

## **DILEMMAS OF COMPLETING DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY THESIS IN GHANAIAN UNIVERSITIES: A MULTI-CASE STUDY PERSPECTIVES**

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**ABSTRACT:** *Even though previous research stressed the importance of doctoral degree to the universities there is limited multi-case research that explores factors affecting postgraduate's completion of Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) thesis in public and private Universities located in different settings. To fill this gap in the literature, a qualitative multi-case study into perspectives of six PhD students in two Ghanaian universities was conducted for a period of six months. One research question directed the study. The interpretivist philosophy informed the choice of the methodology. The students and the universities were purposively selected for the study. Data were gathered using semi-structured individual interviews. Both within and across interpretative analysis was used. The findings of the study revealed among others that students' busy schedules at workplaces and supervisors inability to provide feedback on time delayed completion of PhD thesis within stipulated period. It was recommended that the Dean of graduate studies need to organize workshop on time-management for PhD students to enable them grasp the skill of balancing occupational and academic activities. Management of the universities should improve remuneration for thesis supervision to motivate supervisors to offer the necessary assistance to research students.*

**KEYWORDS:** Doctor of Philosophy, dilemmas, multi-case, across case, thesis

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## INTRODUCTION

Universities play a significant role in research outcomes. Research outcomes act as a core of excellence in prioritized areas of any nation which generate high impact on research publications as well as attracting the best brains for teaching and research and production of high standard graduates (Abiddin, 2012). The objective of postgraduate research is to make students learn how to undertake a systematic investigation based on work done by peers in the field and contribute to current state of knowledge (Toncich, 2006). More emphasis is placed on systematic investigation than the degree to which knowledge is enhanced. Many individuals are investing resources to obtain Doctorate degree. This has become necessary since the degree equips individuals with the requisite skills and competencies needed to compete in the job market. PhD degree adds value to bachelors and masters degrees which have limited job opportunities.

Doctoral programme is seen as an academic growth process through which students develop their intellects and train themselves as scholars through the support and guidance of the universities. Students need to be supported in their growth to establish individual scholarly identity (Lin & Cranton, 2005). This means that Ghanaian universities should provide the needed support to PhD students in their academic pursuits. One area of concern that has received less attention in postgraduate programmes in Ghana is low completion rate of PhD thesis. Doctoral students have different backgrounds in terms of employment, social responsibilities, expectations, funding, family life and others. These and academic programme requirements influence the completion rate of the PhD programme. Access to information and the kind of support services provided to Doctoral students also affect thesis completion rate (Elgar, 2003).

In Ghana, PhD programme demands research work. The submission of an empirical research commonly known as thesis is an essential component of the requirements for the award of Doctor of Philosophy Degree. In research work, students are required to identify a suitable research problem from a particular field. Moreover, students are required to consider whatever problems they identify vis-à-vis individual competence and professional experience, and possible difficulties such as availability of information and limitation of time (Education System Ghana, 2015). The quality of postgraduate research supervision stands tall among the factors that facilitate research work and has therefore, attracted the attention of scholars (Oredein, 2012).

Current evidence shows that students' inability to finish postgraduate programme are on the rise in the universities. This is indicated by Asante's (2016) study that high percentage of postgraduate students is unable to complete their studies within the stipulated period of three or four years. It is worrisome if duration of PhD programme becomes longer as it makes the institution unattractive to prospective Doctoral students. To understand this phenomenon, there is the need to pay attention to research on postgraduate thesis completion in Ghanaian universities. There is also the need to understand better issues that influence this phenomenon. There is again, the need to study students reactions to their inability to complete PhD thesis in order to identify strategies for action. An in-depth qualitative multi-case study exploring the context of the issue can illuminate understanding and facilitate adherence to finishing PhD thesis within specific timeframe. This study is a

qualitative multi-case analysis that describes and interprets issues on completion of doctoral thesis. The following exploration research question was posed: What factors affect postgraduates' completion of PhD thesis in Ghanaian public and private universities? There is the urgent need to provide answer to this question.

### **The Problem**

The Government of Ghana has provided financial support such as thesis grant to facilitate post graduate thesis writing yet it appears a good number of postgraduates are unable to complete PhD thesis within stipulated period in the universities. An interaction with PhD students seems to indicate that they are confronted with some issues and due to that majority of them seem not to be progressing in terms of thesis completion. Recent information from Post Graduate Studies Office also indicated that from 2012 to 2019, only 6% of students enrolled on PhD programme had completed thesis and graduated.

Literature searched showed that PhD students are unable to finish thesis within the specified duration (Bowen & Rudenstine, 1992). Baafi-Frimpong (1998) posited that certain factors affect graduates' thesis completion. These issues motivated the researchers to explore factors affecting postgraduates completion PhD thesis with the view of providing suggestions to manage the issues.

### **Knowledge Gaps**

Though some developed countries such as United Kingdom, America, New Zealand, Germany, Canada and Australia have attempted to address issues concerning completion of postgraduate research (Scholtz, 2007) there are still some gaps that need to be filled regarding low completion rate of PhD research in Ghanaian universities. Literature searched on what have been done generally indicated that not much has been done by earlier researchers in Ghana though few studies (Baafi-Frimpong, 1998; & Asante, 2016) are available. These studies located were limited to master's thesis. However, no attempt seems to have been made to explore factors affecting postgraduates' completion of PhD thesis. This was considered a gap to be filled in the present study.

Another gap that was addressed in this study was the need to conduct purely qualitative research. The previous studies used mostly descriptive statistics (Baafi-Frimpong, 1998) and mixed-method approach (Asante, 2016). Using multi-case study approach to explore PhD thesis completion is non-existence in Ghanaian universities. This paper sought to fill this vacuum.

Previous studies conducted in Ghana (Baafi-Frimpong, 1999; & Asante, 2016) involved only public universities and overlooked private universities. This paper included both private and public universities as the cases to draw information.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of the study was to explore factors affecting postgraduate students' completion of PhD thesis in Ghanaian public and private Universities. In essence, the study explores policy opportunities for improvement in PhD thesis completion in Ghanaian universities.

### **Research Question**

What factors affect postgraduate students' completion of PhD thesis in Ghanaian public and private Universities in Ghana?

### **Significance of the Study**

The study will provide information on the issues that affect PhD thesis completion so that appropriate measures could be adopted to manage the issues. This will go a long way to manage issues associated with PhD thesis completion in Ghanaian Universities. The findings of the study will also prompt supervisors to supervise students in efficient and effective manner.

### **Research Context**

Research is one of the core mandates of universities in Ghana. The universities receive varied assistance from the government for their numerous activities through the Ministry of Education. The path to Doctorate degree in Ghana usually follows the attainment of bachelors and masters degrees (Education System Ghana, 2015).

In spite of the growing demand for PhD programmes in Ghana, Ghanaian public and private universities seem to be experiencing issues regarding low completion of doctoral thesis. This issue motivated the researchers to explore factors associated with delay in completing PhD thesis in Ghanaian public and private universities which offer both taught course and research component.

## **METHOD**

### **Participants**

A multi-case qualitative approach was employed for the study since the researchers wanted to find out differences regarding issues affecting PhD thesis completion. Two Ghanaian universities namely: public and private were purposively sampled for the study. Six participants were selected using purposive sampling technique. In total, six participants formed the sample size for the study. The acceptance of the sample size was based on Kane's (1995) recommendation that in qualitative research smaller sample size is used.

### **Inclusion Criteria**

Inclusion criteria for this study were PhD students who had spent five years and above on the programme and have not completed thesis writing. The researchers ensured that postgraduates who participated in this study had adequately experienced the phenomenon being studied to provide rich information. An exclusion criterion was postgraduate students who are not offering PhD program.

### **Instrument**

Unstructured interview guide was the main instrument used to gather data from participants. Face-to face in-depth interview was conducted to elicit response from participants. The interview was guided by the research question but were unstructured enough to make room for discovery of new ideas and themes. Interview allows participants to talk at length and elaborate on points because they have the opportunity to react to questions and probing questions posed to them (Gall, Borg & Gall, 1996). The interviews allowed the researchers to establish consistency of responses from

participants during the interview sessions. The interview guide focused on issues associated with PhD thesis completion.

### **Procedure**

Informed consent was sought verbally from students prior to data collection to participate in the study. The instrument was administered to participants in two case universities from June 2019 to November 2019. The interviews were conducted at the universities premises to PhD students who were eligible. After gaining their consent, each participant was asked to respond verbally to questions on the interview guide. The guide was modified as data proceeded to further refined questions that were not eliciting the intended information and to reflect the categories and concepts that required further development (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The students thoughts were tape recorded with permission from them. The interviews were conducted at the time students were free. Each interview lasted for 30 to 35 minutes.

### **Data Analysis Plan**

The data analysis was on case by case basis to identify main themes within each of the cases to address the research question. The students thoughts were transcribed verbatim. The views were further categorized into themes. The themes were identified through Open and Axial coding. The themes that emerged from the analyses were used to describe the phenomenon being studied which was linked to the research question.

## **RESULTS**

The results of the study were reported as follows: the case of three students at public university in Kumasi and the case of three students at private university in Accra and finally, across-case analysis.

### **Case Study Analyses of Public University:**

#### ***Students related issues affecting thesis completion***

The doctoral students indicated a number of factors responsible for their inability to complete thesis on time. Students perceived their busy schedules at the workplace, inability to locate requisite information for the thesis, lack of knowledge on what goes into various components of PhD thesis as factors affecting the completion. This is reflected in the following excerpts:

*“My inability to complete PhD thesis on time can be attributed to my work schedules. In actual fact, I’m a busy person. I wasn’t granted study leave with pay and making time to write my thesis has been a major problem because when I go home after work, I’m already tired and can’t sit in front of my computer to work on my thesis. In fact, it is really a problem oh! Also, I have a problem of developing conceptual framework for my work”.*

*“I had problem with my health for some time now and due to that I have not been able to work on my thesis for almost a year. Also, I’m less knowledgeable in selecting the appropriate statistical tools for data analysis and how to use them to test the hypothesis I have stated. Honestly, I’m getting confused”.*

*“Alright, my tight schedule at my workplace is a contributing factor to the delay of my PhD work because I don’t close early at all. During weekends too, I engage myself in a lot of social activities which I’m obliged. Truly speaking, I don’t have adequate information on what goes into PhD thesis.”*

### **Case Study Analyses of Private University Students:**

#### ***Students related issues associated with delay in thesis completion***

*“I’m combining full-time job and PhD programme at the same time. Since I work in a different region, paying regular visit to the university’s library to read and fish for information is a problem. My knowledge on certain portions of the dissertation is inadequate and this is serving as obstacle to my ability to finish the research. Then again, my office does not permit me to absent myself even a day. In fact, I have a very tight work schedule”*

*‘Personally, my own job activities pose a hindrance to the progress of my work. I’m the head of department and at the same time a lecturer and performing dual roles makes it difficult for me to make time for my research work. I experience a lot of interruptions at my office during work. Also, I always get home already tired and find it difficult to read. Additionally, I am unable to locate relevant information on my research topic”.*

*“I am doing the programme on part-time basis and I have not been able to balance my job and dissertation writing. Honestly, I spend more time at my workplace and devote less time to my research activities. I have been struggling with development of conceptual framework because I have come to the realization that my research skill is also not adequate to help me write the PhD dissertation and I think these have been the main issues affecting my ability to make progress as far as my dissertation writing is concerned”*

### **Supervisor related issues**

Supervisors play a very significant role in students’ thesis writing in academic institutions. They provide students with the requisite guidance and direction to shape the work. Lack of effective supervision results in low quality of students work, late submission of thesis and impedes institutional progress. From the interviews conducted, the students attested that they have good relationship with their supervisors. The students shared their sentiments:

#### **Case Study Analyses of Public University Students:**

#### ***Supervisor related issues associated with delay in thesis completion***

*“I worked with only one supervisor and finished the whole work after five years. I submitted the*

*work to the department and only to be informed that working with only one supervisor is not accepted by the Graduate Board. Due to that a second supervisor was assigned to me and we had*

*to start the whole write up again because he seems to disagree with the approach of the thesis. In fact, the second supervisor’s comments are not motivating at all. They are disheartening indeed! I have a very good relationship with him alright”.*

*“Currently, I am working with only one supervisor. He always disagree with whatever I write and I expect him to guide me as to what to write but.....hmmm. He did not give me a schedule for meetings and because of that we don’t often meet. Honestly speaking, I feel discouraged”.*

*“I defended my proposal after the taught course and right after that I was given a supervisor. I find it difficult to continue the work because he made me aware that if he has not invited me, I shouldn't come and I have been waiting almost three months now and I have heard nothing from him. Anyway I have no other means. He relates well with me alright”.*

### **Case Study Analyses of Private University Students:**

#### ***Supervisor related issues associated with delay in thesis completion***

*“What I can say about my supervisor is that it takes him several months to vet my work. I realized that I can't finish my corrections on time because the directions are sometimes not clear. I have difficulty in getting access to him regularly though we have a schedule for meetings. I think I can attribute this to his busy schedules. However, his human relation is good”.*

*“My supervisor keeps so long marking and responding to concerns regarding my dissertation. I can count the number of times we meet in a year. I submit my work as and when I'm ready because the schedule of appointment we drew is not used to keep me on my toes. Anyway he welcomes me when we meet.”*

*“I sometimes wait for long periods of time for feedback. I don't see the feedback to be constructive. He only marks and puts question marks which is very difficult to interpret and it is damping my spirit as well. I expect my supervisor to provide more support and directions on research techniques but to no avail. “Despite the table designed for meetings, I still have few personal interactions with him”.*

Thus, both public and private PhD students have similar issues regarding supervisors supervision affecting thesis completion. For public university students, low intrinsic motivation and lack of prompt feedback on their theses were experienced by students. The guidance and support expected to be provided by supervisors were hardly received. Supervisors failed to interact regularly with students. Some of the supervisors comments are very discouraging. Students relationship with the supervisors was very cordial. For private university, students informed that, supervisors seemed to disagree with whatever some of the students write. Supervisors and students have schedules for meetings. They take long time to provide feedback on students theses. Supervisors fail to support them with research techniques. However, students claimed to have good relationship with their supervisors. These issues were pointed out as posing obstacles to thesis completion and thereby hindering effective progress of students' academic life.

### **Across Case Analyses of Thesis Completion in Public and Private Universities.**

To further understand those factors that affect completion of PhD thesis, across-case analysis (by university) is reported next. All the six participants in the study perceived that students and supervisors' related factors determined the number of years students are required to complete PhD thesis. However, for assisting students to be aware of the factors that pose obstacles to completion of thesis, the students experienced multiple factors in the university settings. For instance, while students in public university had no schedule for meetings and they meet supervisors as and when they are ready, private university students they had schedule for meetings but failed to follow it. It could be said that students have limited interactions with supervisors which slows down the pace they are required to move.

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Looking at both cases, the factors were aligned with students inability to balance work and thesis writing to make judicious use of limited time at their disposal. Since it is more likely that student and supervisor factors are dominant in public university setting, these factors are commonly present in private university setting as well. It is obvious that students thesis completion is delayed. It could be concluded that the type of university and the setting are not determinant of the delay in completing PhD thesis but rather the factors involved. This seems to explain why students in both universities shared similar sentiments.

## **DISCUSSION**

Certain key findings that came out of the interviews held with postgraduate students on factors that affect completion of PhD thesis in the universities are discussed. The discourse on the first theme (student factors) indicated that students busy schedules at workplaces posed a challenge to completion of thesis on time. This means that students devote more time to job activities at the detriment of thesis writing and therefore, lack adequate time to work on academic activities. The implication is that academic progress will be retarded and they are likely to overspend the required number of years for the programme. Students' attention to think through the thesis and make meaningful inputs will be affected and this will prolong the completion of thesis. Bowen and Rudenstine (1992) shared similar view that working students who are simultaneously conducting research and working are at a disadvantage to balance work and research. This finding is consistent with Long's (1985) finding that working students are less likely to complete their dissertation within the stipulated time and generally takes longer time to finish than non-working students. The finding is in agreement with Hunguley's (1988) assertion that the demand on one's job is number one factor that impede progress on the dissertation.

Findings showed that students had inadequate Knowledge on what goes into PhD thesis, inability to locate requisite information for the concept being studied. This means that students will not be able to put pieces of information together to present the work. The quality of thesis may not be achieved since the required information for the thesis cannot be located.

Findings further showed that students lacked knowledge on development of conceptual framework for the thesis. This means that students do not have the needed research skills and may have difficulty in identifying concepts to base the thesis on. This will prevent them from providing suitable justification for the study. Spending more time on development of framework will affect the pace at which they are to work. Students' interest in the programme is likely to be killed and this therefore will result in total withdrawing from the programme. This finding is in consonance with Beile's (2003) statement that Doctoral candidates' ability to locate scholarly information is a problem confronting them.

Findings indicated that students have less knowledge on selecting required statistical tools for data analysis. This implies that students cannot make meaningful progress and wrong tools will be applied to analyze the data which will result in findings that do not represent the problem on the ground. This is likely to affect students academic and social life since a lot of time is wasted and extra cost is incurred to complete the programme. This will lead to stress and frustration and there



is the tendency to withdraw from the programme and the intended purpose of obtaining the terminal degree may not be achieved. This finding supports Blunt and Conolly's (2006) assertion that students have a problem on how to select appropriate tools for data analysis.

Findings revealed that students engaged themselves in a lot of social activities which they claimed they were obliged. This means that students have less time for the research work. It could be deduced from the finding that rich and adequate data needed to put the thesis in good shape will not be provided and this will result in delay in completing the programme.

Discourse on the second theme revealed that supervisors were unable to provide prompt feedback on students thesis submitted for vetting. It could be inferred from the finding that supervisors delay in responding to students issues regarding their research. This implies that students cannot work as expected and the idea of completing the research within stipulated period will not be materialized since students are likely to overspend the duration of the course. This finding is in support of Thompson, Kirkman, Watson, and Stewart's (2005) recommendation that supervisors should always be available and provide adequate, thorough and timely feedback to students.

An irregular meeting with students was reported as an issue in thesis completion. This implies that students are often denied the necessary face to face contact to share ideas and receive directions from supervisors. This will lead to frustration among students. The pace students are required to work will not be possible and there is the likelihood that students will be discouraged to work hard and finish the research on time. The finding confirms Wisker's (2008) observation that postgraduate students have a problem of knowing when and how often to consult their supervisors. The finding is consistent with McComarck's (2004) submission that lack of personal contact has an effect on postgraduate students who feel isolated or unacknowledged.

Lack of intrinsic motivation was revealed to be a hurdle for Doctoral thesis completion. This shows that students are ill-motivated and will feel more relaxed to put in extra efforts. This will work against completion of the thesis within the stipulated time. This finding deviates from Armstrong's (2013) suggestion that more time needs to be spent on motivating students in their earlier preparation for thesis otherwise lack of motivation and comprehension of concepts may continue to be a barrier. Findings indicated that discouraging comments from some supervisors affect thesis completion. This implies that students are discouraged to continue conducting the research. The students may find it difficult to make headway which will in the long run affect early completion of the thesis. This finding is not in consonance with Wilkinson's (2005) statement that supervisors need to be supportive and expose postgraduate students to constructive criticisms which help them to adopt and develop a critical stance in relation to their work.

However, findings revealed that students have cordial relationship with supervisors. This shows that good atmosphere exists in the universities. There is the possibility that the cordiality will bring students' closer to supervisors and promote effective guidance. The finding is consistent with Wisker's (2008) observation that supervisor-supervisee relationship has been acknowledged as an important factor directly influencing the success or failure of postgraduate thesis supervision. It is evident that supervisors require effective interpersonal skills (Delamont, Atkinson & Parry, 2004).

## **CONCLUSIONS**

Based on the major findings discussed above, some key issues were notable about delay in PhD thesis completion. Students perceived their busy schedules at workplaces to be a factor affecting their abilities to complete thesis within stipulated time. Engagement in a lot of social activities was found to delay students' completion of PhD thesis in the universities. Adequate knowledge on what goes into certain components of PhD thesis was reported to be lacking'. Students were found to have less knowledge on selecting requisite statistical tools for analysis. Inadequate knowledge on development of conceptual framework was revealed as a factor affecting completion of PhD thesis. It could be concluded that the inadequate skill of conducting PhD research work poses hindrance to students' efforts to finish the programme as required.

As the findings of the study illustrate, supervisors were unable to provide prompt feedback on students work submitted vetting. It was found that supervisors had irregular meetings with students. Intrinsic motivation needed to boost students moral was reported to be lacking. Discouraging comments on students work also impeded their progress in thesis report writing. However, students reported to have cordial relationship with supervisors. This suggests that within the two universities, there existed common issues bothering students regarding PhD thesis completion.

## **Implications**

The findings of the study have several implications as far as delay in PhD thesis in public and private universities students' is concerned. Students' busy schedules at their workplaces as reported by the study to affect completion of thesis implies that students are not able to balance work and thesis writing. They probably choose not to apply basic time-management very often because they are not aware of them. Students need to find time to grasp the basic time-management to deal with issues affecting their ability to complete PhD thesis as expected.

It was revealed from the study that students engaged themselves in a lot of social activities. The implication is that students are distracted during thesis writing and possibly they leave thesis writing uncompleted. Limiting participation in social activities could facilitate early completion of PhD thesis which is likely to reduce academic cost and stress among students.

Lack of adequate knowledge on certain components of PhD thesis, selection of statistical tools for analysis and development of conceptual framework imply that students seem to have inadequate skill to conduct PhD research. This may influence the rate at which students finish thesis. Adequate knowledge on thesis writing could help explain changes in students' research work which could also improve completion rate of PhD thesis in the universities in Ghana.

Lack of prompt feedback on students' thesis, intrinsic motivation and discouraging comments from supervisors imply that supervisors probably do not give students the needed attention regarding thesis writing which perhaps poses hindrance to students' ability to finish thesis writing on time. It would be necessary for supervisors to devote much attention to thesis supervision and consider it as part of their daily work schedules.

### **Recommendations for Practice**

1. Doctoral students should cultivate the habit of reading extensively on their research topics to possess the skill of locating scholarly information for their research work. They need to read articles from reputable journals and scholarly books which are of high quality to equip them with research skills.
2. The Dean of graduate school needs to organize workshop on time-management for PhD students to enable them grasp the skill of balancing occupational activities and academic work as well as social activities.
3. The Heads of department need to organize seminar on PhD thesis writing every semester to expose students to the various components of PhD thesis. This will enable students familiarize themselves with what goes into PhD thesis writing.
4. Presentation of quarterly progress report by students on PhD thesis should be reinforced by the Heads of Department in order to put students on their toes to work within time.
5. Thesis supervisors need to draw a schedule for meetings with students and both should strictly follow the schedule to facilitate early completion of thesis by students.
6. Supervisors need to apply intrinsic motivation technique during supervision to induce student to work effectively on their thesis.
7. Supervisors need to give constructive criticisms which provide guidance, directions and encouragement to students.
8. Management of the universities should improve remuneration for thesis supervision to motivate supervisors to provide prompt feedback on students theses submitted for vetting.

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