Timely Completion of Post-Graduate Studies among Nigerian Female Students: Challenges and Prospects

Agundo, Nguavese Adoo

Abstract

Timely completion of postgraduate studies is crucial for academic and professional advancement; however, female students in Nigeria face unique challenges that often lead to delays. Most studies focus on the difficulties encountered by women in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM), with less attention given to those in other disciplines. Similar delays also affect women in non-STEM fields, which prompted the interest of this study. This research explores the prospects for timely postgraduate completion among female students, emphasizing institutional, socio-cultural, and personal factors. Using a qualitative method, the study conducted and analyzed 10 in-depth interviews (IDIs) with participants purposively selected from four departments at Kaduna State University. The Intersectionality theory was employed to analyze the collected data. Key barriers identified include delayed supervisory feedback, inadequate research funding, gender biases, and the dual burden of academic and domestic responsibilities. Additionally, systemic issues such as academic strikes and limited access to research resources further hinder progress.Despite these challenges, there are opportunities for improvement through gender-responsive academic policies, increased funding support, mentorship programs, and flexible learning structures that accommodate family responsibilities. The study recommends that universities and policymakers implement targeted interventions to promote gender equity in academia, ensuring female postgraduate students have equal opportunities for timely completion. Addressing these issues will not only enhance female students' academic experiences but also contribute to the broader goal of gender inclusivity in higher education. This study provides valuable insights for stakeholders in education, government, and advocacy

groups working to improve postgraduate education and development for women in Nigeria.

Keywords: *supervisor-supervisee, postgraduate education, timely completion*

Introduction

Postgraduate (PG) programs train students in understanding existing knowledge and practice, and in creating new knowledge, communicating complex ideas, networking, problem-solving, project management, research governance, and organization, among others (Japheth et al., 2023). These skills are too significant for any institution of learning, academic body, organization, and country to ignore. This justifies the need to improve postgraduate education (Stevens, 2021). Master's and doctoral degree programs in universities introduce students to the world of independent research so that through their studies, they are able to generate new knowledge which, in turn, contributes to personal, professional, and national development (Amani et al., 2022). Hence, the quest for knowledge and development has created a huge demand on the postgraduate study system where women are not left out of this need for development.

Despite the efforts of universities in conducting these postgraduate programmes, there have been challenges of delayed completion or even abandonment by the students. Whitehouse (2019) showed the importance of undertaking a research on timely Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) completion by exploring its geographical spread. Although, the associated areas of coverage indicate a tilting towards the Anglosphere (Australia, Canada, UK and USA) and Commonwealth countries with strong educational ties to the UK (Nigeria and Malaysia). It still suggests that the period for PhD completion is a research problem worthy of investigation in several countries and thus constitutes an international research phenomenon since the 1960's.Several international organisations have conducted studies on postgraduate duration and completion with its impact on world economies (Botha,

2016). These studies revealed a challenge of poor students' completion of postgraduate studies, especially in Africa where 85% fail to complete in the allocated time (Motseke, 2016; Rong'uno; 2016; Waswa et al., 2020). Many postgraduate students in Africa take at least double the minimum required years to complete their programmes, which continuously places challenges on universities and the development of the economy (Aina, 2015; Japheth, 2023).

This study, therefore, seeks to examine the factors affecting the timely completion of postgraduate studies among female students in Nigeria. It aims to identify the key institutional, socio-cultural, and personal barriers contributing to delays and explore possible solutions for improving female students' academic experiences and outcomes.

Although, several studies have examined problems experienced by Postgraduate candidates, much has not been investigated on the prospects of timely completion of female PG students in Nigeria.

Literature review
Challenges of timely completion among Nigerian female Post Graduate students
Research into timely PhD completion has taken many forms and achieved greater sophistication in its approaches since the 1960s (Whitehouse, 2019). Existing literature has revealed that timely completion of postgraduate studies is a problem in various countries and the hindrances could differ by university and country (Ndayambaje, 2018). Previous studies have also shown an understanding of postgraduate studies completion challenges with a focus on perspectives from various postgraduate students in either one faculty and/or discipline (Motseke, 2016; Van de Schoot et al., 2013). It is considered an international problem, even though the educational systems for PhD differ substantially across countries.

Timely completion of postgraduate studies is a critical issue in Nigeria, with many students facing prolonged study durations due to

institutional, financial, and socio-cultural challenges (Aina, 2015). However, female postgraduate students encounter unique obstacles that further delay their completion rates. These challenges include balancing academic work with family responsibilities, gender biases in academia, limited access to funding opportunities, and delays in supervision and research processes (Ahmed, 2024). According to Mbonyiryivuze et al, (2023) other barriers preventing women from timely completion of their studies and earning their doctorates is a lack of female motivation including shortage of female leaders, female lecturers, female research project supervisors and administrators in science-related departments, and a lack of social, emotional, and financial support. They equally stated that Doctoral degrees are widely acknowledged to be expensive, hence the reason for enrolment later in life, at a time when family responsibilities are greater. Thus, while family sacrifices are necessary, they put strain on the family. As a result, dropping out is typically a deliberate decision made by some students after weighing the costs and rewards.

This supports the position that completing a thesis in time in Nigeria has continued to be a challenge because it requires considerable skills, knowledge, determination and is dependent on many interacting factors. Literature shows that this has remained a challenge with less number of candidates completing their doctoral and masters programs in time (see Botha, 2018; Eyangu et al., 2014; Daramola, 2021; Hadi & Muhammad, 2019 ;Japheth et al., 2021; Motseke, 2016; Skopek et al., 2020; Wamala et al., 2012). Reports of low study completion rates abound, some with less than 10% of postgraduate students graduating annually, leading to prolonged years of study (see Agu & Odumegwu,2014; Eyiuche, et al., 2015). Interaction with postgraduate students in some tertiary institutions shows that they hardly graduate within the stipulated time. It is more worrisome when their residency period in the university expires, and students are expected to reapply for fresh university admission (Musa & Ibrahim, 2017). This a

frustrating situation that sometimes leads to the abandonment of the program. Research indicates that a significant percentage of Nigerian postgraduate students, particularly women, struggle to complete their programs within the stipulated timeframe (Ndayambaje, 2018). Supervisory bottlenecks, academic strikes, and inadequate research facilities further exacerbate the problem, making it difficult for female students to meet deadlines. Some schools refuse to provide on-campus day care, maternity leave, sick leave, and other basic human rights to PhD students and researchers, citing low STEM enrollment as an excuse (Bondarescu et al., 2018). In addition, by observation, societal expectations often place a heavier domestic burden on women, reducing the time available for research and coursework.

This confirms the fact that completing a post graduate research in time, has continued to be a challenge and a topic investigated by researchers. Despite various interventions such as scholarships,funding initiatives, incentives and mentorship programs aimed at supporting female postgraduate students, the issue of prolonged study duration persists even in developed countries (Japheth et al., 2023; Whitehouse, 2019). This also implies that there are silent areas of gender equity in institutions that need to be sorted to enhance the timely completion of postgraduate studies among female students.

Studies by Masterman (2014) suggest that the academic ability of doctoral students at the start of the program, which is measured by high grade point average (GPA), does not determine PG degree completion. According to the study, those who started off their doctoral journey with academic prowess and ability did not determine who would complete or not complete their doctoral degree. These findings clearly suggest that academic ability cannot explain or predict variations in doctoral degree completion, thereby indicating the role of multifaceted factors for delays in research completion.

Post Graduate Completion rates by Women

In a study by (Abedi & Benkin, 1987), gender was found to be a factor responsible for timely completion, where it took women more than a year longer than men to complete the degree, however this was determined by field of study. More recent findings document that women are less likely to complete the doctoral degree than men across all disciplines (55% of women vs. 58% of men), and within STEM disciplines (Bamgboje-Ayodele et al., 2016). This is corroborated by Bondarescu et al., (2018) who revealed that women have a systematically higher rate of drop out in more male- dominated STEM fields. Even though this spans across non STEM disciplines as well, due to other factors. Work by Kube et al, (2024) showed that across STEM disciplines, the stereotypical beliefs about women, heteronomous gender roles, gender workload, sexism, and structural power relations are significant factors for hindering female success in STEM careers in higher education.

The issue of lack of knowledge of the system and PG processes is another reason for drop out cases or delays, not necessarily due to lack of intelligence. This equally affects most female PG students in other disciplines as poor understanding of the academic processes can impede timely completion, coupled with other factors. A challenge that was observed is the inability of women to earn at their full potential while in graduate school, notwithstanding the expectation of better remuneration upon completion of doctoral studies. This could be due to family or job related interferences.

The consequence of delays in degree progress, leads to skill loss in fields where competent women with terminal degrees are in limited supply and therefore, leading to low contribution by females in professional roles (Mbonyiryivuze et al, 2023; Moghadam et al., 2017).

Theoretical framework

Intersectionality Theory by Kimberlie Crenshaw is employed as the theoritical framework for this study. This theory is considered suitable because it provides a comprehensive framework which supports and analyses the prospects and challenges of timely completion of Post Graduate studies among female students in Nigeria. Intersectionality is the complex, cumulative manner in which the effects of different forms of discrimination combine, overlap, or intersect. For those who embody different marginalised identities, these often overlap and amplify each other to create a unique experience of discrimination which allows us to view the world outside of our own experience and better understand how different forms of marginalisation can deepen and amplify each other to create unique vulnerabilities (IWDA, 2018).

This theory recognizes that gender is not the only factor affecting female postgraduate students, factors like class, marital status, and financial background intersect to shape their experiences. For instance, Women from lower-income backgrounds face greater financial struggles, while married women and mothers face double responsibilities of academia and household duties (Crenshaw, 1989). It also highlights how academic institutions fail to accommodate the complex challenges faced by women from different backgrounds.

Methodology

The study used a qualitative inquiry in order to elicit in depth knowledge of the challenges female postgraduate students encounter and how this influences their ability to graduate on time. This technique allowed the researcher to disclose the reality of the occurrence based on participants actual experiences (Cohen et al., 2010). The study was conducted in Kaduna State University (KASU), Kaduna state. Participants were purposively drawn from four departments namely Sociology, History, Mass Communication and Political science, who were all post graduate students either running an MSc or PhD program. The essence of this selection is because these

departments have a number of PG applicants enrolling yearly and they are non STEM discipline. Through snowball and convenientce sampling techniques, 10 postgraduate students were recruited. Participants selected for data gathering were women between the ages of 26 and 50 years, since the study is concerned with female PG students. A total of 10 In depth Interviews (IDI) were conducted.

The Socio demographic characteristics revealed that the prominent age (80%) of the participantsnts was 34-45 years. This exposes that women tend to pursue higher degrees when they are both working and can afford to pay and also while raising families. There were 50% Christian and 50% Moslem women. 90% were married, out of which 20% were widowed and 10% unmarried.

In this study, the researchers sought oral informed consent from all participants and maintain confidentiality throughout the research process. Data was collected face-to-face using semi structured interviews with female postgraduate students at different times. Information was analysed employing the thematic approach through organizing, reducing and synthesizing the data, including searching for common patterns/themes.

Data Analysis
Based on the responses from ten female postgraduate students from the Departments of Sociology, History, Political science and Mass communication in Kaduna State University Nigeria, the key findings were categorized into three major themes. Academic, Socio- cultural and personal factors, with accompanying sub themes.

Academic Factors and Barriers
The academic factors influencing postgraduate research include the gender-inclusive academic environment, supervisor workload, strikes, and financial considerations. Research has established the prevalence of gender bias, with female students often feeling overlooked in classroom discussions and academic opportunities. However, efforts

have been made to address these biases (Kube et al., 2024; Thasniya, 2022). A gender-inclusive academic environment allows female postgraduate students to feel free from discrimination and harassment, ensuring that all students are respected and valued. Findings highlight the challenge of limited access to female mentors for postgraduate female students. The lack of role models who understand their unique challenges can hinder guidance throughout the research process. This situation may contribute to gender bias in supervision, as some male supervisors may not take female students as seriously as their male counterparts, leading to discouragement and delays.

Having a female professor who supports me has been very encouraging, but there are not many women in senior positions in my department (PG student, 1).

Observations made on gender stereotypes, witnessed by the researcher as a PG student disclosed cases where PG Lecturers and Supervisors told their pregnant or nursing mother students how unprepared they were for the Postgraduate program as it was not mandatory for them to be in school, instead they should seek the alternative of taking care of their motherhood responsibilities instead of being in school. It is only when gender bias is curtailed in the academia that more females would be encouraged to enrol and an increased number of female students would graduate in time. This is what some participants had to say:

Some supervisors don't take female students seriously, they assume we won't pursue our degree to the end. (PG student, 10)

Male supervisors sometimes treat us differently from the male students, and female supervisors are too few to provide enough mentorship (PG student, 4).

Participants expressed concern that effective postgraduate studies require a research environment conducive to learning. This includes equipping modern libraries with solar energy and efficient internet access, enabling them to access recent and relevant online journals. To

address the ongoing electricity challenges, the installation of solar energy is necessary to mitigate this issue. A PhD student made the following statement:

Many of us struggle with accessing relevant academic materials, especially recent books and journals that add to new knowledge, coupled with the regular power grid collapse or the recent strike action by electricity workers, not to mention academic strikes. These add to make achieving a PhD in time very difficult (PG student, 3).

Studies have shown the disconnect in the role of proper research supervision. It has been identified in various studies as the key contributor in the timely completion of postgraduate studies in terms of the number of meetings with the students, quality and timely feedback on students' work, and clarity of the supervision norms and expectations (see Abiddin & Ismail, 2011; Cekiso et al., 2019; Kaur & Kaur, 2013;Wu et al., 2024). This is corroborated by Ngozi and Kayode (2013) who reported that the way the supervision process is handled by the supervisors is most important, but the students and universities have a role to play in determining the students completion phase.

Findings indicated Supervisory delays is a common occurrence as many female students experience delays in feedback from their supervisors, as this delay extends to fieldwork especially if the population of study can be accessed during particular seasons or events. A statement by a participant revealed this:

The heavy workload saddled on these supervisors makes it difficult for them to concentrate on their supervisees work. I was unable to go to the field as at when due because my supervisor could not make out time to properly review my research questions. This in turn slows down research progress tremendously. (PG student, 7)

Aside supervisors' having a heavy workload, low level of commitment was also reported to affect timely completion of postgraduate studies. One student shared the following:

We have cases of Supervisors hurriedly glancing through a supervisees work and concluding that the student does not know anything or is incapable of the PG degree, thereby causing frustrations and discouragement. Additionally, the supervisor does not impact the knowledge as expected in the course of academic guiding, coupled with our research being very theoretical and meeting deadlines becomes difficult (PG student, 2).

Limited funding availability is also another issue that was identified. Financial problems were reported as one among the challenges hindering early completion of postgraduate studies. Most students were private-sponsored hence were utilizing part of their study time to work and earn money for managing their tuition fees, upkeep, and academic expenses.

Socio-Cultural and Gender-Related Challenges

Socio- Cultural expectations often pressure women to prioritize family and marriage over academic achievements, making it difficult for female students to focus on their studies. Findings revealed that in the eventuality of the death of a child or spouse and without support systems, the student may abandon the program or delay completion. This supports the position of the intersectionality theory where other factors like socio- cultural norms influences timely completion of female students.

Lack of social support where families and communities sometimes see postgraduate education as unnecessary for women, as they are expected to submit to husbands by way of not being more educated than him. As a matter of fact, some women are seen as a threat and being in competition with the husband especially when he is not supportive of her decision to further her education. Hence, reducing

the women's motivation to complete their studies. It is usually the resilience of the female that enables her to overcome these challenges.

Personal factors
Balancing Academic, Family, and Financial Responsibilities
Post Graduate women experience financial struggles due to limited access to financial support. Many female students must work to fund their studies, which affects their ability to focus on research. Also limited research funding options unlike STEM fields, tends to affect them by having fewer scholarships and research grants, making it difficult for students to finance their projects.

Family responsibilities associated with Married female students, especially mothers, who face additional task of child and adult care giving, making it difficult to meet deadlines. Including the pressure from family members to prioritise domestic duties over academic responsibilities.

There is also the emotional and psychological pressure of remaining motivated by devising coping strategies like: resting, attending social events, watching movies and reassuring oneself of the bigger picture.

Findings and Discussion
Prospects of Timely Postgraduate Completion in Nigeria: A Female Student's Perspective
Postgraduate education in Nigeria presents significant opportunities and challenges, particularly for female students who often navigate additional societal and institutional barriers. Timely completion of postgraduate studies is essential for career advancement, academic progression, and personal development. Regarding gender dynamics, it has often been assumed that female students are disadvantaged regarding graduation rates attributable to research challenges as women face barriers that are either personal or institutional or both, and to succeed, they had to pay a high price to climb up (Ahmed et al.,2024). Though this may apply to men as well, it is obvious that the

challenges and feelings of guilt for women weigh them down making it extremely hard for them to be successful and complete their program (Mbonyiryivuze et al, 2023).

Many women have encountered cultural, social, emotional, psychological and physical hurdles in the course of post graduate pursuit. The issues ranged from permission from husbands to further education, raising funds to finance education and the bottlenecks involved in gaining admission to the mental burnout and juggling roles as a mother wife and career person (Ahmed et al., 2024; Mbonyiryivuze et al, 2023).

There are several factors that influence the ability of female students to complete their studies within the stipulated time frame.

Institutional Factors

Supervision is a significant determinant of timely postgraduate degree completion (Aina, 2015). From the outset, both the supervisee and supervisor should establish an effective working relationship and discuss ways to optimize research progress (Japheth et al., 2020). When this relationship is not established, misunderstandings can arise, leading to frustration. In this study, several supervisor-related factors contribute to delays in female postgraduate students' completion of their research work. These include the supervisor's unavailability when needed, delayed feedback on submitted work, insufficient knowledge of the subjects undertaken by students, frequent changes to research topics, imposition of topics on supervisees, failure to adhere to scheduled discussions, gender discrimination, unconstructive criticism, refusal to adopt modern supervision methods, setting unrealistic expectations, undermining students' self-esteem through mockery, and subtly requesting money or threatening to fail students. These factors negatively impact timely graduation, as corroborated by Eyiuche et al. (2015), Jergussen (2022), Ndayambaje (2018), Ngozi & Kayode (2013), and Nnebedum & Obuegbe (2020).

Lack of Mentorship and Support Networks is an area of great challenge among female postgraduate students. They often lack access to strong academic and female mentorship and peer support, which are crucial for research motivation and career growth (Berry,2017;Masterman, 2014).

Inconsistent Academic Calendar due to strikes by the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU) have historically disrupted academic programs, causing delays in research work and coursework, delayed graduation . Extended periods without active research engagement can cause Loss of momentum, thereby negatively affecting their academic research output (Ntiasagwe, 2020).

Limited resource availability like access to adequate research materials, internet and energy source is a huge challenge, which can delay or hinder female students from graduation (see Ndayambaje, 2018). Gender bias could be exposed when some schools refuse to provide on-campus day care, maternity leave, sick leave, and other basic human rights to PG students and researchers, citing low female enrollment as an excuse (Mbonyiryivuze et al, 2023).

Financial Constraints are experienced by many female PG students, since they self-fund their education or rely on family support for tuition and research costs, which may be unstable. Inadequate funding affects data collection, conference participation, and thesis completion. This is supported by Ndayambaje (2018) as she highlights this view strongly.

Despite scholarship schemes like Tertiary Education Trust Fund (TETFUND), there are limited scholarship opportunities attributed specifically for female postgraduate students. They often face competition and a lack of tailored funding opportunities, prolonging their study period.

Socio-Cultural and Gender-Related Challenges

Findings showed how gender stereotypes and traditional expectations tend to prioritize domestic roles over academic achievements, indicating how this can affect female students' confidence and commitment to timely completion. This is validated by a published dissertation which used qualitative methods, concluded that although women doctoral students in Psychology, Education, and Sociology agreed that they had access to important socialization opportunities such as research, publication, and frequent interactions with faculty advisor, however, their experiences of these socialization moments were qualitatively less impacting due to stereotypes (Watford, 2007). Specifically, women perceived that opportunities to participate in research projects, and receive career guidance and job search support was less available to them than their male doctoral student peers (Masterman, 2014).

Personal Factors

The female PG experience is an emotional and multifaceted journey toward becoming a scholar, furthermore, worry, anxiety, burnout, uncertainty, social isolation, and loneliness may occur at various phases while completing a PG degree (Janta et al., 2014). This may affect female students disproportionately due to additional responsibilities.

The need to multi-task is an important strength every female PG student must possess. When faced with some situations, motherhood roles earned priority as they had to choose their homes and children over their academics (Mbonyiryivuze et al, 2023).

A major hurdle of every participant of this study is being able to balancing family and Academic responsibilities. Many female postgraduate students juggle academic work with family responsibilities. Married women and mothers have to get the approval of the husbands before enrolling in school. They also often face time

constraints, making it difficult to meet deadlines (Ahmed 2024; Masterman, 2014).

Conclusion

Timely postgraduate completion in Nigeria remains a challenge, especially for female students who face unique socio-cultural, financial, and institutional barriers. However, with the proper support systems, improved policies, and gender-sensitive academic reforms, female students can navigate these challenges effectively. Addressing these issues will contribute to a more inclusive and efficient postgraduate education system in Nigeria.

Recommendations

Promoting Gender Inclusion in Academia through mentorship programs, female-led research groups, and workshops on academic survival skills can help female students stay motivated. There have to be gender-responsive policies that address the unique struggles female postgraduate students face which limits their research productivity and engagement in academic networks. Where necessary, female PG students should be mentored by same-gender faculty and in departments with more female faculty which will encourage mentorship and make the supervisors more empathic towards the supervisees.

During orientation programs, women enrolled into PG programs should be encouraged, confident and should be provided assistance through counselling, whenever needed. Formalized student support systems developed by institutions are recommended to help female PhD candidates receive academic updates, social, and psychological support from their peers. Through these mentoring arrangements, experienced PhD students who are making good progress in the program can share their expertise and experience with colleagues who are experiencing problems and delays.

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