

PROGRAM PROGRESSION AND COMPLETION AMONG POSTGRADUATE STUDENTS AT BISHOP STUART UNIVERSITY

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ABSTRACT

This paper was generated from findings of a survey that was done involving postgraduate students and lecturers of Bishop Stuart University to find out the status of course progression and completion among Masters and PhD students. The study sought to establish the factors impacting program progression and completion among postgraduate students at Bishop Stuart University. The data for the study was collected through online questionnaires and interviews with Masters and PhD postgraduate students that were registered between the years 2015 and 2018. The findings indicated that the majority of students spend more than twice the amount of the minimum time allowed for the programs registered for. It was established that after the completion of the first academic year of class work, there is little follow up on the students. As a result, most students graduate well behind schedule while others drop out. Financial constraints were mentioned by students as the main challenge causing delay in program progression and completion. Other key challenges mentioned were the Covid-19 induced lockdown, disagreement between supervisors, personal health challenges and inaccessible or unresponsive supervisors that take a very long time to provide feedback when they are given work for review. Some students also

mentioned that they were unable to access most online journals that required a subscription.

Introduction

Many students across the world are enrolling for post graduate education. Most of the post graduate students are staff in higher education institutions on professional development but there are also other students employed in other institutions. There are also many students progressing to do post graduate studies immediately after their undergraduate courses, especially in light of the reality that it is becoming increasingly difficult to get employed after getting the first degree due to acute competition for the few jobs available.

According to UNESCO (2020) in the last twenty years, higher education enrolment worldwide almost doubled, going from 19% to 38% between 2000 and 2018. In Uganda, according to the National Council for Higher Education (2018), a total of 1885 staff in higher education institutions were enrolled for Masters programs compared to 748 for PhD programs. Post graduate education offers a more specialized focus on specific study areas. This is likely to equip graduates with expertise which is very necessary especially in the modern world where the job market is flooded with many qualified people, thereby making the competition very stiff. A post graduate education is also very likely to add value to the name of the graduate thereby earning them more respect from employees and the society at large. Post graduate qualifications are also most likely to come with better earnings thereby making the return on investment more worthwhile for an individual.

Moreover, some careers require postgraduate qualification. For example, according to Olara (2023), Makerere university lecturers were ordered to acquire PhDs or lose their jobs. Apart from career progression, postgraduate education may also benefit those who may wish to change their careers and those who may just

wish to take on a personal intellectual challenge which may lead to personal material and psychological gratification.

Post graduate education at Bishop Stuart University is coordinated by the directorate of post graduate studies and there are many courses at post graduate diploma, Masters degree programs and PhD programs. This study mainly focused on the Masters and PhD courses, considering that many diploma courses do not involve research which appears to be the main cause of slow progression or drop out.

Problem Statement

Although the demand for post graduate education is increasing everywhere in the world including Uganda, there appears to be a problem of slow progression and completion especially in developing countries.

According the University post graduate hand book, Masters Degrees and PhD students are expected to graduate in 2 and 3 calendar years respectively. However, only a small percentage of students of students are able to complete their post graduate courses. For example, only 2 out 19 students registered for the Master of Education program at Bishop Stuart University were able to graduate on time while none of the 15 PhD students registered were able to graduate on time. Many of these students usually complete the taught programs on time but the delay in most of the cases starts when the students start on research. The majority of students end up spending more time than the minimum prescribed period while others end up dropping out of the courses completely.

For example, according to Monton *et. al* (2015), on average 16% of Masters graduates in South Africa continue to enroll for a PhD within 5-years of completing their masters studies. Of these, only 39% complete their doctoral studies within 7 years. Approximately 60% of all Masters students are still enrolled four years after their first entrance. This means that the corresponding

attrition rate (or dropout rate) is 40%, and this pattern has not changed significantly from analyses of earlier masters cohorts. Between 34% and 45% of masters students take three to five years to complete their degree. c. With regards to doctoral retention, approximately 60% of all doctoral students are still enrolled by the fifth year after their first entry (i.e. have completed or are in the process of completing). This means that the corresponding attrition rate (or drop-out rate) is 40%. The same study found that the average completion time for Masters and PhD students was 5 and 7 years respectively, even though the minimum time allowable for the courses is 2 and 3 years respectively.

The same study (Monton et.al 2015) reported much better completion rates for Universities in the developed countries.

Data for students in the United States who entered doctoral programs in 1992-93 to 1994-95 found that the overall cumulative 10-year completion rate was 57%. At Canada's 15 research-intensive universities 70.6% of the students who entered PhD studies in 2001 successfully completed within nine years across disciplines. British students who enrolled in 1996-97 for a period of seven years up to 2002-03 had a completion rate of 71% for full-time and 34% for part-time PhD students.

A comparative analysis of the doctoral students in South Africa who commenced their studies in 2003, 2004 and 2005 illustrated an average completion rate of 35% after five years and 42% after six years. The 2006 cohort showed a 48% completion rate after seven years.

Failing to complete the program on time by many students is a problem to the students themselves but also to the institutions. Other potential students who would like to enroll are likely to be demotivated to enroll when they see those ahead of them not progressing as they should. Timely progression and completion would also help to free up time and resources for institutions and supervisors to take on new students. Finishing programs in time is also likely to improve the reputation of an academic institution.

Students who finish their programs in time can also be encouraged to start on other more advanced courses. Failure to progress or finish in time also makes students spend more money on top of losing time that they would be spending working for more money, thus slow progression leads to a double loss to the student. Spending more time than was originally planned also leads to fatigue and this may affect the quality of the work. At some point, students and supervisors end up turning in work that is not as good as it should be, just for the sake of finishing the course.

Moreover, slow progression may even render the study irrelevant since the problem that the researcher may have identified may have since mutated or evolved or may require other solutions other than those suggested by the researcher. Slow progression also often times results into a bad relationship between the supervisor and the student because many times the student begins to put the blame on the supervisor, claiming that the supervisor is intentionally and maliciously causing the delay. On the other hand, the supervisor may also begin to blame the student, claiming that the student is not doing enough to progress as quickly as they should.

Purpose and Objectives of the Study

This study was intended to find out factors affecting course progression and completion among post graduate students at Bishop Stuart University so as to identify measures that may be taken to improve the rate of completion. The study was guided by the following specific objectives:

- I. To find out the status of program progression among post graduate students (Masters and PhD) at Bishop Stuart University
- II. To find out factors that affect program progression and completion among Postgraduate students

III. To suggest measures that may lead to improvement in program progression and completion

Literature Review

Many studies that have been done across the world show that factors that affect progression and completion of postgraduate studies are many and varied. De Zoysa (2008), in a study done to investigate the factors affecting the completion of postgraduate degrees for students using the long distance mode in Sri-Lanka reported that in a group of 51 post graduate students, 48% had completed on time, 36% were still progressing while 20% had dropped out. Some of the factors identified that affected progression included language barrier (for the non-English speaking students), financial difficulties, lack of sufficient knowledge in research methods, lack of support by university authorities and supervisors, poor program structure, insufficient library and ICT facilities, and poor time management by supervisors and university facilities.

In a study by Rachel Brooks, Kate Byford, and Janet Batsleer (2014) it was reported that academic and personal support, funding, and clear expectations and feedback were important factors in postgraduate student success.

Similarly, in a study by Pasha-Zaidi and Andrew W. Kemp (2018) the literature review analyzed 64 studies on postgraduate program completion rates from around the world. The review found that personal and academic factors, such as motivation, time management skills, academic preparation, and supervisory support, were key factors in postgraduate program completion.

A survey of postgraduate students in the United Kingdom, UK Higher Education Academy. (2019). found that academic support, supervision, and feedback were important factors in postgraduate student success. The survey also found that students who reported

higher levels of satisfaction with their postgraduate experience were more likely to progress to further study or employment.

A review of the literature by Lesley Pugsley and Roger Davis (2018). Which analyzed studies on postgraduate program completion and progression from around the world found that factors such as student motivation, program structure, supervision, and support services were important predictors of postgraduate program success.

Meanwhile, Kylie Shaw, Helen Partridge, and Gillian Hallam (2013) in a study that examined the factors that contribute to postgraduate coursework completion and non-completion in Australia, found that personal factors, such as motivation and time management skills, were important predictors of completion, along with program structure and support services.

In another study, Hommadai (1990) pointed out absence of adequate policy and programming of research work by university departments as a major cause of poor progression. Ismail (1997) found out that poor progression was attributed to the students' home and institutional environment such as students' economic background demographic variable and distance from the students' home to the university. Similarly Muthukrishnan et. al (2022) reported that key factors influencing graduation on time were student research skills and institutional support.

In a study done in Pakistan, Muhammad (2021) identified personal factors, supervisory factors, social support and institutional factors as major factors affecting course progression among post graduate students. Similarly, Ferrer de Valero (2009) attributed poor progression and low completion rates to institutional bureaucracies. Meanwhile, in a study done to establish individual and institutional factors that influence completion rates in a medical education Master's program in Germany, difficulty in choosing a research topic and lack of timely feedback from supervisors were the major factors.

Businge (2019) reported that student dropout rate in Uganda were alarming. It was reported that according to the 2016 Africa Higher Education student survey report, almost 30% of all students in Uganda who join University education never finish their courses on time or end up dropping out. Some of the factors identified include pregnancy, alcoholism, misappropriation of tuition fees by students and financial difficulties. Similarly, Eyangu *et. al* (2014) noted that completion rates among Masters students was very low. The delays and dropouts were attributed to delays in returning research comments by both internal and external supervisors, personal student weaknesses such as lack of commitment, lack of time due to commitments at home or at work and delays caused by institutional bureaucracy. Other factors identified include disagreements or failure to move at the same pace by co-supervisors, relaxed or unclear university policies on enforcing timely completion, health challenges, lack of funds and lack of commitment of the supervisors.

Stella Mbabazi and James Arinaitwe (2019) examined the factors that influence postgraduate completion rates in Ugandan universities and offers recommendations for improving academic success. The study found that funding, supervision, time management, research skills, and personal factors were all important factors in postgraduate program completion.

Justus Mugaju and Grace B. Nanyonga (2018) discussed the state of postgraduate education in Uganda, including enrollment, completion, and quality. The authors highlight challenges such as funding, research capacity, and infrastructure, and suggest strategies for improving postgraduate education in Uganda.

Suzan Nakacwa and Anthony Mugagga (2017) examined the factors that influence postgraduate student retention and attrition in Uganda, using data from a survey of postgraduate students at Makerere University. The study found that academic factors, such as supervision and course quality, were important predictors of

retention, as were personal factors such as motivation and time management skills.

Muhairwe Immaculate, Kigongo-Mueller Joyce, and Ronald Bisaso (2017), discussed the challenges of postgraduate education at Makerere University, including funding, supervision, and quality. The authors suggest strategies for addressing these challenges, such as enhancing supervision and support services for students.

While the foregoing literature from around the world and Uganda in particular identifies the common causes of poor program completion and progression, most of the studies are done in environments that are different from the context of the current study, which was done in a young private university in a developing country with very little experience in running post graduate courses.

Postgraduate Programs at Bishop Stuart University

The University has been offering postgraduate courses in various disciplines since 2007. These include post graduate diplomas, Masters degrees and PhD programs. This study focused mainly on Masters and PhD students, since these are the ones that are required to do classwork and research.

Research Design and Methodology

The study adopted a descriptive survey design. The data for the study was collected through online questionnaires and interviews with Masters and PhD postgraduate students that were registered between the years 2015 and 2018. All the 15 students who had enrolled for various PhD programs and all 19 students who had enrolled for Masters in Education during the period 2015-2018 were involved in the study.

The questionnaire for the participants was used to elicit responses from participants on specific areas regarding students' experiences especially factors that impacted their program progression. The questionnaire was followed up with one-on-one interviews in order to be able to ask follow up questions to enable the researcher to understand the views of respondents. Participants who could not be reached physically were interviewed on phone.

Findings

Out of the 15 students that registered for PhD in the period 2015-2018, none had been able to graduate in the minimum period of 3 years. One student was able to graduate after 6 years in 2022 while another 2 graduated after 7 years in 2023. This means that based on the number that had completed, the average completion time for PhDs was 6.5 years. The remaining 10 students were still doing research while 2 students said they had abandoned the course. One of the students who had abandoned the PhD course cited financial difficulties while another said he had lost interest in the course when he realized that the program did not rhyme well with his previous qualifications.

Of the 19 Masters students who had enrolled from 2016-2018 and participated in this study, none had been able to graduate in the minimum period of 2 years. Only 2 students were able to graduate 1 year late while 5 students graduated 3 years late. 2 students graduated 4 years late. This means the average completion time for Masters was 5 years. The remaining 10 students out of the 19 (53%) were still progressing or had dropped out of the course.

The findings also showed that of the 19 participants who were Masters Students that had registered from 2016-2018, none of the students were able to graduate in the minimum period of 2 years. 3 students had graduated 1 year late, 4 students graduated 2 years late, 3 graduated 3 years late while 10 students were either still progressing or had dropped out of the course.

Students were asked whether they felt that they had enough time to do their research work and 80% said they indeed had enough time while 20% felt that they were too busy at their work place to be able to progress and complete their course in time.

Asked whether they had enough funds to enable them to progress and complete on time, 48% said they had enough funds. On the other hand, 35% said they did not have enough funds while 16% gave a neutral response.

The students were asked whether they had enough access to their supervisors. 63% of the respondents said they had access to their supervisors while 21% gave a neutral response and 12% said they did not have sufficient access to their supervisors.

57% of the respondents said they had access to both their supervisors while 20% said only one of their supervisors were accessible. 21% of the respondents gave a neutral answer to the question about accessibility to both supervisors.

When asked to rate their supervisors knowledge of research methods, 57% of the respondents agreed that their supervisors were knowledgeable compared to 10% who disagreed and 8% who gave a neutral response.

Asked whether they sometimes received contradictory guidance from their supervisors, 48% of the respondents said they did not face such a problem compared to 27% who gave a neutral answer. 23% of the respondents said they faced the problem of getting contradictory guidance from their supervisors.

The study also sought to find out whether the students felt they had enough knowledge and access to ICT facilities. The majority of the students (80%) said they felt they were not challenged as far as knowledge and access of ICT. The remaining 20% talked of problems like poor internet connectivity in their areas, printing facilities and lack of or unreliable electricity.

Asked about the support they get from the University especially in terms of clear timelines for progression and completion of research work, 58% said they felt the University

provided clear timelines. However, 42% said the University did not provide clear timelines. Asked whether they were regularly contacted by the University authorities to encourage them to progress with their research work, 50% of the students said they were never contacted and 10% gave a neutral answer. Only 40% said they were contacted.

Some Factors that have Helped Students to Progress

The students were asked to mention some factors that may have helped them to progress with their work. Some of the factors mentioned include encouragement from the supervisors, personal determination, peer support and a conducive learning environment at the University.

Some Factors that have Hindered Course Progression and Completion

However, the students mentioned financial constraints as the main challenge. Over 50% said they did not have enough funds to cover all costs, considering that they were using their meager salaries to finance their programs. One of the participants said the salary was hardly enough to cover his personal and domestic needs and leave enough to cater for the needs of the program.

Other key challenges mentioned were the Covid-19 induced lockdown. Most respondents said the onset of the Covid lockdown left them hopeless and unsure of when normal life would resume. The lockdown also meant that they could not travel to meet supervisors or access material in the university and other libraries.

Another factor mentioned was disagreement between supervisors. Participants mentioned that disagreements often times left them stranded, failing to decide which advice to follow. Personal health challenges were also mentioned by some

participants. Another problem mentioned was inaccessible or unresponsive supervisors that take a very long time to provide feedback when they are given work for review.

Some students also mentioned that they were unable to access most online journals that required subscription. This problem was made worse by lack of sufficient funds on the part of individual students but also lack of sufficient knowledge on how to subscribe to such journals. One student for example said that most journals required one to have a credit card and the student confessed that neither did he have a credit card nor did he know how he would use it to subscribe.

Suggestion for Improvement

According to the students, allocating one key supervisor may ensure quicker progression than the current practice of two supervisors who sometimes give contradictory guidance or fail to move at the same speed while reviewing students' work. It was also suggested that the University should subscribe to online journals to enable students to access them.

Students also suggested that the University should help students to identify alternative sources of funding and sponsorship because post graduate education is very expensive and many students do not earn enough to enable them to finance their education.

In addition, students also mentioned that the University should follow up on the supervisors to ensure that they do their work punctually and with commitment. Students also suggested that the University needs to do more as far as following up and encouraging students. They also suggested that there should be regular student seminars and presentations. It was also suggested that the University should come up with clear and strict timelines which students should be reminded about from time to time. It was also suggested that students should be provided with an opportunity to

give their feedback about the challenges they may be facing from time to time. This they said could be through questionnaires or regular meetings.

Views from Supervisors

Apart from the data collected from students, data was also collected from 10 University staff who had been research supervisors in the period 2016-2020. 75% of these were at the rank of Lecturer while 25% were at the rank of Senior Lecturer. 60% of these supervisors said students did not appear to be too busy to be too busy to have time to progress and complete their research work compared to 20% who gave a neutral answer and 20% who said students appeared to be too busy. However, 60% of the supervisors said students did not come for regular consultation, compared to 20% who gave a neutral answer and 20% who were satisfied with the number of times students came for consultation.

On whether students appeared to have good knowledge of research methods, 40% of the lecturers said students did not appear to have sufficient knowledge of research methods while 40% gave a neutral answer. Only 20% agreed that students appeared to have good knowledge of research methods. Similarly, 40% of the supervisors said students did not appear to have good knowledge of academic writing skills compared to 40% who gave a neutral answer and 20% who were satisfied with the students' knowledge of academic writing skills.

On whether the University gives clear guidelines and time lines for progression and completion of research, 60% Of the lecturers agreed that clear time lines were given compared to 40% who disagreed. Meanwhile, 60% of the lecturers said they had enough time to handle students doing research while the remaining 40% disagreed.

Regarding supervisors remuneration, 60% of them said they were not satisfied with the amount and the frequency of payments

compared to 20% who were satisfied and 20% who gave a neutral answer. Considering the speed at which the university handles students' research to enable them to progress and complete their research work, 60% were satisfied with the speed compared to 20% who gave a neutral answer and 20% who were not satisfied.

On factors that may be slowing down students' progression and completion, supervisors observed that many students were not committing enough time to research while others appeared to be having challenges as far as knowledge of research methods was concerned. One of the supervisors mentioned that some students insist on doing research topics that are not easily manageable. Other challenges identified included students' work schedules and financial challenges.

The supervisors suggested that as measures to bring about improvement in progression and completion of post graduate courses, the university should issue clearer and stricter timelines and institute sanctions such as surcharges for students who fail to meet the deadlines. I was also suggested by the supervisors that students should be compelled to give timely progress reports about their work.

Discussion and Key Emerging Issues

The study established progression and completion rates among post graduate students at Bishop Stuart University that are far from desirable. With no students completing their courses in the minimum time and the majority taking twice as much time as they should to graduate, the situation is a matter of urgent concern.

More effort needs to be put in preparing the students by giving them not only enough knowledge but also enough information about what they need to do and when they need to do it. It was found out that while the majority of students who enroll for Masters and PhD courses tend to complete the initial class work which is done in the first academic year on time, delays usually start to set in as

soon as students embark on research work. Students are often left to work at their own pace and because they are no longer required to be physically at the University, many disappear from the university and their supervisors' radar. The students, the university and the supervisors need to review their strategies and work methods in order to ensure more regular and timely course progression and completion.

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