Effect of supervision on timely completion of PhD Programme

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Abstract

Although universities continue to attract students to register for Doctor of Philosophy Programme known as PhD, the challenge to complete these programmes on time has remained weighty. Hence, this paper aimed to explore supervision as a contributing factor. The study adopted Narrative Research Design and targeted international PhD graduates from Kenyatta University in Kenya. In total, the study dealt with six graduates of the 2015 and 2016 classes sampled by means of Snowball technique. An interview guide was developed. E-mail, Skype, WhatsApp chats and phone calls were used in data collection. Thematic analysis was used to analyze data which were reported in narrative form using direct quotes and/or paraphrase. The overall findings revealed three supervision defects that hinder the timely completion of PhD for international students. These are (i) limited level of supervisor-supervisee interaction, (ii) inadequate technical guidance from supervisors and (iii) poor or delayed feedback from supervisors.

Keywords: *Supervision, PhD programme, Timely completion, International Students, Kenyatta University*

Introduction

The desire for higher education is driven by social demand and globalization effects (Nayyar, 2008). That is why; it is a common phenomenon to realize that people are interested to undertake higher levels of education outside their home countries.

In this perspective, the United States of America (USA) has been one of the places to attract many Doctoral students from all across the planet (Begalla, 2013). In effect, the increase of international students in USA's higher education was much motivated by quality education, relevant training, applied knowledge and opportunities for more partnerships (Urban, 2012; Begalla, 2013).

Europe and Asia are also parts of the world that have attracted Doctoral students – especially from developing countries- due to the international education provided (Valentine, 2012) but also due to the usage of English as a medium of instruction (Le Phan, 2013). On the African continent, South Africa is the leading hub of Doctoral Programmes and hence, attracts many candidates from this continent (Botha, 2010). In the East African region, Makerere University, University of Nairobi as well as Kenyatta University have kept the lead in attracting international students. In Rwanda, internationalization of Higher Education is foreseen to be a new venture to build a robust higher education (Mugabo, 2015).

Nonetheless, although universities continue to attract students in their PhD programmes, the challenge to complete these programmes on time has remained weighty (Shariff, Abidin, Ramli & Ahmad, 2015) and scholars have not ceased to investigate into this concern (Wamala, Ocaya & Oonyu, 2012). Like in the case of United Kingdom, Armstrong (2004) reported that the level of non - or late-completion of PhD studies was between 40% and 50%. Similarly, in the United States of America, 50% of students entering doctorate programs have been dropping before concluding their programmes (Krauss & Ismail, 2010).

It is in this regard that the present study was set to establish the link between supervision and timely completion of PhD programme. It considered personal experiences of international PhD graduates of Kenyatta University in Kenya.

Research objectives

(a) To inquire into the supervisor-supervisee relationship and its effect on timely completion of PhD programme.

(b) To explore the level of guidance of supervisors and its contribution on timely completion of PhD programme.

(c) To establish the implications of the feedback from supervisors on timely completion of PhD programme

Literature review

From an international spectrum, this section is organized into three subheadings. The content shades light into findings of the previous researches around the practice of PhD supervision and its relation to the timely completion of the PhD programme. The literature also highlights the extent to which international students need special guidance to cope with new academic and living environment.

The practice of PhD supervision

According to Shariff, Abidin, Ramli and Ahmad (2015), Doctor of Philosophy, usually known as PhD is the utmost academic degree awarded by universities. In fact, across times, PhD has been considered as the most valued scholarly level because it is commissioned to produce new knowledge, new interpretations and new explanations (Park, 2005). The motivations to undertake PhD derive from carrier, job requirements or personal fulfillment (Davis, 2003). At university level, having a big number of PhD holders constitute distinctive attributes for ranking and accreditation. In addition, offering PhD programmes is an indicator of the capability to influence the society in terms of policies and practices as well as drive technological advancement and innovation (Bøgelund, 2015).

PhD studies involve thesis or dissertation writing. Hence, the PhD candidate also called the 'supervisee' need to be assigned 'supervisors'. Supervisors detain the power to profile the suitability of PhD candidates, ascertain the progress of their supervisees and even certify supervisee's readiness for final vetting for the PhD award. Therefore, the choice of the supervisor is a prominent factor. Depending on the university policy, the choice of the PhD supervisor is either up to the supervisee or the faculty's choice and every supervisee is assigned one to three supervisors. What is essential to note here is the fact that the supervisor plays a wide range of roles ranging from advising, mentoring, and monitoring (Grant, Hackney & Edgar, 2014).

In case it is up to the candidate (supervisee) to choose the supervisor, Manderson (1996) advises doctoral students who want to be successful not to base on friendship or personal needs as they choose supervisors because this can cause difficulties in the early stages of doctoral studies. Manderson (1996) commends to prioritize academic needs and abilities. Among qualities of a 'good supervisor' are reliability, confidence ability to listen, encourage and share information and have free interaction with the supervisee. A good supervisor is also expected to demonstrate a proof of knowledge in the research topic and the research methodology, ensuring continuous, supportive and prompt feedback (Dietz, Jansen & Wadee, 2006). The qualities of a good supervisor also include being enthusiastic, affectionate, understandable, easiness to access or contact and the possibility to treat the student as a junior colleague (Dimitrova, 2016). Important to note is the fact that in some instances, the choice of supervisors is limited because not all supervisors detain required level of experience in doctoral supervision (Davis, 2003). Some of the strategies to enhance supervision include faculty taught courses which PhD students are called to pursue, workshops to attend, journal articles to publish

and/or conference presentations to make as mandatory components of their overall training (Ismail, Abiddin & Hassan, 2011).

In fact, supervision is fundamental because throughout the PhD journey, students encounter many challenges including the lack of information and guidelines, lack of familiarity with research topic and methodology. That is why supervision goes beyond mere academic framework and involves more complex social and human relations (Dimitrova, 2016). This pushes Abiddin, Hassan and Ahmad, (2009) to argu that supervision is a complex and multidimensional task as it brings together the academic, human relations, management and professional expertise. Though there is no universally agreed perception of how an effective supervision would look like, Dimitrova (2016) mentions that a PhD student effectively supervised should be reflected in the high quality research work produced. To be effective, supervision involves a two-way interactional process whereby the supervisee and the supervisor deliberately engage each other within the spirit of professionalism, respect, collegiality and open-mindedness. Therefore, an effective supervisor should be open to various people's characters, communication and writing styles and capable to give encouragement whenever required (Ismail, Abiddin & Hassan, 2011).

Nonetheless, though the role of the supervisors is valued, it is crucial to underline that the PhD work remains under full responsibility and ownership of the supervisee. The supervisors' role should not be turned into imposing ideas as it used to be in the past (Hemer, 2012). Rather, the supervisors should interpret positively the supervisee's worries, confusions and interrogations which in nature derive from the newness in the research area and limited expertise.

Timely completion of PhD and the peculiar concerns of international students

In view of Stock, Finegan and Siegfried (2009) the timely completion of PhD programme varies from one university to another. Like for instance, the Queensland University of Technology in Australia defines timely completion of PhD to be within 3.5 years. In the case of University of Rwanda in Rwanda the timely completion for the newly started PhD programmes is four years (UR, 2014; Tabaro, 2014). On a benchmark, the review of university policies, in developed and developing world, informs that timely completion of PhD ranges between three to five years. In effect, due to the importance attached to the PhD programme and the investments that go along with this highest level of university education, the foregoing discussion on timely completion of PhD programme is fundamental. That is indeed justified by the fact that timely completion of PhD programme has been a shared concern by governments, universities, sponsoring bodies and doctorate candidates themselves (Shariff, Abidin, Ramli & Ahmad, 2015).

With reference to the context of tertiary education in Malaysia; Ismail, Abiddin and Hassan (2011) noted that students embarking on postgraduate studies tend to be much concerned about particular timeframe for completion of their programmes. The reasons behind such worries include age, culture, family and workplace contingencies, sponsorship or funding sources, learning mode (full against part-time), which all together bring pressure to the candidate (Ismail, Abiddin & Hassan, 2011).

Though it may be pleasant to study abroad, a number of researches indicated that the change of socio-cultural and environment context may cause discomfort and psycho-emotional trouble. Therefore, compared to

local students, the pressure for international students in terms of timely completion of PhD programme is much higher. In fact, studying outside one's home country; living and working with people of different culture, race and/or language sounds has never been easy (Ezebilo, 2012). That is the reason why Ezebilo (2012) points out that one of the challenges faced by international doctoral students is the cultural shock and social integration. Furthermore, Oyeniyi, Bain and Furgerson (nd) indicated that 97% of the international students had experienced many of the types of stress. As explanation to this stress, Leong, Ward and Low (2000) argue that stress among international students is explained by many factors such as the lack of acquaintance with the language barriers, the demands of a new academic environment and financial limitations. These views complement Mori (2000) who underlines that international students deserve special treatment because they are not only affected by the distance from family but also environmental acclimatization and limited relationship with the instructors and peers.

Ishimaya (1989) underlines that international students also experience socio-cultural difficulties outside the campus. This is derived from the fact that they are considered not only as new but also outsiders to the host culture. Hence, this may end up into loneliness, depression and anxiety which; as pointed out by Perrott (2003); are common issues for the majority of international students who stay away of the home country and family members for long. Therefore, the role of the supervisor working with international students should not only be limited to guidance but also to help understanding the culture (Ekblad, 2007). Moreover, to be able to assist an international supervisee adequately, the supervisor needs to be open, flexible, and insightful, be a good communicator as well as a substitute to the family at distance (Lee, 2007).

Supervision among other factors contributing to timely completion of PhD programme

Due to research focus and methodology, researchers do not seem to be unanimous on contributing factors to timely completion of PhD programme. For instance, in a study carried out in Nigeria by Ngozi and Kayode (2013), it was concluded that students' related factors such as students' interest and predisposition towards research work, student's skills in research conduct are more attributive to delay in completion of thesis. To elaborate more on this issue of timely completion of PhD, Ismail, Abiddin and Hassan (2011) reported that numerous research findings confirm that the (i) ability of the student, (ii) research itself and (iii) supervision are the major contributing factors to the rate of degree attrition and completion experienced by various higher education institutions. This assertion seems the same as the one of Pitchforth, et al. (2012) whose view tells that completing a PhD on time is a complex process, influenced by many interacting factors like personal factors, research environment and the research project itself. In confirmation of this, Shariff, Ramli and Ahmad (2015), surveyed 320 PhD candidates from Malaysian Public Higher Educational Institutions, and concluded that timely completion of PhD was associated with factors like supervision, research skills, research work, institution, motivation and de-motivation.

Nonetheless, further researches have come to point out supervision as a prominent factor to timely completion of PhD. For instance, the study carried out in United Kingdom by Abiddin, Hassan and Ahmad (2009) indicated that in the high proportion of PhD students who fail to complete their studies, most frequently have cited problems with supervision to be the root causes. It is on this ground that Ismail, Abiddin and Hassan(2011)

confirmed that sporadic or erratic contact with supervisors, who may be too busy with administrative or teaching responsibilities, have too many students or who are always away from the university, affect the supervisee' progress. Similarly, Bourke, Holbrook, Lovat and Farley (2004) in their conference paper on attrition, completion and completion times of PhD candidates indicated that the problems related to supervision were evoked most frequently among the leading causes to non-completion of PhD. Similarly, Orellana et al. (2016) indicated that supervision style is among the lead factors to determine the supervisee's advancement. To illustrate the role of supervision towards timely PhD completion, Orellana et al. (2016) mention that for instance when the supervisor and the supervisee are geographically separate, this distance brings additional challenges, mainly associated with the level of interaction. In this perspective, Woodward (1993)'s study established a strong positive relationship between frequent supervision and successful completion of PhD. Supervision is meant to facilitate the student's research skills development.

One of the prominent issues that come out during supervision is the supervisee-supervisor relation. It is on this ground that Delany (2013) describes good supervisors as being approachable, friendly, supportive, have positive attitude, open minded, prepared to acknowledge error, organized, thorough, stimulating, conveys enthusiasm for research. In the same vein, a good supervision and agreeable relationship between supervisee and the supervisor are not only vital components of successful doctoral training (Dimitrova, 2016) but also constitute key determinants towards timely completion of the PhD programme (Latona & Browne, 2001). In confirmation of this, a study conducted by Ezebilo (2012) on challenges in Postgraduate Studies in a Sweden revealed that the success of research or doctoral students largely depends on their relationship with supervisors. Thus, poor supervision does not only have profound impact on the quality of the work of PhD students, but also on supervisees' motivation and advancement (Abiddin, Hassan & Ahmad, 2009). It is in this perspective that Abiddin, Hassan and Ahmad (2009) underline that good supervisory practices help students fulfill their potential while in reverse, the supervisor's failure to attend to his expectations and responsibilities can harmfully affect the completion of the PhD degree.

In brief, it is important to recognize that supervisor-student relationship determines the success or failure of students' studies or research work completion. Hence, PhD supervisors are called to be enthusiastically ready for assistance in all their full capacities, playing more the role of a guide, mentor and collaborator (Manathunga, 2007; Wisker, Robinson & Shacham, 2007)

Conceptual framework

This study had two main research variables. The independent variable was 'supervision' while the dependent variable was 'timely completion of PhD programme (Figure 1). The interplay between these two variables and the way they were operationalized was done through a diagrammatical representation called 'conceptual framework' (Orodho, et al.; 2016). Like in the case of supervision, the sub-variables - on the basis of which the data collection instrument was designed - include collaboration, guidance and feedback as provided by the supervisor(s). Nonetheless, this study did not investigate other possible contributing factors to timely completion of PhD programme like candidate' attributes, the nature of the research and institution factors. These were assumed as intervening variables.
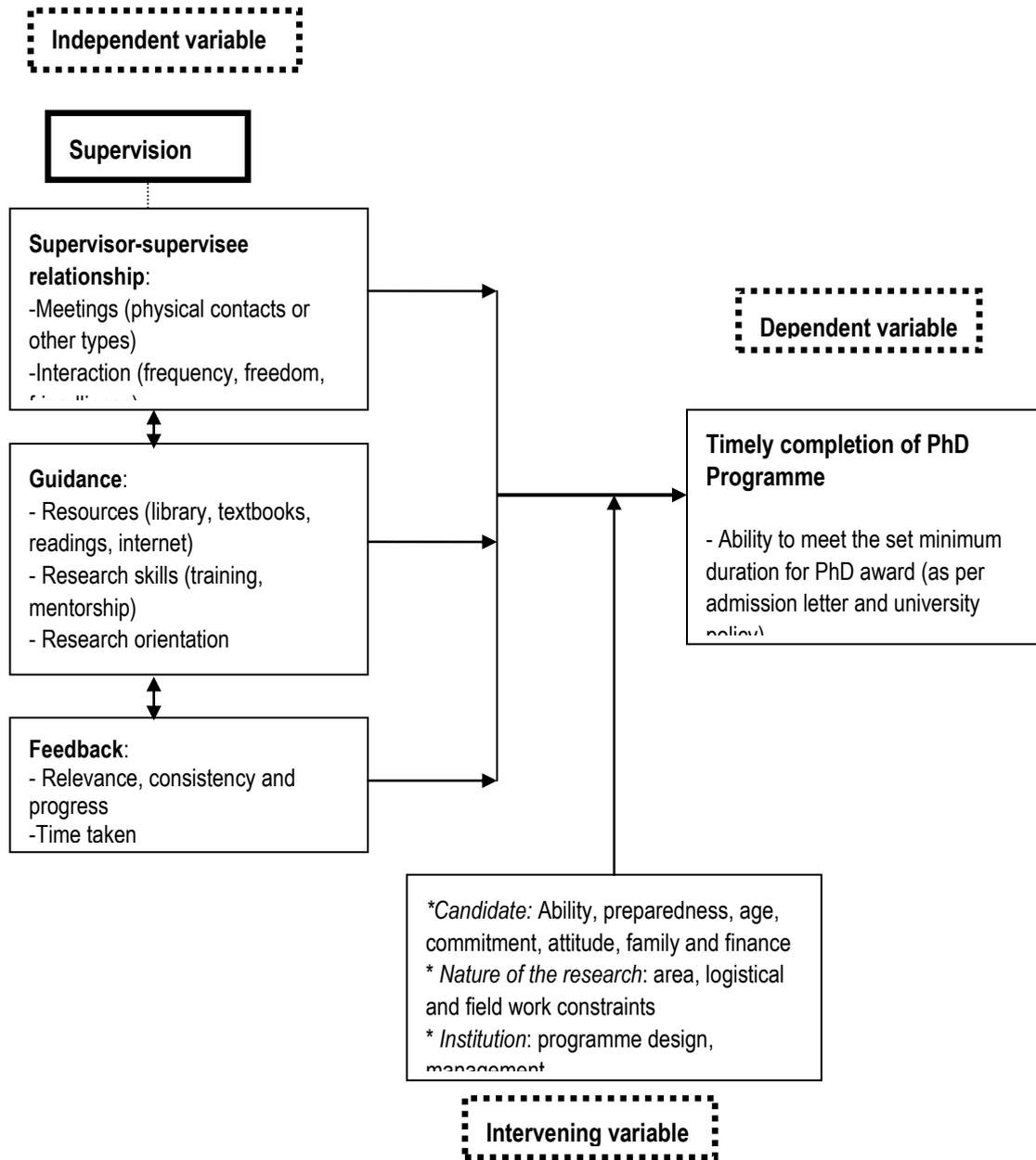
Figure 1: **Effect of Supervision on Timely Completion of PhD Programme**

Source: Researcher (2017)

This study adopted a purely qualitative pathway and adopted the narrative research design (Orodho, 2017). Snowball; a non probability sampling techniques was used as a sampling procedure (Amin, 2005). Informants were six graduates of 2015 and 2016 classes. These were part of international students' community of Kenyatta University between the academic years 2010/2011 and 2015/2016. One was from the School of Pure and Applied Sciences, three were from School of Education and two were from the School of Economics. An interview guide (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2011) was developed and Email as well as WhatsApp were used as data collection tools to reach these graduates being far in their home countries. Thematic analysis was used to analyze data. Data were reported in narrative form using direct quote and paraphrase (Creswell, 2012; Orodho, et al.; 2016). Ethical considerations were catered for in this study as well. In doing so, the respondents' names were kept unanimous by replacing names with a code 'RIG', i.e., Respondent to the Interview Guide. Therefore, six codes were adopted ranging from the first respondent (RIG1) to the last (6th) respondent (RIG6).

Findings

In light of the research questions, this section describes the informants' personal experiences with regard to (i) the level of collaboration of supervisors and its effect on timely completion of PhD programme, (ii) the level of guidance of supervisors and its contribution on timely completion of PhD programme and (iii) the feedback from supervisors and implications on timely completion of PhD programme.

The effect of supervisor-supervisee relationship on timely completion of PhD programme

The findings of this study indicated that the supervisor-supervisee relationship is determinant towards timely completion of PhD programme. Some of interviewees found it easier to approach their supervisors while others were totally confused regarding the strategies to adopt when it came to the time to approach the supervisors.

In relation to timely completion of PhD programme, the respondent RIG3 narrates his/her supervisory experience as follows:

> "*I managed to compete the PhD programme in three years….I cannot say it was because I was cleverer than my colleagues with whom we started the programme at the same time. I made it because; one, I was on full time…, two, I kept good relationship with my supervisor – I could walk in his office whenever I see him around, call or text him-and he would always welcome me…*".

In the view of another respondent RIG4, though the supervisor was also welcoming and supportive what helped him/her much was the collaboration with other students s/he came to know through supervision meetings. This is how s/he provided the whole story:

> "*For sure the supervisor cannot do everything...In my case, I was helped by the supervision meetings introduced by my supervisor. S/he used to call all her/his supervisees –be they on Masters of PhD programme once a month- then each supervisee would present his work to the group. The group would challenge you, give you comments, ask questions and so forth….You would leave the floor with more enlightenment in your work, having identified the weak points to rework or reshape or even having got assurance that your work is really worth of value…, this enabled me to develop relationship with that group of students…we would share resources (textbooks, journal articles) and support each other at every other stage…Moving in group is always good; I have seen, so I can tell*".

A totally desperate experience in terms of collaboration with the supervisor is herein given by the respondent RIG6. For this one, s/he could not predict how and when to contact the supervisor whose flexibility in supervision modalities was not evident. This is how the respondent framed the scenario:

> "*My supervisor…haaa! S/he was always busy here and there, chairing meetings. S/he was heading many projects…S/he insisted that I should not call him/her and s/he could only meet me on appointment. S/he was harsh and would stick on his personal principles ...I would send email, check on her secretary to inquire when s/he would be around…It is even this secretary who would remind her/him that I have brought a work that needs feedback…this supervisor made my life hard for nothing…I wish I had changed him/her, but I was advised not to change him/her because of the influence s/he had in my department and even in my school. Colleagues and other lecturers said that it would be a conflicting situation that would even lead to my failure....I had to look kind, not harmed, humble, respectful in her/his presence... So, I accepted working with him/her that way.*"

In a nutshell, the analysis of the information collected from informants indicate that the level of collaboration between the supervisee and the supervisor brings about difference in terms of academic training and emotion which may impact on the timely completion of the PhD programme.

The contribution of the level of guidance of supervisors on timely completion of PhD programme

The analysis of the data gathered from various respondents enabled to realize that the level of guidance provided by supervisors plays a decisive role in determining the supervisee's level of advancement and by implication the timely completion of PhD programme. In this perspective, one of the respondents RIG2 communicated:

> "*…what delayed and frustrated me was the lack of consistency in comments from supervisors …One would say the work is ok, another one would rubbish my work and worse enough s/he would not indicate to me what s/he wanted me to write, how to write it or indicate to me the resources that would guide me more …For sure, you need a big heart to accommodate such a person and balance his attitude with the one who would tell you that things are ok, then be decisive on the next steps to undertake... You can easily give up…*"

To make emphasis on the role of guidance from supervisors, another respondent, RIG4, tells his/her story based on the fact that s/he wasted more than one year searching for a research topic. The supervisee RIG4 came to settle when s/he approached his supervisor and told him/her the difficulty s/he had. RIG4 acknowledges herein the guidance received from the supervisor and the extent to which it helped to get started with research proposal writing:

> "*…I remember that I changed research topics for about five times…For each, I would develop a concept paper and bring it to my supervisors… It was not only time consuming but also it gave a bad impression to my supervisors that I did not know what I was looking for…One day, one of my supervisors called me in his office purposely to discuss the challenge I had to get settled on a research topic….Through our discussion, I came to realize that I was the one taking a wrong approach …. The whole issue for me was technical and central. I was working on concepts that either came in my mind or trying to work around other people's research topics instead of focusing on evident research problems - issues that are fact based in my area of specialisation -, review the literature to get inspired into how to get clear and measurable research variables and then move on… I really wasted my time and efforts, but that is what learning is all about… I am really thankful to my supervisor…*"

The look into the views of informants lead to realize two opposed supervisory experiences which all have the potency to affect timely completion of the PhD programme. The first is the supervisor' failure to show up research expertise as observed in the inability to orient and avail resource support to the supervisee's work. The second is the supervisor' keen scrutiny leading to the identification of the supervisee's weak point or areas of confusion, and thus bring him/her on track.

The implications of the feedback from supervisors on timely completion of PhD programme

The timely completion of PhD programme requires that all parties play fully their roles. Therefore, in as far as supervision is concerned, this study investigated also the issue around time and content i.e. consistency and relevance of feedback from supervisors and the extent to which it affects the timely completion of PhD programme. In this perspective, the respondent RIG5 communicated:

> "*My main supervisor has always been rare on campus … I remember there was a time we couldn't meet for about three months….. that is the reason why my three years study leave elapsed…I struggled to get the extension of my sponsorship, apply for one more year study leave from my employer, get a new Student's Pass; an equivalent to stay Visa failure to get it means that you are living illegally in Kenya and thus you can be arrested anytime at any point….it was a long story which I avoid to remember…Coming to the issue of feedback, I appreciate however the quality of feedback from my main supervisor… he was thorough and very good especially in research methodology…. To address all his comments would take me not less than a month because I would be required to go back and read to justify what I did, how I did it and why I did it that way…I wish he was good also in giving prompt feedback*"

While the respondents RIG5 could at least appreciate the quality of feedback from his/her supervisor, the respondent RIG1 did not experience any substantial contribution from his/her supervisor and had to strategize otherwise in order to advance in his dissertation pathways. This is how RIG1 describes his/her supervisory experience in terms of feedback:

> "*I don't know how to qualify the person who supervised me… I would see the guy on campus almost all working days when I would pass near his office. But what amazed me is the fact that when you meet him/her, s/he had either misplaced your work or you have always to start afresh explaining to him/her about what your work is all about…. then he would go through the work in your presence, turning pages, picking typographical errors only then s/he would sign the supervision track form and then you go…I was not sure whether what I was doing was right or wrong until I decided to work more with the second supervisor and also requesting constant inputs from other lecturers - fresh PhD holders- in my department.*

The analysis of the data in this section on feedback from supervisors shows two major elements that all may impact on timely completion of the PhD programme. The first is the fact that addressing comments from supervisors takes time. Hence, if supervisors would give feedback on time, it would save time for the students' progress especially for international students whose stay abroad is abided by special financial, work contract and legal conditions. The second is the reality that some supervisors give less attention to supervisee's work. As implications, these supervisors fail to master the supervisee's work and end up by giving irrelevant, inconsistent or unsubstantial remarks.

Discussion

In reference to the experience of graduates, former international students at Kenyatta University, this study has shown that supervision is a contributing factor to a timely completion of the PhD programme.

The first research objective was set to inquire into the supervisor-supervisee relationship and its effect on timely completion of PhD programme. The respondents in this study revealed that collaboration does not simply constitute a human relation feature but also an engine towards smooth exchange and interaction between the supervisee and the supervisor. On this point Delany (2013)indicates that good supervisors are approachable, friendly, supportive, have positive attitude, open minded, prepared to acknowledge error, organized, thorough, stimulating, conveys enthusiasm for research. The findings to this study again concur with Latona and Browne (2001), who mention that the positive relationship and quality of the interaction between the supervisee and supervisors constitute a vital determinant of timely completion of PhD programme.

The second research objective intended to explore the level of guidance of supervisors and its contribution on timely completion of PhD programme. The information given by the informants suggests that the lack of proper and timely guidance is not only a time wastage in the PhD journey but also a frustrating experience at the supervisee's end. This assertion concurs with the findings of Abiddin, Hassan and Ahmad (2009) that emphasized that proper PhD guidance is the underlying factor to motivation and advancement. Furthermore, the information collected from respondents indicates that good supervisory practices can help PhD students fulfil their potential as commended by Abiddin, Hassan and Ahmad (2009). In the same perspective of the contribution of proper guidance towards timely PhD completion, Ismail, Abiddin and Hassan (2011) underline that postgraduate studies are much concerned about particular timeframe for completion of their programmes. Hence, an effective supervisor needs to be flexible to satisfy supervisees' needs, open to various people's characters, communication and writing styles, and capable to give encouragement whenever required (Ismail, Abiddin & Hassan, 2011). In case of inadequate guidance from supervisors, some of the interviewees indicated that they made recourse to peers and other faculty members. This strategy is recommended by Ismail, Abiddin and Hassan (2011), who explain that PhD supervision is a complex and multidimensional exercise. Therefore, supervisees are called to mature and strategize because the supervisors alone cannot do everything (Hemer, 2012, Manathunga, 2007, Wisker, Robinson & Shacham, 2007). This would even be one of the tactics to overcome the distance effect between the supervisee and the supervisor who might be geographically separate because of academic, professional or personal circumstances (Orellana, Darder, Pérez & Salinas; 2016). More particularly, supervisors handling international students need to be informed that these students need more guidance because (i) the change of socio-cultural and environment context may cause discomfort and psycho-emotional trouble and (ii) the lack of acquaintance with the language barriers, the demands of a new academic environment may hinder their level of integration and academic advancement (Leong, Ward & Low, 2000; Mori, 2000).

The third research objective posited to investigate into the feedback of supervisors and establish its implications on timely completion of PhD programme. The collected data point to the fact that poor feedback pushes the supervisee to lose hope of assistance from their supervisors. This is true because sporadic or erratic

contact with supervisors affects the supervisee' progress (Ismail, Abiddin & Hassan, 2011). Although some informants appreciated supervisors who used to give thorough comments on their works, they were not happy of delayed feedback. This remark concurs with Dimitrova' s (2016) argument that some of the top most qualities of a good supervisor include ensuring continuous, supportive and prompt feedback. The quality of such a feedback does not only facilitate the timely completion of the PhD programme (Shariff, Abidin, Ramli & Ahmad, 2015) but also reduces pressure to international students (Lee, 2007, Ezebilo, 2012) who strive (i) to understand the new set of people and lifestyle (Ishimaya, 1989) and (ii) abide with financial contingencies (Leong, Ward & Low, 2000) imposed by funding agencies, family and employment terms back home.

Conclusion and recommendations

While well established higher learning institutions are recognized through the PhD programmes on offer, timely completion of the PhD programmes has remained a research concern. One of the contributing factors for this situation has been found to be inadequate supervision. It is on this ground that this study recommends that universities running PhD programme should constantly meet PhD students together with the supervisors so that any supervisory challenges or abnormality can be addressed in good time. The findings to this study push also to recommend that in order to avoid frustrations, socio-economical as well as legal issues, universities having international students in their PhD programmes should put in place adequate administrative and academic mechanisms to monitor the progress of these students. For PhD candidates, this study reveals that the PhD journey is not straightforward. To be successful on the PhD journey, they have to be psychologically mature, work in teams, keep their level of motivation high, seek and constantly upgrade their research skills. For supervisors, the findings to this study encourage a reflection on their supervisory roles and responsibilities. It is also a call to supervisors to understand supervisees' differences in terms of training, background, skills and learning desires and respond to these accordingly.

To address peculiar needs of international students, this study recommends that higher learning institutions should (i) enforce their policies and practices aiming at providing adequate induction to international PhD students. Indeed, these institutions are called to accompany and assist international students at all stages of the PhD programme. Supervisors of international students are invited to play more the role of guide and counselor because they are dealing with supervisees who might be overwhelmed by potential stress caused by financial costs, the family at distance, sponsorship and employment contingencies as well as cultural and language differences.

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