my person". (Ramata)

However, not all participants reported positive adviser interactions. Approximately three quarters of participants noted that not encountering the "right" adviser or mentor constrained their progress either "a lot" or "some".

My adviser was unable to contribute much in terms of providing expert information. He does not have much knowledge on the various research

methodologies and hence cannot help me with my methodology chapter. I was often left alone to solve it by myself. (Sambo)

Traore said that his advisor was actively publishing academic articles, and therefore had better knowledge of research methodologies. This lecturer also encouraged his supervisees to publish their findings.

I think the students who are under the supervision of lecturers who are active in academic publications have a greater chance to complete their research successfully and submit on time. They are even more likely to publish before graduation. (Traore)

Some of the participants mentioned that knowledge of statistical analyses was of particularly importance for advisers, especially in the primary stages of their research when they are concentrating on writing their research proposal. From a student's perspective, advisers who have a deep knowledge of statistical analyses are better equipped to understand the whole research proposal.

The participants also argued that advisers should also play a substantial role in guiding the student to narrow the scope of the research area and focus on areas significant to the current context. If the adviser is able to lead the student in choosing the right topic at the primary stages of research, it can be expected that there will be more time to work on the research. On the other hand, they may spend a lot of time reading and presenting proposals, which are ultimately rejected by the committee evaluating the proposals.

Advisers' Attitude and his/her Relationship with Students.

The advisers' behavior and lack of confidence in their student's capability is the third subtheme that came out of the statements, as evidenced by the following affirmation:

My adviser and I had a very minimal understanding and he never fully accepted what I did. I suppose he never believed in my capability in conducting research and this was very embarrassing. Maybe I wasn't as good as some other students and maybe it was my problem. But I could have really improved if he had only trusted in my capability. (Zeynab)

Zeynab believed that the lack of confidence was evident in her adviser's actions and that this had dispirited her. She therefore often refrained from meeting with her adviser. This became a major setback and held back progress in her research work.

Richard was another participant who shared Zeynab's point of view in that his adviser's criticisms of his work and harsh comments had a severe impact on his self-confidence. Although he acknowledged the fact that his adviser may have intended to motivate him, he nonetheless felt that the harsh comments were made repeatedly as knee-jerk reactions that negatively influenced him and contributed to his decreasing confidence levels. Similarly, some participants also indicated that advisers' comments on their chapter drafts had often left them more confused. When, for example, Richard's adviser left question marks on the pages of his draft and phrases such as "rewrite this section", he said it was embarrassing and it did not help him in any way to identify his weaknesses:

I could understand that my adviser wasn't satisfied with the text, but I couldn't understand what I had to do or from which perspective it had to be reviewed. (Richard)

Student Features

The second broad theme that emerged in this study was student features.

Absence of Background Knowledge and Experience in Academic Research

In addition, the absence of experience in writing academic research was also cited as an obstacle. Other problems cited by the participants were: an absence of background knowledge on selecting proper research topics, and ensuring originality and research methodology. Research is far more complex than simply attending lectures and passing courses. It requires good time management and the setting of deadlines and exercising commitment to the research. The journey of a research graduate student often starts with the selection of a topic, and was cited as one of the most challenging parts. Alex makes the following claim:

Finding a research topic was the most stressful part of doctoral research. I spent over 25 weeks researching a proper topic. Now looking back I was solely dependent on the review of previous literature. Later in a workshop I was told that if I had simple interviews with my target population which were residents of elderly houses I could have found my topic much faster based on their real needs and challenges. (Alex)

This shows that some students are rarely aware of society's needs and start their journey by solely relying on existing literature. A notable number of participants reported that they had problems identifying dissertation topics and that they had encountered significant obstacles in, for example, collecting or analyzing data.

I did not feel prepared to conduct and write-up research...When I applied for a PhD the first time, my knowledge about research was very limited. Indeed, before applying for a PhD, my adviser and I agreed on a topic. Later I faced a serious lack of resources and there were very limited studies on the topic. However, I was worried about changing my topic. I felt my time would have been wasted if I changed my topic. Finally, after one year, I changed my topic. So I had almost lost the first year of my study. (Mary)

I wonder about my ability to conduct independent research. In our faculties, we are tied to the projects of others and don't deal with certain aspects of the work until the dissertation. (Bernard)

In addition, choosing a very broad topic that does not provide a viable research title, being confused with the research topic selected, spending too much time selecting a proper research topic, choosing "wrong topics" and having a lack of sound understanding of the study area are also considered as factors that contributed to unnecessary hindrances to the students' research study.

Lack of Communication Skills

A lack of communication skills either in English or in the official language of the host country, as the students have learned it for not more than nine months, had also been stated as an impediment to students whose mother tongue was neither English nor Turkish. There was therefore a communication deficiency with their adviser, and with other students and researchers. In fact, as both advisers and students used either a second language or the

adviser's mother tongue for communicating, the true meaning was often lost and other difficulties arose.

Absence of Commitment to Timely Degree Completion

Most of the participants said that they lacked critical thinking skills and were unable to alter research perspectives when necessary. Some stated weaknesses in time management, having found it difficult to balance between their academic and family life. Others claimed that they were distracted from their goals as they spent too much time on social networking websites.

The participants also pointed out the importance of having strategies that can help them evolve faster. They felt that being passive with advisers and accepting their comments without argument was not always a good strategy. Hence, some students stated that they were over-dependent on their advisers' comments. The selection of an adviser must also be carefully done because a mismatch between a doctoral student's research area and an adviser's research interest will seriously hinder the doctoral student's capability to conduct proper research.

Another participant, David, believes that his adviser occasionally changed her mind, which resulted in David having to rewrite particular chapters. In other words, he believes that it was his obedient nature and that of others like him who accepted all the ideas from their advisers without argument that directed a slower improvement in their study.

Skills of Writing-up Research

Participants said that poor skills of writing-up research and the absence of background knowledge and experience on research writing were major impediments in their pursuit of a doctoral degree.

Unfamiliarity with English grammar contributed to poor skills of writing and this affected their capability to present concepts and thoughts in a comprehensible and logical way. Some students mentioned their weaknesses in the management of their reading resources and were overwhelmed with literature in their areas. For instance, Alex argued that he had lost valuable time because he had listened to his adviser:

I lost the first year of my doctoral study accepting my adviser's belief that the first year of study is just for reading research method books and literature review, then starting writing in the second year. I now realize it was the wrong idea. (Alex)

Behavioral Characteristics

Some of the participants complained that they suffered from excessive stress and mild bouts of depression resulting from an inability to concentrate, lacking motivation, insufficient self-confidence, and fear of failure.

I spent a lot of time in the postgraduate room. After reading a few pages of a book, I lost my concentration. So, I ended up spending time on social networking websites to check on my friends' updates. I ended up spending a few hours or more doing that. I felt guilty about it but my mind gets diverted easily. (Fatima)

Djiallo depicted his experience of losing motivation although he had been highly motivated at first:

It the beginning I was very motivated to complete my doctoral research as soon as possible. I used to spend over 12 hours in the research room. Later, I lost motivation. Conducting research was tougher than I expected. Almost whatever I wrote was a kind of rubbish to my adviser. (Djiallo)

Djiallo's experience showed that even though students are motivated enough at the start of their doctoral research, they may lose motivation midway. Although the factors that cause students to lose motivation is not limited, it includes a general lack of understanding of the difficulties and challenges of higher education.

Research Obstacles

The second broad theme that came out from the study was the difficulties with research obstacles. The students faced various research obstacles during their study, namely, a lack of access to recent research papers and books on their topic. A lack of access to equipment, technical glitches in laboratories and unhelpful support staff were cited as additional impediments that affected the doctoral students. For some, data collection was very time consuming, and some had to return to their home countries in order to collect data, which was both costly and time consuming.

My survey population was the principal company directors. Meeting with them and conducting interviews was very time consuming. (Pelagie)

Some students had problems identifying dissertation and that they had encountered significant obstacles in, for example, data analysis results that yielded inexplicable phenomena that were tough to explain, even after a series of tests.

I did not feel prepared to conduct and write-up my research...I sort of bumbled along, not knowing what I didn't know.

I wonder about my ability to conduct independent research. In the School of Education, we are tied to the projects of others and don't deal with certain aspects of the work until the dissertation.

The participants mentioned that the earlier they had dealt with research during their previous academic years the better they would have been able to conduct research and collect and analyze data.

Funding Issues

Most studies indicated that financially supported students have a higher rate of timely completion. The financial issues encountered by some African students included difficulties such as bringing money into the country due to high cost transaction fees and low currency conversion rates that reduced their spending power in the host country.

I had to wait for a friend to bring money to me when travelling here.

Not having a permanent job in their country, depending on their parents for financial backing, a drop in local currency rates and exchange rates, increases in registration fees for international students, were all mentioned as factors to have impeded the participants' research progress. For example, Rebeca and Moutari are fourth-year doctoral students who claimed that:

Funding was often insecure and...policies were unfair. I remember how frustrated I felt as I sat correcting a stack of student papers while the student sitting next to me (who was supported by work-study money) worked fulltime on her dissertation. (Rebeca)

When I first started my studies here, the price of renting an apartment was costly. I left the dormitory, although it was free for scholarship students, as I brought my wife and my two-year old son. In fact, when I decided to pursue a doctoral degree here, I estimated all the costs and found the reality was totally different. During the last year the value of my home country's currency had dropped against that of the host country I am studying in due to instability and current troubles in my country. (Moutari)

Another participant, Traore talks about the financial matters she confronted, even though there were university scholarships available:

While there are some scholarships available for graduate students in this university, not all enrolled students are eligible. Therefore, some students are supported by scholarships from their own countries, and others are dependent on funding from family. Doctoral students are not lawfully allowed to work here, and a work permit is required to work for a private firms. (Traore)

Yahaya, another student, had this to say:

Due to the low monthly allowance offered by the country I am studying in and the currency rate drop against the US dollar, I had to be very careful with my spending. I could have concentrated more on my studies if I wasn't so worried about funding issues. (Yahaya)

It is significant that the findings regarding financial obstacles encountered by African international students is a contributing factor to an extended period for completing their PhD studies so that others are aware of their sociopolitical and financial circumstances. In fact, this is a double-edged sword, as delays also cause additional financial hardships.

Psychological Obstacles

Participant data also showed obstacles encountered that were not found in previous research. Affected by the critical issues involving their countries, these obstacles are basically psychological in nature. Halimatou, for example, identifies the ongoing civil war in her country as a major problem that had caused her undue mental stress (Abdullah & Evans, 2012).

I couldn't return home. I was very worried about my family. Sometimes I couldn't even call them. I wasn't sure if I could continue my studies or would have to return home. I then wasn't sure if I could have returned to complete my studies. (Halimatou)

Halimatou was obviously distracted from her studies by her concern for her family back home. Even though, she was keen to complete her doctoral degree, although her state of mind did not enable her to focus wholly on her research as she was very worried about her family. In addition, fear of losing a family member (e.g. loss of a parent when studying away

from home) and the fear of losing working opportunities were also pointed out by students as other psychological hindrances.

Family Engagements

The final broad theme that emerged from this research was family engagement and responsibilities, which had some influence on the students. Basically, students with families of their own had to also think about work to back themselves and their families up financially. In the comments that follow, Rakiatou and Farouk describe their difficulties balancing degree and family-related responsibilities:

While finishing my degree, I gave birth to two children and had almost (90%) of the childcare responsibilities. My husband's postdoc stipends were insufficient to pay for daycare. (Rakiatou)

My father became ill and died while I was in the doctoral program. I had to make arrangements and settle his affairs, making many trips back and forth. (Farouk)

In addition, some of the students gave birth during their candidature period and this obviously affected them. A paucity of backing from family members, deaths of family members and depression over such events also significantly impacted the research progress of the students. Enforced visits back home due to one problem or another contributed to delays in completing their research.

Conclusion and Recommendations

In this current study, the aim was to point out factors that negatively influence the research progress of international doctoral students from Africa. Findings across studies indicate that the availability of viable and stable funding sources, the presence of an involved and supportive adviser, opportunities to participate in meaningful research projects, and the occurrence of health, family, or marital problems all critically impact degree progress. Depending on the number, timing, and combination of such factors, they most likely dictate whether or not the degree was even completed at all. As Owler (2010) contends, writing a doctoral dissertation is not always a smooth, efficient process for many students. Based on this affirmation, this current research attempted to highlight the different obstacles that doctoral students from Africa encounter compared to others. Six main themes were identified from the content analysis of the transcribed interviews: student features, funding issues, research obstacles, family engagements, psychological obstacles and the role of advisers. The first four factors cited concur with previous research found in the literature. However, two additional themes came out in the analysis, the negative impact of advisers and psychological obstacles, were believed by the students to have negatively influenced their study progress.

This current study asserts that advisers can also negatively influence their students' study progress, which in many ways diverges from the findings of several past studies (e.g. Ho et al., 2010; Ives & Rowley, 2005; Kam, 1997; Kearns et al., 2008; Manathunga, 2005; Mohamed et al., 2012; Seagram et al., 1998; Van Ours & Ridder, 2003; Wright, 2003). In fact, the adviser's behavior and their relationship with students is important. If advisers do not have trust in their students' capability or are fond of making comments that are vague or disparaging, they merely mirror the academic weakness of the adviser. In addition, their lack

of availability and absence of engagement are also stated as contributing factors that negatively influence students' research progress.

A significant understanding that this current research yields is that the relationship between adviser and student need more careful review, particularly as a function of academic discipline. Indeed, the adviser-student relationship is very sensitive in higher education. The perception of advisers and their lack of confidence in their student's capability can create rifts in adviser-student relationships. The mutual belief between adviser and student play an important role in the successful progress of a PhD dissertation. Hence, this research argues that advisers should be tactful and constructive in making comments and not be overly critical to the extent that it affects the students psychologically, particularly when the students come from different sociocultural contexts. In fact, it is pivotal for advisers to provide feedback that is constructive in order to help the students make more informed decisions and improve themselves.

It is also substantial to have good adviser-student relationships through a mutual understanding of each other's expectations. For example, some advisers tend to work on the premise that students should be completely independent. On the other hand, students foresee their advisers as having insight on their area of study and to guide and mentor them, especially when they are on the wrong track. Thus, it is significant that advisers and students discuss each other's expectations at the outset. Students must be told that they are responsible for their own progress and should be able to defend their research. Advisers, on the other hand, must not assume that all research students can become totally independent and so must assist them in any way they can in order to help them move toward greater independency. In addition, since the quality of advising depends on how much time advisers allocate to their research students, it is suggested that faculties reduce other responsibilities of their academic staff, especially those who have numerous postgraduate students within their responsibilities.

The third factor that negatively affected student study progress was difficulties experienced with funding resources. The toughness with funding resources was found to be specifically related with the unstable situation of many African countries. This included complications in receiving money from their family, not having a permanent job in their country, a decrease in currency and an increase in the currency exchange rates in the host country of their studies. In addition, international students have experienced difficulties such as an increase in registration fees for foreign students and having neither permission to work nor the right to a work permit due to the restrictions of holding a student visa.

Student features were also found to be a factor that negatively affected their own PhD degree completion. The student features that were an impediment fall into four subthemes: an absence of background knowledge and experience in academic research, a lack of communication skills, an absence of commitment to timely degree completion, and skills of research-based writing. Students' poor writing and reading skills, unfamiliarity with the grammar of either English or the official language of the host country, unfamiliarity with academic writing, and a weakness in understanding English or the official language of the host country were seen as major barriers that caused delays in completing their research. Additionally, an absence of research methodology knowledge, difficulties in selecting the research topic and ensuring originality of the research were all stated as obstacles faced by

the students. The students also quoted poor critical thinking and time management skills, and being passive with the adviser as being obstacles.

Psychological obstacles, research obstacles and family engagement were three other factors known to decrease the rate of student's research progress.

To conclude, the current study has provided an insight into the perspectives of African PhD students pursuing their degrees abroad. Although, the participants were all studying at two universities in the Middle East, the study argues that other international students from Africa studying in other regions will likely face similar problems, specifically those whose countries suffer from war or political instability. These students are bound to have extra psychologically-associated obstacles which students from politically stable countries are unlikely to have or even relate to. As established earlier in this article, the participants of this study had mentioned that their minds were affected by the political instability in their countries and thus were distracted, which had affected their study progress.

For further improvement, the researchers suggest that advisers or faculty members might also consider conceiving student mentoring systems in which experienced doctoral students who are evolving well in the program can share their wisdom with less experienced students and with those who are facing obstacles and delays. This type of formalized mentoring would help students to receive ongoing academic, social, and psychological support from their own student colleagues throughout their doctoral tenure.

In addition, graduate programs might consider developing a regular, mandatory portfolio review system to guarantee that each doctoral student will meet face-to-face regularly with his or her entire doctoral committee to discuss the details of his or her academic and research progress. Such feedback can be very powerful, not only in terms of providing substantive guidance, but also in terms of identifying faculty members who may best support the student's timely progress toward their degree.

Notes

Corresponding author: ALMOUSTAPHA OUMAROU SOUMANA

References

- Abdullah, M. N. L. Y., & Evans, T. (2012). The relationships between postgraduate research students' psychological attributes and their supervisors' supervision training. *Procedia-Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 31, 788-793.
- Abedi, J., & Benkin, E. (1987). The effects of students' academic, financial, and demographic variables on time to the doctorate. *Research in Higher Education*, 27(1), 3-14.
- Araque, F., Roldánb, C., & Salgueroa, A. (2009). Factors influencing university drop out rates. *Computers & Education*, 53(3), 563-574.
- Bolli, T., Agasisti, T., & Johnes, G. (2015). The impact of institutional student support on graduation rates in US Ph. D. programmes. *Education economics*, 23(4), 396-418.
- Bourke, S., Holbrook, A., Lovat, T., & Dally, K. (2004). *Characteristics, degree completion times and thesis quality of Australian PhD candidates*. Newcastle, Australia: NOVA, The University of Newcastle's Digital Repository.
- Bowen, W. G., & Rudenstine, N. L. (1992). *In pursuit of the Ph.D.* Princeton, EE. UU: NJ Princeton University Press.

- Cook, M. M., & Swanson, A. (1978). The interaction of student and program variables for the purpose of developing a model for predicting graduation from graduate programs over a 10-year period. *Research in Higher Education*, 8(1), 83-91.
- Dante, A., Valoppi, G., Saiani, L., & Palese, A. (2011). Factors associated with nursing students' academic success or failure: A retrospective Italian multicenter study. *Nurse Education Today*, 31(1), 59-64.
- De Valero, Y. F. (2001). Departmental factors affecting time-to-degree and completion rates of doctoral students at one land-grant research institution. *The Journal of Higher Education*, 72(3), 341-367.
- Elo, S., & Kyngäs, H. (2008). The qualitative content analysis process. *Journal of Advanced Nursing*, 62(1), 107-115.
- Girves, J. E., & Wemmerus, V. (1988). Developing models of graduate student degree progress. *The Journal of Higher Education*, 59(2), 163-189.
- Groenvynck, H., Vandevelde, K., & Van Rossem, R. (2013). The PhD track: Who succeeds, who drops out? *Research Evaluation*, 22(4), 199-209.
- Ho, J. C., Wong, L. C. J., & Wong, P. T. P. (2010). What helps and what hinders thesis completion: A critical incident study. *International Journal of Existential Psychology and Psychotherapy*, 3(2), 117-131.
- Humphrey, R., Marshall, N., & Leonardo, L. (2012). The impact of research training and research codes of practice on submission of doctoral degrees: an exploratory cohort study. *Higher education quarterly*, 66(1), 47-64.
- Ives, G., & Rowley, G. (2005). Supervisor selection or allocation and continuity of supervision: Ph. D. students' progress and outcomes. *Studies in higher education*, 30(5), 535-555.
- Jiranek, V. (2010). Potential predictors of timely completion among dissertation research students at an Australian faculty of sciences. *International Journal of Doctoral Studies*, 5(1), 1-13.
- Kam, B. H. (1997). Style and quality in research supervision: the supervisor dependency factor. *Higher Education*, 34(1), 81-103.
- Kearns, H., Gardiner, M., & Marshall, K. (2008). Innovation in PhD completion: The hardy shall succeed (and be happy!). *Higher Education Research & Development*, 27(1), 77-89.
- Kluever, R. C. (1997). Students' attitudes toward the responsibilities and barriers in doctoral study. *New Directions for Higher Education*, 1997(99), 47-56.
- Lebcir, R. M., Wells, H., & Bond, A. (2008). Factors affecting academic performance of international students in project management courses: A case study from a British Post 92 University. *International Journal of Project Management*, 26(3), 268-274.
- Maher, M. A., Ford, M. E., & Thompson, C. M. (2004). Degree progress of women doctoral students: Factors that constrain, facilitate, and differentiate. *The Review of Higher Education*, 27(3), 385-408.
- Manathunga, C. (2005). Early warning signs in postgraduate research education: A different approach to ensuring timely completions. *Teaching in Higher Education*, 10(2), 219-233.
- Mohamed, A., Ismail, A. H., Mohd, M. M., & Mohd, N. (2012). Exploring Factors Influencing the Success of Doctoral Students in Engineering. *Procedia-Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 60, 325-332.
- Morton, K. R., & Worthley, J. S. (1995). Psychology graduate program retention, completion and employment outcomes. *Journal of Instructional Psychology*, 22(4), 349-353.

- Owler, K. (2010). A 'problem' to be managed? Completing a PhD in the arts and humanities. *Arts and Humanities in Higher Education, 9*(3), 289-304.
- Rodwell, J., & Neumann, R. (2008). Predictors of timely doctoral student completions by type of attendance: the utility of a pragmatic approach. *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management, 30*(1), 65-76.
- Schofer, E., & Meyer, J. W. (2005). The worldwide expansion of higher education in the twentieth century. *American sociological review, 70*(6), 898-920.
- Seagram, B. C., Gould, J., & Pyke, S. W. (1998). An investigation of gender and other variables on time to completion of doctoral degrees. *Research in Higher Education, 39*(3), 319-335.
- Smith, B. (1995, April). *Hidden Rules, Secret Agendas: Challenges Facing Contemporary Women Doctoral Students*. Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association, San Francisco, CA.
- Tinto, V. (1987). *Leaving college: Rethinking the causes and cures of student attrition*. ERIC. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Van Ours, J. C., & Ridder, G. (2003). Fast track or failure: a study of the graduation and dropout rates of Ph.D students in economics. *Economics of Education Review, 22*(2), 157-166.
- Wright, T. (2003). Postgraduate research students: people in context? *British Journal of Guidance and Counselling, 31*(2), 209-227.
- Wright, T., & Cochrane, R. (2000). Factors influencing successful submission of PhD theses. *Studies in Higher Education, 25*(2), 181-195.