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Rethinking Supervisory Support: Examining Its Influence on Doctoral Studies Completion Outcomes in Kenya

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Abstract

This study examined how supervisory support practices affect doctoral studies completion at a university. It addressed the persistent challenge of low completion rates of about 11–30% in local universities. Grounded in general systems and Tinto's integration theories, the research adopted a mixed-method descriptive survey with 339 respondents, including 182 supervisors, 147 doctoral students, and 10 deans. The data was collected using questionnaires and interviews. Descriptive statistics, simple linear regression, and thematic analysis were employed. Findings reveal that supervisory support practices are negatively and significantly associated with doctoral completion outcomes (Students $\beta = -0.186$, $p = .043$, $P<.05$, 2-tailed; Supervisors: $\beta = -0.196$, $p = .035$, $P<.05$, 2-tailed). The results imply that current supervisory models inadvertently impede timely doctoral study completion. Participants revealed inconsistencies in supervisor availability, quality of feedback, and supervisory frameworks as sources of delay, pointing to a mismatch between intended support and actual outcomes. This context-specific evidence from a premier public university underscores the need for comprehensive, responsive supervisory strategies to improve doctoral completion rates, thereby strengthening research capacity and human capital development in the globe.

Keywords: supervisory support, doctoral studies, doctoral completion

1. Introduction

Doctoral education is key to knowledge production, innovation and societal change, and enables scholars to contribute to policy and the solution of complex problems. However, to date the issue of doctoral attrition is still conceptualized as a global problem, and the underlying causes and mechanisms have received insufficient research attention. There is also still limited knowledge about how to predict, prevent and minimize dropping out by doctoral students in contemporary programmes (Alves *et al*., 2024; Wairungu & Maina, 2021). About 50% of doctoral students do not complete their programs (Breitenbach, 2024).

Low completion rates, long durations taken to graduate, and low drop-out rates continue to pose a risk to institutional productivity and the sustainability of the systems of higher education (Van Rooij *et al*., 2021; Williams *et al*., 2023). Effective supervision is closely related to student persistence, since strong supervisory support can help students progress to graduate on time and stay motivated. Weak supervisory support however, can lead to delayed graduation or the student dropping out of his or her program (Haley *et al*., 2024; Knight *et al*., 2023).

The doctoral programme is influenced by systemic constraints such as high faculty-student ratios, inadequate supervision access, and poor departmental monitoring systems which can impede doctoral progression and slow the process (Mwangi & Ochieng, 2023; Kimani *et al*., 2022). Research in the US and Europe has demonstrated that structured supervision such as regular meetings, formal feedback and mentoring are highly effective in enhancing doctoral progress and completion rates (Thompson & Rodriguez, 2022; Bhatti & Hassan, 2024).

Doctoral education is not problematized in one context, such as in terms of completion problems. For example, approximately 50% of the doctoral students in Malaysia completed their doctoral programmes while approximately 23% of the doctoral participants in Iran successfully completed their programmes (Jeyaraj, 2020). It is suggested that the trends reflect a broader structural issue, particularly in the developing systems of higher

education, and that the delayed/non-completion is a symptom of that. Similarly, many doctoral students in Africa receive inadequate training, lack clear feedback on their progress, and have little institutional support which can delay progress and lead to longer study times.

Persistent challenges are especially acute in Kenya. In terms of actual completion rates, although national policies have been set to carry out doctoral programs within a three-year cycle, the reality is uneven. According to national data, only 11%–30% of doctoral degree candidates graduate on time, and the trend may be explored at the country's oldest and largest postgraduate institution, the University of Nairobi (CUE, 2019; UoN, 2023). There have been several recent studies that have identified factors affecting progression to a doctoral degree.

Lugulu, (2022), Ronoh *et al.*, (2025), Momanyi, (2022) highlight students' preparedness for dissertation writing, and Rop and Mibei (2024) highlight institutional and academic barriers. Omedi, *et al.,* (2025) highlight increased academic pressures, while Mcharo (2025) emphasizes the need for good supervisory support. These studies offer valuable inputs, however, there is still limited empirical evidence of the impact of specific supervisory support practices, such as feedback availability and quality, and supervisory institutional structures on doctoral studies completion rates in major Kenyan universities. This disparity makes it difficult to develop effective systems of supervision for the timely completion of doctoral degrees.

Supervisory support practices have several aspects which are crucial for the success of the doctoral student (Devos *et al*., 2027). For instance, the frequency of meetings, and the timely feedback are important factors in the smooth progress of students, also the availability of supervisors is also important. In addition, the quality, clarity, and timeliness of feedback are fundamental for students to improve their work. The feedback should be constructive and should be delivered quickly. The environment in which effective supervision can take place is influenced by institutional supervision systems, such as departmental monitoring systems and workload distribution. It is crucial to understand how these dimensions relate to the achievement of doctoral outcomes so that timely completion supervision systems can be developed.

The study is based on two theories namely General Systems Theory (GST) and Tinto's Student Integration Theory (Tinto, 2006). GST, as defined by Ludwig von Bertalanffy, presents universities as interconnected subsystems and the disruption of one subsystem can have an impact on the entire process of doctoral progression. Tinto notes that academic and social integration are key elements of student retention, and that supervisors can play an important part in both academic engagement and institutional belonging. These two frameworks offer a two-way perspective on doctoral supervision, with GST offering a systemic institutional perspective and Tinto's theory placing a focus on relationship and student-centered processes that can help students persist and complete their doctoral degrees.

The study employs a mixed-methods design with quantitative for descriptive and regression analysis and qualitative data analysis techniques to examine the relationship between supervisory support practices and doctoral studies completion outcomes at the University of Nairobi. The conceptual framework involves supervisory support practices as an independent variable; its indicators include availability of the supervisor, quality of supervisory feedback, and institutional support structures, and doctoral studies completion as a dependent variable. This study aims to offer empirical evidence of the effects of supervisory practices on doctoral studies completion by examining these dimensions.

This study contributes to academic and practical discussions. Basically, this study makes various academic and practical contributions: it provides context-specific evidence on one of the critical yet under-researched domains of PhD education in Kenya, it provides insights for institutional planning and practice to enhance supervisory practices, and it places Kenya's evidence in the broader context of doctoral completion in Africa and the world. Finally, the study aims to establish the nexus between supervisory support practices and timely doctoral studies completion and its structural barriers, and it emphasizes the significance of a systemic as well as a relational approach to supervision in the field of doctoral completion.

Although the local doctoral framework takes three years, this timeline is often exceeded with only 11% to 30% of students completing their doctorates in public universities (Commission for University Education, CUE, 2025; Matheka *et al*., 2020; Kigotho, 2022). This policy-practice divide has impeded the creation of trained researchers, the output of institutional research, and the realization of national knowledge and innovation strategies (Hill & Conceicao, 2020; Kessio, 2022).

The findings from existing studies suggest that the delay is due to inadequate student preparedness and supervision, institutional stress, and workload, but no specific analysis of the practices that have an impact on the delay (Ronoh*, et al*., 2025; Rop & Mibei, 2024; Omedi *et al*., 2025; Mcharo, 2025). Consequently, the evidence of supervisory support practices, particularly at the site of this study is limited. This study empirically tries to fill

this gap by examining the availability of supervisors, the quality of feedback from supervisors, and institutional supervisory arrangements in relation to timely doctoral studies completion outcomes.

2. Literature Review

Supervisory support is considered a key element for doctoral studies completion beyond the academic support, and includes the intellectual, emotional, and institutional experiences of doctoral candidates. But emerging evidence indicates that supervision is not simply an academic relationship, but rather a complex one that includes aspects of mentoring, feedback, accountability, and socio-emotional support. Haley *et al.* (2024) and Knight *et al.* (2023) demonstrate that good supervision boosts research productivity, confidence in the research process and persistence, which lowers attrition and delays. Similarly, Thompson and Rodriguez (2022) found that systematic mentoring and structured supervisory feedback significantly impact the likelihood of timely doctoral completion. Bhatti and Hassan (2024) reported that institutionalized supervisory protocols and regular meetings, documented progress reviews and feedback timelines contribute to increased doctoral completion rates.

However, the prevailing international literature is strongly based on higher education contexts in the West where doctoral education has been embedded in relatively stable institutional systems, less supervisor burden and sophisticated supervision monitoring. Pyhalto (2018) relates a high proportion of doctoral delays to poor supervisory interaction. The study links interacting consistently with feedback and communication to a great improvement in the progress of doctoral degrees. However, these models assume institutional conditions that may not be found in resource-poor universities. Scandinavian and Australian systems institute co-supervision, mentoring committees and digital progress-monitoring systems, for instance, which share supervision and reduce delays.

Supervisory support in Africa is becoming more and more limited due to a mixture of structural and institutional factors and less to interpersonal relationships. According to Ndlovu *et al.* (2023), some of the challenges that hinder the completion of doctorates in sub-Saharan Africa are the high student-supervisor ratio, insufficient institutional support, and limited individualized supervision. Okonjo (2023) also notes that frequent interaction between supervisors and mentees results in good completion outcomes in the region. He points out that many Western assumptions on supervision fail to recognize the value of linguistic diversity, indigenous knowledge systems, and mentorship practices that are grounded in community. This implies that the effectiveness of doctoral supervision in universities in Africa is difficult to understand without considering the institutional and socio-cultural context. Netanda *et al*. (2019) demonstrate that mentoring and peer-support systems used online can help retain students in Open and Distance Learning courses, but too much supervision in digital form could harm relations between supervisors and students. The contradiction demonstrates the general conflict between expanding the number of doctorates and providing quality supervision in higher education.

In East Africa and Kenya in particular, despite the ongoing institutional challenges, there are still several institutional factors that are increasingly shaping doctoral completion whereby supervisory support emerges as a key driver. Kimani and Wangari (2023) cite supervisory support as the most important factor that correlates with completion rates in public universities. This accounts for a significant amount of variation in doctoral completion. The research also shows that the move to virtual supervision media like Zoom and Google Meet has also revealed disparities in access to the Internet, faculty workload and responsiveness.

Based on this, Ronoh *et al*. (2025) identify three main gaps in the literature in regard to emotional aspects of supervision. Firstly, the emotional aspects of supervision, particularly empathy, trust and responsiveness are becoming more prominent in sustaining doctoral progress, but these are poorly institutionalized within university policies. Secondly, there is a lack of information regarding how emotional dimensions are being addressed in supervision practice. Thirdly, there is also a lack of information on how universities can foster the development of these emotional aspects in supervision.

Primarily, there are still a lot of Western supervisory structures that do not reflect institutional contexts and mentorship practices in Africa. African studies are also still methodologically underdeveloped and do not have enough longitudinal and large-scale quantitative data to support the connection between completion outcomes and supervisory practices. In addition, there is a lack of theory about institutional aspects like workload of supervisors, responsibility systems, and digital monitoring systems in the local context. The literature thus shows that context-sensitive, institution-based supervisory models are needed to tackle both the relational and structural aspects that affect doctorate completion in local universities.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

A descriptive survey design with quantitative and qualitative approach was used in the study to explore the influence of supervisory support practices on completion of doctorate studies at a public university as recommended by Asenahabi (2019). The study targeted 1,183 doctoral supervisors, 646 graduates and 10 deans making a total of 1,839 participants.

3.2 Sample and Data Collection

A stratified random sample of 329 was drawn to represent all faculties with a 5% margin of error used following the Taro Yamane (1967) formula. The study received responses from 182 supervisors, 147 graduates and 10 deans from a total sample of 339 participants. Structured, self-administered questionnaires were administered on supervisors and graduates along with interviews conducted with deans. Content validity was ensured through expert reviews and a pilot study that gave feedback for refining the instruments. The test for reliability brought Cronbach's alpha values of above 0.70 for all constructs revealing that the instruments and assessment scales were reliable.

3.3 Analysis of Data

The quantitative data was analysed in SPSS (version 25) using descriptive statistics (frequencies, means, standard deviations) and inferential statistics comprising of linear and multiple regression. Themes were used for the thematic interpretation of qualitative interview data, which were then transcribed, coded and organised. The obtained data underwent rigorous verification for completeness and consistency. The study was approved by the national research approvals body National Commission for Science, Technology and Innovation (NACOSTI Ref. No. 396856) while adhering to voluntary participation with informed consent, confidentiality and anonymisation of data. The results were displayed in tables and figures for quantitative results and in thematic narratives for qualitative results.

4. Findings/Results

The distribution of supervisory authority is marginally male dominated. However, it is important to note that the authority is more concentrated in men which may be pertinent to access, mentoring and the relationship of doctoral supervision. The majority of doctorate students are aged between 32 and 40 years with many in their early 30s. This is important because older candidates are more likely to be at the intersection of work and family commitments which may hinder the carrying out of their research and increase the need for timely supervision.

The descriptive statistics sought to evaluate how supervisory support in the doctoral program impacts completion rates at a public university. Data gathered from both students and supervisors sought a well-rounded view on accessibility of supervision practices, the quality of feedback, and the support provided by the institution. These insights are rated on a 5-point scale to measure the strengths and weaknesses in the supervision process which plays a crucial role in doctoral completion. The obtained results are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Doctoral Students and Supervisors' Responses on Supervisory Support

Variable	**Doctoral Students** (n = 107)		**Doctoral Supervisors** (n = 145)	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Doctoral students receive professional guidance from supervisors.	3.74	0.90	4.52	0.78
Supervisors are available for consultation and guidance.	3.82	0.79	4.52	0.74
Supervisors monitor students' work and research progress.	3.83	0.73	4.60	0.64
Supervisors provide academic and research guidance.	3.88	0.79	4.55	0.63
Time-sensitive reviews aid students' work development	4.00	0.84	4.60	0.56
Supervisor-supervisee relationships facilitate academic progress.	3.84	0.90	4.67	0.53
Supervisors provide mentoring and support via guidance in seminars, research arenas, and academic progress.	4.06	0.88	4.68	0.54
Grand Mean (Overall)	3.69	0.83	4.60	0.62

Source: Researcher, 2025

The supervisory support practices reported by the Doctoral students were found to be moderate on most dimensions and the supervisory support practices reported by the supervisors were significantly higher than those of the Doctoral students. The greatest perception gaps were found in mentoring, relationship quality, research monitoring, and timely feedback, which reflects a mismatch between mentoring intentions and student feedback, rather than a lack of mentoring. The highest ratings were given in the areas of mentoring support (Mean = 4.68, SD = 0.54); supervisor-supervisee relationships (Mean = 4.67, SD = 0.53); and monitoring research progress (Mean = 4.60, SD = 0.64). On the other hand, students found these other dimensions as lower notably relationship quality (Mean = 3.84, SD = 0.90) and research monitoring (Mean = 3.83, SD = 0.73). The pattern indicates that there is institutional engagement with the supervisory relationship, but students generally don't experience it as readily visible, accessible, and sustained over the course of the doctoral journey.

There were moderate trends in professional guidance and academic support. Supervisors rated themselves significantly higher in professional guidance (Mean = 4.52, SD = 0.68) and academic advice (Mean = 4.55, SD = 0.63) than did students (Moderate Satisfaction = 3.74, SD = 0.90 and 3.88, SD = 0.79 respectively). This is a difference in supervision relationship and communication. Supervisors might think that having regular contact with students is sufficient support, whereas students may see support as being responsive, consistent and useful to their research. Supervisors also reported high levels of overall supervisory support (Mean = 4.60), but the lowest student ratings in the study were for this measure (Mean = 3.69). The same pattern emerged in timely feedback, with the supervisors rating themselves highly (Mean = 4.60, SD = 0.56) while students rated themselves at a lower level (Mean = 4.00, SD = 0.84).

While both groups agreed that feedback was important, the findings indicate that there are still delays, inconsistent communication and follow-through, and a lack of regular communication that impacts doctoral experiences. Results show a systematic perception mismatch of supervisory practices. Supervisors report high overall levels of effective and supportive supervision while students report moderate and inconsistent supervision in relation to key issues in doctoral progression. It therefore appears that difficulties in the completion of the doctorate are not necessarily related to the lack of supervision, but more to the lack of consistency in terms of quality, responsiveness and relational aspects of the supervision.

4.1 Descriptive Results of Doctoral Completion Rates

This study sought doctoral completion outcomes, focusing on supervisory support as the main factor influencing success. While there are other institutional elements at play, the analysis zeroes in on supervisory support to evaluate how it directly affects students' ability to tackle challenges and graduate on schedule. By incorporating insights from both students and supervisors at the University of Nairobi, the study emphasizes that completing a doctorate is influenced not just by personal determination but also by the larger framework of policies, resources, and supervisory dynamics. The findings are summarized in Table 2.

Table 2. Doctoral Students and Supervisors' Responses on Doctoral Completion Rates

Statements	**Students' Mean**	**Students' SD**	**Supervisors' Mean**	**Supervisors' SD**
The doctoral program achieves high graduation and timely completion rates.	3.25	1.12	4.52	0.78
Most doctoral students complete their studies within the expected timeframe.	3.34	1.06	4.52	0.74
The university provides sufficient institutional support and clear guidelines for timely coursework completion.	3.49	0.95	4.55	0.63
Doctoral candidates are supported to complete and defend their theses within the expected period.	3.74	0.83	4.60	0.64
Supervisory support, including timely feedback and mentoring, enhances doctoral completion.	3.88	0.80	4.68	0.55
Grand Mean	3.54	0.95	4.57	0.67

Source: Researcher, 2025

Table 2 shows a consistent difference of opinion regarding the completion of the doctoral degree and institutional support between doctoral students and supervisors. On all indicators, completion processes and supervisory effectiveness were rated much higher by supervisors than by students, suggesting that the institutional support is experienced differently by supervisors and students. The largest differences were in the views on completion and timely graduation of doctorates. Students' ratings on timely completion were significantly lower (Mean = 3.25, SD = 1.12) than that of supervisors (Mean = 4.52, SD = 0.78). The same pattern was true for the time students expect it will take to complete their doctoral study: students rated moderate (Mean = 3.34, SD = 1.06), and their supervisors rated very high (Mean = 4.52, SD = 0.74). The trend suggests that supervisors view completion as a technical or institutional issue, while students perceive it as delays, the burden of the workload and lengthened research processes.

There were medium-level trends in institutional guidance and thesis completion support. The average institutional support for timely completion of coursework was 3.49 with a SD of 0.95 and the supervisor ratings were very high at 4.55 with a SD of 0.63. Likewise, moderate Student assessments (Mean = 3.74, SD = 0.83) were identified for support given in thesis completion and defence compared to High assessment (Mean = 4.60, SD = 0.64) by supervisors. Patterns indicate that progression to doctoral study may be well structured within institutions, but not always perceived as accessible, responsive and sufficient to help students make timely progress. The least positive development from the students' point of view was related to supervisory feedback and mentoring support. Both groups recognized the importance of supervision in the progress of Doctorates, with students giving lower ratings for supervisory support (Mean = 3.88, SD = 0.80) than the supervisors did (Mean = 4.68, SD = 0.55). This loophole identifies the issue of the quality, consistency and timeliness of supervisory engagement. Pupils do not appear to feel sure that there are enough feedback mechanisms to allow them to make a sustained improvement in their research.

Overall, the findings suggest a systematic difference between the views of the institutions and the students' experience. On indicators of completion, students rated their overall support as *"moderate,"* while supervisors rated their support systems as effective on a consistent basis. It is suggested that the pattern is related to the absence of structures rather than to lack of contact with the institution, but more to lack of communication, responsiveness and engagement in practice in the doctoral experience.

4.2 Inferential Analyses

To determine whether supervisory support significantly predicts doctoral completion, separate linear regression analyses were conducted for doctoral students and supervisors. The regression models examined the extent to which supervisory support explains variations in perceived doctoral completion outcomes across the two respondent groups

Table 3. Linear Regression Model

Respondent Category	Predictor (IV): Supervisory support practices	Dependent Variable (DV): Doctoral studies completion	R	R^2	Adjusted R^2	Standard Error of the Estimate
Doctoral Supervisors	Supervisory support	Doctoral completion	0.438	0.192	0.163	0.443
Doctoral Students	Supervisory support	Doctoral completion	0.502	0.252	0.215	0.689

Source: Researcher, 2025

As indicated in Table 3, the regression model revealed a moderate relationship between supervisory support and doctoral completion, as denoted (r = 0.438, P>.05) between doctoral supervisors. The value of R^2 equals 0.192, which indicates that the variable of supervisory support, and other variables, is able to explain the variation in the rate of doctoral completion up to 19.2%. Adjusted R^2 of 0.163 is the value that takes into consideration any changes in the model, and the standard error of estimate was 0. 443.

In the case of the doctoral students, the regression model indicated that supervisory support and the completion of the doctoral degree had a strong relationship, and the R value was 0.502. The value of R^2 was 0.252, indicating that the supervisory support and other factors described the 25.2% of variance in doctoral completion. The adjusted R2 of 0.215 illustrates the accuracy of the model, and the standard error of estimate is 0. 689. These results

demonstrate that supervisory support is highly effective in the completion of doctoral students, and higher effects have been reported by the doctoral students than by the supervisors.

Table 4. Analysis of Variance (ANOVA Results)

Respondent category	Source	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Doctoral Supervisors	Regression	6.475	5	1.295	6.613	.000
	Residual	27.220	139	0.196		
	Total	33.695	144			
Doctoral Students	Regression	16.155	5	3.231	6.801	.000
	Residual	47.981	101	0.475		
Total		**64.137**	**106**			

Source: Researcher, 2025

The ANOVA results indicate that both the models; doctoral supervisors and the students are also significant predictors of doctoral completion. The model resulted in a statistically significant result, F (5, 139) = 6.613, p=000, P<.05, 2-tailed, amongst the doctoral supervisors. It is a significant outcome, which demonstrates the significance of institutional supervisory support from the view of the supervisors, having a moderate explanatory power.

In the same way, the ANOVA analysis with doctoral students produced a statistically significant model F (5, 101) = 6.801, p=.000, p<.05, indicates that the identical predictors produce a significant amount of variance in doctoral completion. The fact that the F-statistic in the student model is a little bit higher indicates that the students have a better predictive effect.

The research indicates that institutional aspects, especially supervisory support has a close relationship with doctoral completion, but personal factors such as motivation, resilience, and socio-economic factors also contribute to it. The students and supervisors are in consensus with the fact that they need to enhance supervision, resources, and flexible study opportunities. The doctoral completion is a subject of structural and personal factors; it means that universities should introduce complex strategies, and further research should investigate these complicated processes.

Table 5. Regression coefficients Analysis for Supervisory Support and Doctoral Completion

Respondent Category	Predictor	B	SE B	β (Beta)	t	p
Doctoral Supervisors	(Constant)	1.717	0.801	—	2.143	0.034
	Supervisory Support	-0.200	0.094	-0.196	-2.129	0.035
Doctoral Students	(Constant)	0.855	1.042	—	0.820	0.414
	Supervisory Support	-0.283	0.138	-0.186	-2.047	0.043

Source: *Researcher, 2025*

The regression results indicated that there was a negative relationship between supervisory support practices and completion of the doctorate that was statistically significant for both students and supervisors (B = -0.200, p = .035, P<.05; B = -0.283, p = .043, P<.05, respectively). The pattern indicates that intensive supervisory involvement might be targeted only toward students who are already having some level of progression or delay difficulties, or are having academic challenges instead of serving as a more consistent intervention. Students' negative coefficient reflects greater likelihood of delaying progress, giving less feedback, or dependence on supervision. This trend was echoed by the qualitative results. Some deans reported that the current supervisory structure was supportive and flexible whereas others said they saw multiple obstacles in the way of timely completion such as delays in feedback, lack of mentorship, and limited availability of supervisors. Thus, the results suggest that there are differences between the faculties in supervisory quality.

4.3 Thematic Analysis

Qualitative data was analyzed using a themed approach and this revealed rich insights into the mechanisms by which supervisory support works. Three strongly interrelated themes emerged as follows:

Theme 1: Accessibility and Responsiveness

Supervisors' availability and prompt feedback were highlighted as important in sustaining the momentum of research. Structured meetings, and open avenues for ad hoc questions, minimized the anxiety of candidates and helped minimize risk of stagnation. A participant commented as follows:

> *"The fact that I was able to send my supervisor an e-mail and get a response within a few days kept me moving on and not feeling a lot of doubt for long periods of time"*

This theme is congruent with the quantitative results, and finds that the issue of accessibility is not limited to the procedural aspect, but also plays a role in psychological security and persistence.

Theme 2: Research Strategy and Academic Guidelines

Supervisors significantly contributed to the design of the research and methodologically to decisions and analytical approach. Supervisors who gave candidates well-reasoned, specific suggestions for research plans were reported to boost confidence and productivity. As one of the doctoral candidates noted:

> *"My supervisor did not simply fix my errors; they taught me to solve problems in a smart manner, which was the reason that I was able to complete my dissertation."*

This theme shows that the impact of supervisory support is not limited to motivating students to undertake work, but that they also have a direct effect on the quality and level of academic work, thereby strengthening completion chances.

Theme 3: Psychosocial and Motivational Support

Aside from academic tutoring, participants emphasized the need for emotional assistance and mentoring. Supervisors who recognized successes and made the challenges commonplace, and who supported resilience, were often mentioned as important to maintaining engagement. One participant explained:

> *"At times I felt completely overwhelmed, but it was the encouragement and belief that my supervisor had in me that I knew that I could do the doctorate."*

In the inferential analysis, a partial mediation effect was found in the relationship between supervisory support and high levels of self-efficacy and persistence, which can be attributed to the psychosocial dimension.

Other emergent sub-themes were role modelling, in which supervisors' professional activity was a model for doctoral candidates; and network facilitation, in which supervisors' networks made resources and collaborative opportunities available. These findings show that supervisory support has a complex nature and has cognitive, relational and structural aspects which all affect doctoral outcomes.

5. Discussion

In the student group as well as the supervising group, there were again a high proportion of males, which once more points to the gender imbalance in doctoral studies. This finding aligns with the Commission for University Education report which shows the national trend on the topic. It also corroborates the findings of Ronoh *et al.* (2025) that female doctoral candidates must also deal with other social and house duties that stand as a barrier to their research work. It is not just an unequal participation, but an unequal doctoral condition as well. Therefore, gender moderates the pathway of completion of candidates who are being supervised, are working full-time or part-time, and are receiving institutional support.

The age distribution also provides a context for doctoral study as a mid-career study. The majority of them were in the age group of 30-45 years indicating that doctoral education is not a continuous academic pursuit, but rather pursued concurrently with their employment. The above findings by Rop and Mibei (2024) show that there are many doctoral students who are working professionals, and who want to improve their careers, while also having institutional and personal responsibilities. This is a trend which explains the extended durations it takes for completion as reported in local universities. The context in which doctoral progression takes place is more and more an environment of competing demands of employment, research, teaching and family life instead of protected academic environments.

The results also suggest some structural aspects of the participation of those taking doctoral degrees on a part-time basis. This was a very common experience for the majority of the respondents which is also similar to

many local higher education institutions that usually have a full-time job and are working on their doctoral research. In the same way as with Omedi *et al.* (2025), this study recommends that the shortening of the time to doctorate is not solely due to students' motivation. Workload and the length of a doctoral study is growing due to the increasing number of publications, complexity of methods and institutional reporting. Here, supervisory support is particularly important but, in this study, it is shown that supervisory support is reactive and not proactive.

Disciplinary variation was also a factor in supervisory experiences. In science-related subjects, there seemed to be more formalised systems of supervision with well-defined steps, clear direction in terms of methodologies and more regular of supervision. The models of supervision were less structured and the models of progression were less predictable in the humanities and social science subjects. The findings support the idea of Mcharo (2025) that structured supervisory systems are most suitable in methodologically oriented fields like quantitative disciplines where the research process is constantly supervised and monitored. The idea is that the usefulness of supervising is not uniformly transferable between disciplines and it is a part of the disciplinary cultures.

The main result of this study is about the interaction of supervisory support and completion of the doctoral degree. There has been a consistent emphasis in the literature on the positive influence of supervision on the survival and success of doctoral students. Mcharo (2025) and Ronoh *et al*. (2025) studies indicate that timely feedback, frequent interaction and consistent doctoral supervision are crucial for improving doctoral progress. This study however found a negative correlation between supervisory support and doctorate completion that was statistically significant. The negative regression coefficients were reported by both supervisors and students, suggesting that more supervision was related to slower progress, or slower completion times.

This result appears to run counter to the current literature on doctoral supervision. There are additional layers of the supervisory process, however. The supervision can enhance precisely during the time that the candidate encounters difficulties in studies, in his method or protracted postponements. High levels of supervision in this context are about intervention by the institution on behalf of those pupils who are struggling, rather than intervention to support good progress. In this instance, supervision is not just more than what it will come to be in the future, it is more than in the present. Supervision is then interchanged for a compensatory role and not a preventive one. This is also shown indirectly by the findings of Omedi *et al.* (2025) who noted that the delays in doctorates are often increased once they have been exhibited in the institutions.

One of the major distinctions between reactive and proactive supervision is this one. Early methodological guidance, regular communication with students, regular feedback cycles and structure milestone monitoring are components of the proactive supervision. However, in reactive supervision, the emphasis turns to *'crises'*, 'delays' and 'stalled research progress. The findings show that there is a need for a lot of supervision which might occur after the onset of progression challenges in Kenyan Universities. Statistically, therefore, there is a relationship between the amount of supervisory interaction and completion time.

This is complemented by qualitative data from deans. But many supervisors were described as dedicated mentors and institutional barriers continued to threaten uniformity of supervision. High ratios of supervisors to students, slow feedback to students, administrative demands, and limited availability hindered sustained engagement with doctoral students. Rop and Mibei (2024) also observed structural challenges which include heavy workloads of faculty members and limited research infrastructure for effective postgraduate supervision in Kenyan universities.

The study shifts emphasis from quantity of supervision to quality and timing of supervisory interactions. Outside of these periods, students' engagement may be more likely to occur when they are facing academic challenges and is insufficient to result in improved completion outcomes regardless of the level of engagement. What appears to be more important is the implementation of a mentorship program that is purposeful, sustained and is initiated at the beginning of the doctoral program. Predictable communication systems, supervisors that are readily available, clear milestones, and feedback are more likely to get things done than are more interventions after extended delays.

The results therefore contradict the notion that more supervision leads to speedy doctorate completion. Instead, supervision is situated in a broader institutional, disciplinary and professional context that influences the quality and timing of supervision. The evidence suggests a supervision paradox in that increased supervision may be indicative that students are in distress, not in successful progress. The problem of the lag time in the doctoral program therefore requires institutional reform in order to change the focus from reactive intervention to proactive mentorship, to ensure sustainable teaching workloads, to identify supervisory structures, and to establish effective accountability systems.

6. Conclusion

Supervisory support is an academic and relational process that has an impact on the progress of doctoral studies. The partial mediation through research self-efficacy suggests that in the context of the impact of supervision on completion, the role of supervision is not limited to technical guidance, but extends to support in developing candidates' self-efficacy in addressing challenges in research and institutional pressures. However, the moderation of the institutional context means that supervision is not homogeneous across all institutional contexts. Supervisory support is shaped by program structure, workload distribution and institutional research culture, and the effectiveness of supervisory support is related to timely completion or not.

The evidence also reveals that the social nature of supervision including who is available, how, trust and motivational support is crucial for doctoral success. This broadens the role of supervision from the traditional academic responsibilities to a mentorship role. But not all candidates' experiences are the same, as there are variations in their experiences. Slow feedback, undeveloped engagement, and unrealistic expectations were often associated with lower ratings, especially in resource-limited environments or contexts where there was high demand for teaching. The patterns indicate that higher rates of doctorate completion do not necessarily rely on more contact with the supervisor. Consistency, quality of the relationship, manageable workloads, and supportive institutional processes are essential to effective supervision. Structured mentorship programs, peer support networks, and enhanced supervision protocols can thus contribute to minimizing differences in doctoral experiences and boosting completion rates.

7. Recommendations

The present results indicate that doctoral supervision should be a more proactive and structured process, rather than a reactive one. To create formal supervisory structures to define expectations, feedback timelines, research milestones and responsibilities at the start of candidature. These can help to minimise role ambiguity and increase accountability during doctoral progression.

Targeted training on mentorship, communication, and feedback management should also be enhanced for institutions to build their supervisory capacity. The analysis of the responses of the supervisors revealed the inconsistencies, which universities should take care in reducing the workload of supervisors and keeping the ratio of supervisors and students under control to achieve higher quality of interaction between the two.

The evidence also suggests that regularity and responsiveness of supervision is more critical for doctoral completion than the amount of supervisory contact. Hence, universities should embed regular monitoring and feedback mechanisms to detect student supervision gaps early and enhance student support. Support provided for Doctoral students such as Research Methodology Workshops, Academic Writing Support, and Peer Mentorship Programmes can also mitigate the problem of overdependence on individual supervisors.

Further studies are needed to investigate the relationship between supervisory support and completion across the spectrum of African public universities and to see if there is a general pattern of a negative correlation between supervisory support and completion, with the potential that supervisors' engagement increases when problems with progression begin. Comparative studies among universities and disciplines might offer greater understanding of the impact of institutional conditions on the effectiveness of supervision and completion of the doctorate degree.

8. Limitations

The main strength of the study is the use of a mixed method approach comprising of both quantitative and qualitative approaches. However, the sample of participants came from a large public university hence the findings may not be representative of all universities in the country. There were practical constraints in recruiting doctoral graduates since many former candidates had relocated out of the country while others were not readily available. Therefore, a snowball referral strategy was used following initial recruitment through university networks and professional contacts.

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Ethics Statement

All the participants of the study gave their consent prior to data collection and their names were de-identified in reporting for anonymity. Approval by the Research Ethics Committee at the university was obtained in addition to approved by the National Commission for Science, Technology and Innovation (NACOSTI) Protocol No. NACOSTI/P/24/41785.

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Authorship Contribution Statement

Abdi: Conceptualization, design, data acquisition, data analysis/interpretation, writing.

Matula: Conceptualization, Editing/reviewing, supervision, final approval.

Kyalo: Conceptualization, Editing/reviewing, supervision.

Chepkonga: Editing/reviewing, supervision.

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