

DEMYSTIFYING THE BLAME GAME IN THE DELAYS OF GRADUATION OF RESEARCH STUDENTS IN UNIVERSITIES IN GHANA: THE CASE OF UNIVERSITY FOR DEVELOPMENT STUDIES

John Yaw Akparep,

Department of Administration and Management Studies, School of Business and Law,
University for Development Studies, Tamale, Ghana

Enock Jengre,

Legal Resources Centre, Dzorwulu, Accra, Ghana

Dorothy Abaamah Amoah,

Department of Development Education, Faculty of Education, University for Development
Studies, Tamale, Ghana

ABSTRACT: *Research students` thesis is a fundamental component of the University life after completion of their course work. Post graduate research students of the University for Development Studies (UDS) are expected to complete their programme within two years and three years for masters and PhD regular respectively but are mostly not able to do so due to delays in thesis write-up. Since its inception, the University has made strides in graduate studies. Regrettably however, graduate students have consistently complained of not graduating on record time. This has been a source of worry with the resultant blame games as to who actually contributes to the delays in thesis completion and graduation. The foregoing debate is the underlying motivation for this article as it tries to bring to the fore the reasons behind the delays of research students in not graduating on record time in UDS. This study adopted qualitative case study methods to collect and analyze data. Post graduate research students; delayed from graduation, continuing students, supervisors/administrators and graduated research students constituted respondents for this paper. Primary and secondary sources of data were employed for the study. Purposive sampling was adopted to sample 25 participants spread across gender, type of programme and mode of study. Findings revealed that successful completion of the thesis work had a direct bearing on a harmonious relationship built on trust, cooperation and hard work between the student and supervisor. Also, it was found out that supervisors were assigned more students to be supervised than they could have sufficient time and attention for. On the other hand, research students were found to combine work with their studies that limited the time they spent on their thesis thereby leading to the delay completion and graduation. The study therefore concluded that both students and supervisors contributed to the delay in graduation of research students in the university. The researchers recommended that enrolment into post-graduate programmes in the university should be reduced to match the number of qualified and experienced lecturers/supervisors available for graduate studies so as to make supervision of research work more manageable and that management of the university should sanction students who by their own making fail to graduate on record time from their programmes.*

KEYWORDS: Demystify, blame, game, thesis, delays, graduation, university, students

Background and Problem Statement

Thesis, sometimes described as dissertation is purely an academic exercise that is expected to be the original idea of a postgraduate research student and serves as a core component of the requirements for the award of degree in one's area of study. Research students' thesis is therefore a fundamental component of the University life as it is seen as a means to achieving an end (Buttery, Richter & Filho, 2005). Students are therefore expected to complete their thesis within a stipulated duration of time, mostly two years and three years for masters and PhD regular research students respectively (UDS Graduate School Students' Handbook, 2015). The duration of postgraduate programme varies depending on each university's and country's postgraduate regulations. It a typical feature of the Ghanaian educational system is that, a large proportion of research students spend more years than the curricular prescribe to attain their degrees. This proposition has gained support by scholars as Rennie and Brewer (1987) whose work indicated that students spend more years than programme duration at post graduate level majorly owing to slow pace of the thesis completion. Due to this, it came as no surprise to Rennie and Brewer (1987) as they saw the occurrence of thesis delay as 'thesis blocking'. Delayed graduation of research students is becoming a widespread phenomenon and, hence, a topical issue not only in the case of Ghana, but in a growing number of countries, such as the United States of America, Germany, France, Denmark, Sweden and many other European countries (see, among others, Brunello and Winter-Ebmer, 2003; Bowen, Chingos and McPherson, 2009; Hakkinen and Usitalo, 2002; Van Ours and Ridder, 2002).

It is purported that a number of research students in Ghanaian tertiary institutions do not graduate on record time due to thesis blocking. What accounts for thesis blocking remains a challenge. In Ghanaian universities, especially University for Development Studies (UDS), experience shows that most research students do not graduate within the record time and at times some of them stay four to six years more than the normal programme duration. It appears that supervisors are often overloaded with students to supervise than their time allow. Wallace (2003) indicated that in some universities, a supervisor is not expected to supervise more than six full time PhD students and six master's students as a regulation. The process where a student passes through the departmental defense (proposal or pre-field) stage to the external defense stage before he/she could have a successful thesis completion may pose a challenge where the external examination delays. Each of these stages involves a lot of commitments in terms of time, money and bureaucratic procedures. It should be noted that each defense will require the attention of all the academic staff in the department and the faculty as well as external examiners.

Over the years, there seems to be increases in the number of students enlisted for postgraduate research programmes each year in the UDS. However, the major challenge at this level has been the issue of completion and graduation as thesis writing is a pre-condition to being awarded postgraduate degree. The University for Development Studies (UDS), Ghana, started running full time graduate research programs on all its four campuses (Tamale, Wa, Nyankpala and Navrongo) in the 2010/2011 academic year. Since its inception, the University has made strides in graduate studies. Regrettably however, graduate students have consistently complained of not graduating on record time. This is a source of worry not only to continuing students, the institution and supervisors but prospective applicants as it breeds apathy on their part of not willing to apply to

study at UDS for fear of abandoning their program or not graduating on record time. This brings into question the reasons for the delays. Morton & Worthley (1995) found that students' completion of thesis could be affected by personal factors as job, family, insufficient training of students and problem with the supervisor(s) and the administrative bureaucracy involved. Green & Powell (2005) stressed on individual (gender, age, ethnicity and social background), structural (levels of funding and disciplinary area), academic (previous experience and the type of research being undertaken) and environmental (supervision, mentoring, progress review and academic culture) factors as major reasons for thesis completion delay.

Clearly, Ho, Wong & Wong (2010) also pointed out that distractions from thesis research like recreational activities, life events, family, children, friends, pregnancy, giving birth and caring for a baby could lead to delays in thesis completion. Other identified factors by Ho, Wong and Wong were: poor knowledge of data related processes, lack of understanding of the thesis writing process, and student-supervisor personal qualities as major hindrances to thesis completion. Also, as Ssegawa & Rwelamila (2009) indicated, lack of hands-on skills in the research process on the part of students especially in the early stages (research definition and design) is a contributive factor to the delay in graduating. To Rennie and Brewer (1987), lack of a clear and realistic research topic and a perfectionist tendency were found to be major predictive factors contributing to the delay in completing thesis. The completion of thesis issues and factors related to postgraduate degree completion had been widely researched (Elgar, 2003; Jinarek, 2010; Myres, 1999; Olorunnisola, 2011; Ssegawa & Rwelamila, 2009). Some of these researchers affirmed that many post graduate students were faced with attrition owing to challenges in completion of thesis work. Others attribute the delays to inadequate supervision from supervisors/lecturers. This is the source of the blame game between supervisors and students as to who is responsible for the delays in completion of thesis and graduation. (Olorunnisola, 2011; Elgar, 2003). The deeper root of low completion rates is examined by Lovitts from a personal experience. She left two doctoral programs before finishing a third one, in sociology, at the University of Maryland in 1996 (Lovitts, 1996; Lovitts, 2001 in Gardner, 2008).

In the view of some scholars, the reasons for the low completion rate of research programmes may be grouped into three major themes namely: student deficiencies, inappropriate supervision process and inappropriate research environment. Studies have examined factors ranging from personal, academic and financial with no standard findings of which seems to influence completion ahead of the others (Gardener, 2008; Berelson, 1960 in Gardner, 2008; Wamala et al., 2012). Studies conducted in United States of America have shown that completion rates varied across major disciplines, with natural sciences recording the highest compared to humanities (Gardner, 2008). The high completion rate in sciences was attributed to the manner in which students interacted and bonded as a faculty research community especially through laboratory sessions, as opposed to the research isolation found in humanities. The reasons for research students' delay in graduation seem to be diverse and may not be attributed to a single factor. Whereas the longer it takes to get a degree determines the value placed on the certificate, the low completion rate also translates into high costs for the sponsors and the institution since supervisors will have to spend additional time assisting students. Attempts to give reasons for the delays in graduation of UDS research students have triggered the blame game of accusations and counter accusations from supervisors, research students especially and the institution as to who is responsible for the delays.

The foregoing debate is the underlying motivation for this article as it tries to bring to the fore the reasons behind the delays of research students not graduating on record time in UDS. The study seeks to highlight the factors responsible for the delays in thesis completion in the bid to demystify that blame game and possibly change attitudes towards the general conduct of the thesis work to ensure early completion and graduation in the University.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Ensuring that research students who matriculate at higher educational institutions in Ghana persist to graduation is an area of concern to higher institutions, supervisors and students. A significant body of research identifies factors that contribute to students delays in thesis completion and graduation and possible interventions to assist them. Identification of these factors in turn led to theory formation and the development of frameworks within which institutions can affect the experience of students in ways that increase thesis completion rate and graduation (Kuh et al. 2005). Kuh et al. (2005) identified abroad participation as an enriching educational experience linked to higher rates of degree completion, although little research has been conducted on this connection. Toward this end, literature is reviewed on: thesis blocking, supervisor's role in thesis completion, student-supervisor relationship and the benefits of thesis completion and graduation

Thesis Blocking

Experience has shown that students spend more years than programmed at post graduate level majorly owing to slow pace of thesis completion. This occurrence of thesis delays is deemed to be 'thesis blocking' by (Rennie and Brewer, 1987). Rennie and Brewer identified lack of a clear and realistic research topic and a perfectionist tendency as major predictive factors contributing to the delay in completing thesis. The completion of thesis issues and those related to postgraduate degree completion had been widely researched (Elgar, 2003; Jinarek, 2010; Myres, 1999; Olorunnisola, 2011). Some of these researchers affirmed that many post graduate students are being faced with attrition owing to challenges in completion of thesis work. Thesis completion delays as a result of students' skill in research conduct and students' lack of capacity and preparedness for research and postgraduate study. The post graduate student's emotional and psychological problems (Zuber- Skerritt, 1987), social and intellectual isolation (Conrad & Phillips, 1995), students' personal difficulties (e.g. financing, family issues) (Buttery, Richter, & Filho, 2005), sexual harassment and gender issues in supervision (Lee, 1998), and organizational factors (e.g. work space, facilities) all contribute to the delay. Students' personal challenges that could delay thesis completion include lack of knowledge, frustration, loss of interest, negative feedback and insecurity from the supervisor and lack of dependence related to mastery of research skills.

Morton and Worthley (1995) identified difficulties with balancing between personal and academic lives as a hindering factor in students' ability to complete their theses. This could result in students' insufficient research knowledge. For example, the student may have come from a different discipline and have not received sufficient training in research methodology. This implies that to be efficient in the thesis write up, the student will have to spend extra time to learn the basics of research methods as a foundation to be well grounded in the thesis write up. Glatthorn (1998) also stated that towards the end of students' coursework, they might have considered change of career plans, values or priorities, which could distract them from completing their theses. Myers (1999)

study carried out revealed that, most of the participants for the study stated that family or other personal obligations like paid jobs or professional responsibilities took time away from working on their dissertation. Lack of understanding of the thesis writing process was also found by Myers (1999) as a major hindrance in thesis completion. Glatthorn (1998: 211) also suggested that fear arising from the “lack of knowledge and from students’ own insecurity” may hinder thesis completion while Myers (1999) study showed that frustration and/or loss of interest were the biggest barriers to thesis completion. The frustration, negative feedback, difficult relationship with the supervisor, or a change of interest, could easily make a research student lose the initial enthusiasm he or she had for the studies.

In some comparative studies, male students were found to complete their thesis faster than their female counterparts and be less likely to discontinue their studies, though some of these effects were small (Green & Powell, 2005). In another study by Seagram, Gould, and Pyke (1998), gender appeared unimportant to the issue of thesis completion. Also, Green and Powell (2005) found out that workload associated with part-time work commitments were also issues that may partially affect delays in thesis completion. Meanwhile, in their study of 3579 postgraduate students working towards a PhD between 1984 and 1993 in the UK, Wright & Cochrane as reported in Green and Powell (2005) considered gender, age, faculty cluster (e.g. Sciences vs Arts), part-time vs full-time study modes, student origin, source of funding, class of first degree, and whether the students were graduates from within the host university as factors in delays of thesis completion. Key findings were that students most likely to submit their thesis within the years were males and those that were studying a science-based subject, had a high grade first degree, held research funding and, interestingly, were international and studying part-time.

Supervisor’s Role in Thesis Completion

To be able to write a thesis well researched, the role of a supervisor in guiding the student is of utmost importance and cannot be overlooked. Lecturers who are skillful in research work are needed as supervisors to guide postgraduate research students to successfully complete their studies. Without effective supervision of postgraduate studies, it will be difficult to produce new knowledge. Each successful graduate applicant will be assigned a supervisor either during the course work period or after the course work is over. Every research student will be assigned at least one supervisor for research master’s degree and at least two for PhD studies. Where the supervisors are two, the team will be made up of a principal supervisor and a co-supervisor and each must hold at least a PhD degree or be a senior lecturer (Seidu, 2015).

Lategan (2009) asserts that postgraduate supervision is the active engagement by the supervisor through the research process to guide the student to solve a research problem. She explained that the process of supervision starts with identifying a suitable supervisor who can assist the student to identify the research problem, apply correct methodologies to address the research problem and find appropriate solutions to the stated problem. In some universities, a supervisor is not expected to supervise more than six full time Ph.D. students and six master’s students as a regulation. This measure is put in place in order for the supervisor to have at least sufficient time for the students. Supervisor/supervisee working relationship could result in delays in thesis completion. Unclear motives and purposes of supervision (Wallace, 2003), supervisors’ preference of some supervisory roles over other roles (Vilkinas, 2002) and lack of research training amongst supervisors are mostly

identified as major hindrances to thesis completion. Some supervisors are not trained on the newest research methods that could help them in guiding their students in the postgraduate studies which results in their inability to apply and transfer the appropriate skills and research expertise to their supervisees. This could be attributed to either inability of some university management to organize seminars for research development of these supervisors or supervisors' lack of intrinsic motivation to develop them.

Student-Supervisor Relationship and Thesis Completion

The student-supervisor relationship is imperative for successful thesis completion within program duration. Supervisors are assigned to research students in order to give students technical support for writing their theses. Assignment of supervisors is normally based on their competence and their interest in a particular area of study. Where there is no supervisor to be assigned to guide a student in his/her chosen area of research, the student may be required by the awarding institution to look for a supervisor whose name is forwarded to the Graduate School for consideration (Seidu, 2015). The relationship between a student and a supervisor commences immediately the supervisor is officially assigned to the student. The relationship should be founded on a solid rock of certain principles, rules and regulations in order to successfully complete the thesis work.

Seidu (2015) indicated that many graduate students experience delays with their theses majorly owing to poor student-supervisor relationships. The relationship therefore needs to be carefully managed to achieve its objectives. The student should be of good behavior and the supervisor should live a life worth emulating. Research conducted indicated that unclear motives and purposes of supervision, supervisors' preference of some supervisory roles over other roles in guiding students contribute to the delays in thesis completion (Wallace, 2003; Vilkinas, 2002). The student-supervisor relationship should be built on honesty and hard work. Honesty requires you to be factual, open and transparent in all that the student says and writes. As Seidu (2015) pointed out, the relationship should not just be "to pass your thesis and go away". He opined that, student-supervisor relationship that travels beyond the end of the thesis, inter alia, often become beneficial in terms of academic progress. Granted that the relationship is positive, it enables the supervisor to assist such student(s) by way of writing a recommendation letter for further studies and guiding in research publication(s) among others.

Benefits of Early Thesis Completion and Graduation

Thesis completion has numerous benefits for society and the individual, the effects of which lead to public investment in higher education institutions. At a societal level, benefits of educational attainment include lower crime rates; lower welfare, medical, and prison costs; and a more stable society and government (McMahon, 2009). Baum and Ma (2007: 2) found that "adults with higher levels of education are less likely to depend on social safety-net programs, generating decreased demand on public budgets" (p. 2). Turner (2004: 14) observed that when degree completion rates are low, or graduation is delayed, the production of skilled workers in the economy is reduced which results in lower tax revenue and spending. Failure to move matriculated students through the educational system to degree completion impacts not only the individual, the academic institution but society as a whole in important ways. Individual benefits are intertwined with societal benefits of educational attainment. The most immediate and significant benefit is the wage

premium associated with degree completion (McMahon, 2009; Turner, 2004; Baum & Ma, 2007; Bound, Lovenheim, & Turner, 2009). According to McMahon (2009), college graduates are earning 70% more than high school graduates, a number that has increased dramatically since 1970. Not surprisingly, through effective research work, educational attainment is negatively correlated with rates of poverty and unemployment (McMahon 2009; Baum & Ma, 2007). Non-monetary benefits of higher levels of thesis write up include better health of the individual and his or her children; increased longevity; lower infant mortality rates; likelihood of children attending college; happiness (McMahon, 2009); and easier access to more prestigious positions in society (Pascarella and Terenzini, 2005). At an institutional level, graduation rates are often seen as a measure of the success of the institution (Astin, 1996). Low completion rates negatively impact public confidence in higher educational institutions and institutional enrollment management and budgetary stability (Braxton, Hirschy, & McClendon, 2004).

A large number of studies have examined the economic returns to education in order to provide evidence on the motivations that drive the individual's choice of continuing to study, especially after undergraduate studies. According to the rational-behavioural model, people acquire more education only if their lifetime earnings expectations increase (Becker, 1964; Card 1995, 2001; Heckman and Honoré, 1990; Manski, 1990). In fact, it has been proven that people who invest in education, especially in post graduate research studies, have more job opportunities, and thereby a reduced probability of being unemployed, and they earn more during their entire working life than those who have spent less time in education. It appears that human capital influences directly both the profile and the dynamics of the total work career of each individual as well as his/her income profile. At large, more educated people face low probability of being unemployed and at the same time have more chances of facing better labour market conditions from the start. As US data indicate, an additional year of schooling typically raises an individual's earnings power (Trostel et al., 2002). Thus, a person decides to invest in education because of the greater expected monetary and non-monetary returns. Higher earnings prospects are the most obvious benefit and the consensus estimate is that the return to education is quite substantial as the thesis work contributes immensely to the development of the country Ghana.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted the qualitative design in the collection and analysis of data. It involved in-depth interviews (one-on-one interviews) in order to fully understand the issues being investigated—delayed graduation of research students. 10 research students of the University for Development Studies who did not complete their programmes within the given programme duration constituted part of the population for the study as they were taken as 'delayed students'. Also, 5 continuing students who had not completed their required programme duration and working on their thesis and 5 supervisors assisting students with their thesis were included in the study. In order not to be biased, 5 students who had been able to graduate on record time from research programmes in the University were contacted for their views on what made it possible for them to graduate on schedule. Qualitative methods, such as one-on-one interviews were considered as effective tools that offered the researchers an opportunity to get in-depth information regarding the study as posited (Maxwell, 2005).

Primary and secondary sources of data were employed to corroborate findings of the study. Interviews formed the basis for the primary sources of data. A semi-structured interview guide was designed for the respondents. This way, the researchers had control over the line of questioning while allowing respondents adequate space to provide historical and detailed information where necessary (Creswell, 2007).

The sample size of 25 participants was spread across gender, type of programme and mode of study. The interviews were conducted with these respondents since the information to deal with the problem could be obtained from them. The study made use of purposive sampling technique in sampling lecturers supervising research students working on their thesis. The purposive sampling was a useful technique for soliciting information from specific people from whom such information could be obtained (Maxwell, 2005). On the part of both postgraduate and graduated research students, snowball sampling was deemed appropriate and hence, adopted. One delayed candidate in a department was usually contacted and then implored to supply the names of other students experiencing delays in completing their research. This approach was useful since it afforded the researchers an opportunity to identify and interview students experiencing delays in completion of their thesis which would have been practically difficult, if not impossible.

With the consent of respondents, all interviews were audio recorded. The audio files were then transcribed and interview transcripts coded for purposes of easy reference. While transcribing the audio files, the researchers noted down themes emerging from the interviews which were later on verified by several rounds of reading of the interview scripts. The themes so identified were then categorized into major themes with sub-themes for each of the major themes. As Maxwell (2005) advised, this is a very useful approach to qualitative data analysis as it provides great opportunities for the researcher to carefully organize volumes of qualitative data into insightful findings.

PRESENTATION, ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

This section presents the results of the analysis of data collected in line with the objective for the study. The primary aim of this study was to demystify the blame game of delays in graduation of research students in UDS. This was done with the view of erasing the misconceptions surrounding who actually contributed to the delays in completion and graduation of research students. The results of the analyses were presented mostly in narratives.

Thesis Blocking

Thesis writing is an important requirement towards the award of a research degree, for either master's by research, MPhil degree or PhD degree. The researchers were curious to uncover what actually led to thesis blocking as propounded by various scholars. In an interview with a PhD student in Social Administration class, who started his study in 2013 missed no words as he shared his frustrations regarding the challenges he faced:

“HmMMMM am worried because I surely cannot tell what happens to my programme. Since we started the program it was in my second year that I was assigned supervisors. I don't know but unluckily enough, can you imagine that for about seven months I sent my work to my supervisors and they have not even read it?” (Interview with PhD student, 2016).

From the above excerpt, a PhD student who was expected to have gone far in his thesis writing unfortunately was yet to have chapter one approved. This constraining factor where among other things, supervisors were occupied too much with other activities with little or apparently no time to attend to students severely delayed timely completion of thesis. Clearly, whereas many times the norm was to see students or some students pre-occupied with other activities other than academic work as indicated by some scholars (Morton and Worthley, 1995), making it difficult to sit down and work on their thesis, a number of them such as the above respondent had a rather different turn of events. This indicated that, one could not position the blame solely on the door step of either of the parties involved as the scholars claimed.

In a separate interview with an Mphil student on what contributed to thesis blocking, emanated the following response:

Ok, the problem comes from the supervisor. You see a student spends sleepless nights out of his/her busy schedules to sit up and work on the thesis only for the supervisor not to have time to look the work. Imagine I sent my work to my supervisor for more than three months without feedback, I then went to the supervisor's office only to be told that he could not find my work and so, I should print another copy for him... (interview with Mphil student, 2016)

Clearly, Mphil students devote one full year after their course work towards comprehensive thesis work expected to contribute to knowledge. In order to complete and graduate on record time, students are often advised and encouraged to put up their best and even start on time. This is as a result of the demanding nature of the thesis work that undoubtedly needs ample time and a lot of readings to complete. So, where a student sends his/her work to be guided by a supervisor and it so appears that the supervisor, for any reason best known to him/her, does not apportion considerable time and space for the student actually creates delays in completion in which case the supervisor stands accused.

On their part, supervisors/administrators sharing their views on thesis blocking opined:

“My brother (supervisor referring to the researcher), thesis blocking or delays as we normally call has become an albatross hanging around our necks as supervisors who expect our students to complete and be well grounded in research in general. One thing that I have personally observed is that, some students spend very little time working on their thesis and easily forget that our programmes are on full time. So, the none serious ones sometimes portray that the supervisor should even do the thesis for them. These factors among others I have not said trigger the delays in completing their thesis on record time for especially the master's students. Also, PhD candidates are mostly

occupied with one job or the other to the neglect of the programme, which is also demanding. This apparently makes it difficult for them to combine work, family and the thesis among other factors” (interview with a supervisor, 2016)

So far, one important component which needs stressing is that in completing thesis work that is credible and contributes to knowledge, it is more demanding as exemplified in the above excerpt. Whereas in thesis writing a supervisor has an important role to play, students should not lose sight that the work belongs to them and so to be able to complete on record time, they should be able to devote enough time and be prepared to put down something worth reading to their supervisors. According to another supervisor, many of the students have not been committed to their thesis, hence, the delays in completion.

“Thesis delays have become a teething problem to us here in the University. What I have seen is that many times our students are not ready to complete on time. Some of them will want you the supervisor to chase and beg them to have the work to supervise. I mean, it doesn't work that way; we are busy attending to other graduate students, undergraduate students' project work, lectures, we have to research and publish articles for promotion, attend to family pressures... So, at any given time, we are occupied doing one thing or another. Personally, what I do for students under my supervision is that, those serious ones get better supervision than their colleagues on the other side. This in effect makes it possible for the serious students to complete their thesis work within the record time” (interview with a supervisor, 2016)

“As an administrator, I normally skim through some of our students draft thesis work to make sure that everything is intact. I must confess that even the format is a problem for some of them (students) to follow. Once your thesis content is rich but you fail to follow the accepted format prescribed in the graduate handbook, no matter what, there will be delays in thesis completion, submission and subsequently, graduation. One interesting yet worrying thing is that some students easily forget the research methods they have been taught in class. In view of that, some students have poor knowledge of the demands of the thesis work and the perfectionist tendency of quality work also engulfs them...(interview with graduate school administrator, 2016).

The excerpts above from the perspectives of supervisors/administrator give an account of what usually contributes to delays in thesis completion and graduation. These clearly support what scholars have said, that, difficulties with balancing between personal and academic lives contribute to thesis delays (Morton and Worthley, 1995). Also, some students pursued research programmes which had no much link with their undergraduate discipline and so had no foundation or insufficient training in research methodology in the area, resulting in students' insufficient research knowledge. It means that to complete the thesis write up on time, the student had to spend extra time to learn the basics of research methods as a foundation to be well grounded in the thesis write up. Field data also revealed that some graduate students think that the course work is more demanding than that of the thesis. So after the course work, most of them not only relax but also get onto their jobs with little priority to the thesis. This they think will have more time to work on the thesis, which apparently ends up creating delays for them. Data therefore gives credence to

Glatthorn (1998) assertion that towards the end of students' coursework, they might have considered change of career plans, values or priorities, which could distract them from completing their thesis.

Supervisor's role towards thesis completion

The role of a supervisor in guiding students' thesis towards successful completion of their research work whilst contributing to knowledge is of utmost importance as data from respondents indicated. As per the University's requirements, master's and PhD students are assigned at least one supervisor and two supervisors where one will be main supervisor and the other co-supervisor respectfully. An interview with a PhD student on whether supervisor's role was key to timely thesis completion resulted in this response:

“Truly, the role of the supervisor indisputably is pivotal in successful thesis completion. The supervisor is your guide and the one directing you and so whatever you write as a student, if he does not read and approve of it, though you may continue writing, it will be difficult for you to complete without his approval or signature...” (interview with PhD student, 2016).

Clearly, the role of the supervisor(s) in assisting students to complete their thesis work cannot be overemphasized. It is therefore expected of the supervisor to have research knowledge in the area of study of the student. This way, the supervisor stands in the better position to assist students under his/her guide in tweaking their thesis. One problem identified by respondents came from some supervisors who had no research interest and limited knowledge to guide students in their chosen area of study. This way, the supervisors had to play two roles: being students/learners and supervisors. Students/learners because, such supervisors had to spend considerable time to research/study the area where the supervisee was researching, before guiding the student. This way, the possibility of delays in thesis completion was assured as most times, they were pre-occupied with other academic and family activities and with little time to learn and assist students in their thesis. Recounting his plight of not been able to complete since 2010, an MPhil student lamented:

“For me a lot of the blame of my inability to complete goes to my supervisor for his little or even no research interest in my chosen area of study. My research is in the area of finance but clearly, my supervisor is a gender activist. You will send her your work and for months and when she finally responses, will tell you of gender issues which have no place in finance. I lodged a complaint right from the beginning to change her but it has not been fruitful...” (Interview with MPhil student, 2016)

Still touching on supervisors' role, supervisors interviewed revealed how their role was as important as that of the role of the students. They indicated that supervisees were seen as those who did not have the “technical eye” in tweaking their thesis and hence needed to be assisted in that respect. So, there should be a collaborative effort of supervisor and supervisee in shaping the work.

“As a supervisor, I see my role in guiding students' thesis as important as that of the student's. Whereas a supervisor cannot assist a student who has not written anything to be guided, so also a student cannot proceed or complete without the assistance of a

supervisor per the University's requirement...so it should be collaborative..." (Interview with Supervisor, 2016)

A graduate in an MPhil programme emphasized that, supervisors played important role in thesis writing, adding that there was the need to create a better enabling environment for both the student and the supervisor to collaborate towards the success of the thesis.

Student-Supervisor Relationship towards Thesis Completion

The relationship that needs to be between the supervisor and supervisee should be mutual and harmonious in order to move along towards timely thesis completion and graduation by research students. Available data from the respondents revealed the relevance of a supervisee having a cordial relationship with the supervisor to get along throughout the research cycle or process. The findings revealed that poor student-supervisor relationship led to delays in thesis completion. Findings indeed emphasized that there should be a cordial relationship built on trust and hard work. This way, parties involved would be on the same wave length towards the success of the thesis. Quizzed as to the relationship she had with her supervisor, a respondent shared her lamentation:

"Well, it has not been the best as I expected. We, women, sometimes find difficulties when assigned to a supervisor who wants to have an amorous relationship with you before engaging in a legitimate duty of supervising your thesis. The problem is that it's even more difficult to explain convincingly to management, so as to assign you to a different supervisor..." (Interview with MPhil student, 2016)

Again, in a separate interview with a PhD candidate on how student-supervisor relationship affected thesis writing, the response was:

"Yes, if the relationship is not cordial, even the interest to look at your work will not be there and the student will not be at peace. The students my supervisor supervises are eight (8) for masters and already some of them have poor relationship with him. So, the students are finding it difficult to have him attend to their work. With this, how possible could they complete any time soon?" (PhD student, 2016)

From the above excerpts, it is explicit that student-supervisor relationship regarding thesis writing in the University largely leaves much to be desired. Thus, it also contributes to the delays in thesis completion and graduation. A respondent however cautioned that, in establishing better and cordial relationship for the success of the thesis writing, care must be taken in demarcating the boundaries so as not to engage in any illicit relationship that tarnishes the image of the institution. This corroborates Seidu' (2015) argument that supervisors are assigned a lot of students making it difficult to have sufficient time to supervise them and that, students who had built a trusted and better relationship with them were better off as it served as a bait to have them supervise their work for them and adding that the relationship should be established on certain principles and rules of engagement agreed and accepted by the parties involved to ensure that supervisees would know their limits and act accordingly.

From the view point of the supervisors interviewed on the relationship between both parties, they unanimously indicated the importance of students having a friendly relationship with supervisor(s) founded on certain principles, rules of engagement and obeying instructions. Data collected further indicated the need to consider relationships that went beyond the thesis work/academic work in line with the view of (Seidu, 2015). This is indeed true because, students after graduation and in seeking for jobs or further studies would want to as part of the requirements, submit recommendation letter mostly from the supervisor/s who supervised the students. This is usually made easier through relationships that were good.

For many respondents, clear guidance and communication were essential to their thesis trajectory. Or rather, they perceived an absence of clear guidance and communication as fundamental in causing delays, as these two respondents discussed:

“I have been having a difficult time relating with my first project which I started with my supervisor, who doesn't pay attention to what I am doing anymore. [...] I fell in a void when my previous supervisor left for further studies, and no one noticed he was supervising some students. It took me 6 months to find a new supervisor, start a project ... That time is lost, and I do not get any (monetary) help on that point.”(PhD candidate, 2016).

Sixth year PhD candidate in the Social Sciences, delayed by 2 years and still working on the thesis remarked:

“My supervisor does not motivate or stimulate me scientifically or socially. He does not provide any practical supervision, nor does he ensure that a secondary supervisor does so, even when explicitly asked to do so, and agreeing upon this. This has caused considerable and unnecessary delays in my project. When confronted, the supervisor denies any insufficiencies and does not show willingness to invest in improving the situation.” (6th year PhD candidate in Endogenous Development delayed by approximately 2 years, 2016)

Answers to open-ended questions provided interesting insights into candidates' experiences and perceptions of thesis delays. Efforts to clearly set out the boundary as to who actually contributed much to the delays in thesis completion and graduation received the following responses from both the supervisors and the students:

“In fact students should take part of the blame but a larger share from my point of view goes to the supervisor. This is because no matter how good you are, if your work is before your supervisor and he does not read and approve it, it is of no use and you can't make progress. Remember that the student never gets there until the supervisor first (takes the lead)...part of the blame also goes to the University administration because you assign students to supervisors and you fail to monitor progress and no deadlines or reminders (Interview with PhD student, 2016)

“Well, I would not want to shirk responsibility as a supervisor but I think that there is no need to blame anyone. However, much of the blame will go to the student(s) simply

because, they mostly fail to exercise restraint in working with their supervisors. Supervisors are very busy most often and supervise more than we can bear at times...Again, part of the blame may have to be squarely on some supervisors who shirk their responsibility to supervise students (interview with a supervisor, 2016)

“From my experience as administrator and with some interactions with supervisors and students, I think they have to equally be blamed if any, at all. This is because a serious student will always put pressure on the supervisor to be effective and students having challenges with their supervisor/s could follow proper channels of communication to have issues resolved...”(interview with post graduate school administrator, 2016)

The responses above indicated clearly that, both students and supervisors shared the blame in the causes of delays in thesis completion and students' graduation. Whereas both students and supervisors were merely trading blames on each other regarding who contributed much to the delays in thesis completion, the situation is more worrying that there exists delays in thesis completion and yet little or apparently nothing is done to improve upon the problem confronting the University. One important yet ignored question that comes to mind is whether there is the need to have accusations and counter accusations as to who contributed to the delays. The responses on the blame game painted a gloomy picture of the future prospects of postgraduate research programmes of the University.

CONCLUSION

The study revealed that both students and supervisors played major roles towards the successful completion of the thesis. The relationship that existed between the students and supervisors also played significant role towards the early completion of the thesis. It was found out that supervisors were assigned more students to be supervised than they could have sufficient time and attention for. From the other angle, it was established that research students were found to combine work with their studies that limited the time they spent on their thesis thereby leading to the delay in completion and graduation. The study therefore concluded that both students and supervisors contributed almost equally to the delay in the completion of thesis and subsequent graduation of research students in the University. The University also shared the blame for failing to put proper mechanism(s) to keep track/check of progress of students' thesis both on internal supervision and on external examination, thereby causing the delays.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Where supervisors appear not to cooperate with students due to whatever reason, justifiable or otherwise, it is recommended that students could submit their work to the post graduate programmes coordinator for onward submission to the supervisor/s. This should accompany with the date in which the student should receive response from the supervisor/s. This way, such supervisors are made to work within schedule leading to timely response whilst ensuring progress. It is also recommended that, day/s should be set aside purposely for thesis work. This becomes necessary since some supervisors double as having administrative duties to perform and so have little or no time for thesis supervision. Special days set aside by supervisors to attend to their

students' thesis will aid in tweaking students thesis. There should also be a mechanism to check/track the progress of thesis when sent for external examination.

The graduate board of the University should put in place measures to set special days whereby external examiners are brought to the University purposely to examine students' thesis. Such external examiners should be adequately catered for and be motivated to spend considerable time purposely meant to mark thesis. This way, issues of delays with external examinations will be a thing of the past. Students and supervisors should be made to formally write to Departments/University, explaining why students have not been able to complete their thesis within the record time. This way, conscious efforts will be put in place by both parties to play their part to ensure early thesis completion and graduation.

Enrolment into research programmes in the University should be made to match the number of qualified and experienced lecturers/supervisors available for graduate studies so as to make supervision of research work more manageable. This will reduce the work load of supervisors who supervise more students than the requirement. Finally, students, who are unable to complete their programme on record time as a result of their own making; should be made to lose their studentship status to serve as deterrent to others to work hard.

REFERENCES

- Astin, A. W. (1996). Involvement in learning revisited: Lessons we have learned. *Journal of College Student Development*, 37(2), 123-134.
- Baum, S., & Ma, J. (2007). *Education pays: The benefits of higher education for individuals and society* (Monograph). Retrieved from College Board website: <http://www.collegeboard.com>
- Becker, G.S. (1964). *Human Capital: A Theoretical and Empirical Analysis, with Special Reference to Education*. New York: Columbia University Press
- Berelson, B. (1960). *Graduate education in the United States*. New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Bound, J., Lovenheim, M., & Turner, S. (2009). *Why have college completion rates declined? An analysis of changing student preparation and collegiate resources*, Cambridge, MA: National Bureau of Economic Research.
- Bowen, W.G., M.M. Chingos and M.S. McPherson (2009). *Crossing the Finish line: Completing college at America's public universities*, Princeton University Press, Princeton
- Braxton, J. M., Hirschy, A. S., & McClendon, S. A. (2004). Understanding and reducing college student departure [Monograph]. *ASHE-ERIC Higher Education Report*, 30(3)
- Brunello, G. and R. Winter-Ebmer (2003). Why do students expect to stay longer in college? Evidence from Europe, *Economic Letters* 80(2): 247-253.
- Buttery, E. A., Richter, E. M., & Filho, W. L. (2005). An Overview of the elements that influence efficiency in postgraduate supervisory practice arrangements, *International Journal of Educational Management*, 19, 726 <http://dx.doi.org/10.1108/09513540510574920>
- Card, D. (1995). Using geographic variation in college proximity to estimate the return to schooling, In *Aspects of Labour Market Behavior: Essays in Honour of John Vanderkamp*, ed. L. N. Christophides, E. K. Grant, and R. Swidinsky. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 201-222.

- Card, D. (2001). Estimating the return to schooling: Progress on some persistent econometric problems, *Econometrica*, 69, 1127-60
- Conrad, L., & Phillips, E. M. (1995). From isolation to collaboration: a positive change for postgraduate women? *Higher Education*, 30(3), 313-322.
- Creswell, J. W. (2007) *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing among five approaches*. Thousand Oaks, California, Sage Publications Inc.
- Elgar, F. (2003). *PhD completion in Canadian universities*, Final Report Halifax, Nova Scotia: Graduate Students Association of Canada. Retrieved January 12, 2016 from <http://careerchem.com/CAREERINFO-ACADEMIC/Frank-Elgar.pdf>
- Glatthorn, A. A. (1998). *Writing the winning dissertation: A step-by-step guide*, Thousand Oaks, California: Corwin Press, Inc.
- Green, H. and Powell S. (2005). *Doctoral study in contemporary higher education*, Maidenhead: SHRE and Open University Press.
- Häkkinen, I. and R. Uusitalo (2003). The effect of a student aid reform on graduation: a duration analysis *Journal of Applied Econometrics*, 5(1): 1-28.
- Heckman, J.J. and Honore B. E. (1990). The Empirical content of the Roy model, *Econometrica*, 58, 1121-49
- Ho, J. C. W., Wong. L. C. J. and Wong P.T.P (2010) What helps and what hinders theses completion: A critical incident study. *International Journal of Existential Psychology and Psychotherapy*, 3(2)
- Jiranek V. (2010). Potential predictors of timely completion among dissertation research students at an Australian faculty of sciences. *International Journal of Doctoral Studies* Volume 5, 2010 Retrieved from <http://IJDSv5p001-013Jiranek273.pdf>
- Kuh, G. D., Kinzie, J., Schuh, J. H., Whitt, E. J., & Associates. (2005). *Student success in college: Creating conditions that matter*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass
- Lategan, L. O. K. (2008). Why the fuss about research and postgraduate supervision, An Introduction to postgraduate supervision. Edited by Lategan, African Sun Media
- Lee, D. (1998). Sexual harassment in PhD supervision, *Gender and Education*, 10(3), 299-312
- Levitt, E. E. & Hutton, L. A. (1983). Correlates and possible causes of math anxiety, in: N. J. Butcher & C. D. Spielberger (Eds) *Advances in personality assessment* (vol. 3) (Hillsdale, NJ, Erlbaum), 129-140.
- Lovitts, B. E. (1996). Who is responsible for graduate student attrition: The individual or the institution? Toward an explanation of the high and persistent rate of attrition, *The Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association*, New York, 8-12, April
- Manski, C.F., (1990). Adolescent econometricians: How do youth infer the returns to schooling?, in *Studies of supply and demand in higher education*, edited by C.T. Clotfetter and M. Rothschild. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 43-60.
- Maxwell, J. A. (2005). *Qualitative Research Design: An interactive approach: Second Edition*. Thousand Oaks, California: Sage Publications
- McMahon, W. W. (2009). *Higher learning, greater good: The private and social benefits of higher education*. Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press
- Morton, K. R., & Worthley, J. S. (1995). Psychology graduate program retention, Completion and employment outcomes, *Journal of Instructional Psychology*, 22(4), 349-353.

- Myers, L. H. (1999). *Barriers to completion of the doctoral degree in educational administration*, An Unpublished Doctoral Dissertation, Faculty of the Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University
- Olorunisola, A. O. (2011). Meaning and essence of doctoral research supervision: A paper presented at the workshop on contemporary issues in research supervision organized by the postgraduate school, University of Ibadan, held at the Conference Centre, University of Ibadan.
- Pascarella, E. T., & Terenzini, P. T. (2005). *How college affects students: A third decade of research* (2nd ed.). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass
- Rennie, D. L. & Brewer, L. (1987). A grounded theory of thesis blocking, *Teaching of Psychology*, 14(1), 10-16. doi: 10.1037/0022-0663.95.2.375
- Seagram, B., Gould, J. and Pyke, W. (1998). An investigation of gender and other variables on time to completion of doctoral degrees, *Research in Higher Education*, 39(3), 319-335.
- Seidu A (2015) writing a thesis: A guide for social science students, institute for continuous education and interdisciplinary research
- Ssegawa, J. K., & Rwelamila, P. D. (2009). The research skill factor as a cause for high postgraduate attrition rate, *Journal of Engineering, Design and Technology*, 7, 293-322. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1108/17260530910998703>
- Trostel, P., I. Walker and Wolley P. (2002). Estimates of the economic return to schooling for 28 countries, *Labour Economics*, 9(1), 1-16.
- Turner, S. E. (2004). Going to college and finishing college: Explaining different educational outcomes. In C. M. Hoxby (Ed.), *College choices: The economics of where to go, when to go, and how to pay for it* (pp. 13-61). Retrieved January 4, 2016 from <http://www.nber.org/chapters/c10097>
- Graduate School Students` Handbook (2015) University for Development Studies, M-buk concepts, Tamale, Ghana
- Van Ours, J. C. and G. Ridder (2003). Fast track or failure: A study of the graduation and dropout rates of Ph.D. students in economics, *Economic of Education Review*, 22(2): 157-166
- Vilkinas, T. (2002). The PhD process: the supervisor as manager. *Education and Training*, 44(2), 129-137
- Wallace, S. (2003). Figuratively speaking: Six accounts of the PhD viva, *Quality Assurance in Education*, 11(2), 100-108
- Wamala, R., Ocaya, B., & Oonyu, J. C. (2012). Extended candidature and non-completion of a Ph.D. at Makerere University, Uganda. *Contemporary Issues in Education Research*, 5, 174-184.
- Zuber-Skerritt, O. (1987). Helping postgraduate students learn. *Higher Education*, 16(1), 75-94.