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# Structural and Policy Determinants of Doctoral Studies Completion: A Qualitative Study

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**Abstract**

Doctoral education is central to knowledge production and national development. It is evident that the completion rate for doctoral programs in universities remains critically low due to gaps in facilities, policy and resource adequacy that impede the quality and scope of doctoral research. Fewer than 30% of candidates successfully graduate, and in some public universities, completion rates stand as little as 11%. This study explored the structural and policy determinants of doctoral studies completion. These include supervisory support, research facilities, institutional policy support, funding and publications for graduation. The study used a qualitative approach with semi-structured interviews and thematic analysis. The study employed stratified random sampling to select a representative sample. A purposive sampling strategy was applied to select the deans from faculties at the University. Data was collected using in-depth interviews among 10 deans of faculties and 182 supervisors purposively sampled from ten faculties at the university. Audio recordings were transcribed and coded thematically then analyzed using NVivo (version 15). The study found that inadequate university research facilities and funding could impede the quality and scope of doctoral research. Further, academic policies such as the 'publication-before-graduation' requirement and challenging institutional policy impact the overall success and completion of doctoral studies. Institutional policy adjustments including supportive supervision policies may therefore be necessary. The allocation of internal research grants and access to competitive external grants could help alleviate financial barriers that could impede completion. The study recommends enhancing supervisory support, improving research infrastructure and financial support systems, and reforming institutional policies.

**Keywords:** doctoral studies, completion, structural and policy

## 1. Introduction

The attainment of a doctoral degree is expected to create leaders with practical competencies and theoretical expertise for guiding institutions achieve sustainable growth, equity and innovation (Torculas. 2026). Doctoral graduates contribute not only to universities but also to national research systems public policy formulation industry innovation and socio-economic transformation. Despite the distinctive position occupied by doctoral studies and increased enrollment, completion has remained a challenge worldwide. Completion rates rarely exceed two thirds of enrolled cohorts and in many systems less than half of doctoral candidates complete within the stipulated period globally (Wollast *et al.,* 2023).

Doctoral studies have been characterized by high attrition, prolonged time to graduate and uneven completion outcomes (Alves *et al*., 2024). Prolonged study durations lead to inefficient resource use, stifles research productivity and exacerbates the existing skills gap. While individual motivation and self-efficacy matter, institutional obstacles due to inadequate governance, funding and physical research infrastructure have been linked to longer completion times and increased dropout rates (Wairungu & Maina, 2021). The completion of the doctoral program is closely related to effective institutional management support systems in higher education. Motanya *et al.* (2023) claim that long completion times are the effects of incomplete policy implementation, ineffective supervision structures, and institutional practices that are poorly aligned.

In the United States longitudinal studies show that fewer than 50% of doctoral candidates complete their degrees within ten years with attrition particularly pronounced in social sciences and humanities (Wollast *et al.,* 2023).

Europe has a comparatively stronger performance with average completion rates of approximately 55% (European University Association, EUA, 2023). Approximately 71% of doctoral candidates in Germany complete their studies successfully. In Britain doctoral completion rates range between 50% and 60% while in countries such as Iran Ukraine Armenia and Russia completion within the stipulated period remains below 35% (Sotnikova, 2022).

These variations underscore that doctoral completion is deeply embedded within national higher education policies, funding regimes and institutional management cultures rather than being a universal function of academic ability. Institutions with deliberate management support systems record higher completion rates than those where doctoral education remains loosely coordinated (Kimani *et al.*, 2022). Only about 32% of doctoral candidates in African public universities complete their studies within the authorized period (Mwangi & Ochieng, 2023).

## 2. Literature Review

Many studies have investigated the determinants of doctoral studies completion but few have specifically investigated structural and policy determinants of doctoral studies completion qualitatively. The meta-analysis provided by Devos *et al*., (2017) is an interesting study of the dynamics of doctoral dropouts, in which the lack of expertise in support within the institutional framework, the low degree of graduate's integration, and the low levels of aligning supervisors are attributed to delays and attrition.

The research environment, especially university research facilities, plays a critical role in shaping the experiences and completion rates of doctoral candidates. These include institutional infrastructure especially digital materials, availability of supervisors, and fair policy frameworks. Infrastructure that lacks integration into everyday research practice, supervision workflows, and training structures is unlikely to influence completion meaningfully (Eggleton, 2024). Similarly, where research facilities are limited or unevenly distributed, then supervisory capacity is compromised, regardless of supervisors' individual commitment (Castle *et al.*, 2021). Quality, usability and responsiveness to research facilities have been found to be necessary for improved doctoral outcomes (Momanyi, 2022; Rong'uno, 2016).

Literature points to the role of financial support in doctoral studies completion. Resource literacy and institutional support are also decisive factors that convert infrastructural capacity into scholarly productivity (Motanya *et al.*, 2023). Some studies show that it is procedural barriers in the form of complicated application procedures that undermine the effectiveness of financial aid more than absolute scarcity (Mark & Tukamuhebwa, 2023). Hence, this line of research points to funding structures as responsible for doctoral attrition. Other studies such as Lugulu (2022) associate funding challenges to financial mismanagement and institutional inefficiencies and weak institutional buffering mechanisms.

The literature reveals that inadequate formal supervision protocols that include structured but timely feedback, regular mentoring and supervisor availability led to late completion (Thompson & Rodriguez, 2022). Other studies identified the lack of research seminars and poor supervisor student ratios to result in attrition (Addae *et al.*, 2023). Positioning supervision at the center of doctoral policy therefore enables institutions not only to improve completion rates but to sustain intellectual vitality and scholarly independence among doctoral graduates.

Some studies have linked weak institutional governance to low doctoral completion rates (Hill & Conceicao, 2020). Thus, institutional policies that are fragmented or fail to be implemented intensify attrition (Momanyi, 2022). Specifically, unclear policies on supervision allocation, thesis submission procedures and research funding disbursement are primary contributors to delayed completion and attrition. Universities that also implemented milestone tracking, periodic assessment, and progress dashboards using automation technology reported high numbers of graduates (Breitenbach, 2023).

It is evident from the literature review that there has not been any qualitative research that specifically investigated the structural and policy determinants of doctoral studies completion. All of the above studies are quantitative in nature. This study investigated the specific role that structural and policy factors play in doctoral completion rates. The study provides insight to the academic community into how structural and policy factors can be optimized to improve doctoral completion rates. The study also informs policy development and proposes interventions targeting challenges contributing to low completion rates which impede the growth of higher education.

## 3. Methodology

### *3.1 Research Design*

This was a descriptive qualitative study which used semi-structured interviews and thematic analysis and was reported according to the Standards for Reporting Qualitative Research (SRQR) framework (O'Brien *et al.,* 2014). The study employed a constructivist research paradigm, focusing more on participants' lived experiences for an understanding of the system.

### *3.2 Sample and Data Collection*

The research team collected data using in-depth interviews among deans of faculties (n = ten) and supervisors (n = 182) at a large university in Kenya. A total of 192 participants were purposively sampled from ten faculties at the university.

The study employed a stratified random sampling technique to select a representative sample from a large population of doctoral supervisors within the institution. A purposive sampling strategy was applied to select deans from the ten faculties at the university. This combination of sampling techniques allowed the study to capture diverse perspectives from supervisors and faculty leaders, thereby enriching the depth and breadth of the data collected.

The research team conducted in-depth interviews with deans of faculties and supervisors to gather their experiences in structural and policy factors associated with completion of doctoral studies at the university.

The principal investigator developed an interview guide from a wide review of literature in doctoral studies completion. The interview guide was refined by other members of the research team comprising three members of faculty. The guide consisted of a standard set of open-ended questions with probing questions for clarification and elaboration.

The deans of faculties were involved in in-depth key interviews to obtain qualitative insights into their views on structural and policy determinants of doctoral studies completion. This inclusive approach facilitated the validation of findings, promoted stakeholders buy-in, and enabled the triangulation of diverse perspectives. By reviewing supervisory support systems, research infrastructure, financial aid programmes, and policy support, the study identified prevailing trends and strategies that influence doctoral progress and completion.

The interview guide focused on two main topics: (1) The availability of research facilities to support doctoral students, and (2) the nature of institutional policy support. Semi-structured interviews lasting between 30-60 minutes were conducted face-to-face in participants' working spaces on diverse dates.

### *3.3 Analysis of Data*

Audio recordings were transcribed by all members of the research team. The coding and thematic analysis approach adopted followed the six steps recommended by Braun and Clarke (2006, that is, data familiarizing, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming and report writing. Data analysis was conducted without the use of software. Two team members read through the transcripts multiple times while taking notes for creating initial codes which were matched with data extracts. To minimize bias, the principal investigator verified the coding and their combination into themes. Codes were then organized into meaningful themes and relevant data added to each theme. Themes were then defined and described in line with the research questions of the study. The report was written by the principal researcher and approved by other members of research team following the Standards for Reporting Qualitative Research (O'Brien *et al*., 2014).

Aspects of trustworthiness, including credibility, dependability, and transferability were followed (Forero *et al.,* 2018; Morse, 2025). Credibility was ensured by having a research team that is competent in educational management and policy. Audio recording sessions were also used to capture participants' exact words and probes used for clarification. Dependability was ensured through verification of transcripts, codes and themes by the principal investigator and through consensus and prior institutional approval of the study. To ensure transferability, purposive sampling enabled diversity in information shared that could be applicable in other settings.

## 4. Findings/Results

A total of ten Deans of faculties (female = three) and 182 supervisors (female = 68) were interviewed. Overall, participants provided mixed opinions on the availability of structures and policies to facilitate timely doctoral studies completion. Participants also reported many challenges in doctoral studies completion ranging from inadequate library facilities to inconsistent supervision policies. Three major themes were identified.

**Theme 1: Availability of structures**

**Sub-theme 1: Research facilities**

An important facilitator of doctoral students' timely completion is the availability of research facilities including laboratories. The deans consistently reported that such resources and facilities were available to doctoral students to support their academic progression. One Dean reported that:

*"We have existing Memoranda of Understanding (MoUs) with institutions like the Kenya Agricultural and Livestock Research Organization (KALRO), the International Livestock Research Institute (ILRI), and KEMRI, which help bridge the gap in access to specialized research infrastructure.* (Dean 05).

It was noted that the availability of large research grants enabled the improvement of resources for doctoral students. For instance, one supervisor reported that large research grants "are significantly improving the resources available to support our doctoral students." (Supervisor 06).

However, such facilities did not extend to the availability of current books and journals in the library. The library was viewed as outdated and insufficient to meet current academic demands. One supervisor reported that:

*While there is a designated library section for graduate graduates, it lacks regular updates and does not sufficiently address evolving academic and research needs.* (Supervisor 05).

Additionally, there was a contrasting viewpoint on the availability of resources and facilities owing to universities' current financial situation which compelled administrators to prioritize other needs. One Dean said that:

*The availability of research facilities for doctoral graduates is quite limited, largely due to the university having to prioritize multiple competing needs under tight financial conditions.* (Dean 01).

The deans' findings suggest a mixed but cautious appraisal of research facilities available to doctoral graduates. While a designated library section exists for graduate graduates, it was viewed as outdated and insufficient to meet current academic demands. Although formal partnerships with key research institutions (KALRO, ILRI, KEMRI) provide important access to specialized infrastructure, resource availability remains uneven.

Some deans acknowledge improvements, particularly through large research grants that enhance support for doctoral work, however, others highlight significant limitations driven by financial constraints and competing institutional priorities. Overall, the findings imply that while progress has been made in expanding research support, there remain critical gaps in facilities and resource adequacy that could impede the quality and scope of doctoral research.

The findings implied that institutional approach not only strengthens the material conditions necessary for high-quality doctoral research but also reflects a broader strategic priority to integrate external expertise and resources. Such partnerships may positively influence graduates' research productivity, innovation potential, and the relevance and impact of their doctoral work in national and regional development contexts.

**Sub-theme 2: Funding**

An important finding that emerged from the interviews was how universities approached research funding and its influence on doctoral graduates' completion time. It was reported that the university does not fund doctoral students directly. However, the availability of competitive external research grants adds a significant layer of financial support. As one dean remarked:

*There's no direct funding provided by the university for doctoral students, but they do have access to competitive research grants, which support their work to a reasonable extent* (Dean 07).

This suggests that although the university's direct financial contribution may be limited, external funding plays an essential role in supporting doctoral research, albeit to a more limited extent. These findings align with the perspectives of both doctoral graduates and doctoral supervisors, who noted that the availability of research grants plays a critical role in the timely completion of doctoral studies.

Deans pointed out that graduates who receive research grants are more likely to complete their studies within the prescribed time frame, which further supports the idea that financial aid for research, rather than direct tuition support, facilitates academic progress. The university's strict guidelines governing the allocation of internal research grants ensure that funds are spent appropriately, which enhances the focus of doctoral students on their research activities.

Deans also consistently reported that doctoral students benefit significantly from internal research grants. These grants, while not designated for general financial support, are strictly allocated for research purposes. One dean reported that:

*The university's internal research grants are strictly allocated for research purposes only. There are clear guidelines in place to ensure these funds are not diverted to any other use, which promotes integrity and focus on research support. They do have access to competitive research grants, which support their work to a reasonable extent* (Dean 03).

It emerged from the interviews that this clear division of doctoral funding is designed to ensure that funds are used efficiently and exclusively for research-related activities, thus maintaining research integrity and enhancing academic productivity. This finding was echoed by other deans and supervisors, who agreed that internal research grants play a vital role in supporting doctoral research, although they are not a direct means of financing students' overall education. One male dean stated:

*"The university's internal research grants are strictly allocated for research purposes only. There are clear guidelines in place to ensure these funds are not diverted to any other use, which promotes integrity and focus on research support. They do have access to competitive research grants, which support their work to a reasonable extent" (Dean 03, personal communication).*

This statement highlights the structured nature of the funding, ensuring that the resources are directed where they are most needed towards enhancing the quality of research, not diverting funds to other academic or personal uses.

The qualitative findings underscore the importance of financial support in doctoral studies completion, particularly in the form of research grants. While direct funding for general doctoral expenses is not provided, the allocation of internal research grants, along with access to competitive external grants, helps alleviate financial barriers that could otherwise impede students' ability to complete their work. The clear guidelines governing the use of these grants promote financial integrity, ensuring that the resources are used exclusively for research, which helps students maintain focus and productivity.

Additionally, the findings suggest that research funding not only supports the academic rigor of doctoral studies but also contributes to timely completion. The availability of research funding reduces the stress and barriers associated with financing the research, allowing students to focus more on their academic work. The deans' perspectives also highlight the university's role in ensuring that funding mechanisms are efficiently managed and that funds are allocated based on clearly defined criteria, further enhancing the overall research environment.

These findings point to the critical role that research-focused financial support plays in enabling doctoral graduates to complete their studies within the prescribed time frames. While direct funding may not be available for all aspects of doctoral education, the support provided through competitive research grants as both internal and external significantly contributes to doctoral progress, highlighting the importance of financial mechanisms that are directly tied to research outcomes. This insight is particularly valuable for university administrators looking to optimize financial aid structures for doctoral students.

**Theme 2: Policy support**

Interviews with deans of faculties revealed mixed opinions on the nature and extent to which existing institutional policy supports doctoral students.

**Sub-theme 1: Supervisory support**

Interviews with supervisors and deans highlighted the role of supervisory support in support of the policy on doctoral studies. It emerged that supervisory support was shaped by formal institutional structures that guided supervisor assignment and monitoring and accountability. For instance, deans reported that supervisors were appointed through departmental forums and were required to submit periodic progress reports on doctoral supervision activities. One dean reported that:

*Supervisors are assigned during departmental meetings, and each is required to submit periodic progress reports on the supervision process. This structure has helped maintain a relatively high standard of engagement between supervisors and their doctoral graduates.* (Dean 01).

Persistent challenges in the supervisory relationship were cited. These include delayed feedback, limited supervisor availability, and inadequate mentorship that frequently impede student progress.

Both supervisors and deans reported that structured supervisory systems enhanced accountability and consistency in doctoral supervision. Regular reporting mechanisms strengthened supervisor engagement and sustained interaction with doctoral candidates. As one Dean pointed out:

*Overall, the system is strong, with mechanisms in place to resolve issues as they arise, including reassigning graduates to different supervisors when concerns are raised* (Dean 08).

Overall, interviews pointed to the existence and functioning of supervisory structures. However, their effectiveness varies, with some graduates benefiting from responsive mentorship while others encounter barriers that slow their academic progression.

**Sub-theme 2: Publications for graduation**

The qualitative findings revealed that doctoral graduates benefit partially from the existing institutional policy support and structures. However, supervisors and deans unanimously cited a single barrier in the policy framework that has delayed timely graduation. This is the new rule that requires doctoral students to publish in journals of specific impact factors to graduate. This emerging publication requirement hinders timely graduation. One dean reported that:

*The current policy governing the doctoral program is unfair to graduates. It requires them to publish two articles before they can graduate, which I believe could be done after.* (Dean 07).

Despite the requirement to publish articles before they can graduate, there were mixed perceptions of supervisory support for doctoral graduates. It was indicated that graduates could access supervisory support in case they encountered challenges. One dean emphasized this by saying:

"*Overall, the system is strong, with mechanisms in place to resolve issues as they arise, including reassigning graduates to different supervisors when concerns are raised"* (Dean 08, a personal communication).

The findings underscore the tension between institutional requirements and the realistic expectations of doctoral candidates on supervisory support. The deans expressed concerns that certain academic policies, such as the publication requirement are burdensome for doctoral candidates who may already be under significant pressure to meet other academic demands. While these policies are intended to enhance the quality of doctoral work, the deans noted that the timing and feasibility of such requirements could impact the overall success and completion of doctoral studies.

The qualitative findings reflect a complexity in the influence of institutional policy support on completion of doctoral studies. The policies, while offering structure and support, also introduce challenges that may hinder students' ability to meet graduation requirements within the prescribed timeframe. The deans' views suggest that certain policy adjustments may be necessary to better align with the needs and capabilities of doctoral candidates.

## 5. Discussion

While progress has been made in expanding research support, there remain critical gaps in facilities and resource adequacy that could impede the quality and scope of doctoral research. These findings are in line with Rong'uno (2016) and Momanyi (2022) who emphasized quality and usability beyond availability of research facilities to be significant. Eggleton (2024) also noted that infrastructure needs to have integration into everyday research practice, supervision workflows, and training structures to influence completion meaningfully. These findings underscore that access to research facilities plays a more decisive role in doctoral progress than the mere existence of institutional policy support, which on their own do not necessarily translate into higher completion rates. The divergence in the significance of research facilities between supervisors and graduates reflects differing valuations of institutional assets, suggesting uneven experiences within the academic environment.

These findings underscore the importance of financial support in doctoral studies completion, particularly in the form of research grants. While direct funding for general doctoral expenses is not provided, the allocation of internal research grants, along with access to competitive external grants, helps alleviate financial barriers that could otherwise impede students' ability to complete their work. The clear guidelines governing the use of these grants promote financial integrity, ensuring that the resources are used exclusively for research, which helps students maintain focus and productivity.

The findings implied that institutional approach not only strengthens the material conditions necessary for high-quality doctoral research but also reflects a broader strategic priority to integrate external expertise and resources. Such partnerships may positively influence graduates' research productivity, innovation potential, and the relevance and impact of their doctoral work in national and regional development contexts.

Costa *et al.* (2018) noted that predictable financial support strengthens academic attachment and reduces withdrawal risk by stabilising students' engagement with institutional systems (Costa *et al.* 2018). Similarly, Van and Jansen (2021) reported that funding stability shortens time to completion and facilitates consistent supervisory engagement. Overall, these findings point to the critical role that research-focused financial support plays in enabling doctoral graduates to complete their studies within the prescribed time frames.

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Additionally, the findings suggest that research funding not only supports the academic rigor of doctoral studies but also contributes to timely completion. The availability of research funding reduces the stress and barriers associated with financing the research, allowing students to focus more on their academic work. The deans' perspectives also highlight the university's role in ensuring that funding mechanisms are efficiently managed and that funds are allocated based on clearly defined criteria, further enhancing the overall research environment.

These findings point to the critical role that research-focused financial support plays in enabling doctoral graduates to complete their studies within the prescribed time frames. While direct funding may not be available for all aspects of doctoral education, the support provided through competitive research grants as both internal and external significantly contributes to doctoral progress, highlighting the importance of financial mechanisms that are directly tied to research outcomes. This insight is valuable for university administrators looking to optimize financial aid structures for doctoral students.

The qualitative findings underscore the tension between institutional requirements and the realistic expectations of doctoral candidates on supervisory support. The deans expressed concerns that certain academic policies, such as the publication requirement are burdensome for doctoral candidates who may already be under significant pressure to meet other academic demands. While these policies are intended to enhance the quality of doctoral work, the deans noted that the timing and feasibility of such requirements could impact the overall success and completion of doctoral studies.

These findings are in line with Hill and Conceicao (2020) who note that rigid prescriptive policies often intensify attrition by failing to respond to heterogeneous doctoral needs. Rong'uno (2016) also argued that policy incoherence manifests in fragmented administrative procedures and opaque institutional processes that generate uncertainty, delay and disengagement. The findings reflect a complexity in the influence of institutional policy support on completion of doctoral studies.

The policies, while offering structure and support, also introduce challenges that may hinder students' ability to meet graduation requirements within the prescribed timeframe. The deans' views suggest that certain policy adjustments may be necessary to better align with the needs and capabilities of doctoral candidates. These findings are similar to Motanya *et al.,* (2023) who identified unclear policies on supervision allocation, thesis submission procedures and research funding disbursement as primary contributors to delayed completion.

Breitenbach (2023) also showed that doctoral success follows deliberate policy engineering rather than organic academic socialisation. The findings implied that the non-significance of institutional policy support points to a potential policy-practice gap, where formal regulations and frameworks may not sufficiently translate into actionable support for graduates.

The evidence suggests that structured supervisory systems enhanced accountability and consistency in doctoral supervision. Regular reporting mechanisms strengthened supervisor engagement and sustained interaction with doctoral candidates which is associated with improved academic guidance and steady research progress. Despite the existence and functioning of supervisory structures, their effectiveness varies. Some graduates benefit from responsive mentorship while others encounter barriers that slow their academic progression.

According to Bhatti and Hassan (2024), a substantial increase in completion rates was observed following the introduction of formal supervision protocols that clarified expectations, feedback timelines, and accountability mechanisms. Thompson and Rodriguez (2022) found that candidates who received structured feedback and regular mentoring completed their programs at more than twice the rate of their peers.

Kimani and Wangari (2023) also reported that supervisory support explains a substantial proportion of variance in doctoral completion across public universities. These findings imply that institutional oversight of supervision

processes supported doctoral completion indirectly by promoting responsibility and continuous monitoring. However, while the structure encouraged engagement it did not necessarily guarantee uniform quality across supervisors which points to the need for continued capacity strengthening and supportive supervision policies.

## 6. Conclusion

This study explored the structural and policy determinants of doctoral studies completion in Kenya. It is evident that the completion rate for doctoral programs in universities remains critically low due to gaps in facilities, policy and resource adequacy that impede the quality and scope of doctoral research. These include access to research facilities and funding, poor supervisory practices, and institutional inefficiencies. However, without targeted interventions informed by rigorous research, the challenges contributing to low completion rates are likely to persist, further impeding the growth of higher education. The study results indicate divergence in the significance of research facilities between supervisors and graduates which reflects differing valuations of institutional assets.

Increased supervisory support was associated with longer completion periods rather than faster completion. Supervisory support intensified when doctoral candidates encountered academic or research challenges, thereby extending completion timelines due to the need for additional guidance and intervention. The study concludes that supervisory support influenced doctoral completion not through its volume but through its timing and focus. Effective supervision appears to depend more on the quality, relevance, and strategic alignment of support with candidates' needs rather than the frequency of supervisory engagement alone. As a key predictor of doctoral studies completion, supervisory support highlighted the importance of targeted and responsive supervisory practices in doctoral education.

In terms of research facilities and completion of doctoral studies, it was concluded that supervisors view well-equipped research facilities as crucial for timely doctoral completion. This is in contrast to doctoral graduates who do not perceive research facilities as having a substantial impact on their ability to complete doctoral studies. This divergence suggests that while supervisors emphasize the role of infrastructure, personal access or varying research needs may influence doctoral graduates' experiences.

The study concluded that institutional policy support did not influence completion of doctoral studies at the University. The mere existence of institutional policy support was not sufficient to shape doctoral completion trajectories. Rather, it implies that policy frameworks may remain peripheral to doctoral progress unless they are effectively operationalized, clearly communicated, and aligned with the practical realities of supervision, research, and student support within the university context.

The study concludes that financial aid program support has a significant influence on completion of doctoral studies. This indicates that access to financial resources facilitates doctoral progression by reducing economic barriers. While internal research grants demonstrate strong governance and targeted support for research, the absence of direct funding for doctoral graduates' highlights reliance on competitive external grants, which may be unevenly accessible. These findings underscore the importance of strengthening structured and reliable institutional financial aid mechanisms to enhance doctoral completion outcomes at the university. The allocation of internal research grants and access to competitive external grants could help alleviate financial barriers that could otherwise impede completion.

Academic policies such as the publication requirement are also burdensome for doctoral candidates hence certain institutional policy adjustments may be necessary. Moreover, it is apparent that structured supervisory systems enhance accountability and consistency in doctoral supervision. As this does not necessarily guarantee uniform quality across supervisors, there is need for continued capacity strengthening and supportive supervision policies.

## 7. Recommendations

The study recommends restructuring doctoral supervision design to clearly defined student focused supervisory standards that emphasize trust, accountability, and academic guidance. Universities should adopt formal supervisory frameworks that specify roles, meeting schedules feedback timelines and expectations at each stage of doctoral progression. Supervisors should receive regular capacity building on mentorship assessment guidance and research ethics linked to measurable performance indicators. Recognition and promotion criteria should explicitly value effective supervision while workload policies should allocate protected time for doctoral mentorship. These actions will strengthen supervisory quality improve alignment of support with doctoral needs and promote timely and well guided doctoral completion.

The university should invest in stable digital research platforms and library systems that remain accessible across faculties and study modes. Physical workspaces should be redesigned to support doctoral research through

dedicated study areas accessible beyond standard office hours. A central doctoral information desk should be established to host policies procedures timelines and support services in one navigable system. Administrative workflows related to registration ethics clearance and examinations should be streamlined with clear service timelines to reduce delays. Faculties should institutionalise interdisciplinary research forums and shared seminars to strengthen scholarly interaction. Targeted support mechanisms should be formalised for doctoral candidates with disabilities caregiving responsibilities or field-based research demands to ensure equitable participation and sustained academic progress.

The study recommends the establishment of clear and publicly documented funding criteria to guide the allocation of doctoral financial support. The university should enforce fixed timelines for the release of stipends and scholarships and monitor compliance through a central finance tracking system. Predictable income opportunities should be expanded through structured teaching assistantships research contracts and community-based projects that align with doctoral training goals. The university should also implement a financial access monitoring tool that records funding coverage gaps and usage patterns among doctoral graduates. This mechanism would support timely redistribution decisions and ensure that financial support reaches eligible candidates in a fair and timely manner thereby reducing delays in doctoral studies completion

The study recommends that universities redesign the doctoral policy framework to function as an operational support system rather than a regulatory checklist. This should involve establishing clear milestone tracking mechanisms with defined timelines, responsible offices, and automated alerts to flag delays early. Formal and accessible dispute resolution procedures should be instituted with specified response timelines and independent mediation structures to prevent prolonged supervisory or administrative conflicts. Structured feedback mechanisms should be embedded at key stages of candidature to capture input from both doctoral candidates and supervisors and translate it into corrective action. Policy reviews should occur on a scheduled cycle and involve doctoral graduates and supervisors directly, with documented follow up actions, to ensure policies remain practical, transparent, and aligned with the realities of doctoral training.

Several underexplored areas were uncovered that warrant further academic inquiry. These gaps offer opportunities for methodological advancements and conceptual development, with the potential to enhance interdisciplinary understanding and inform policy improvements. The study suggests that future studies should examine supervision as a situational and reactive practice. Research should interrogate when and why supervisory intensity increases, how support is triggered by doctoral difficulty, and whether late stage or crisis driven supervision alters completion trajectories. Qualitative longitudinal designs would be appropriate to trace supervisory engagement across doctoral phases.

The divergence between supervisors' and graduates' perceptions of research facilities support warrants focused investigation on actual access rather than formal availability. Future research should examine how doctoral graduates interact with laboratories, libraries, digital platforms and shared facilities in daily practice. Attention should be given to usability, gatekeeping practices and informal hierarchies that may shape infrastructure benefits unevenly.

There is need for future studies to disaggregate financial aid by type, source, duration and predictability to establish which funding mechanisms most strongly support timely doctoral completion. Experimental or quasi experimental designs could assess how consistent stipends, internal grants or structured work opportunities influence persistence decision making and completion pacing. In addition, future research should adopt comparative designs across public and private universities. Such studies would identify systemic patterns institutional outliers and transferable practices that shape doctoral completion nationally rather than institutionally.

## 8. Limitations

The main strength of the study is the use of a qualitative approach and the competence of the research team which built trust and resulted in participants freely expressing their views. Therefore, findings shed better light on this understudied aspect of doctoral studies. Although much care and rigour went into designing and carrying out the study, certain limitations require mention. Firstly, 192 participants were purposively sampled. Secondly, the sample came from a large city-based university. Therefore, the findings may not be representative of all universities in Kenya. Notwithstanding the small sample size and location, the findings present an accurate picture of the status of doctoral studies in Kenya and much of the global south.

The study faced practical constraints in recruiting doctoral graduates. Many former candidates had relocated across regions or countries and others were not readily available. Initial recruitment therefore relied on university networks and professional contacts and subsequently used a snowball referral strategy. This approach facilitated

access to a broader pool of respondents, yet it may have introduced selection bias toward individuals who remain professionally connected or who share similar experiences.

Data collection depended primarily on self-reported accounts. Such data are vulnerable to recall error and social desirability effects that can shape how participants portray their supervision experiences or institutional interactions. To reduce these risks the study triangulated interview findings with institutional documents and administrative records where available and used careful question phrasing to minimise leading responses. Nonetheless some measurement uncertainty remains. Despite these limitations, the study applied purposive sampling to capture diversity across faculties and graduation cohorts.

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**Ethics Statements**

The research involving human participants underwent thorough review and approval by the Research Ethics Committee at the University of Nairobi. Prior to participating in the study and after receiving a detailed description of the study, all participants provided written informed consent indicating their voluntary agreement to participate. Participants' names were de-identified in reporting for anonymity. The study was 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: Editing/reviewing, supervision, final approval.

Kyalo: Editing/reviewing, supervision.

Chepkonga: Editing/reviewing, supervision.

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