



Why Do Doctoral Students Struggle to Finish? A Phenomenological Exploration of PhD Completion Dynamics

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Abstract :

Doctoral completion remains a persistent challenge in many higher education systems, particularly within developing contexts where adequate academic support structures have not always accompanied institutional expansion. This study explores the dynamics shaping PhD completion at the University of Dodoma, Tanzania, using a qualitative phenomenological approach that centres doctoral students' lived experiences. The research aims to understand how institutional, personal, supervisory, and systemic factors interact to influence doctoral progression and completion outcomes. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with 35 PhD candidates from diverse academic disciplines and analysed using inductive thematic analysis. The findings reveal that doctoral completion is not a linear process determined solely by individual effort but is shaped by interconnected pressures operating across multiple levels. Institutional barriers such as bureaucratic procedures, limited research facilities, and rigid programme structures were found to slow academic progress. Personal challenges, including financial constraints, competing professional responsibilities, and psychological pressures, emerged as the most frequently experienced obstacles. Supervisory dynamics, particularly delayed feedback and heavy supervisory workloads, significantly influenced motivation and research continuity, while systemic publication requirements intensified pressure during advanced stages of candidature. The study highlights that doctoral completion should be understood as an ecological process requiring coordinated institutional and policy responses rather than student-focused interventions alone. These findings provide practical insights for higher education management and policymakers seeking to improve doctoral completion rates through supportive academic environments and integrated supervision practices.

INTRODUCTION

Doctoral education has become a central pillar in strengthening research productivity and knowledge development within contemporary higher education systems. Universities increasingly depend on doctoral graduates to support innovation, academic renewal, and national competitiveness. The growing expansion of doctoral programmes across many regions, particularly in developing countries, has not been

accompanied by proportional improvements in completion outcomes (Barbier, 2025; M.A. Lugulu, 2022; Malah-Kuete, 2025). Reports on higher education development indicate that doctoral completion rates remain uneven globally, with many candidates exceeding expected study duration or failing to graduate entirely (Dharamshi et al., 2022; Menuet & Sekeris, 2022; Roy et al., 2023). In several African higher education systems, prolonged completion periods and low graduation rates continue to limit research capacity development (Akala, 2023; Ali & Pandya, 2021; Bekova, 2025). Scholars argue that these challenges reflect structural and institutional constraints rather than individual academic inability (Y. C. Chen & Lin, 2022; Nguyen et al., 2022; Onaolapo, 2025). The persistence of delayed completion suggests that doctoral education must be examined beyond individual performance indicators. Understanding doctoral completion as a broader educational phenomenon, it is therefore necessary to explain how institutional environments and academic systems shape students' progress.

Recent scholarship has increasingly recognized that doctoral completion is influenced by multiple interacting dimensions rather than a single determining factor (Maguraushe & Gumede, 2025; Martinez-Vogt, 2021; Pham et al., 2025). Studies examining doctoral persistence emphasize the importance of psychological resilience, academic identity, and motivation in sustaining progress throughout candidature (Chamadia & Qureshi, 2021; DEMİR, 2023; Skinner, 2023). At the same time, research highlights the decisive role of supervisory relationships, institutional climate, and access to academic resources in shaping doctoral experiences (Bengtson & McAlpine, 2022; L. H. Chen, 2025; Lawrence & Hatchett, 2024). Evidence from higher education research shows that delayed feedback, unclear supervisory expectations, and limited research infrastructure frequently contribute to extended study duration. Other studies also demonstrate that financial pressure and competing professional responsibilities affect doctoral students' capacity to maintain consistent research engagement (Girgibo, 2022; Mensah, 2025; Onaolapo, 2025). Although these findings collectively broaden understanding of doctoral education, much of the existing literature relies on survey-based or quantitative approaches that prioritize measurable variables over experiential understanding. Consequently, the subjective meaning-making processes through which students interpret challenges during their doctoral journey remain insufficiently explored.

A critical gap, therefore, exists in understanding how doctoral completion challenges are experienced simultaneously across personal, institutional, supervisory, and policy environments. Many previous studies isolate individual factors, such as supervision quality or funding availability, without examining how these factors interact in everyday academic life. This fragmentation limits the ability to explain why students facing similar institutional conditions experience different completion trajectories. Furthermore, empirical studies focusing on doctoral education in African contexts remain relatively limited compared with research conducted in Western universities. Within Tanzania, research addressing doctoral completion has largely focused on policy or institutional performance indicators rather than students' lived experiences. As a result, little is known about how doctoral candidates interpret administrative procedures, supervision dynamics, and publication expectations within their daily academic realities. Addressing this gap requires an approach capable of capturing shared meanings and experiential depth, making phenomenological inquiry particularly relevant.

This study aims to explore the dynamics shaping PhD completion at the University of Dodoma through a qualitative phenomenological approach that foregrounds doctoral candidates' lived experiences. The research seeks to examine how institutional structures, personal circumstances, supervisory interactions, and systemic policy requirements collectively influence doctoral progression. By situating doctoral completion within a specific institutional context characterized by a research-based doctoral model without coursework, the study provides insight into how standardized programme structures interact with diverse student realities. The investigation contributes to existing scholarship by offering context-sensitive evidence drawn from students' perspectives rather than relying solely on administrative metrics. In doing so, the study responds to calls within higher education research for more interpretive investigations capable of explaining how doctoral education operates in practice rather than solely in policy design.

The central focus of this research is the understanding that doctoral completion represents a lived and relational process shaped by interconnected academic environments. A phenomenological perspective allows exploration of how doctoral candidates interpret challenges related to bureaucracy, supervision, personal responsibilities, and publication requirements as part of their academic journey. Rather than treating completion delays as individual shortcomings, this study positions doctoral experiences within a broader ecological context in which institutional arrangements and personal realities continuously interact. Such an approach provides deeper insight into how meaning, motivation, and academic progress are constructed over time. By emphasizing experiential understanding, the study establishes a foundation for examining doctoral completion dynamics holistically and prepares the methodological discussion that follows.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study employed a qualitative research design to explore the dynamics influencing PhD completion through students' lived experiences within a real academic setting. A qualitative approach was selected because the research sought to understand meanings, perceptions, and personal interpretations rather than measure variables numerically (Boer & Lütkepohl, 2021; Gihar, 2022; Ho, 2024). The study adopted a phenomenological research type, which aims to capture shared experiences and subjective interpretations of individuals who have directly encountered a particular phenomenon (Christy, 2025; Kimberley, 2021; Operiano et al., 2024). This design was considered appropriate because doctoral completion involves complex emotional, institutional, and relational experiences that cannot be adequately explained through quantitative measurement alone. The research was conducted at the University of Dodoma (UDOM), Tanzania, a multidisciplinary institution operating under a single dominant PhD model focused on research and thesis without formal coursework (Lou, 2024). This context provided a relevant setting for examining doctoral completion dynamics, as students operate within standardized institutional structures shaped by national higher education policies.

Data were collected primarily through semi-structured interviews, enabling participants to express their experiences openly while allowing the researcher to explore emerging issues in depth (Alajmi & Worthington, 2021; Juraeva, 2025; Malin et al., 2021).

The researcher acted as the primary research instrument, facilitating dialogue and probing participants' reflections to understand factors influencing doctoral progression. Thirty-five PhD students from various academic disciplines were purposively selected to provide rich and relevant insights, following purposive sampling principles outlined by Ahmad & Wilkins (2025). Interviews were conducted at the University of Dodoma over a three-week period in June 2025 and continued until thematic saturation was achieved. Supporting data were obtained from institutional documents, including enrolment records and programme structures, to contextualize participants' narratives. Credibility of findings was strengthened through data triangulation between interview accounts and institutional documentation, as well as reflective verification during interviews (Morgan, 2024). Ethical procedures were strictly followed, including institutional ethical clearance, informed consent, voluntary participation, and the use of pseudonyms to protect participants' identities.

The study employed inductive, data-driven thematic analysis to interpret participants' experiences systematically. Interview recordings were transcribed and organized in a spreadsheet to facilitate pattern identification and preliminary categorization. Following Braun & Clarke (2022) principles and procedures for thematic analysis, the analysis involved repeated reading of transcripts, generating initial codes, grouping similar meanings into categories, and developing themes that emerged directly from participants' narratives rather than predetermined analytical frameworks. This inductive process ensured that interpretations remained grounded in empirical data and authentically reflected participants' perspectives. The analysis's credibility was enhanced through iterative comparisons across interviews, continuous refinement of thematic categories, and careful alignment of the raw data with emerging interpretations. By emphasizing transparency in coding and maintaining close engagement with participants' accounts, the analytical process enabled a nuanced understanding of doctoral completion dynamics while preserving the contextual richness characteristic of phenomenological inquiry.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

The study revealed that PhD completion at the University of Dodoma is shaped by four interrelated domains: institutional, personal, supervisory, and systemic dynamics. Participants consistently described doctoral progression as a complex and non-linear process that cannot be explained solely by individual effort. Instead, completion trajectories emerged from the interaction between institutional conditions, personal circumstances, supervisory relationships, and broader systemic requirements.

Figure 1 presents the distribution of challenges reported by participants across these domains. The figure illustrates how doctoral completion difficulties were experienced unevenly, with personal dynamics appearing most frequently in participants' narratives, followed by supervisory, institutional, and systemic factors. This pattern indicates that while structural conditions shape doctoral study, students most directly experience these pressures through their everyday academic and personal realities.

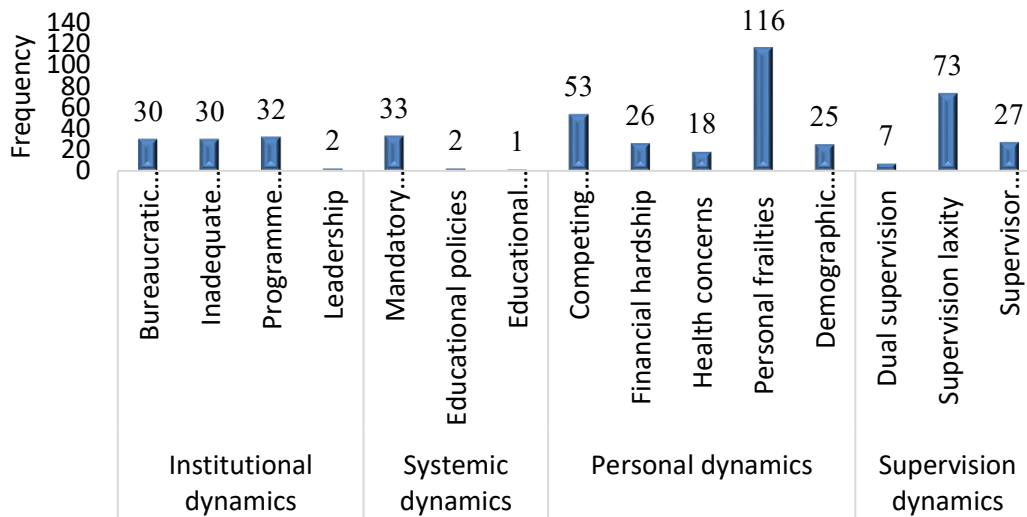


Figure 1. PhD Completion Dynamics. Source: Field, data (2025)

Institutional Dynamics

Institutional barriers were widely described as structural conditions influencing doctoral progress. Participants identified bureaucratic procedures, inadequate facilities, rigid programme structures, and limited institutional support as recurring challenges. Administrative delays, particularly related to approvals and feedback processes, were frequently reported as interrupting research continuity. One participant explained: “Completing a PhD is challenging and often stressful. Reviewers highlight many errors, and addressing comments can be time-consuming, requiring me to pause other work” (PhD candidate, June 2025).

In addition to administrative issues, limited academic resources were perceived as hindering research productivity. Participants emphasized that outdated learning materials and restricted access to facilities slowed their scholarly work: “Many books are outdated; it feels like the library prioritizes quantity over quality” (PhD candidate, June 2025). Students also expressed frustration with the rigidity of the “PhD by research and thesis” model, which was perceived as limiting flexibility and restricting alternative completion pathways such as PhD by publication.

Personal Dynamics

Personal challenges emerged as the most frequently reported domain influencing doctoral completion. Participants described a combination of psychological pressures, financial hardship, competing priorities, demographic pressures, and health-related concerns that affected their ability to sustain research momentum. Self-doubt and reduced self-efficacy were commonly mentioned. As one candidate reflected: “I mimic the path of others who completed to believe I can succeed” (PhD candidate, June 2025).

Financial instability further complicated doctoral progression, with many students relying on limited funding sources. Gender-related constraints were also highlighted, particularly regarding family expectations and social roles: “PhD is more difficult for women due to family responsibilities and male authority” (PhD candidate, June 2025). Balancing multiple responsibilities was another major challenge. Participants frequently described difficulties managing employment alongside doctoral study: “I have a full-time job and struggle to meet deadlines” (PhD candidate, June 2025). These experiences

demonstrate how personal circumstances directly shaped students' capacity to maintain consistent academic engagement.

Supervisory Dynamics

The supervisor–student relationship was described as a critical determinant of doctoral progress. Participants emphasized supervision laxity, heavy supervisory workload, and coordination challenges within co-supervision arrangements as key concerns. Delayed feedback emerged as a recurring issue affecting research momentum: “You might submit a paper and wait up to two months for feedback” (PhD candidate, June 2025). Participants noted that supervisors often managed multiple students alongside teaching and administrative responsibilities, which reduced opportunities for regular interaction and timely guidance. In some cases, co-supervision arrangements resulted in conflicting advice, creating uncertainty and extending revision periods.

Systemic Dynamics

Systemic factors, particularly mandatory publication requirements, added another layer of pressure to doctoral completion. National policy requirements demanding published and accepted manuscripts before graduation were perceived as academically valuable but practically demanding. One participant explained: “Meeting high publication standards while writing the thesis is overwhelming; the fear of rejection delays progress” (PhD candidate, June 2025). While intended to strengthen research quality and visibility, participants indicated that publication expectations could prolong completion when adequate institutional support mechanisms were unavailable.

The findings show that the interaction of institutional inefficiencies, personal demands, supervisory capacity, and systemic requirements shapes doctoral experiences. Participants' accounts indicate that completion develops through interconnected circumstances rather than through isolated difficulties. These conditions operated simultaneously, creating accumulated pressures that influenced students' academic progress and decision-making throughout the doctoral journey. In the context of higher education, including Islamic higher education institutions and pesantren-oriented academic environments, such experiences highlight the significance of sustained mentorship, institutional sensitivity, and collective responsibility in supporting scholarly persistence. The evidence suggests that improving completion outcomes requires responses that address institutional practices, supervisory engagement, and structural expectations in an integrated and contextually grounded manner.

Discussion

This study demonstrates that PhD completion at the University of Dodoma is shaped by the interaction of institutional, personal, supervisory, and systemic dynamics rather than individual academic capability alone. Participants' experiences revealed that doctoral progression is a multidimensional process influenced by administrative structures, personal life circumstances, supervisory relationships, and national policy expectations. Personal dynamics emerged as the most immediate challenges, particularly financial constraints, competing professional responsibilities, and psychological pressures affecting research continuity. Institutional barriers, including bureaucratic procedures and limited research facilities, further constrained students' ability to maintain consistent progress. Supervisory dynamics, especially delayed feedback and

heavy supervisory workloads, significantly influenced motivation and academic clarity.

Additionally, systemic requirements, such as mandatory publication policies, intensified pressure during the advanced stages of candidature. Viewed collectively, these findings suggest that doctoral completion is not a linear academic trajectory but an ecological process shaped by interconnected environments surrounding the student. The results highlight that delays frequently arise from cumulative pressures across multiple domains rather than from isolated individual shortcomings, reinforcing the importance of examining doctoral education through a holistic, system-oriented analytical perspective.

The findings contribute to existing scholarship on doctoral education by reinforcing and extending prior research that identifies doctoral completion as structurally embedded rather than individually determined. Consistent with Malah (2025), this study confirms that psychological well-being, motivation, and personal circumstances play a decisive role in doctoral persistence. Similarly, the institutional inefficiencies identified in this research align with those of Menuet (2022), who argue that administrative delays and inadequate research infrastructure significantly influence completion timelines. However, this study advances the literature by demonstrating how these structural challenges are experienced in students' everyday realities and by highlighting the mediating role of personal circumstances within institutional contexts. The findings also support Roy (2023) observation that supervisory workload constraints are widespread across African higher education systems, affecting feedback quality and interaction frequency. Furthermore, while Seeber and Ali (2021) note that publication requirements enhance research quality, this study reveals a tension between policy expectations and institutional capacity for support. By integrating these dimensions into Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, the study addresses a gap in the existing literature, which often examines doctoral challenges in isolation rather than as interacting ecological layers (Poole, 2025).

This study has important implications for educational management, particularly for the governance and administration of doctoral education within higher education institutions. The findings highlight that effective doctoral completion management requires integrated institutional coordination rather than reliance on individual student resilience. From a management perspective, university leaders need to strengthen administrative efficiency by simplifying approval procedures, improving monitoring systems, and establishing structured mechanisms for progress evaluation to reduce bureaucratic delays. In the context of educational management, supervisory practices should be supported through workload regulation, supervisor training, and clear supervision guidelines to ensure timely and constructive academic feedback. Furthermore, institutions should develop student support systems that integrate financial assistance, academic writing support, and psychosocial counselling to address the personal and professional challenges doctoral candidates face. Within Islamic educational management, these findings reinforce the importance of amanah (responsible leadership) and institutional care in managing academic development, emphasizing that educational leadership must balance academic standards with student well-being. By adopting holistic and student-centred management approaches, higher education institutions can create enabling environments that promote timely completion, strengthen research productivity, and enhance institutional academic quality.

CONCLUSION

Doctoral completion has increasingly become a critical concern for universities seeking to strengthen research capacity and academic sustainability. However, completion challenges are often interpreted as individual student shortcomings rather than outcomes shaped by broader academic environments. This study addressed that gap by examining PhD completion dynamics at the University of Dodoma through a student-centred perspective. The findings demonstrate that the interaction of institutional structures, personal circumstances, supervisory practices, and systemic policy requirements influences doctoral progression. Completion was experienced as a complex, nonlinear process in which bureaucratic procedures, limited research resources, competing professional and family responsibilities, supervisory workload constraints, and mandatory publication expectations collectively shaped students' trajectories. Rather than functioning independently, these factors operated simultaneously, producing cumulative pressures that affected motivation, research continuity, and completion timelines.

These findings highlight the importance of viewing doctoral education as an interconnected educational ecosystem requiring coordinated institutional and policy responses. Improving completion outcomes, therefore, depends on strengthening administrative efficiency, enhancing supervisory capacity, and providing integrated academic and student support systems that address both academic and personal dimensions of doctoral study. The study underscores that sustainable doctoral education is not solely measured by graduation numbers but by the creation of enabling environments that foster scholarly development and research productivity. For higher education leaders and policymakers, the results suggest the need for holistic management strategies aligned with realistic policy expectations and institutional capacity. Future research may extend this work through comparative and longitudinal studies to further understand how ecological dynamics influence doctoral experiences across diverse higher education contexts.

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