Understanding the Motives for Pursuing Postgraduate Studies and Causes of Late Completion: Supervisors and Supervisees’ Experiences

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Abstract
This article is a product of a study that deployed a qualitative research approach to examine what motivates students in Tanzania to undertake postgraduate studies, and the causes of late completion of such studies. A total of 47 participants were involved in this study through focused group discussions and semi-structured interviews. The results revealed five distinct reasons why postgraduate students enter a doctoral or master’s degree course: employment prospects, better salary, career progression or change, personal development, and prestige or self-actualization. Moreover, it was found that the determinants of late completion were both institutional and personal. Institutional factors included a non-supportive learning and research environment, cumbersome thesis and examination process, heavy supervisors’ workload, supervisors’ lack of motivation, and low entry qualifications by candidates. On the other hand, personal factors were poor educational background, social and financial problems, lack of good communication skills, research incompetence, low commitment, and partial study leave. The study concludes that efforts to improve the quality of postgraduate training should address the potential systemic, institutional and individual barriers. In the light of this, it is recommended that the institutional conditions and policies should be re-examined to ensure that supervisors and those they supervise are effectively facilitated in fulfilling their roles and responsibilities, so that postgraduate research produces good and timely quality results.

Keywords
postgraduate supervision, motives for postgraduate studies, late completion, institutional factors, personal factors, Tanzania

Introduction
Research plays a central role in generating knowledge for socio-economic development. In this regard, investment in knowledge generation through research has the potential to transform a country’s economic development and technological innovations (Auriol, 2010). Universities have a key role of creating knowledge through research undertaken by their staff and students in diverse fields. Master’s and doctoral degree programs in universities introduce students to the world of independent research so that through their studies they are able to generate new knowledge which in turn, contributes to personal, professional, and national development. Depending on university regulations and guidelines, postgraduate studies at master’s and doctoral levels have prescribed subjects which these students undertake and are expected to pass after examinations, within a specified time frame. In Tanzania, the duration of a postgraduate program ranges from 18 to 24 months for a master’s and from 36 to 48 months for a doctoral degree.

Research indicates that students join postgraduate studies due to various motivational factors (Incikabi et al., 2013; Tarvid, 2014). The motivation for joining postgraduate studies determines learner’s commitment, learning, and achievement outcomes (Rothes et al., 2017). Identifying and analyzing the reasons why students join postgraduate programs is important for informing the universities, so that the decisions and plans they make in managing postgraduate studies ensure that students do not only complete their studies on time, but also produce quality work. Indeed, this is vital for candidates’ self-reflection in terms of assessing their learning objectives and personal expectations (Habahbeh, 2012).
Available literature shows that the main reasons why students undertake doctoral or master’s studies include the desire to explore their potential, get promotion and a higher salary, broaden their career opportunities, get stimulated intellectually, acquire research skills, meet the requirements of a specific occupation, change a career, escape from routines and dissatisfying careers or institutional politics (Ayub et al., 2017; Gill & Hoppe, 2009; Incikabi et al., 2013; Tarvid, 2014). Research has further shown that universities and families are good sources of inspiration for the decision to become doctoral students. For example, Wiegerovaa (2016) argues that students who have been pinpointed by the faculty or department for future employment considerations based on their performance at master’s level are more likely to be motivated to join doctoral studies. Likewise, economic and emotional support from parents and attitude by immediate family members on doctoral education can also be a motivating factor for the decision to join postgraduate studies (Wiegerovaa, 2016). These empirical studies suggest that the motives that make a person to pursue postgraduate studies are multifaceted and individuals may possess a range of these motives. Generally, the motive for joining postgraduate studies might have implications for the completion rates, as both internal and external motives and goals determine the amount of time and effort that students will devote to pursuing their studies (Ayub et al., 2017) and fulfilling their expectations.

Globally universities have continued to attract students into master’s and PhD programs, but one of the overarching challenges is the completion time. There is overwhelming evidence in the literature that most postgraduate students at both Master’s and PhD levels take longer than is required by the program (Akparep et al., 2017; Burmeister, 2015; Ghatak et al., 2021; Jones, 2013; Nouri et al., 2019). For example, Krauss and Ismail (2010) found that in the United States of America, 50% of students entering doctorate programs have been dropping out before completing their programs. In the Netherlands, Van de Schoot et al. (2013) found that only 10% of PhD students managed to finish their studies in the commonly prescribed 4 years. Also, a report by the South African Council on Higher Education (2010) shows that 45% of PhD candidates in South Africa never complete their studies, and 29% drop out within the first 2 years. Similarly, a study by Jones (2013) reports that about 33% to 70% of PhD students who start their studies never finish. It is evident from the literature that timely completion of studies is beneficial to students, employers, universities, and the country’s economy (Ghatak et al., 2021; Van de Schoot et al., 2013; Ward & Brennan, 2020). The findings of these studies attest that slow completion of PhD studies is a serious concern across different contexts.

Research into postgraduate studies offers varied explanation regarding the causes of late completion, which slightly differ by university and country. From the analysis of previous research, the main reasons for late completion of postgraduate studies fall under three major categories, namely, supervision quality, institutional climate, and candidate characteristics including incoming skills (Ghatak et al., 2021; Komba & Chiwamba, 2018; Motseke, 2016; Ndayambaje, 2018; Spronken-Smith et al., 2018; Thomas, 2019; Van de Schoot et al., 2013; Van Rooij et al., 2021; Ward & Brennan, 2020). These studies concur in their findings that universities, students, and supervisors all have a significant role to play in ensuring timely and successful completion of postgraduate programs.

Quality of supervision is mentioned to be fundamental for quality postgraduate studies (Hamilton & Carson, 2015; Motseke, 2016; Ndayambaje, 2018; Spronken-Smith et al., 2018; Van Rooij et al., 2021). For example, Van Rooij et al. (2021) found that what led to satisfactory completion rates among PhD candidates in Netherlands was the quality of supervisor-student relationship, student’s sense of belonging, amount of freedom a student had and whether he/she was working on a project closely related to the supervisor’s research interests. Also, Hamilton and Carson (2015) argued that as academia’s highest qualification, a PhD is not only a means of having a sustained focus on research but also contributing new knowledge in a particular field. In this process, supervisors must guide students and give them full support, while ensuring that good interpersonal relationship is established and maintained during the entire study period. In this regard, Chiome and Chabaya (2012) advise that supervisors should not only possess knowledge of the discipline but also demonstrate ability to establish a sound relationship with their students, which encompasses warmth, respect, understanding, acceptance, and trust, in order to prop up their professional development. Other supervision qualities include accessibility and frequency of meetings (Pitchforth et al., 2012), timely and informative feedback (Ndayambaje, 2018), clarity on the supervision norms and expectations (Essa, 2011; Skakni, 2018) as well as avoiding power conflicts especially when there is more than one supervisor (Ismail et al., 2013).

Some studies have linked the quality of postgraduate supervision to institutional characteristics, roles, and responsibilities (Ghatak et al., 2021; Kyvik & Olsen, 2014; Motseke, 2016; Spronken-Smith et al., 2018). These include general research and physical environment, resources and facilities for the course and research projects and administrative efficiency of the universities. Motseke (2016) and Kyvik and Olsen (2014) emphasize that students at the master’s and doctorate level need a favorable research environment and quality resources for successful engagement in research. This is further supported by Spronken-Smith et al. (2018) who asserts that institutions should ensure the learning environment and supervision process are the best to foster learning and research processes.

Moreover, personal characteristics of a postgraduate student as a key stakeholder in the training also matter a lot in determining the amount of time taken to complete one’s
studies. Previous studies (Pitchforth et al., 2012; Thomas, 2019; Van de Schoot et al., 2013) have proved that the characteristics of the candidate and incoming skills are some of the internal factors which are critical to successful completion of postgraduate studies. These characteristics include financial status, emotional state, attitude toward the research project, gender, whether the candidate has children or not, marital status, motivation, interest in doing research, as well as adherence to the original thesis plan (Van de Schoot et al., 2013; Thomas, 2019; Van Rooij et al., 2021). Though all the mentioned characteristics are very important in deciding completion rates, Pitchforth et al. (2012) recognize the contribution of candidates’ incoming skills particularly writing and speaking English, and time management skills as major personal determinants of completion rates. It is further argued that students’ ability to communicate their ideas and thoughts in writing especially when English is not their first language is an important consideration in the success of the postgraduate training. This goes together with the students’ ability to plan and prioritize their activities in line with the set deadlines by the university, supervisors, and individual timeframes.

From previous studies, as already indicated, we have learnt that students join postgraduate studies for various reasons which are both internal and external. Also, the motives partly determine the efforts to accomplish students’ learning expectations and objectives. Moreover, the existing literature clearly shows that timely completion of postgraduate studies is a problem in various countries and the impediments vary by university and country. We have also learnt that most of the previous studies offer an understanding of postgraduate studies completion challenges with a focus on perspectives from postgraduate students in one faculty and/or discipline (Habahbeh, 2014; Motseke, 2016; Nkwabi, 2011; Van de Schoot et al., 2013) and international students (Ndaiyambuje, 2018) with limited focus on the perceptions of supervisors and university management. Blending the views from supervisors, students, and university management on what factors affect timely completion of postgraduate studies, has provided this study a balanced conclusion and interpretation. Moreover, the fields of study in the current research, that is, natural sciences, engineering, law, humanities, social sciences, and education are diverse, a factor which allowed multidisciplinary perspectives and experiences. Therefore, this research sought to address two objectives: (a) to explore why students in Tanzania undertake postgraduate studies, and (b) to find out why they fail to complete their studies on time, based on their experience and that of their supervisors.

**Methods**

**Research Design, Participants, and Areas of Study**

The study was a qualitative inquiry to establish motives for joining postgraduate studies and the factors that determine why postgraduate students fail to complete their studies on time, according to the supervisors and students. The approach enabled the researchers to reveal the reality of the phenomenon based on participants’ lived experiences (Cohen et al., 2010). Thus, the researchers were able to gain deep understanding of the constraints that hinder the completion of postgraduate studies on time by asking the “how” “why” and “what” questions. The participants were postgraduate students who had extended their studies, their supervisors, and the respective academic officials handling postgraduate matters in two public and two private universities in Tanzania. Through snowball and convenient sampling techniques, 24 postgraduate students were recruited. These postgraduate students were recruited from the fields of Natural Sciences, Engineering, Law, Humanities, Social Sciences, and Education. A convenient sampling technique was also applied to get 19 supervisors, while four administrators (Coordinators of postgraduate studies) were purposively selected by virtue of their position and responsibilities. In total, the study involved 47 participants.

**Data Collection Methods and Analysis Plan**

Data was collected through face-to-face interviews with supervisors and postgraduate coordinators at different times, as well as focused group discussions (FGDs) held with postgraduate students. Information was analyzed employing the thematic approach through reducing, organizing and synthesizing the data, and searching for common patterns/themes. Accordingly, appropriate codes were chosen and used to illustrate the key issues emerging from the interviews and FGDs. In this study, research ethics were adhered to prior to data collection by obtaining research permits from relevant authorities, seeking oral informed consent from all participants and maintaining confidentiality throughout the research process.

**Findings and Discussion**

The findings are presented based on the research objectives. The first section covers the motives of students for enrolling in a postgraduate program, while the second is concerned with the diverse factors experienced by the research participants, which have affected completion of the postgraduate program.

**Motive for Enrolling in a Postgraduate Program**

The first objective of the study was to investigate students’ motives for joining postgraduate programs. Thus, it was crucial to establish the motives before exploring the reasons why they were unable to complete their studies on time so that informed interventions could be made to raise the completion rate. The findings from FGDs with postgraduate students indicate that the reasons for embarking on postgraduate
students are a better salary, employment prospects, career progression, personal development, and gaining prestige or a reputation. With regard to salary increase two postgraduate students had this to say:

After being employed, I realised that there was a big disparity between the salary of Bachelor degree holders and those holding a Master’s degree in the same field. This motivated me to go for further studies in order to raise my salary (Master’s student, University B, Humanities).

I was motivated to join the postgraduate programme to develop my career and get a higher salary (Master’s student, University D, Social Sciences).

A raise in one’s salary means development in one’s career; so some postgraduate students thought that it was essential to upgrade their qualifications to enable them take up more responsibilities at their place of employment. This was particularly the case of an academician, who disclosed the following:

I believe that having a PhD would increase my salary, but more importantly it would build my capacity to execute the main duties of an academician like doing research, becoming a consultant and research supervisor. To do these, I would need a PhD, which is the appropriate qualification (PhD student, University A, Education).

On top of career development and increased salary, another PhD student was motivated to join the program in order to gain prestige, as explained below:

Although having a PhD was a requirement of my employer, I would still have chosen to pursue that path, because having a PhD is a milestone, it gives you prestige, and people trust you in many undertakings. So this is something that I have been dreaming of for quite some time (PhD student, University A, Social Sciences).

Another student spoke about the greater possibility of finding employment, as follows:

I came to realise that with a Bachelor degree it is very hard to compete in the labour market. Nowadays, a lot of graduates are unemployed, and so having a Master’s degree will increase my chances of getting a job (Master’s student-University C, Business).

From the foregoing anecdotes, it is evident that students are motivated differently to join postgraduate studies. The current research identified five major motives which are both internal and external to the students. These are, as hinted earlier, better salary, employment prospects, career progression or change, personal development, and higher reputation. Literature shows that both internal and external motives have different implications for the completion rates based on the devoted time and effort in pursuing the respective programs (Ayub et al., 2017). Understanding the motives and their implications is crucial to inform university policies, practices, and students’ self-evaluation of goals and labor market needs (Habahbeh, 2014). According to Wiegerovaa (2016) desire and motivation are closely linked to satisfying one’s needs in his or her social environment.

These findings are similar to those reported by Wiegerovaa (2016) who found out that what influenced students to join a doctoral program in the Czech Republic was the possibility of obtaining employment with a reasonable salary and embarking on a professional career. Similarly, another study by Skakni (2018) in the United Kingdom found that what influenced students to undertake doctoral studies and persevere throughout the process was the desire to achieve their ambition, get stimulated intellectually, and develop their career. Tarvid (2014) also found that students pursuing a PhD were keen to learn more and do research, because they wanted to progress in their career or get a better job with a better salary, and achieve a higher social status. Similarly, Di and Wen (2014) reported that in China students join postgraduate studies for knowledge acquisition and desire to get decent jobs. They also found that other students go for postgraduate studies because of peer influence and to fulfill parents’ expectations. Generally, the students’ motive for joining a master’s or PhD program seem to satisfy their cognitive, social, emotional, and economic needs as well as employers desire and that of their significant others.

Causes of Late Completion of Postgraduate Studies

The study investigated the reasons why postgraduate students did not complete their studies on time through FGDs and interviews. The findings from the students, supervisors, and postgraduate studies coordinators revealed a number of factors that had caused postgraduate students to be late in completing their studies. The experience of postgraduate students, coordinators of postgraduate studies, and supervisors has shown that supervisors’ workload, low motivation, the examination process, and entry qualifications have adversely affected the quality of postgraduate training and the timely completion of studies at all the researched institutions. The causes of late completion are discussed in the sections that follow.

Institutional Factors

The institutional factors that affected postgraduate training comprised the learning environment, examination process, supervisors’ workload, entry qualifications, change of supervisor, and supervisors’ motivation. With regard to the learning environment, postgraduate students argued that effective postgraduate studies require a research environment which motivates learning, such as having a modern library where
they can access online journals, research reports, and books, together with well-furnished study rooms and laboratories. The findings indicated that only few of these learning facilities were available in the surveyed institutions, as one participant observed:

The challenge is that many higher learning institutions, including ours, start offering postgraduate programmes without ensuring that all the necessary requirements like a library, laboratory and study rooms are in place, which contributes to the late completion of studies (Coordinator Postgraduate Studies, University C).

Similarly, one of the postgraduate students commented on the need for a supportive learning and research environment:

Postgraduate students require a friendly and scholarly learning and research environment with a library and study rooms that are well-furnished, with access to the internet and online materials, credible journals and books, so that they can proceed smoothly with their academic endeavours. However, the situation in our institution is critical, as these resources are normally taken for granted (PhD student, University A, Education).

The study also found that postgraduate students from different schools and faculties in the studied institutions did not have special postgraduate study rooms. In most cases, the limited space accommodated only a few students. For instance, one student from University A said:

In the case of our school, we have a postgraduate room which is being used by all postgraduate students and sometimes by some undergraduates, and so there is scramble for space. Unfortunately, even the new building does not have a room for postgraduate students, making the situation even worse. The only alternative may be to stay in our hostel (PhD student, University A, Humanities).

Based on the findings, it is evident that the environment in the participating universities was not in favor of student learning and research needs; this resulted to late completion of their studies. According to Kyvik and Olsen (2014) a supportive learning environment is important for quality postgraduate training and research. The findings of this study echo those by Komba and Chiwamba (2017), Kyvik and Olsen (2014), and Motseke (2016) who established that lack of access to relevant books, journal articles and reliable internet services affect the completion rate of postgraduate studies. While the current study found that lack of digitalized resources, shortage of well-equipped study rooms for postgraduate students’ private study, and laboratory equipment adversely affect postgraduate studies in Tanzania, other studies reported different results. These include the nature of the field of study (Gardner, 2009), access to conferences, whether living on or off campus, and whether or not the student has access to library services outside the university campus (Pitchforth et al., 2012).

Apart from the learning environment, the participants complained about supervisors’ workload, due to shortage of human resources. In most of the surveyed universities, there was inadequate number of academic staff with the qualification required to supervise postgraduate students, and so one supervisor has a large number of them. This factor was reported to have affected greatly the quality of supervision. For instance, most of the supervisors complained that they had to supervise more than 10 postgraduate students at a time, which affected their efficiency and effectiveness. One supervisor had this to say:

Despite the presence of the university workload policy, our department has a limited number of qualified staff to supervise students, and so we are always overloaded. For example, currently I am supervising 15 postgraduate students and 4 undergraduate students. So, I sometimes find I am inefficient as far as quality postgraduate supervision is concerned (Supervisor, University D).

The experience of supervisor from other universities was as follows:

The high staff-student ratio is unavoidable, because there are instances in which one person is allotted many courses to handle, is required to set and mark final examinations, do research and consultancies and supervise more than 7 postgraduate students. How can one be efficient given this kind of workload? (Supervisor, University B).

Apart from a heavy workload, supervisors’ low commitment was also reported to affect timely completion of postgraduate studies. One student intimated the following:

I had to go abroad so that I would have ample time to write up my research report. I settled with my supervisor that I would be sending one chapter at a time. I did so, but I received no feedback on any of my submissions. Worse, upon my arrival home, I was told to resubmit some of the chapters because earlier copies had been misplaced. A year passed without any feedback. I thank God that the university management started demanding to know why students were not completing their studies on time, including me. Following this pressure, for the first time, one of my supervisors phoned me demanding to know the stage I had reached and why I had not graduated. It pains me indeed (PhD student, University A, Social Sciences).

A student from another institution had this to share:

I remember, I submitted my work in February. I kept reminding my supervisor to give me feedback, but whenever I reminded her, she kept on telling me . . . just relax. I will read, I will read it. At the end, she told me I had done absolutely nothing. I cried bitterly for hours! I was shocked to find out that all this time, she had managed to read only a part of it and concluded that nothing had been done (Master’s student, University C, Business).
Lack of commitment among supervisors was also reported by one of the postgraduate coordinators as one of the factors causing delay:

Some supervisors do not take time to read students’ work. In our case, there are second-year students whose proposals have neither gone to the Departmental nor the School Committee because the supervisors have delayed the process. We have had to stop allocating students to such supervisors (Postgraduate studies coordinator, University B).

Lack of commitment among supervisors was partly attributed to low motivation. It was noted during the interviews with postgraduate supervisors and coordinators that supervisors are allocated a huge number of postgraduate students, with meagre remuneration compared to the amount of work they are expected to do. On that basis, most supervisors lack motivation, especially when it comes to reading students’ work. The following remark, from the Coordinator of Postgraduate Studies and supervisor, elaborate this:

Supervisors are not motivated to supervise postgraduate students because they are paid very little, just a token of appreciation. One cannot compare a task like reading a thesis/dissertation of 300 pages or more with what they get as remuneration. It is very discouraging. This issue has been raised at different academic forums but no action has been taken to address it (Postgraduate studies coordinator, University A).

There is completely no incentive to do this work. We are toiling to help students meet good research standards, but . . . . . We are not promoted on the basis of this supervision, so why bothering? Why can’t we just teach and embark on our own issues? (Supervisor, University A).

Literature shows that supervisors’ commitment and their availability are of paramount importance toward timely completion of postgraduate studies, especially in terms of the number of meetings with the students, quality and timely feedback on students’ work, and clarity of the supervision norms and expectations (Burmeister, 2015; Ndayambaje, 2018; Overall et al., 2011; Pitchforth et al., 2012). Indeed, committed and motivated supervisors mentor their students in different ways by introducing them to various services which help to navigate the research journey. Supervisors’ lack of motivation is also partially linked to their expectations regarding students’ achievement which have not being met. Regardless of students’ background, most supervisors expect a high level of commitment from students which, if not forthcoming, tends to reduce their motivation to support them, thereby delaying the completion of studies (Bøgelund, 2015; Halse, 2011).

Nulty et al. (2008) argue further that, recognizing the supervisors’ excellence in the academic promotion has a great influence on supervisors’ commitment. In respect to that, some universities have taken into consideration the number of postgraduate students who have successful completed their studies when one is applying for academic promotion. For instance, at the University of South Australia (2020), a supervision of higher degrees matters when applying for academic promotions. Also, in Kenya, promotion from senior lecturer/senior research fellow to associate professor requires evidence of successful supervision of four postgraduate students and the number of supervisions increases to five students for the higher academic ranks (Kenyan Commission for University Education, 2014). However, as explained in the previous quotes, in Tanzania the practice is different as postgraduate students’ supervision does not directly contribute to the academics’ promotion points. The assessment of academic staff performance sorely depends on teaching, publications, and consultancy (The University of Dar es Salaam, 2016). Although the existing guidelines are silent about the contribution of postgraduate students’ supervision on the promotion of academic staff, this responsibility is viewed as part of the academic’s teaching and supervision obligation which is assessed through Open Performance Review and Appraisal System (OPRAS), contribution to the scientific scholarly community, compliance to the university postgraduate guidelines, and improving one’s curriculum vitae as far as supervision and examining postgraduate students are concerned.

Furthermore, late completion was linked to student-supervisor relationship and change of supervisors. The study findings revealed that lack of cooperation between students and supervisors had affected research progress. This was explained by one student as follows:

A supervisor wants to be worshipped like God. You cannot call or meet him if you do not have an appointment. Even if you agreed to meet, when you get to the office, usually there is no room for discussion and negotiation. I think the ongoing seminars for both students and supervisors would help to remove worries and improve student-supervisor relationship (PhD student, University A, Engineering).

Another student recounted a similar experience:

Sometimes this process is difficult due to the relationship that you have with the supervisor. You find some supervisors are very harsh, they cannot see and value your potential; they always see your weaknesses. And because of that, all the time they have a negative attitude to your work, and are not interested with your progress. This lowers students’ confidence and sometimes reinforces freezing of the programme, quitting or changing supervisor, all of which account for late completion (Master’s student, University B, Humanities).

The experiences recounted above indicate that some postgraduate students fail to complete studies timely because they may not be on good terms with their supervisors. In the research process, both parties have a role to play in ensuring that studies are completed on time. A good relationship,
whereby students trust their supervisors, enables them to set their study goals and meet their expectations, because they are being encouraged to be independent, while being supportive of each other. Literature shows that the quality of the supervisor student relationship contributes to students’ satisfaction and timely completion of their thesis (Shin et al., 2018), while a poor relationship can lead to attrition (Golde, 2005). Poor student-supervisor relationship is partly attributed to little knowledge on the roles attached to being a postgraduate student or a supervisor. For instance, supervisors’ job entails being a mentor, influencer, facilitator, counselor, and guide among others. As such, Gube et al. (2017) affirm that supervisors who are aware of their roles are likely to be responsive to students’ needs and expectations. The influence of student supervisor relationship on completion rate was also raised in the literature by Cicco (2014), Akparep et al. (2017), and Goldman and Goodboy (2017) who emphasized the fact that if postgraduate students are to complete their studies successfully, they need to have a good relationship with their supervisors.

Another challenge which was said to contribute to the late completion of postgraduate studies was the change of supervisors. This inhibits students’ progress, as supervision styles and approaches tend to differ between one supervisor and another. One supervisor had this to share:

_Unless it is absolutely necessary, I would discourage frequent changes of the supervisor or research title because it takes a lot of time to adjust..._ (Supervisor, University A).

Examination logistics and assessment of students’ work were among the challenges that postgraduate students have to deal with. With regard to examinations, two specific sub-themes emerged; these are proposal approval processes and thesis/dissertation examination procedures. In almost all universities, it was found that there were varied degrees of delays in receiving feedback from internal and external examiners, and unclear schedules for presenting proposals at departmental, school, or institute level and delays in the approval stages. To substantiate this, one of the supervisors had this to say:

_The Department and School Committees delay approving proposals. Normally, students wait for one to three years before their proposals get approved. In this case, the possibility of completing on time becomes very doubtful_ (Supervisor, University B).

This argument was supported by some of the postgraduate coordinators. One of them said:

_The examination of students’ theses sometimes takes a long time. Some students complete writing up their research report on time, but it takes two to three months or more for each examiner (internal and external examiners) to read the submitted work and provide feedback. The situation is worse with some internal examiners who take more time than external examiners. This is really a big challenge for both students and we as the university (Coordinator postgraduate studies, University A)._  

Adding to that, one student reported to have been the victim of a delayed thesis examination schedule. He said:

_My PhD thesis examination was rescheduled twice, because the chairperson of the panel on the respective days was sick and when the third schedule was about to be cancelled one of my supervisors reacted and requested another chairperson so that I could defend my work, otherwise it would have been rescheduled again (PhD student, University A, Humanities)._  

Furthermore, a delay in the proposal approval process and thesis examination has been noted as a major challenge to students’ completion rate. The findings echo what Martinsuo and Turkulainen (2011) and Ghatak et al. (2021) report; they are also of the opinion that delays in coursework completion and report arrival contributed to late completion of doctoral studies.

Moreover, low academic ability of some postgraduate students was another contributing factor to the late completion of postgraduate studies. The findings from both the interviews and FGD disclosed that some students who had been admitted to postgraduate programs were weak in terms of academic abilities and so were unable to cope with what was expected of them. Based on the findings, this factor was more evident at Universities B, C, and D than at University A. As a result of such low entry qualifications, the supervision process has become difficult and tedious as explained here under:

_Some of our students are too weak academically to pursue postgraduate studies. Weak students are always a problem as they cannot meet the required research standards_ (Supervisor, University B).

In this regard, students with low academic abilities fail to meet the program requirements in terms of conducting research and writing up their research reports, making the task of supervision very demanding. The study findings are in line with what was put forward by Spronken-Smith et al. (2018) in New Zealand, that recruiting quality PhD candidates contributes to a high completion rate. Also, Wiergerova (2016) insisted that universities need to recruit the best candidates for effective doctoral studies. This proves further that selecting well-qualified candidates for postgraduate studies is one of the ways to improve the completion rate, although using the GPA criterion alone might not always be realistic. This is because one’s academic qualifications may not always represent his or her actual potential; as such, there might be students with higher GPA in their previous academic qualifications who also fail to complete postgraduate studies on time due to other factors. This implies further that
raising the GPA as an entry requirement to postgraduate programs does not guarantee that the students will complete their studies on time. What is needed most of all is for the universities to provide mentorship, scholarly research environment and ongoing professional support at the departmental and supervisory levels to enable students to realize their full potential. This echoes Humphrey et al. (2012) conclusion that smooth and timely completion of studies greatly depends on postgraduate candidates being trained to do research and equipped with soft skills that are transferable.

**Personal Factors**

Apart from institutional factors in contributing to the late completion of postgraduate studies, personal factors were also found to play a vital part. The analysis of both FGDs and interviews showed that students’ educational background, social problems, poor communication skills, lack of research competency, and low commitment as well as partial study leave contributed to the late completion of postgraduate studies, as explained below.

Students’ educational background was pointed out as one of the personal factors affecting some postgraduate students. The findings show that some students had a very shaky background in their chosen field; this affected their progress in coursework. During FGDs with the postgraduate students, they indicated that a mismatch between students’ prior academic background and the program they had chosen often led to being discontinued or finishing late. One participant confirmed this:

*Students’ low completion rate is sometimes caused by their little ability and shaky academic background. For instance, in our class, many students are pursuing a Master’s in Human Resource Management, while they obtained a Bachelor of Education. As a result, many of them have been discontinued because of poor performance in coursework, and only a few have managed to progress, albeit slowly* (Master’s student, University D, Social Sciences).

In the same vein, lack of commitment of the students themselves was found to have contributed to the late completion of their studies. The following remarks were made by a postgraduate coordinator and supervisor to illustrate the situation:

*The main problem leading to late completion is on students themselves. As a supervisor, I do my part, and then all of a sudden you realise that the students are not responding, even to your calls, and in the worst case scenario they disappear for a couple of months without notifying anyone* (Supervisor, University C).

Other supervisors from University D also confirmed that some students were not serious with their studies, and were busy with other activities to the extent that they did not show up for supervision:

*Some of our students here are not committed to their studies. They are very irresponsible. In fact, my own son was supposed to graduate last year; but after completing the coursework part, he started looking for a job, so academic issues were compromised by the quest for a better financial status* (Supervisor, University D).

Also, competence in using the English language was reported to slow down students’ speed to write proposals and research reports. It was noted that in all the sampled universities, students have to conduct their research and communicate in English. However, the findings show that some postgraduate students could not effectively communicate in English, especially in report writing as explained by one supervisor:

*English is a problem for our postgraduate students. Most of them fail to write clearly and get approval of their proposals on time because of their poor English language skills* (Supervisor, University B).

The influence of academic background was reported by Gardner (2009), Pitchforth et al. (2012), and Jiranek (2010) who ascertain that academic achievement accounts for variations in completion rates of postgraduate students. Pitchforth et al. (2012) stresses the fact that students’ prior knowledge regarding their discipline and general level of skills with the English language at the time of enrollment determines their rate of completion. Generally, good communication skills help a postgraduate student to write his/her work (proposal/thesis) confidently and it takes him/her a short time to move from one stage to another. Also, a student’s good command of language helps his/her supervisor to spend little time to correct grammar and connection of ideas. Apart from the language problem, inadequate research skills were pointed out by both supervisors and students as contributing factor to students’ poor research progress. Universities tend to enroll postgraduate students who have Bachelor degrees from recognized universities, but who are novices in the basics of research. As a result, a lot of these students fail to produce intellectually convincing research proposals. To elaborate, one supervisor reported:

*Some postgraduate students are very weak academically, and some are in their PhD programmes. It is difficult to comprehend how they managed to complete their Master’s degree. Some of them fail even to produce clear and meaningful sentences. How then could you expect this kind of student to write a thesis of about 300 pages?* (Supervisor, University B).

This was also confirmed by some postgraduate students, as remarked by one Master’s student:
My poor research skills have contributed significantly to the late completion of my studies. Frankly speaking, I had a good supervisor but I could not present ideas in a logical manner and, in most cases, my supervisor complained about lack of connectivity between ideas and phrases. I lacked the writing skills I should say. Otherwise, I should have completed my studies earlier than I did (Master’s student, University A, Education).

The problem of poor research and writing skills among postgraduate students was also evident in the studies by Olakulehin and Ojo (2008), Tshiponokwva (2013), and Motseke (2016) which emphasize the importance of research capacity to both supervisors and supervisees in postgraduate training. Since postgraduate studies engage students in independent research under the guidance and support of supervisors, research skills prior to joining Master’s or PhD programs are worthwhile. As informed by the findings of the current study, limited knowledge on research undertakings impede one’s ability to effectively and efficiently accomplish one’s research work, hence a lot of time is wasted, leading to late completion of studies. Similar findings are reported by Rauf (2016) who emphasize that student quality had significant influence in completing postgraduate thesis in Sri Lanka as compared with other factors. The current results also concur with what is reported by Fung et al. (2017) who declare that the quality of postgraduate students is linked with writing skills which may cause delays as supervisors demand high quality work and consistent high performance to meet the institutional standards.

Social problems were found to affect students’ timely completion of their studies. Among others, death of beloved ones, sickness, and family responsibilities were mentioned, as challenges facing postgraduate students. Such problems hindered their academic progress. One PhD student had this to share:

I lost my mother two years after being enrolled for PhD studies. Therefore, I had to take on family responsibilities because my father was unwell. I had no time to concentrate on my studies. Worse still, in 2014 my father passed away and a year later my supervisor also passed away. These three grave incidences made it virtually impossible for me to complete my studies on time (PhD student, University A, Humanities).

These findings echo Motseke (2016) study who reported that adult postgraduate students with family commitments took most of their time to handle family matters hence could not sufficiently focus on their studies in South Africa. Similarly, Van de Schoot et al. (2013) found that PhD candidates with families and those who had issues in their marriage were likely to delay completing their studies. This suggests that balancing both academic and social responsibilities is a challenge in completing postgraduate studies on time.

Moreover, partial study leave was also pointed out by students and supervisors to have influenced the late completion of PhD studies. The participants reported that students with partial study leave had many obligations to fulfill during their training, which limited the time they had to spend on their coursework and write up their research findings, as elaborated below:

Most of our students have partial study leave. They are doing their studies while continuing with their work, which is not bad. The problem is their failure to balance their employers’ requirements and academic obligations (Supervisor, University D).

This was also reported by one participant during the interviews:

Some of our students are working somewhere else and so once they complete their coursework they tend to go back to their workstations, and when they return it is already too late. Automatically, they cannot complete their studies on time (Postgraduate studies coordinator, University A).

In addition, financial problems were reported as one among the challenges hindering early completion of postgraduate studies. Partial scholarship and delays in the disbursement of research funds have been major challenges for some of the postgraduate students. It was noted that some students were private-sponsored hence were utilizing part of their study time to work and earn money for managing their tuition fees, stipend, and accommodation. Others who had a scholarship claimed that their sponsors (employers) did not release the research funds on time. As a result some of them had to deregister while others delayed in collecting data. The following quotations give more clarification:

For me, lack of sponsorship has affected my academic progress. I don’t even understand how I have managed to continue with my studies because most of the time I have been busy searching for fees (Master student, University C, Business).

A supervisor at University C had similar observations:

Most students do not have enough funds to cover the full cost of their postgraduate studies. They manage to pay fees for only one year of their coursework and when it comes to dissertation writing they find themselves struggling to get funds from elsewhere which affects their progress (Supervisor, University C).

As explained earlier, for postgraduate students who have full sponsorship, untimely disbursement of the research funds contribute to delays in field work as noted hereunder:

My sponsor did not provide research funds on time. This greatly contributed to the delay in completing my studies. I was supposed to go for fieldwork during the summer. Unfortunately, the funds were not disbursed on time but were realized during the rainy season when I could not collect data. As my research was partly Archaeology and partly History, I had to wait until the following summer (PhD student, University A, Humanities).
Another student reported the following:

I have a partial scholarship and the rest is covered by my employer. The problem arose during fieldwork which was supposed to be funded by my employer. I expected to begin fieldwork in October, but I only got the funds in February, the following year. This adversely affected my progress (Master’s student, University B, Business).

While engagement in activities to increase finance gain has been perceived as a delaying factor for completion rates in Tanzania, employment opportunity has been reported to influence the completion rate in other parts of the world where on-campus employment is reported to increase the chances to defend the thesis timely (Bekova, 2021). Based on the study findings, it is noted that postgraduate students’ preparedness in terms of funding and registration for the program prior to their admission is important for students’ decision to join postgraduate studies. Research indicates that financial stability of the students determines their ability to meet their financial and academic obligations (Pitchforth et al., 2012). As such, students with financial constraints are likely to study under a stressful environment, and this affects their concentration on the studies. The findings of the current research are also in line with those reported by the Van Rooij et al. (2021) who found that there were significant differences in the completion rate between sponsored and non-sponsored students, and part-time and full time students. Fully sponsored students were found to complete their studies earlier than those with partial or no scholarships.

Based on the findings of the study, it is obvious that completion of postgraduate studies requires initiatives from both individual (i.e., student) and the institution (i.e., University). Furthermore, individual’s persistence and success in the postgraduate studies is partly linked with motivational factors for joining postgraduate studies (McGee et al., 2016). This study found five motivational factors which influenced students to enroll to the postgraduate studies, namely; employment prospects, better salary, career progression or change, personal development, and prestige or self-actualization. Research indicates that whether intrinsic or extrinsic, the motivation explains why people behave the way they do (Brailsford, 2010). For example, intrinsic motivation is significantly associated with deep study strategy, high study effort, and good academic performance (Kusurkar, 2012). Other studies reported a positive association between motivational factors and postgraduate students’ autonomy, involvement, persistence, and satisfaction (De Clercq et al., 2021; Devos et al., 2015; Mason, 2012). As such, the motives for students’ decision to join postgraduate studies define their behavior, commitment, actions, and reactions which might either positively or negatively affect the completion rate.

**Conclusion and Recommendations**

As explained earlier, this research explored factors contributing to postgraduate students not completing their studies on time by considering the lived experiences of supervisors and postgraduate students in higher learning institutions in Tanzania. The study also sought to find out what motivates postgraduate students to join Master’s or PhD programs. The analysis of the findings revealed that the main reasons were to get a promotion and a better salary, progress in or change their career, develop themselves, gain prestige or achieve self-actualization. From the findings, it is also clear that both institutional and personal factors adversely affect the quality of postgraduate studies; as a result, students fail to complete their studies on time. Based on the study findings, a few proposals could be put forward to address the problem of late completion of studies by postgraduate students. First, a strong supervisor-student relationship needs to be strengthened through continuous training to both supervisors and students on their roles, responsibilities, and expectations toward an increased completion rate and high quality research output. Secondly, there is a need for postgraduate students to recognize the importance of being prepared financially and their full availability for the program prior to their admission. They should be able to balance their social and academic commitments for timely completion of their studies. Thirdly, the university management should ensure that there are adequate supervisors and learning facilities, and equipment to enhance effective provision of postgraduate programs. Fourthly, the ongoing support and mentorship to students by the respective departments and supervisors should be enhanced to improve postgraduate students’ academic writing and research skills. Fifthly, it is recommended that universities should establish and/or strengthen online supervision and follow-up mechanisms to track postgraduate students’ progress and performance, determine supervisors’ and students’ commitment, as well as identify the challenges experienced, for timely and informed interventions. Lastly, further research can be extended to examine the determinants of supervisors’ commitment and motivation and compare the postgraduate supervision experiences and late completion across disciplines using a quantitative approach.

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