

## Keeping the Research Thesis on Course: Case of Kenyatta University Doctoral Students Experiences during the COVID 19 Pandemic

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### Abstract

*Completion of doctoral studies is the apex of academic accomplishment. Postgraduate studies, particularly in Africa have been dogged with a myriad of issues that derail the process, thus hampering completion rates. However, among the many issues that affect the doctoral students' completion, it's not yet largely evidenced the extent to which the COVID 19 pandemic affected the doctoral student's thesis writing, despite the fact that the pandemic had other far reaching ramifications on higher education with many universities having to shut down albeit temporarily. The objective of the study was to establish doctoral students' research thesis progress and experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic period. The study utilized descriptive survey design with an online survey being used to collect data. The sample comprised ninety-one PhD students from the Department of Education Management, Policy and Curriculum Studies, School of Education, Kenyatta University. Quantitative data was analyzed using descriptive statistics while thematic analysis was used to analyze qualitative data. The study established that the majority of the students 57% had made some progress in their doctoral studies thesis writing during the pandemic period through online engagement with faculty and from insights gained in the interactive research-related webinars organized by the department. Additionally, students indicated that they experienced work related (36.2%) and institutional (29.8%) challenges. However, the majority indicated that their greatest need of support to enhance progress in their thesis work is improvement in receipt of prompt feedback from supervisors and capacity building on research methodology. The study recommends adoption of blended supervision, tutorial doctoral sessions for guidance and psychosocial support structures to enhance progress in doctoral studies.*

**Keywords:** Completion, Doctoral Studies, Experiences, Pandemic, Supervision, Tutorials, Research progress

## Introduction

There has been rapid growth in the higher education sector especially in establishment and enrolment. Despite this expansion, Teferra (2014) observed that postgraduate studies remain dwarfed due numerous challenges, one of which is low completion rates. According to Patterson (2016) in the United States and United Kingdom, only about 50% of postgraduate students complete their studies. In the Netherlands only 10% of students finish their doctoral studies in a period of 4 years. (Sverdlick, 2018) found a high of found a dropout rate of 50% for doctoral students including those under highly esteemed fellowships. This presents a worrying situation with regard to doctoral studies completion even in developed nations.

In Africa, the scenario is no different; in Nigeria, the average time for doctoral studies completion being seven to eight years. In Egypt, the completion rates were found to be at 60% in life sciences, 55% and 49% in social sciences and humanities respectively (Rong'uno, 2016). According to Commission for University Education (CUE, 2015) Kenya has set a benchmark of 20% of each cohort to graduate within a stipulated time of 3 years, However, currently doctoral graduation rate stands at 11% with an average completion time of six (Barasa & Omulando 2018). Ng'ethe et al. (2012) attributed the problems of completion to inadequate funding, institutional challenges especially those related to supervision and inadequate support programmes and facilities for graduate students as well as work and family related issues. Edgar (2003) reported that postgraduate students in the arts, humanities and social sciences have the lowest graduation rates. The completion rates may differ during crisis and uncertain times, for example, the emergence of the COVID 19 pandemic is likely to have adverse effects on doctoral studies especially on thesis supervision thus impeding students' progress. Pyhältö et al. (2023) study on experiences of disengagement of doctoral students in Finland reported that the COVID 19 pandemic had hindered students' progress and affected their study wellbeing negatively.

There has been great concern among faculty, doctoral students as well as stakeholders in the higher education sector on the low doctoral completion rates with focus on the time it takes to complete a doctoral degree, the high rate of student drop-out and the low graduation rates across universities and their campuses. The Commission for University Education (CUE) has also raised the concern over the low graduation rates among doctoral students in Kenya. The stipulated time for completion of a doctorate degree across many universities is between 3-5 years (CUE, 2019). However, this benchmark is seldom achieved although Mwangi, Mutwiri and Muthima (2022) observed that COVID-19 disruptions provided an opportunity for institutions to transform their teaching, learning, and assessment practices. According to UNESCO, (2021) report nearly 1.2 million students were affected by the closure of learning institutions during the pandemic. The report noted that 85% of HEIs in Europe shifted to online modes while Africa had the highest rate of interruption due to inadequate infrastructure. A survey by International Association of Universities (IAU) (2020) showed that 80% of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) reported that COVID 19 affected research as well as teaching and learning since a majority of the institutions were shut down during the pandemic. This creates the need to capture the experiences of doctoral students on how they were steering through their doctoral thesis work during these unfamiliar times.

Research writing is an integral part of successful completion of doctoral studies. This has been a major challenge for many doctoral students due to a myriad of factors leading to delayed completion or drop out. The situation was further complicated by the emergence of the COVID 19 pandemic and it was therefore

imperative to explore doctoral students' experiences as they navigated through the research writing process during the pandemic. For instance, Pyhältö et al. 2017 note that one of the basic effects of the pandemic is the decrease in research networks especially for doctoral students. Corner et al. (2018) also avers that this erosion of interactions due to the pandemic may result in reduced access to institutional support, scholarly environments and networks leading to learning loss and reduced research productivity. This may paint a picture of challenges caused by the pandemic that may impede the progress of doctoral students in their studies. In fact, Cui et al. (2021) report a negative influence on negative progress and reduced research productivity due to COVID 19.

According to Kenyatta University postgraduate policy, 'the doctorate degree in all Schools shall extend over a period of at least three (3) years from the date of registration for a candidate studying full-time while for Part-time candidates it shall be for a minimum of four (4) years, except under special cases (Graduate School, 2018). The policy further states that no candidate for PhD degree shall be registered as a full-time student for more than four years or a part-time student for more than six (6) years.' (A Handbook for Postgraduate Students 2018 – 2022). Nevertheless the reality is that this benchmark is rarely met by a majority of doctoral students. With limited research on how doctoral students were It was therefore necessary to explore how doctoral students managed their research work in the wake of the disruptions caused by the COVID pandemic.

## Problem Statement

Timely completion of doctoral studies is associated with increased research output, prudent resource utilization, personal and career development and overall impact on national development. Doctoral studies have been affected by numerous challenges like funding constraints for students, supervision and inadequate support programmes and facilities for graduate students as well as work and family related issues (Ng'ethe et al. 2012; Gitings et al. 2018). In Africa, doctoral supervision has been found to be a play a significant contribution to low completion or non-completion of doctoral studies. This has psychological, social, emotional, financial and time implications on students, faculty and universities (Teferra, 2014).

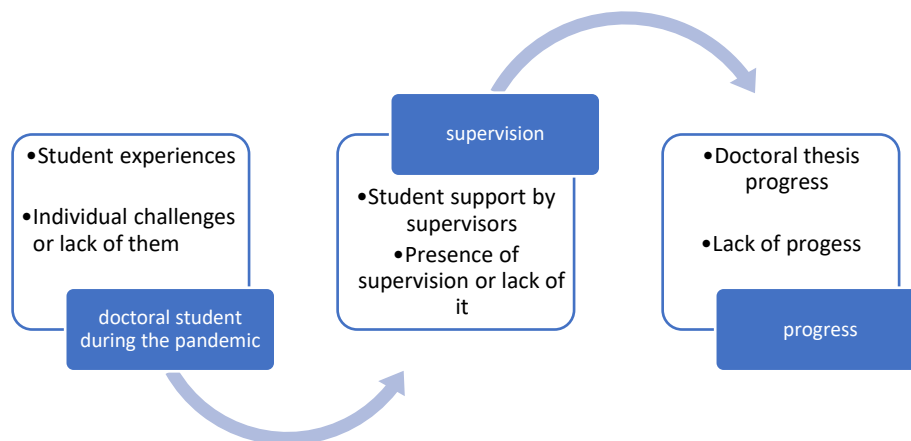
The emergence of the COVID 19 pandemic complicated the situation further as universities were temporarily shut down with many adopting blended or purely online modes of delivery. In Kenya, doctoral students' thesis work and supervision which were predominantly conducted through the face to face approach were bound to be affected during the pandemic period as physical meetings were impractical with the closure of the universities. There was concern that most doctoral students completed their coursework on time but were taking more time than stipulated to write and complete their thesis work. This may be attributed to personal issues, institutional factors as well as doctoral supervision challenges. However, there is limited evidence to show the extent to which the COVID 19 pandemic posed a novel challenge to students' progress in their doctoral studies as HEIs were closed affecting the contact between doctoral students and their supervisors as well as their peers. This study therefore, sought to establish how doctoral students were steering through their thesis work during the pandemic by capturing their experiences with an aim of documenting the experiences to avert any further negative effects on completion rates of doctoral studies especially during the period when blended or purely online modes of delivery and supervision were adopted.

## Objective

To explore doctoral students' experiences in their research thesis work progress during the COVID 19 pandemic period.

## Theoretical Framework

The study was anchored on social constructivist theory by Vygotsky, (1980) which supports the view that learning occurs through interactions. Progress in doctoral studies particularly in writing the thesis requires creation of meaning through intense interactions among peers as well as faculty. The thesis supervision process therefore becomes a critical component that determines the progress in doctoral studies which is also influenced by the frequency and quality of engagements between the student and the supervisor. Social constructivism supports scholarly community interactions as knowledge is constructed through human activity and interactions. The COVID 19 pandemic disrupted these activities and interactions especially between the doctoral students and their supervisors and this may have had an impact on progress in their thesis writing work.



*Figure 1: Conceptualization of the study*

Figure 1 shows the relationship between the dependent and independent variables. The independent variables are supervisor's support and students' experiences. The interaction between the student and supervisor, and the students' experiences are very critical in the progress of their theses writing. If it is positive, the progress is observed and vice versa is also true.

So, holding all factors constants, when students receive all the needed support from the supervisors and the institution, there is a tendency for them to progress and complete the degree within the stipulated time. The vice versa is also true the study was premised on the belief that the COVID 19 pandemic presented a unique scenario to doctoral students that was likely going to affect their interactions especially after the closure of HEIs. This may eventually have an impact on their research work. It was therefore imperative to capture the experiences of doctoral students with regard to the progress in their research work during the unique COVID 19 pandemic period.

## Methodology

The study adopted descriptive survey design targeting approximately 250 registered PhD students in the department of Education Management, Policy and Curriculum Studies, School of Education, Kenyatta University in Kenya (EMPC Database, 2021). This design was adopted as it would help capture both quantitative (background information of the respondents) and qualitative data (experiences) and therefore provide a comprehensive picture from the respondent's perspectives. Purposive sampling was used to sample students who had already completed their course work and had embarked on their thesis work. Purposive sampling was found to be appropriate because the study focus was on progress in thesis work which often begins after completion of course work. A total of ninety-one students responded to the online survey that was used to collect data in August 2021. Quantitative data from the close ended questions was analyzed using descriptive statistics and presented in pie charts and tables while qualitative data was analyzed thematically and presented in narrative form.

## Results and Discussion

### Response rate

The online survey was sent to 120 doctoral students in the department of Educational Management Policy and Curriculum Studies at the School of education from which 96 responded to the survey accounting for 80% response rate.

### Gender and doctoral completion

The study respondents comprised both male and female students as shown in Figure 2.

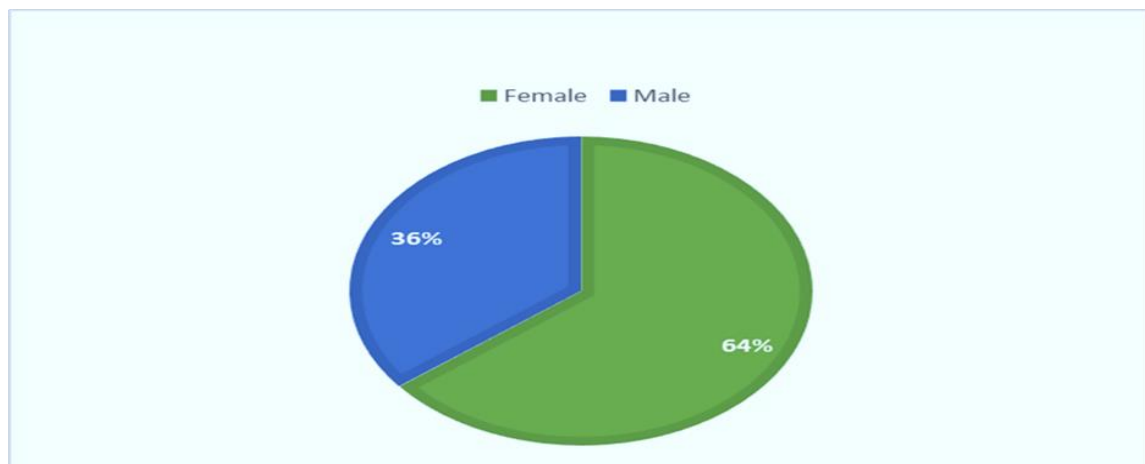


Figure 2: Respondents by Gender

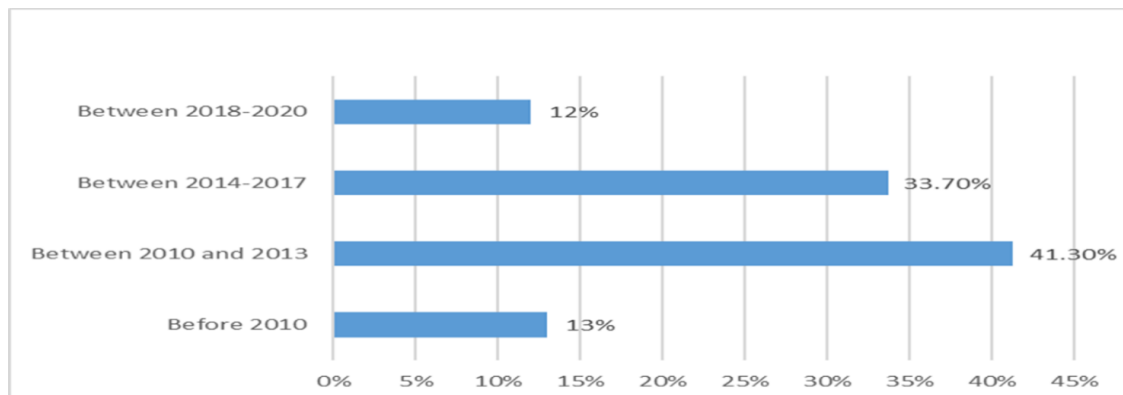
The results in figure 2 show that the majority 64% of the respondents were female while 36% were male. According to Council of Graduate School (2012) women and other minority groups have higher enrolment in doctoral programs across different disciplines. Commission for University (2018) reported that university enrolment by gender gap between male and female had narrowed in 2017 to a ratio of 59:41. In the same

period the enrolment in doctorate programmes was male 10743 while female was 6876 in public universities. On the contrary, the finding of this study shows majority of the respondents enrolled for doctoral studies were female.

However, studies have also established that men are slightly more likely to complete their doctoral studies than women (Visser, Luwel, & Moed, 2007; Groenvynck, Vandevelde, & Van Rossem, 2013). In fact, Brown & Watson (2010) posit that having children correlated with low motivation and achievement for female students. On the other hand, others found no effect of gender on doctoral completion (Van der Haert, Arias Ortiz, Emplit, Halloin, & Dehon, 2013; Spronken-Smith, Cameron, & Quigg, 2018). Myers et al. (2020) research among US and Europe based scientists reported that women had been more affected by the societal changes caused by the pandemic as opposed to men.

The outbreak of the pandemic was found to aggravate the situation as some studies found that research output among the females decreased during this period. Barber et al. (2021) reports that research productivity among mothers and parents with small children had been negatively affected by the pandemic. In fact, Madsen et al. (2022) reports a 24% lower research productivity rate among female compared to men in 2020. In the United States while the total research productivity increased by 35% that of women decreased by 13.2% (Cui, Ding, & Zhu, 2022). The findings point to research showing that the pandemic had exacerbated the pre-existing gender gap in education with women having been further affected by the pandemic. This situation was likely to adversely affect the progress of female doctoral students in their research work.

The study further sought to find out the duration of time students had taken in their doctoral studies. This was established by asking respondents to indicate the year in which they had enrolled for the doctoral degree program. The findings are presented in Figure 3.



*Figure 3: Period of Enrolment for PhD*

The results in figure 3 show that, the majority (41.9%) of the PhD students, enrolled for their doctoral studies between the year 2010 and 2013 which translates to between 7-10 years ago. The findings also show that (13%) of the students had enrolled before the year 2010 which is more than ten years ago. This presents a case where the majority had exceeded the recommended period of three to five years for completion of a

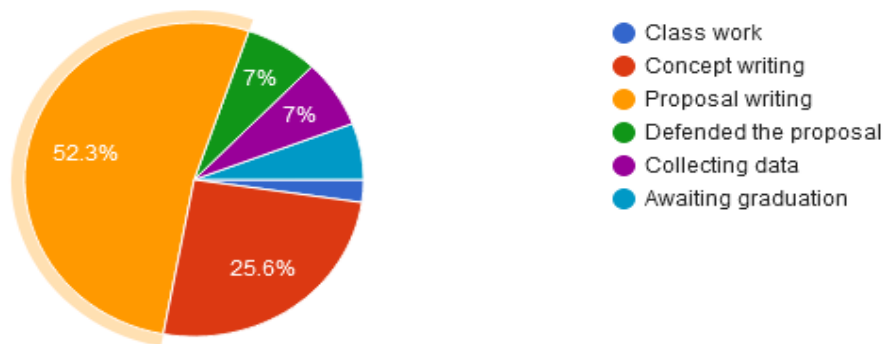


doctoral degree as per the University policy. This long stay has a direct link with low completion rates. The findings concur with the baseline data from the Ph.D. Completion Project that indicated a completion rate of ten years after students begin their doctoral program (Sowell, Zhang, Redd, & King, 2008). This finding is also in line with the Council of Graduate Schools (CGS, 2008) who asserted that in the United States only 41% of doctoral students finish their studies within duration of 7 years. In fact, they reported that 57% of the students complete within a 10-year period. Elgar (2003), states that arts, humanities, and social sciences have the lowest graduation rates among doctoral students.

This finding points to a dire need for all stakeholders-students, faculty, universities, family to consciously focus on ways of providing all forms of support to help improve completion rates to alleviate the very adverse consequences of non-completion to all. According to CUE Report on Status of Postgraduate Studies in Kenya (2016) 27.9% of faculty was supervising doctoral students beyond the Commission for University guidelines. The Commission also reported that out of 100 undergraduate students studying at university, only about two doctoral students are being trained. The report also noted that students' availability and motivation were contributing to the length of time they were taking to complete their studies with recommendation that only students that are ready for the rigorous work in doctoral studies should be admitted. In Kenya, Matheka Jansen and Hofman (2020) observed that the current graduation rate is 11% and further noted that universities were churning out fewer than 300 PhD graduates annually.

Kristoff and De Witte (2021) in their research on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on PhD Education in Europe observed that during pandemic year when most HEIs were closed, the individual likelihood of obtaining a PhD degree reduced significantly as evidenced by a 12% decline in the number of doctoral graduates. They also noted an overall slowed progress of PhD students during the first year-2020- of the pandemic and that the average time to defend a doctoral thesis or project during this period compared to other times decreased insignificantly by 5 weeks. The number of students enrolling for PhD education according to their study did not significantly change during the pandemic while a year later-2021- they observed a significant increase of new PhD students allocated to the supervisors. Research findings support the view that the pandemic was likely to prolong doctoral students' time in their studies, yet majority had already exceeded the prescribed time frame. For instance, Stamp et al. (2021) study found that delays in submission of thesis work affected progress in doctoral studies during the pandemic.

This study also sought to establish the level at which the doctoral students were in their thesis/project work. The results are presented in Figure 4.



*Figure 4: Student's Level of Thesis/Project Work*

The results in figure 4 indicate that the majority 52.3% of the students were at the proposal writing level and 25.6% are at the concept level which together comprise 77.9% with only a partly 7% awaiting graduation as the time. This presents an urgent situation considering that the results in Figure 3 already disclosed that the majority of these students were already 7-10 years into their doctoral studies. There is a pressing need for new strategies to be initiated to ensure students transit from one level of their thesis work to the next without unnecessary impediments and delay. Postgraduate students usually complete their course work (theory and examinations) within the stipulated time, but the majority stagnate at the proposal writing level with low transition rates to the subsequent levels of defending their thesis, collecting data and writing the final document. The focus of this study was therefore on the progress in thesis work during the pandemic for those students that had already completed their course work. Lambrechts and Smith (2020) study found that 89.2% of doctoral students that were at pre, mid and post data collection stages in their studies reported that the pandemic had negative effects on their research plans.

A myriad of strategies needs to be put in place to ensure the majority of the students do not remain at the proposal writing stage long after they have completed their course work. Ng'ethe et al (2012) identified funding constraints for students, supervision, inadequate support programmes and facilities for graduate students as hindrances to timely completion of doctoral studies. Others are work and family commitments, faculty's heavy workload, inflexible learning modes and weak institutional strategies to address supervision issues. Students need to fully play their part by being proactive and focused on their studies despite the many competing and conflicting factors. Student motivation and socialization also play a role in persistence in doctoral studies.

The role of supervision cannot also be overemphasized in its influence on timely completion of doctoral studies. According to McCallin and Nayar (2012) effective supervision is a necessary component to achieving timely graduation for doctoral students. Pyhältö, Vekkaila, and Keskinen, (2015), support that faculty needs to provide timely responses to questions as well as provision of feedback either via emails and phone calls. Supervisors play a critical role in supporting and promoting candidates' learning and research development (Martinsuo & Turkulainen, 2011; Pyhältö, Vekkaila, & Keskinen, 2015). There is also need for universities to look into the issue of bloated workload for staff members in specific schools and departments and strive to adhere to the Commission for University (CUE) 2014 guidelines on supervision. The CUE (2014) guidelines for supervision state that:

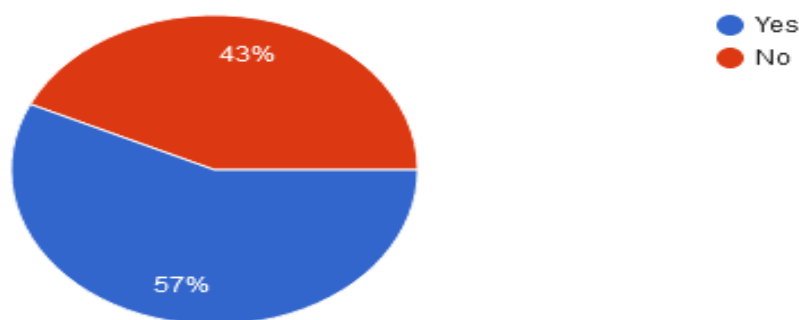


*“An academic staff shall be assigned students to supervise on thesis/dissertation based on a combination of his/her teaching load, administrative duties, and supervision experience and capacity. The maximum number of students an academic staff shall supervise in any given academic year shall be Masters – 5, Doctorate - 3”.*

This would allow faculty adequate time to supervise students and speed up completion since as the study established, majority of the doctoral students are stagnating at the proposal and concept stages having completed the course work within the prescribed time frame. The Commission noted that this guideline continued to be violated with some faculty supervising 2-4 times above the limit. This they noted would continue to have negative effects on the quality of supervision and research output. During the COVID 19 pandemic doctoral students reported decreased levels of satisfaction with supervision arrangements with a majority indicating that they had not been able to secure a meeting with their supervisors during the lockdown (Lambrechts, & Smith, 2020).

Timely completion of doctoral studies is also facilitated by sound institutional structures and support systems. Tinto, (2012) posits that student orientation programs and practices as well as social integration and capacity building in research have substantial effect on doctoral studies success. This should also be reflected at departmental level as Sverdlick, (2018) observed that well laid departmental support structures such as socialization, financial and professional development play to doctoral experiences and achievement. Departments should therefore consider mounting tutorial sessions and other forums for doctoral students to engage with faculty and peers and gain useful insights along the very long doctoral studies journey.

The study also sought to establish from the students’ perspective they had made any progress in their thesis work in the year 2020 when universities closed due to emergence of the COVID 19 pandemic. Their responses are captured in Figure 5.



*Figure 5: Students’ Perspective on Thesis Progress during the COVID 19 Pandemic*

The findings in figure 5 show that 57% of the students indicated that they had made progress in their doctoral thesis during the pandemic period while 43% responded on the contrary. Majority of the respondents attributed their progress from one stage to the other to the adoption of online platforms,

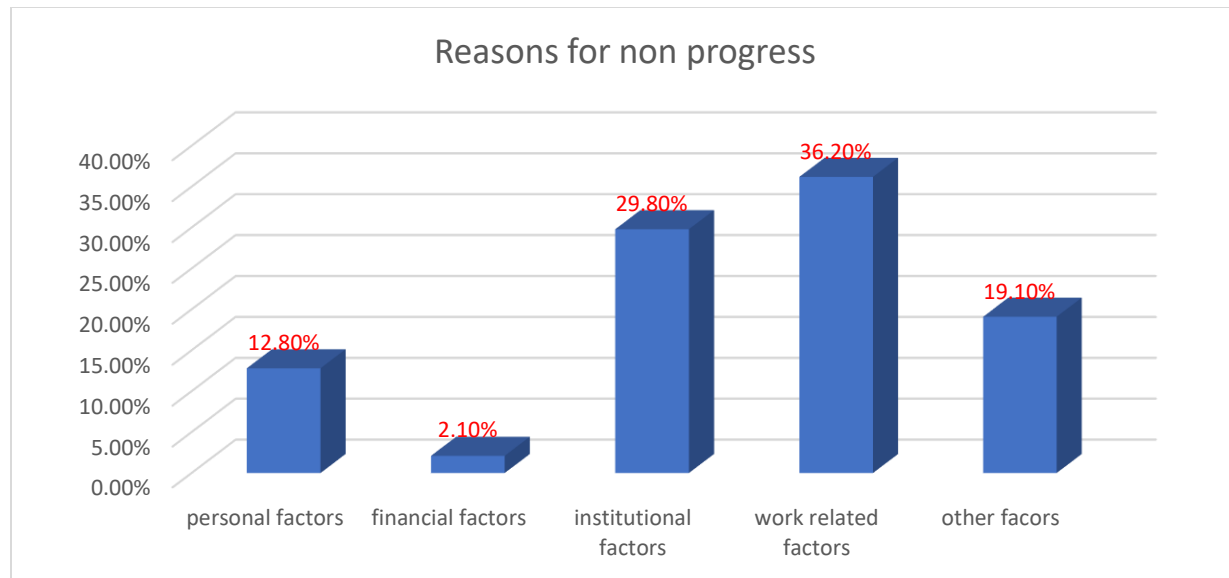
especially google meet by the University Teaching and learning. They observed that faculty used these platforms to also engage with them on thesis supervision. The zoom platform was also used to engage with doctoral students and also mount research related trainings with opportunities for learners to ask questions and faculty to respond. Faculty also volunteered to make presentations on different research aspects e.g. problem statement, literature review, methodology and data analysis. One of the respondents commented, *'I got to understand clearer about the dependent and independent variables that are helping me now write my concept paper. I look forward to completing soonest.'*

With the emergence of the COVID 19 pandemic for the first time the Department of Educational Management, Policy and Curriculum Studies conducted online thesis defenses. One student observed *'Online conferences and defenses act as motivation to students.* The department provided the opportunity for doctoral students to interact among themselves depending on their level, as well as with faculty who responded to their questions and offered guidance during the mounted online forums. Students were also exposed to hands-on activities especially on research. The monthly online supervision tracking forms adopted by the University for both Faculty and students helped enhance the supervision process. During this period the university enforced the use of supervision tracking forms where both faculty and students were expected to fill in weekly and submit the supervision progress. A WhatsApp group for doctoral students and faculty was also used as a communication channel. All these initiatives may have contributed to the progress reported by half of the respondents.

The study findings from the qualitative strand also supported that most students had made progress from the concept level to proposal writing level. One of the students responded, *'I progressed from concept writing to proposal writing, i.e. doing corrections as advised by one of my supervisors. I have not submitted the corrected document.'* Others had also made progress from one section of the proposal to another as captured by these responses: *'I have moved to chapter 3. Still on proposal. Now working on a plagiarism report'; 'Finalizing on my first draft of the proposal.'* However, only a few students indicated that they had moved from the proposal writing stage to data collection and thesis writing. There is a need therefore to address this stagnation to ensure progress and completion of doctoral studies within the stipulated timespan.

Research shows mixed findings on doctoral students' experiences during the pandemic. Guest et al. (2021) study in the United States reported that 40% of doctoral students in the Education faculty at University of Ottawa had a positive experience while 20% viewed it as neutral. The pandemic had negative impact on doctoral productivity and ability to complete their thesis on time and to the required standard (Lambrechts & Smith, 2020).

Students, however, experienced some challenges as some respondents reported that they did not make progress during this period and their reasons are captured in Figure 6.



*Figure 6: Students' Reasons for Non-Progress*

The results in figure 6 indicate that the majority 36.2% of the students reported that they did not make progress in their thesis work due to work related factors. Another 29.8% related their non-progress to institutional factors like closure of the university, supervision challenges and lack of financial support. The findings also show that other factors were rated at 19.0%; personal factors at 12.8% while the least was financial factors at 2.1%. Lokhtina et al. (2022) established that doctoral students experienced challenges to work independently on their research work during the pandemic period. Covington and Jordan (2022) found that the majority of PhD students experienced negative impacts and increased anxiety, together with reduced support from their supervisor. Many researchers reported suffering delays in their experiments, suspended fieldwork and data collection owing to the COVID 19 pandemic (Kobakhidze et al. 2021).

Work related issues were identified as a major hindrance for non-progress in doctoral research thesis during the pandemic despite the lockdown. This finding is in line with research that shows that the majority of doctoral students are often aged and in the working class. Morris (2013) states that there already exists tension between work and family, and that this tension could be worse if the person is studying. Barasa and Omulando (2018) attributed delay in completion of PhD degree to working circumstances and financial difficulties. This was also found to be the case by Khozaei and Salleh (2015) who found doctoral students who are engaged in work while at the same time undertaking their studies have difficulties in completing their studies. On the other hand, Gitings et al. (2018) doctoral students who had full time jobs had better progress in their studies than those who had part time jobs.

Institutional factors were also highlighted as hindrances to progress in doctoral thesis work. This finding concurs with research that has found personal, financial, institutional, supervisor related, non-academic, and other factors are connected to research skills and academic performance (De Zoysa, 2007; Grant, 2005; Meerah, 2010). Itegi and Michubu (2020) also aver that institutional factors play a critical role in providing structures which could either accelerate or impede completion of doctoral studies. With the sudden closure of HEIs some students had submitted a hardcopy of their work to the supervisors who due to the travel

restrictions during the COVID period could not access the hard copies for timely feedback. Kenyatta University has in place an online supervision policy that is directed at providing a regulatory framework for online supervision of postgraduate. The policy states.

In order to enhance the quality of postgraduate supervision, supervisors are encouraged to blend face to face supervision with e-supervision as much as possible. Blended supervision will harness the opportunities in the online platform by reducing distance between students and supervisors while increasing the rate and quality of feedback (Graduate School, 2019).

Faculty should then be sensitized on the existence of the policy and the need to embrace e-supervision considering majority of the doctoral students are working and spread all over the country. This would enhance timely provision of feedback and ultimately link with improved completion rates. Access to institutional facilities was limited during the pandemic due to the subsequent closure of learning institutions.

Personal factors and other factors were rated 12.8% and 19.1% respectively. This indicates that doctoral students have varied personal reasons for non-progress in their studies and would therefore need to be guided and supported at a personal level as well. Some of the highlighted personal factors included lack of motivation, family and work commitments as well as financial constraints. The study found out that only 2.1 percent of the respondents indicated that financial support was a challenge impeding their progress in their thesis work. This is in contrast to Nevill and Chen (2007) who singled out financial support as the main factor contributing to students' ability to complete doctoral degrees among students in the USA. They also established that many postgraduate students in the USA were unable to balance work, family and educational responsibilities simultaneously. Lambrechts and Smith (2020) study found that 38.2% of the doctoral students reported that the pandemic had a negative effect on their finances. Research shows that both student-related factors and institutional factors have an impact on low student throughput and students who take long to complete their postgraduate studies, or do not complete their studies at all (Luescher-Mamashela 2015).

The respondents were asked to indicate the support they needed to enable them make progress in their doctoral studies. The most frequent support indicated was receipt of timely and prompt feedback from their supervisors as well as training on research methods skills. Muthiani, Muthima and Itolondo (2022) carried out a study on Personal, Research, Supervisory and Institutional Determinants of Completion time among Regular Postgraduate Students in School of Education Kenyatta University and recommend that a research methods unit be introduced at undergraduate level as a common unit to ensure that postgraduate students have basic research skills that will come in handy during the thesis writing process. This may in turn translate to improved completion rates. Meerah (2010) found that many adult learners doing research generally felt that they have yet to acquire skills in seeking information for their research and are also deficient in analytical skills. Shulman (2010) advocated for establishment of learning communities between faculty and students where democratic meaningful sharing of ideas is stimulated with regular feedback and social support. In Covington and Jordan (2022) study doctoral students perceived that support for their doctoral programs was significantly lowered during the pandemic compared to perceived support before the pandemic.

Gitings (2018) observed that HEIs often allocate more resources to undergraduate programs while postgraduate studies are given less resources. This scenario has negative influence on timely completion of doctoral studies there are some structural components influencing completion of doctoral studies. Lovitts, (2001) posits that lack of adequate support has been identified as a major factor contributing to doctoral students' non persistence in their graduate studies. It is evident that a lack of adequate support is an important factor with regard to completion of doctoral studies. Gardner, (2007); Pyhältö, McAlpine, Peltonen, and Castelló, (2017) support the availability and provision of resources to facilitate research progress and an effective and increasing participation in the communities as crucial for early career researchers' development.

Social support is also a critical aspect due to the isolation and loneliness that is associated with doctoral studies. According to Vekkaila, Virtanen, Taina, and Pyhältö, (2016) social support refers to the resources in the social environment that doctoral candidates both perceive to be available and use for their research work. Effective academic and social support services are believed to play an important role in the quality graduate experience and student success (Polson, 2003). Greene (2015) study found that the most frequently cited factor considered by participants to be an important in persistence in doctoral studies was the level of support received from both those within the program, such as faculty and supervisors, and those outside, namely, family and loved ones. Several participants highlighted that the high level of departmental, faculty, and supervisory support was an important factor that influenced their decision to persist. Participants also felt that having a supportive supervisor was essential to doctoral student persistence. The positive influence of internal and external sources of support such and family and peers has been demonstrated in other studies (Boulder, 2010; Jairam & Kahl, 2012; Williams-Tolliver, 2010). Gittings (2010) supports the establishment of academic research and writing groups, seminars, and workshops to be made a formalized component of doctoral programs. Muthima (2019) in her doctoral capstone report on enhancing positive attitudes towards research supervision feedback process among the doctoral candidates to increase graduation rates, recommended pastoral supervision where supervisors try to establish the problems that the supervisees are going through with an aim of seeking for an intervention. Weidman et al. (2001) aver that graduate student support can come from peers as well as faculty members.

## Conclusion

Based on the research findings, majority of doctoral students at the Department had taken more than the prescribed time to complete their doctoral studies. Most of the doctoral students were at the proposal and concept writing level in their thesis work despite a majority having enrolled for the program for more than 7 years. This comprised of a majority 77.9%

The study therefore concluded that despite the challenge posed by the COVID 19 pandemic due to HEIs closure most respondents had made progress in their doctoral studies during this period especially from concept to proposal writing level. This was attributed to the fact that faculty and doctoral students in the department of Educational Management, Policy and Curriculum studies embraced and utilized online platforms to mount defenses, engage and offer guidance on research thesis writing during the pandemic. The departmental online defenses and forums assisted students in different aspects of research, and this provided them with a platform to gain useful insights that made the majority make progress in their thesis

work. There was online interaction at various levels; faculty and doctoral students; doctoral students at different stages in their thesis.

Further, it was concluded that a number of students experienced work related and institutional challenges. Some challenges specifically included delayed timely feedback from supervisors and closure of the institutions. However, utilization of technology in supervision and guidance of doctoral students' research thesis work enhanced interaction among faculty and doctoral students during the pandemic period.

## Recommendations

Based on the conclusion, the study therefore makes the following recommendations:

### Policy makers

1. The study found that work related factors affected doctoral students' progress in their research work during the pandemic and the Teachers' Service Commission does not provide paid study leave for doctoral studies. The Teachers' Service Commission to consider providing study leave to doctoral students to help them complete their studies in time to address the issue of work-related issues affecting progress.

### Kenyatta University

1. Majority of the respondents cited delayed communication and feedback from the supervisors as a major hindrance to their progress during the COVID 19 pandemic period. The university to enforce utilization of the existing doctoral supervision tracking mechanisms by faculty and students with a view to improve thesis feedback and progress.
2. Respondents noted that closure of the university affected their progress as physical contact with supervisors and peers was limited. The study recommends building capacity of faculty and students on utilization of online supervision modalities. The university to sensitize faculty and students to comply with the University blended supervision policy guidelines.
3. The university to establish efficient mechanisms to sensitize and create awareness, offer psychosocial support and mentorship to doctoral students on the support services offered by the university.
4. The university to engage more faculty and adhere to the Commission for University Education supervisor student ratio policy to enhance timely feedback.

### Department of Educational management, Policy & Curriculum Studies

1. Majority of the doctoral students reported that they made progress in their thesis writing work during the pandemic period. This was attributed to the online thesis writing webinars facilitated by faculty from the department. The study recommends that the department adopts a plan for regular mounting of online tutorial sessions for doctoral students to expose to research rigorous writing culture, activities and guidelines even post the COVID period. The department to create platforms for doctoral students



to share their doctoral journey challenges with faculty and peers where they can be offered guidance on doctoral thesis writing.

2. The department to create an online platform or App where a doctoral student can engage with faculty members on doctoral thesis writing.

### Doctoral students

1. Doctoral students to be encouraged to create functional peer networking opportunities to enhance social support during their doctoral journey.

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