

## Supervisory Support Services in Enhancing Postgraduate Students Timely Completion of Studies at the Open University of Tanzania

Kassim Salehe<sup>\*1</sup>, Timothy Mandila<sup>\*2</sup>, Philbert Vumilia<sup>\*3</sup>

<sup>\*1</sup> PhD Candidate Mwenge Catholic University

<sup>\*2</sup> Lecturer Mwenge Catholic University

<sup>\*3</sup> Associate Professor Mwenge Catholic University

Faculty of Education, Mwenge Catholic University, P. O. Box 1226, Moshi-Tanzania

Corresponding Author email: [kassimkimweri@gmail.com](mailto:kassimkimweri@gmail.com)

[doi: https://doi.org/10.37745/ijeld.2013/vol11n73452](https://doi.org/10.37745/ijeld.2013/vol11n73452)

Published August 3 2023

**Citation:** Salehe K., Mandila T., and Vumilia P. (2023) Supervisory Support Services in Enhancing Postgraduate Students Timely Completion of Studies at the Open University of Tanzania, *International Journal of Education, Learning and Development*, Vol. 11, No.7, pp.34-52

**ABSTRACT:** *This study investigated supervisory support services in enhancing postgraduate students' timely completion of studies at the Open University of Tanzania. The study was guided by the Zone of Proximal Development Theory by Levy Vigotsky (1978). Convergent design under a mixed research methods approach was employed. The target population were 989 postgraduate students, 133 research supervisors, 4 Faculty Deans and 1 Directors of postgraduate studies. Stratified random sampling technique, multistage sampling technique and purposive sampling technique were used to select a sample of 242 respondents. Questionnaires, interviews guides and document analysis guide were the data collection instruments used. Instruments were validated by research experts and Cronbach Alpha was used to ensure reliability of Likert scale items of questionnaires. Triangulation and peer debriefing were used to ensure reliability of qualitative instruments. Quantitative data were analysed by using descriptive statistics while qualitative data were analyzed by using thematic analysis. The findings indicated that majority of postgraduate students are not provided sufficient support services necessary for research supervision. The study concluded that insufficient support services given to postgraduate students affects their timely completion of studies. It was recommended that the Open University of Tanzania should ensure that support services necessary for research supervision are made available and accessible to postgraduate students for enhancing their timely completion of studies.*

**KEYWORDS:** Research supervision, postgraduate students, timely completion, research supervisors, support services

## INTRODUCTION

Postgraduate education is considered as a vital discipline due to the fact that it gives rise to acquisition new knowledge. The need of postgraduate education has led to the increase in demand of higher education programmes. The demand of postgraduate education has attracted universities worldwide to attract more students into postgraduate programmes (Ghatak et al., 2021). However, evidences from the literature show that most of the postgraduate students at both master's and doctoral programmes take longer than the stipulated time to complete their studies due to ineffective research supervision (Nouri et al., 2019, Sarwar et al., 2018; Mugendi & Githae, 2021). Delay in completion of studies is undesirable and detrimental to universities and students as it leads to psychological and social stress, wastage of valuable resources, and loss of competitive advantages to universities and candidates (Nnebedum & Obdelayuegbe, 2021; Mbogo et al., 2020). In order to avoid delay in completion of studies and their associated consequences, higher learning institutions are encouraged to promote effective postgraduate research supervision.

Delay in completion of studies in universities has been experienced worldwide. In Italy, data show that about 40% of students experience some sort of delay in completion of studies (Aina & Pastore, 2020). Similarly, in the United Kingdom, completion of doctoral students continue to face major challenges where a significant proportion of students do not complete on time or do not complete their studies at all (Whitehouse, 2019). Nnebedum and Obuegbe (2021) reported that most of the postgraduate students in Nigerian universities rarely complete their studies within the time provided. In South African universities, Mahlangu (2021) and Ungadi (2021) found out that masters and PhD students extend their studies beyond the minimum stipulated time. In Kenya, a similar situation has been explained that the number of students enrolled in various postgraduate studies is bigger than those completing studies (Mugendi & Githae, 2021; Mbogo *et al.*, 2020). Like in other countries, Tanzania also faces a similar challenge of most of her students' delay in completing their postgraduate programmes (TCU, 2018; Magali 2019; Mkwizu, 2019; Amani *et al.*, 2022). The findings of the studies demonstrate that low completion of studies among postgraduate students is a serious concern across different contexts.

The delay in completion of studies has been an overwhelming challenge at the Open University of Tanzanian. The number of students completing their studies from various postgraduate programmes at the Open University of Tanzania is small compared to the number of students who enroll (Magali, 2019; OUT, 2021; OUT Graduation Booklet, 2021). For instance, out of 796 masters students enrolled in 2018/19 academic year, only 7 completed studies within the stipulated time. Research supervision has been linked with the delay in completion of studies among postgraduate students in higher learning institutions. In order to curb the challenge of delay in completion due to supervisory challenges, TCU (2019) asserted that, universities have to establish

regulations and guidelines and make them accessible to postgraduate students for effective and efficient supervision.

Quality supervision is mentioned to be fundamental for quality postgraduate studies and timely completion (Nyamubi, 2021). Supervisory support services are the cornerstone to the quality, efficient and effective postgraduate research supervision. Availability of reliable internet services, access to online library services and effective research methodology training positively affects research supervision (Shahibi & Ku-Rusli, 2017; Daniel, 2021; Hauss, 2020; Bashorun, 2021). Moreover, postgraduate students' exposure to the local and international academic conferences, timely allocation of research supervisors and provision of guidance and counseling are among the important support services that enhance research supervision among postgraduate students in the higher learning institutions (Kondo, 2022; Gumbo, 2018; Sarwar, 2018 & Amani, 2022). Therefore, the state of provision of such supervisory support services to postgraduate students at the Open University of Tanzania is not known. Thus, this paper is designed to examine contributions of university supervisory support services in enhancing postgraduate students' timely completion of studies at the Open University of Tanzania.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Postgraduate students who enroll in higher learning institutions, including the Open University of Tanzania, wish to complete their studies within the minimum time stipulated. Studies and reports show that large a number of postgraduate students who enroll in the masters and PhD degree at the Open University of Tanzania take long time to complete their studies (Magali, 2019; OUT, 2021; OUT Graduation Booklet, 2021). Delay in completion of studies among postgraduate students raised concerns to educational stakeholders as it has effect on the loss of resources, increased stress, and setback in students and university competitive advantages. Studies have been conducted to explain delay in completion of studies among postgraduate students in the Tanzanian context (Magali, 2019; Nyamubi, 2021; Amani *et al.*, 2022) but have not exactly linked supervisory support services with the delay in completion of studies among students at the Open University of Tanzania. Therefore, the current study was designed to investigate the contributions of supervisory support services on timely completion of studies among postgraduate students at the Open University of Tanzania.

### **Research Question**

How do the supervisory support services contribute to postgraduate students timely completion of studies at the Open University of Tanzania?

### **Significance of the Study**

The findings of this study are expected to have practical significance to all stakeholders involved in the postgraduate research supervision. The study findings might benefit universities which are the institutions that prepare postgraduate students who would occupy different positions in the

country. The study might also help staff and other education stakeholders involved in supervision of postgraduate theses and dissertations to understand how supervisory support services might affect students' timely completion of studies. Moreover, the study findings might inform policy makers in the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology and Tanzania Commission for Universities and the Open University of Tanzania to formulate policy that would guide effective supervisory support services in the Open and Distance learning institutions in Tanzania. Since students and supervisors are geographically separated, specific policy on the administering ODL research supervision is necessary for effective and timely completion of studies among postgraduate students.

Furthermore, the study findings might add knowledge to the existing body of knowledge on the issues related to supervisory support services on postgraduate students' timely completion of studies at the Open and Distance learning settings. Creswell and Creswell (2018) argued that conducting research in education is important as it produces new facts and suggestions for improvements of phenomenon. In this regard, the study findings contribute to the theory that related to supervisory support services on timely completion of studies. The study may also contribute to the theory by examining how support services enhance students sense of autonomy, competencies and relatedness promotes timely completion of studies among postgraduate students.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This study was guided by Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) theory by Levy Vigotsky (1978). The foundation of ZPD theory is that the learners' ability to successfully accomplish tasks depends on assistance from more capable other person, which generally referred to as assisted learning. According to Vigotsky (1978), learning by individual occurs through social interactions with a skillful person. The main idea of ZPD is that a person with more knowledge can enhance the learning of another individual by guiding a learner through tasks that are above their capabilities. ZPD shows that the difference between what a learner can do without support and what he/she can achieve with the support and guidance of a skilled through interactions.

Zonal Proximal Development theory encourages collaboration and cooperation between learners and more knowledgeable others. In ZPD, learners can benefit from the feedback and guidance received from their peers or teachers. ZPD can also help to build confidence by providing learners with appropriate support and guidance. Moreover, the theory insists that social interactions between learners and more knowledgeable others is the key feature of success. The theory also explained some of the important roles played by teachers and instructors especially on how peer-to-peer or student-supervisors' interactions can play an important role in skill development among learners.

Zonal Proximal Development theory does not apply to all social or cultural groups. For example, people with learning difficulties or with social disorders may not be able to learn effectively

through social interactions unless more and longer support is provided to them than the rest. Therefore the theory is not very much suitable to people with special needs because their ability to interact as a way of receiving supports is limit.

ZPD theory explains how postgraduate students may succeed when they receive support through interactions with people with more experience, knowledge and skills than them. In this case research supervisors are referred as individual with more knowledge than postgraduate students. In the entire process of research supervision, postgraduate student interacts with their research supervisors in order to receive assistance and guidelines related to research writing. Supervisors are referred to as the skilled personnel in the area of study that the students intend to research on. Supervisors work in close relationship with the student throughout the research writing process. The interactions between students and supervisors that exist during dissertation development are vital for the accomplishment thesis writing. Vygotsky observed that interaction with knowledgeable people is an effective way of developing skills and strategies necessary for developing new understanding.

### **Review of Related Empirical Studies**

Hauss (2020) conducted a study in Germany to explore the social and scientific benefits of participating in academic conferences. Mixed method design was used to collect both qualitative and quantitative data for the study. A total of 1234 respondents that included researchers, post-doctoral candidates and doctoral candidates were selected to participate in the study. Questionnaires and interview guides were used for collecting qualitative and quantitative data. The findings of the study revealed that among the benefits of attending to the academic conferences include initiation of research collaborations, access to new knowledge that facilitate research writing skills and enhance timely completion of studies. The study added valuable information in the body of knowledge related to academic conferences on postgraduate students' academic development to broaden the knowledge. The current study was also extended to explore the responsibilities of universities in preparing and exposing students to the academic conferences. Moreover, it has to be noted that the use of varieties of data collection instruments and diversified categories of respondents and data collection instruments might ensure reliability of findings is ensured. Therefore the sample of current study used research supervisors, postgraduate students, faculty deans and director of postgraduate studies and questionnaires, interview guide and document analysis guide to investigate research supervision practices of postgraduate students at the Open University of Tanzania.

Daniel (2021) conducted a study to explore the role of research methodology courses in enhancing postgraduate students' research experiences in public universities in New Zealand. The study employed embedded mixed method design. A sample of 116 postgraduate students was involved in the study. Online questionnaires were used to collect data for the study. The findings revealed that the research methods course is predominantly monolithic, conceptual and inflexible to

individual career development. The findings further added that the research methodology course taught is disengaged from the practical problems. Although the findings of the previous study established that the research methodology courses were inadequate in linking theory and practical aspect of research writing process, the current study highlighted the reasons for the observed inadequacy of research methodology courses. The use of mixed method design with only questionnaire necessitated the current study to employed triangulation by using questionnaires, interview guide and document analysis schedule for ensuring reliability of findings.

Shahibi and Ku-Rusli (2017) conducted a study in Malaysia to investigate the influence of internet usage on students' academic performance. The study specifically discussed the use of internet among final year students of the faculty of Information Management and its impacts on their academic achievement. The study employed quantitative research design. A sample of 206 respondents was selected by using random sampling technique. Questionnaires were used as instruments for data collection. Quantitative data were analyzed by using descriptive statistics. Findings revealed that inaccessibility of reliable internet services hindered students writing their research papers and limiting their better learning experiences for improving their academic achievement. The study has provided constructive information with regard to the useful role of internet on enhancing students' learning in the University. However, a similar study needs to be conducted in the Tanzanian context to explore the accessibility of internet services on influencing research writing and supervision among postgraduate students at the Open University of Tanzania which operates under the Open and Distance mode. To extend the study and findings, the current study examined the distribution of students in different regions of Tanzania and the accessibility of the internet services. Moreover, the use of purely quantitative research design limited the collection of qualitative information through in-depth interview. Therefore the current study employed convergent design that accommodated both qualitative and quantitative data collection instruments in order to ensure reliability of the findings.

Sarwar et al. (2018) conducted a study in Pakistan to identify factors of research delay at the postgraduate level. The study specifically aimed at exploring factors that cause the delay in research work. The study employed qualitative research design. A sample of 56 participants that comprised of supervisors and supervisees were used. Semi-structured interviews were used to collect data for the study. Results revealed that institutional factors such as a delay in Board of studies to meet for the approval of students' proposal and allocate supervisors were among the factors that cause the delay in completion of studies among students. Findings of previous studies contributed to the body of knowledge and informed this study by its valuable information. However, a similar study needed to be conducted in Tanzanian context to explore the effects of delay in allocation of supervisors on postgraduate students' timely completion of studies. It has to be noted that the findings of the previous study relied much on the data collected by using interview guide only, something that might limit the reliability, generalization and transferability

of the findings, therefore, the current study employed questionnaires, interview guide and document analysis schedule to ensure reliability of the findings.

Kondo et al. (2022) conducted a study on postgraduate supervision practices in low regulated University system in Ivory Coast. The study adopted qualitative methodology. A total of 49 respondents comprising of postgraduate students and research supervisors were purposefully selected. Semi-structured interviews were used to collect data from the respondents. Findings of the study revealed that inaccessibility of formal documents and clear regulations that describe roles and responsibilities of students and supervisors during research supervision were among the factors that cause delay in completion of studies among students in public Universities in Ivory Coast. The informed the current study on the issues related to the importance of guidelines and regulations on the supervisory activities, however, a similar study with a bigger sample size and more varieties of data collection instruments needs to be conducted in Tanzanian context to add to the existing body of knowledge. Since the previous study confined itself to provide explanations on inaccessibility of postgraduate regulations and guidelines, the current study was extended to the reasons for inaccessibility of guidelines and regulations necessary for postgraduate studies. Moreover, it has to be understood that the findings of reviewed study relied much on the qualitative information that was collected by using only interview guides. Therefore, the current study employed convergent design that allowed the use of varieties of data collection instruments, multiple categories of respondents, and appropriate sampling techniques that enhanced trustworthiness of the findings.

Bashorun et al. (2021) conducted a study to examine the provision and access to online library support services for distance learners at Ladoke Akintola University of Technology in Nigeria. Descriptive survey was used in the study. A sample of 341 students enrolled in 2017/18 was included by using stratified random sampling technique. Questionnaire was used to collect data for the study. Findings revealed that online library support services were not accessible to most of the students of Ladoke Akintola University which caused a delay in completion of studies to students. The findings of the study by Bashorun *et al.* (2021) provided valuable information regarding the influence of internet connectivity on the accessibility of online library services to students, however, the current study was extended to explore lecturers' access to the library services. It has to be noted that the findings of the previous study relied on the data from only questionnaire which limits the reliability of findings. The current study employed varieties of data collection instruments that include questionnaires, interview guide and documentary analysis and diversified categories of respondents in order to ensure reliability of the findings.

Gumbo (2018) conducted a study to investigate the University of South Africa supervisors' knowledge on technological tools and Information and Communication Technology for postgraduate supervision. Survey research design which was under the quantitative approach was used. A sample of 129 research supervisors from the College of Education at the University of

South Africa (UNISA) was used to provide information. Questionnaire was used to collect data for the study. The results showed that supervisors had limited knowledge of the online supervision because they had not received training for online supervision. Although the findings of the previous study added valuable information to the area of research supervision, a similar study with a larger sample and with diversified categories of respondents needs to be conducted in Tanzanian context to broaden the knowledge. The findings was based on the supervisors' knowledge on the use of online supervision technologies for effective supervision, hence the current study was extended to postgraduate students' knowledge on the use of online technologies and the need for online research supervision training for effective postgraduate research supervision at the Open University of Tanzania. Moreover, the findings of the study relied on the information from only research supervisors and data collected by using only questionnaire which might compromise with the reliability of findings. Therefore, the current study was extended to the use of varieties of data collection instruments such as questionnaires, interview guide and document analysis schedule and the use of different categories of respondents in order to ensure reliability of the findings.

In Tanzania, Amani et al. (2022) conducted a study to explore the motives for pursuing postgraduate studies and cause of late completion of studies. Qualitative research approach was employed to study the experiences of supervisors and supervisees regarding their motives and the cause of delay in completion of studies among postgraduate students. Semi-structured interview and focus group discussion were used to collect data from the sample of 47 respondents that included supervisors and supervisees. The findings revealed that non-supportive learning and research environment, heavy workload, poor education background, lack of study leave among postgraduate students and lack of commitment were the factors that caused delay in completion of studies. It is worthy noting that the study contributed to the existing body of knowledge concerning the causes of delay in completion of studies among postgraduate students. However, a similar study needs to be conducted to explore the causes of delay in completion of studies among postgraduate students in the context of Open and Distance Learning environment. Although the study explored factors for delay in completion of studies, less have been explained concerning the role of university in providing counseling and guidance services to postgraduate students. Moreover, similar study is needed to determine if situation is the same for distance learning students like these of the Open University of Tanzania. Therefore, in order to ensure transferability and reliability of the study findings, the current study employed convergent design that allowed the use of varieties of data collection instruments, and diversified categories of respondents involved in the research supervision in the higher learning institutions.

## **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

This study employed a convergent design under mixed methods approach. The target population of the study was 1,127 individuals that comprised of 989 postgraduate students, 133 research supervisors, 4 Faculty Deans and 1 Director of Postgraduate Studies. Stratified random sampling



technique, multistage sampling technique and purposive sampling technique were used to select a sample of 242 individuals that comprised of 197 postgraduate students, 40 research supervisors, 4 Faculty Deans, and 1 Director of Postgraduate Studies. Postgraduate students who were involved in this study included 162 masters students and 35 PhD students. Questionnaires, interview guides and document analysis schedule were used to collect data from the respondents. Instruments were validated by research experts and reliability of the Likert scale items were ensured through Cronbach's Alpha coefficient that gave an output of 0.782 and 0.750 for students and supervisors respectively. Moreover, triangulation and peer debriefing were used to ensure reliability of qualitative instruments. Descriptive statistics were used to analyze quantitative data using frequencies, percentages, and mean scores. Thematic analysis was used to analyze qualitative data where themes were developed, relevant information was extracted, interpreted, discussed, and finally presented. Direct quotations and transcription were also employed.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This section provides results of the study findings on supervisory support services in enhancing postgraduate students' timely completion of studies at the Open University of Tanzania. To obtain required data, postgraduate students and research supervisors were provided with a five-point Likert scale to rate the level of agreement or disagreement with the statement provided. Table 1 shows the combined responses of postgraduate students and research supervisors on supervisory support services in enhancing postgraduate students' timely completion of studies at the Open University of Tanzania.

**Table 1. Postgraduate students and research supervisors responses on how supervisory support services enhance postgraduate students' timely completion of studies (n=219)**

S/N	Statement	Respondents	SD		D		U		A		SA		Mean
			F	%	f	%	F	%	f	%	f	%	
1	Access to guidelines and regulation for postgraduate programmes	Students	57	28.5	96	48.0	9	4.5	11	5.5	6	3.0	1.9
		Supervisors	13	32.5	18	45.0	2	5.0	5	12.5	2	5.0	2.12
2	There is a reliable internet service for communication	Students	72	40.2	45	25.1	9	5.0	36	20.1	17	9.5	2.33
		Supervisors	14	35.0	15	37.5	3	7.5	4	10.0	4	10.0	2.22
3	University provide trainings for online supervision	Students	89	44.5	63	31.5	9	4.5	9	4.5	9	4.5	1.80
		Supervisors	11	27.5	18	45.0	2	5.0	5	12.5	4	10.0	2.32
4	University exposes postgraduate students to local and international conferences	Students	8	4.5	10	5.6	6	3.4	86	48.0	69	38.5	4.10
		Supervisors	5	12.5	3	7.5	2	5.0	11	27.5	19	47.5	3.90

## Publication of the European Centre for Research Training and Development-UK

5	Allocation of research supervisors is being done on time	Students	73	36.5	92	46.0	4	2.0	6	3.0	4	2.0	1.74
6	The honorarium for postgraduate supervisors is provided on time	Supervisors	16	40.0	11	27.5	2	5.0	7	17.5	4	10.0	2.3
7	Research method course taught theoretically is helpful during research writing stage	Students	82	45.8	67	37.4	10	5.6	10	5.6	10	5.6	1.87
		Supervisors	16	40.0	14	35.0	1	2.5	5	12.5	4	10.0	2.17
8	Students are oriented with skills for online presentations	Students	67	37.4	80	44.7	8	4.5	12	6.7	12	6.7	2.00
		Supervisors	12	30.0	18	45.0	4	10.0	4	10.0	2	5.0	2.15
9	The University provides supervisors with necessary devices for facilitating research supervision	Supervisors	16	40.0	12	30.0	3	7.5	5	12.5	4	10.0	2.22
10	University online library is always accessible	Students	69	38.5	56	31.3	12	6.7	25	14.0	17	9.5	2.30
11	University organizes online mock defence for postgraduate students	Students	99	55.3	53	29.6	9	5.0	18	10.1	0	0	1.69
12	University provide counselling and guidance services on supervision matters to postgraduate students	Students	70	39.1	62	34.6	27	15.1	11	6.1	9	5.0	2.03
<b>Average mean scores of postgraduate students</b>												<b>1.98</b>	
<b>Average mean scores of research supervisors</b>												<b>2.40</b>	

**Source: Field Data (2023)**

**Key: 1= Strongly Disagree (SD), 2= Disagree (D), 3= Undecided (U), 4= Agree (A), 5= Strongly Agree (SA)**

Data in Table 4.7 show that majority (76.5% and 77.5%) of postgraduate students and research supervisors strongly disagreed and disagreed with the statement that postgraduate students have access to guidelines and regulations for postgraduate programmes. Postgraduate students and research supervisors responded with the mean scores of 1.9 and 2.12 respectively. The data show that majority of postgraduate students and research supervisors disagreed that the postgraduate students have access to guidelines and regulations for postgraduate programmes. This implies that

majority of postgraduate students of the Open University of Tanzania have no access to the general regulations and guidelines for postgraduate programmes. Inaccessibility of such documents causes students to write researches that do not conform with the general guidelines and regulations of the university. Another effect of inaccessibility of general guidelines and regulation could be failure to understand formats of various research related academic documents like seminar papers and dissertations. This has consequently created a problem for the supervisors as they are forced to spend more time to assist students to write papers and dissertations based on the general regulations and guidelines. In order to gain an insight into the matter, in-depth interview was conducted with the DPS, and this was reported:

The university has no specific document as general guidelines and regulations for postgraduate programmes, instead, related information is found in the prospectus which is posted on the university website. However, our students do not bother to search for various documents on the website that is why they know nothing about the document (*Personal communication, January 10, 2023*).

An interview with the Den of the Faculty B added that:

It is true that most of our students do not have the general guidelines and regulations with regard to postgraduate programmes that is why they do not know some of basic guidelines of writing researches. Since these documents explained the role of students and supervisors with regards to research writing and supervision, then lack of such document affect their smooth writing of research and supervision (*Personal communication, January 9, 2023*).

Data from DPS and Faculty Dean show that postgraduate students do not have access to the regulations and guidelines for postgraduate programmes. Lack of such guidelines and regulations for postgraduate programmes limits students' understanding of the procedures for supervision and effective writing of dissertations. The findings are in line with the study conducted by Kondo et al. (2022) who found out that inaccessibility of formal documents and clear regulations necessary for academic programmes leads to the delay in completion of studies among students. Also a study conducted by David (2020) in Uganda found out that delayed or non-completion of doctoral studies could be avoided through establishing guidelines that should be followed by both supervisors and supervisees. Awareness and adherence of general such guidelines and regulations for postgraduate programmes would enhance timely completion of studies among students in the higher learning institutions. Therefore, correlation of the findings of the current study with the reviewed literature justifies that lack of guidelines and regulations for postgraduate programmes is among the factors for the delay in completion of studies among postgraduate students.

Moreover, data from Table 4.7 shows that majority (76.0% and 72.5%) of research supervisors and postgraduate students strongly disagreed and disagreed with the statement that the university provides online supervision trainings to postgraduate students. Postgraduate students and research

supervisors responded with the mean scores of 1.80 and 2.32 respectively. The data illustrate that postgraduate students and research supervisors disagreed with the statement that the university provides training for online supervision to postgraduate students. This implies that postgraduate students are not given regular training for online supervision which is the predominant mode of supervision at the Open University of Tanzania. Lack of knowledge of working on the comments through online formats such as line track changes lead to the delay in working on the documents. The knowledge of working with online comments would enhance students' smooth writing of dissertations at the University. The findings were confirmed by the interview with the DPS who had this to say:

There is no specific training for online supervision conducted by the university to postgraduate students. The Directorate of postgraduate studies is planning to conduct such training throughout all OUT regional centres in order to impart students with necessary skills that will enable them to work on online comments given by their supervisors (*Personal communication, January 10, 2023*). When Faculty Dean C was interviewed, had this to explain:

Training on online supervision is very important so that our student can cope with the Open ad Distance Learning systems. It is very unfortunate that during orientation more is discussed with regard to general teaching and learning through ODL but less is explained with regard to research supervision. Lack such crucial support service might be among the challenge that affect postgraduate students timely completion of studies at OUT (*Personal communication, January 13, 2023*).

The excerpts imply that the university had not organized specific training for online research supervision to postgraduate students which is expected to be among the support services given to postgraduate students. This means that postgraduate students are not provided with trainings necessary for working on the online system which is the dominant supervisory procedures at the Open University of Tanzania. Thus it becomes difficult for postgraduate students to communicate with their supervisors regarding to the comments given through online format. It is important for students who pursue their degree programmes under the Open and Distance learning system to be taught on the use of online systems because students and supervisors do not have frequent face to face meetings as in the conventional systems. The findings are in line with the study conducted by Gumbo (2018) who found out that lack of training for online supervision of postgraduate students leads to failure or delay in completion of studies among university students. Another study was conducted by Hart et al. (2022) who revealed that students need generic skills and research basic skills in order to successful complete their research project. These skills include literature search, scientific writing and statistical skills. Association of the findings of the current study with reviewed literature signify that lack of trainings for online supervision to postgraduate students leads to delay in completion of studies.

Moreover, data in Table 4.7 indicate that majority (86.5% and 75.0%) of postgraduate students and research supervisors strongly agreed and agreed with the statement that the university is exposing postgraduate students to the local and international conferences. With regard to the mean scores, postgraduate students and research supervisors responded with the mean scores of 4.10 and 3.86 respectively. Data entails that majority of postgraduate students and research supervisors agreed with the statement that the university exposes her postgraduate students to the local and international conferences. The tendency of students to attend conferences could be due to the fact that the Open University of Tanzania organizes regular academic conferences and students are encouraged to participate. This implies that postgraduate students at the OUT have access to attend conferences organized within or outside the university. Exposure to local and international conferences would help postgraduate students to have more knowledge on the matters related to research writing and supervision. Attending conferences enhances expansion of knowledge and research competence, developing networking strategies and establishing relationships with other professionals. The findings were validated by interview with DPS who explained that:

The Open University of Tanzania organizes academic conferences time after time. Students are encouraged to attend the conferences. Attending these conferences helps postgraduate students to develop skills and knowledge necessary for research writing and getting exposed to the world of academia (*Personal communication, January 10, 2023*).

The information was also confirmed by the Dean of Faculty D, who reported that: In every year our university organizes conference where students and staff are encouraged to attend. Records show that more OUT students are attending these important academic conferences as a result they are exposed to the world of academia. Through attending these conference students interact with scholars from different angles of the world (*Personal communication, January 11, 2023*).

Responses from the DPS and Faculty Dean imply that postgraduate students are exposed to the conferences organized within or outside the university. Attending these conferences give them opportunity to gain research skills and knowledge, especially presentation skills. Presence of these university organized conferences promotes students mastery of research and develop academic networks. The skills obtained through attending such conferences enable them to develop requisite skills and competencies on research writing and supervision. The finding of the current study coincides with a study conducted by Hauss (2020) in Germany who revealed that exposure to academic conferences helps to establish and maintain social relations among scholars, initiation of research collaboration, getting access to new knowledge, and creating visibility necessary for the production of good thesis. This finding was also supported by the theory of Zone of Proximal Development by Levy Vygotsky (1978) with the attribute of interactions, that individuals' interactions with more knowledgeable persons may promote ones understanding and ability to accomplish related tasks. Exposure to the academic conferences helps postgraduate students to

interact with people from various research expertise. Provision of this important support services enhance students' timely completion of studies.

Furthermore, data from Table 4.7 show that majority (92.2%) of postgraduate students strongly disagreed and disagreed with the statement that allocation of research supervisors at the OUT is done on time. Moreover, postgraduate students responded with the mean score of 1.74. The findings indicate that of postgraduate students disagreed with the contention that allocation of research supervisors is being done on time. In general the findings imply that there is a delay in allocation of research supervisors to postgraduate students that significantly affect their completion time. Research supervisors are the most important university support services provided by the University to guide postgraduate students throughout the dissertation writing. Consequently, delay in allocation of supervisors might negatively affect students' timely completion of studies because it might results into the prolonged supervision time. The interview with Dean of Faculty C confirmed that there is a delay in allocation of research supervisors to postgraduate students that affect timely completion of studies. A Faculty Dean reported that:

...there is a delay in allocation of research supervisors to postgraduate students but this is due to normal university procedures. Delay in allocation of supervisors affects students' completion time of studies. Most of students I am supervising complain that they have spent more than three months waiting for allocation research supervisors (*Personal communication, January 13, 2023*).

An interview from the Dean of Faculty D had this to add with regard to the delay in allocation of research supervisors:

Sometimes allocations of research supervisor take long time. When one of my students comes to introduce as his supervisor he claimed to have been waiting for the research supervision for so long despite of early submission of concept paper. This delay in allocation of research supervisors contributes to the overall delay in completion of studies at the Open University of Tanzania (*Personal communication, January 11, 2023*).

The comments from the Faculty Deans indicate that at the Open University of Tanzania there is a tendency of delay in allocating research supervisors to postgraduate students. Delay in allocation of supervisors could be due to lack of enough supervisors or due to prolonged university administrative procedures. Delay in allocation of research supervisors leads to the delay in starting writing dissertations because students have to spend their time waiting for the supervisors. One of the negative effects of waiting for allocation of supervisors is losing focus on the proposed research topic. The findings of this study concurred with the study conducted by Sarwar et al. (2018) in Pakistan who found out that delay in allocation of research supervisors lead to the delay in completion of studies among postgraduate students. Another study conducted in Kenya by Kessio (2022) revealed that inadequate preparation of doctorate supervision procedures leads to the delay in allocation of research supervisors that affect students timely completion of studies. The more

time taken by student to wait for supervisors has implication on the overall study time. The agreement of the findings of the current study with the reviewed literature validates that the delay in allocation of supervisors cause the delay in completion of studies.

Moreover, Table 4.7 indicates that majority (83.2% and 75.0) of postgraduate students and research supervisors respectively strongly disagreed and disagreed with the statement that research methodology courses taught theoretically is helpful in research writing stage and supervision. With regard to mean score, postgraduate students and research supervisors responded with the mean score of 1.98 and 2.17 respectively. The data show that the majority of postgraduate students and research supervisors disagreed with the statement that the theoretical research methodology courses taught are helpful to students during research writing process. This finding indicates that postgraduate students do not benefit much from the research methodology courses taught by the university. The failure by the lecturers to provide relevant research knowledge and skills during the research course could emanate from the way the research courses and the actual conduct of research are scheduled. The findings were also confirmed by the interview from the DPS who narrated that:

The theoretical research methodology course taught during coursework is not much helpful to our students because students repeatedly commit very common mistakes in research writing. Some students fail to cite the sources properly, poor referencing, or even fail to identify the parts of research proposals. The university is planning to conduct regular research clinics for postgraduate students who are at the research writing stage (*Personal communication, January 10, 2023*).

Information was also affirmed by the Dean of Faculty A, who reported that:

Research writing is a continuously process, the research method cause taught is too general to help students writing researches and it is taught during the coursework, therefore by the moment students starts writing dissertation he/she could have forgotten some basic research concepts taught. Therefore there is a need for our university to have regular research clinics for our postgraduate students in order to minimize the obvious mistake committed by our students during research writing (*Personal communication, January 6, 2023*).

The responses from the DPS and Faculty Dean infer that the theoretical research methodology courses taught to postgraduate students during coursework are not sufficient to enable students to effectively write their theses. This indicates that majority of postgraduate students are not able to link the theoretical aspects and the practical aspects of research writing procedures. Moreover, since research writing process begins after the course works completion, therefore lack of time to time research trainings could be high because students might forget some basic research concepts that were taught during the coursework. The findings of the current study concurred with the study that was conducted by Daniel (2021) in New Zealand who observed that the theoretical research methodology course taught in the coursework does not help postgraduate students to develop good

research. This could be possible because there is an interval of time between the coursework and actual research writing stage, hence students might forget some basic research concepts taught. Lander et al. (2019) added that integrated format of research workshops would help students to develop confidence and develop ability to plan, conduct and write up research. Therefore for effective research writing and supervision, students should be given more hands on research seminars. The corresponding of the findings of the current study with the reviewed literature signifies that the theoretical research methodology course taught to postgraduate students does not help students in writing their dissertations.

Data in table 4.7 indicate that majority (69.8%) of postgraduate students strongly disagreed and disagreed with the statement that online library of the university is always accessible to OUT students. With regards to mean score, students responded with a mean score of 2.30. The findings indicate that the majority of postgraduate students disagreed with the statement that the online library service is always accessible to students. This means that postgraduate students at the Open University of Tanzania have no access to online library services. Online library services are very important for students who pursue their postgraduate programs through Open and Distance Learning institutions like the Open University of Tanzania. Inaccessibility of such services limits students and supervisors to access important documents for research writing. The interview that was conducted with Dean of Faculty C affirmed by saying that: *“It is true that sometimes our online library is not available. Inaccessibility of online library limits students to access resources necessary for writing researches”* (Personal communication, January 8, 2023).

Data from the Faculty Dean proves that sometimes online library services are not accessible to OUT students. Online library is important support services for students pursuing studies under the Open and Distance learning. Therefore, inaccessibility of library services might limit the access of resources to students who lives in the remote areas that are unable to visit physical libraries at the regional centre. The findings of current study concurred with those of a study conducted by Bashorun et al. (2021) in Nigeria who found that inaccessibility of online library services limits availability of academic resources necessary for research writing which might lead to delay in completion of studies. Another study by Mwamtimwa (2017) also found that there was a need to promote the usage of e-resources through web technologies to enhance the quality of teaching and researching for effective learning. Online library is important support services that facilitate thesis writing in the Open and Distance Learning system. Coherence of the findings of the current study and the reviewed literature provides the evidence that inaccessibility of online library services at the Open University of Tanzania is among the factors that lead to delay in completion of studies. Generally, the average mean scores of postgraduate students and research supervisors on supervisory support services were 1.98 and 2.40 respectively. The small mean scores indicate that majority of postgraduate students and research supervisors disagreed with the statements that the university provides postgraduate students with the supervisory support services that would enhance research writing and effective supervision. Therefore the findings show that postgraduate



students at the Open University are not provided with sufficient supervisory support services necessary for postgraduate research writing and supervision.

## CONCLUSION

Based on the findings of the study, it is concluded that support services are important facets for postgraduate students' timely completion of their studies. The majority of postgraduate students and research supervisors at the Open University of Tanzania were not provided with the support services necessary for research writing and supervision. Unavailability and inaccessibility of the support services like postgraduate guidelines and regulations, research writing trainings, online supervision training, timely allocation of supervisors and delay in paying honorarium to supervisors contributes to postgraduate students' delay in completion of their studies. It can also be concluded that the few support services such as students being exposed to academic conferences was not enough to enhance timely completion of studies among postgraduate students.

## Recommendations

It is recommended that the Open University of Tanzania should ensure that all support services such as online supervision training, timely allocation of supervisors, access to online library, timely provision of research supervisors and provision of training for online presentations should be highly considered for effective supervision and timely completion of studies.

## REFERENCES

- Aina, C. & Pastore, F. (2020). Delayed Graduation and Over-education in Italy: A Test of the Human Capital Model versus the Screening Hypothesis. *Social Indicators Research* 152:533–553. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11205-020-02446-0>.
- Amani, J., Myeya, H., & Mhewa, M. (2022). Understanding the Motives for Pursuing Postgraduate Studies and Causes of Late Completion: Supervisors and Supervisees' Experiences. *SAGE*, 1–12. DOI: 10.1177/21582440221109586.
- Bashorun, M. T., Raji, A. O., Aboderin, O. A., Ajani, Y. A., & Idogun-Omogbai, E. K. (2021). Provision and access to online library support services for distance learners in Ladoko Akintola University, Nigeria. *SAJLIS*, 87(1). <http://dx.doi.org/10.7553/87-1-1988>
- Creswell, J.W. & Creswell, J. D. (2018). *Research Design Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches Fifth Edition*; SAGE Publications
- Daniel, B. K., 2021. The Role of Research Methodology in Enhancing Postgraduate Students Research Experience. *The Electronic Journal of Business Research Methods*, 20(1), 34-48
- David, O. A. (2020). "To Be or Not to Be?" The effect of supervisor-supervisee relations on students' completion of doctoral studies. *World Journal of Education*, 10(1).

- Gumbo, M. T. (2018). Supervisors' Knowledge of Technological Tools and ICTs for Postgraduate Supervision. *The Turkish Online Journal of Educational Technology*, 17(4)
- Ghatak, S. K., Menon, B., & Mahanty, B. (2021). Identifying, prioritizing and ranking of factors influencing the PhD milestones' completion delays. *Quality and Quantity*, 55, 1457–1476.
- Hart, J., Hakim, J., Kaur, R. Jeremy, R., Coorey, G., Kalman, E., Jenkin, R., Bowen, D. (2022). Research supervisors' views of barriers and enablers for research projects undertaken by medical students; a mixed methods evaluation of a post-graduate medical degree research project program. *BMC Medical Education*. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12909-022-03429-0>
- Hauss, K. (2020). What are the social and scientific benefits of participating at academic conferences? Insights from a survey among doctoral students and postdocs in Germany. *Research Evaluation*, 0(0) 1–12. doi: 10.1093/reseval/rvaa018
- Kessio, D. K. (2022). Effective strategies of doctorate students' blended supervision and mentorship at school of education, Moi University, Kenya. *US-China Education Review B*, 12(6), 220-226. doi: 10.17265/2161-6248/2022.06.005
- Kondo, A. R., Heitz-Tokpa, K., Bassirou Bonfoh, B., and Akindes, F. (2022). Postgraduate Supervision Practices in low regulated University System in Côte d'Ivoire. 8th *International Conference on Higher Education Advances (HEAd'22)*. DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.4995/HEAd22.2022.14861>
- Lander, J., Seeho, S., & Foster, K. (2019). Learning practical research skills using an academic paper framework – an innovative, integrated approach. *Health Professions Education*, 5(2), 136-145. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.hpe.2018.06.002>
- Magali, J. J. (2019) Research Projects Writing Skills and Other Challenges Faced by Master and PhD Students at the Open University of Tanzania. *International Journal of Social Science Research*. 7(1). doi:10.5296/ijssr.v7i1.14668
- Mahlangu, V. P. (2021). Exploring Challenges of Supervising Postgraduate Students in Open Distance Learning in Higher Education Settings. *Bulgarian Comparative Education Society*. 19
- Mugendi, S. M. & Githae, E. N. (2021). Prevalence of non-completion among postgraduate students in selected public universities in Kenya. *European Journal of Education Studies*. 8(12). Doi: 10.46827/ejes.v8i12.4017
- Mbogo, R. W., Ndiao, E., Wambua, J. M., Ileri, N. W., & Ngala, F. W. (2020). Supervision Challenges and Delays in Completion of PhD Programmes in Public and Private Universities: Experiences of Supervisors and Graduate Students in Kenya. *European Journal of Education Studies*. 6(11).
- Mkwizu, K. (2019). Role of Research in Teaching: Analysis of PhD Programs and PhD Graduates at the Open University of Tanzania. *Journal of Issues and Practice in Education* 11(1).67–72.

- Mwantimwa, K. (2017). Utilisation of e-resources to support teaching and research in higher learning institutions, Tanzania. *University of Dar es Salaam Library Journal*, 12(2), 98-123.
- Nouri, J., Larsson, K., & Saqr, M. (2019). Identifying factors for master's thesis completion and noncompletion through learning analytics and machine learning. *European Conference on Technology Enhanced Learning EC-TE, Delft*, The Netherlands.
- Nnebedum, C. & Obuegbe, A.S. (2021). Determination of factors that contribute to postgraduate students' delay in their thesis/dissertation completion. *The Universal Academic Research Journal*, 2(1), 21-29.
- Nyamubi, G. J. (2021). Reflecting on a Personal Doctoral Study Experience: A Journey to Academic and Professional Maturity. *Higher Education Research*. 6(3). pp. 72-77. doi: 10.11648/j.her.20210603.1331
- OUT (2021). *Facts and Figure 2020/21*. The Open University of Tanzania
- Sarwar, M., Shah, A. A., & Akram, M. (2018). Identifying Factors of Research Delay at Postgraduate Level. *Journal of Educational Research*, 21(2).
- Shahibi, M. S., & Ku-Rusli, K. K (2017). The Influence of Internet Usage on Student's Academic Performance. *International Journal of Academic Research in Business and Social Sciences* 7(8).
- Ungadi B.A. (2021) Challenges in Doctoral Supervision in South African Universities. *Open Science Journal* 6(2)
- Vygotsky, L. (1978). *Mind and Society. The development of higher mental process*. Cambridge, M. A: Harvard University Press. Willey Eastern Limited.
- Whitehouse, J. (2019). An Exploratory study of timely PhD completion at a university in the United Kingdom. Unpublished Doctoral thesis. University of Manchester.