

RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN PSYCHOLOGICAL DISTRESS AND NON-COMPLETION AMONG POSTGRADUATE STUDENTS IN SELECTED PUBLIC UNIVERSITIES IN KENYA

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Abstract

Non-completion among university students is a common phenomenon in many parts of the world. Many causes of this problem have been advanced and among them are institutional and individual reasons like financial ability, gender and motivation to complete studies. Psychological distress though not investigated thoroughly has been cited as one of the problems leading to non-completion. The purpose of this study was to establish the relationship between psychological distress and non-completion among postgraduate students in selected public universities in Kenya. Weiner Attribution Theory (1985) informed the study. The study adopted a correlation research design and it was conducted in two selected public universities in Uasin Gishu and Nairobi counties targeting a population of 945 postgraduate students. A sample of (N=273) was obtained from the two selected public universities through systematic random sampling. The study used questionnaires, focus group discussions and document analysis in collecting data. Reliability of the questionnaire was established using Split half method from a pilot study conducted in Uasin Gishu County. Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 23 was used to analyse the data. Descriptive statistics was employed to analyze demographic data while Spearman rank order correlation was employed to test the relationship between psychological distress and non-completion. Findings indicated a weak negative correlation between psychological distress and non-completion, not statistically significant, $r_s(229) = -.063, p > .05$. The study recommended that students should plan for their study schedules and finances to ensure study period is not interrupted by roles that can be put on hold like parenting and inadequate finances. Further, the university administration should put in place/reinforce committees that handle non-completion among students. Development and implementation of postgraduate policy that would track postgraduate journey, as well as establishment of course advisory, guidance and counselling for these students were also recommended.

Keywords - *Non-completion, Postgraduate students, Psychological distress, Public universities.*

Introduction

Non-completion of studies is being encountered globally today at a very high rate. Researchers worldwide have provided contradicting reasons for prevalence of non-completion among students. For instance, In US, researchers have suggested a non-completion rate of 60% and revealed gaps in the higher education system that should serve to meet student's needs. More so, the needs to work and go to school at the same time (Gates Foundation, 2009). A study conducted in US reported a high prevalence of non-completion among students. It found out that up to 50% of their students did not complete their studies (Barefoot, 2014). In Italy, a researcher surveyed non-completion among students and if their background factors impacted on non-completion. The study reported that one third of students enrolled for degrees do not complete their studies. Most drop out before moving to the second year and the remaining abandon their courses later on. A non-completion rate of 65% was discovered (Ugolini, 2002). Background factors were also said to have a high impact of student's inactivity in school. In the UK, a study indicated that attrition rates of undergraduate students were at 15.5% and background factors like resource, staff-student relations and admission criteria had a significant role in student non-completion. They further looked at pastoral care, disability and gender as variables that would impact the students. (Cutler & Pulko, 2002).

In an Australian study surveying students who had joined first term 2004 using an intra-organizational comparative approach reported an attrition rate of 28.5%. The study recommended an integrated approach in curbing non-completion (Danahem, Bowgen, & Somasundanam, 2008). A study conducted in Australia by Mulder and Cashin (2015), reported 16.5% of psychological distress among students. In thirty days' university students with elevated distress reported being unable to work or study for 10 days and having to cut down on work for 12 days because of academic stressors. This study indicated the impact that distress can have in students (ibid). A study by in New Zealand by McKenzie (2005), study on non-completion suggested that their students also experienced non-completion and a range of between 20-30 % of the students enrolled in a developmental education program did not complete their study. This study agreed with Ugolini (2002), study that found out that factor like low social economic status had an impact on non-completion. A Canadian study at York University studied a cohort of 1993-1995 on non-completion and if their race impacted on degree success. Grayson (1998), suggested that 24% of the cohort studied did not complete their degree and that a lower difference of non-completion existed between students of Black, South Asian, Chinese and European Origin.

In Africa similar claims of non-completion have been reported by different researchers and they have too attributed non-completion to a number of factors such as finances, personal reasons, institution factors and examination repeats. For instance, In South Africa, Herman (2011) attributed a 50% of non-completion to personal reasons, student lack of ability and motivation to do a postgraduate program. A study by Mukami (2016) on attrition in private universities in Nairobi established a 37% non-completion rate. The study further reported that more male students knew the whereabouts of other male students who had not completed their studies unlike the female students (ibid). According to Rong'uno (2016), on students' related factors influencing completion rates of doctoral students, a 50% non-completion of cohort 2001-2008 enrolment was established.

Studies globally, regionally and locally show that non-completion is a major problem among students which affect their completion of studies. They also appreciate that student experience personal, academic and institutional challenges that may cause psychological distress. However, there is little literature relating non-completion to psychological distress among students. It is in this light that this research sought to explore the relationship between psychological distress and non-completion among postgraduate students in selected public universities in Kenya.

Objective of the Study

To assess the relationship between psychological distress and non-completion among postgraduate students in selected public universities in Kenya.

Hypothesis

H₀₁: There is no significant relationship between psychological distress and non-completion among postgraduate students in selected public universities in Kenya.

Literature Review

Demographic factors associated with non-completion

Demographic factors like gender, discipline, marital status and finances has been attributed to non-completion among postgraduate students. For instance, in USA, non-completion rate is more than 50% across disciplines and that more women drop out as compared to men. Again, students drop out of humanities and social sciences at a higher rate compared to those in pure sciences (Council of graduate schools 2008; Golde 2005; Nettles & Millet, 2006). A study done in Ontario, Canada by Rhea, Kevin and Eva (2013), on student attrition in midwifery education program used an online survey questionnaire among senior level students, year three and four in two universities. They found out that student who withdrew from school were those who felt academically not supported and students taking a leave for example maternity (ibid). The study is unique as it brings out the academic support as an aspect leading to non-completion.

Studies done in Canada on social demographic characteristics have shown significance to non-completion more so with the undergraduate population in particular male, married parent students are more likely to drop out from school in comparison with their counterparts. (Lambert, Zeman, Allen, & Bussiere, 2004; Shaienks & Gluszynski, 2007). Concurring findings are seen from both Canadian and American non-completion trends. First generation students and students from low social economic backgrounds have a higher likelihood of dropping out (Bowen, Chingos, & Mcphagon, 2009, Ishitani, 2006; Lambert et al., 2004).

In Africa, a South African study done among graduate program leaders who were of the opinion that attrition happened due to students' personal reasons, students' lack of ability, skills or motivation to do a graduate program, students' lack of financial support, poor supervision and an inflexible policy of the universities (Mouton, 2011). According to a research conducted by Felicia and Aina (2018), on "demographic factors as correlates of doctoral degree completion in Nigerian library schools". It indicated a relationship between demographic factors and time-to-completion. It takes an average of 5.7 years to complete a doctoral degree in Nigeria library schools irrespective of mode of study. This study tends to lean on the doctoral students missing out than the master's students (ibid). This research agrees with the global studies that there is a relationship between demographic factors and non-completion.

A Local study in Kenya by Mukami (2016), analyzed demographic data and examination retakes, semester deferrals and student drop outs. She reported that more male students knew about other male students who had dropped out as compared to the female students. Another Kenyan study by Kyalo and Chumba (2011), among Egerton University students found that in order to determine whether a student is able to complete a degree program, a student's interpersonal skills, the university environment and the social economic status of the family needs to be looked at. This study agrees with Mukami (2016) and Rong'uno (2016), that the university environment and social economic status of the student play a pivotal role in student completion of degrees enrolled for.

Prevalence of psychological distress

Psychological distress is widely defined as a state of emotional suffering with characteristic of depression and anxiety. It roughly ranges from 5% to 27% in the general population according to (Benzeval & Judge 2001, Gispert, Rajmil, Schiaffino & Herdman, 2003, Chittleborough, Winefield, Gill, Koster & Taylor, 2011). Wheaton (2007) describes psychological distress as an emotional disturbance that affects the social functioning and day to day living of individuals.

In Australia, through the use of an online survey, Mulder and Cashin (2015) assessed health and wellbeing characteristics of 609 participants, 16.5% of the students reported levels of very high psychological distress. Over the course of thirty days, university students with elevated distress levels reported being unable to work or study for ten days and having to cut down on work for twelve additional days because of academic stressors. About 96% of the distressed students reported low mental wellbeing. The items from Kessler Psychological Distress Scale (K10) that contributed most to distress were related to feeling tired, nervous, and “everything being an effort.” This regional Australian study further supports the negative impact of distress on students (Mulder & Cashin, 2015).

A study done in Belgium by Levecque, Anseel, Beuckelaer, Herden and Gisle (2017) on work organization and mental health problems in PhD students. They used the general health questionnaire to (GHQ-12) to measure psychological distress. They reported that 32% of doctoral students were at a risk of developing a common psychiatric disorder especially depression; one in two doctoral students experience psychological distress, one in three is at risk of a common psychiatric illness. Findings of this study indicate that postgraduate students are at risk of psychological distress. A study in Ireland by Deasy, Coughlan, Pironom, Jourdan and McNamara (2014) Investigation on Psychological Distress and coping amongst higher education students reported 41.9% of psychologically distressed students among undergraduate students. They used mixed method to determine self-reported psychological distress using (GHQ-4) of a total sample (n=1557) of undergraduate nursing and teacher education students. Individual interviews (n=59) provided an in-depth understanding of students' experiences of psychological distress and coping. The high prevalence of PD findings correlated with those recorded in Belgium. The GHQ-4 was also a similar tool used to assess prevalence of PD in the Belgium and Ireland.

In Kenya, a closely related study done by Othieno, Okoth, Supa and Mala (2014) revealed cases of depression among university students: Prevalence and social demographic correlates. They sampled 923 University of Nairobi students and administered Center for Epidemiological Studies Short Depression Scale (CES-D10). The reported findings were that up to 35.7% of the students had moderate depression and 5.6 % with severe depression implying that students were at a risk of distress.

Relationship between psychological distress and non-completion

In USA, Briere (et al., 2017), researched on depressive and anxious symptoms and the risk of secondary school non-completion among 4962 adolescents. By using logistic regression to determine associations between depression, anxiety and school non-completion they found out that depressive symptoms did not predict school non-completion but anxiety did. This study confirms that anxious symptoms could contribute to non-completion.

A UK study done by Tamin (2013), determined whether a history of recent or current mental health problems affected the likelihood of university students dropping out of their studies and if so, additional supportive measures are needed. Occupation health records were analyzed of students enrolled in 2005 with an aim of identifying if they had a mental health issue. Additionally, students who had dropped out of their courses by 2011 were identified. A representation of students with mental health issues was also part of those who had dropped out. A total of 1319 student records were analyzed. The findings of this study indicated that out of the total number of dropouts, 90% had no history of mental health problems, 6% had a

history of mental health problems and 4% had a recent mental health problem. A greater number of students with no mental health problem dropped out from their studies.

An Australian study on Student psychological distress and degree non-completion was conducted using a longitudinal design (Cvetkovski, Jorm & Mackinnon, 2018). A sample of 1265 university students was assessed. PD was measured with mental health inventory MHI-5. Contrary to expectations, the study found that students with PD had lower odds of degree drop out and higher chances of completion than students without PD. This study confirms Tamin (2013), findings that PD has a low correlation to non-completion.

Methodology

The study adopted a correlation research design and it was conducted in two selected public universities in Uasin Gishu and Nairobi counties targeting a population of 945 postgraduate students. A sample of (N=273) was obtained from the two selected public universities through systematic random sampling. The two selected public universities attract high postgraduate students' enrollment, and are among the oldest in Kenya thus well established. The study used questionnaires, focus group discussions and document analysis in collecting data. Reliability of the questionnaire was established using Split half method where the test items were divided into two and each scored independently. The reliability coefficient of 0.8 was established and considered appropriate. Statistical package for the social sciences (SPSS) version 23 was used to analyse the data. Spearman rank order correlation was employed to test the relationship between psychological distress and non-completion.

Results and Discussion

Relationship between psychological distress and non-completion among postgraduate students

The objective sought to establish the relationship between psychological distress and non-completion among postgraduate students. To achieve this objective, the following null hypothesis was formulated:

H01: There is no significant relationship between psychological distress and non-completion among postgraduate students in selected public universities in Kenya.

To answer the hypothesis, Spearman rank order correlation was conducted since the data was measured on the ordinal scale. The findings are presented in Table 1:

Table 1

Relationship between Psychological distress and Non-Completion among Postgraduate Students

	Non-completion
Spearman's rho Psychological distress	Correlation -.063
	Coefficient
	Sig. (2-tailed) .344
	N 229

As indicated on Table 1, Spearman's rank-order correlation was run to assess the relationship between psychological distress and non-completion among postgraduate students. The findings of the study revealed that there was a weak negative correlation between psychological distress and non-completion, a relationship that was not statistically significant $r_s(229) = -.063, p > .05$. The significance level was assessed at the 0.05 level. Based on these findings, the null hypothesis was thus accepted. From the above findings, although there was a significant level of psychological distress and the corresponding level of school non-completion, a significant association could not be established and therefore the study concludes that non-completion cannot be significantly associated to psychological distress but may be associated to other factors not within the scope of the study. This finding agrees with a past study by (Briere et al., 2017), who found no significant relationship between depressive symptoms and non-completion among postgraduate students. However, this study's finding disagrees with a couple of past scholars who found a significant relationship between psychological stress and non-completion among postgraduate students Tamin (2013) and Cvetkovski et al., (2018). The fact that psychological distress did not lead or cause non-completion might be explained by assuming that students dealt well with their psychological distress and did not let it interfere with their studies. The results might be a result of other factors influencing non-completion. For instance, the study has also established that a lack of finances and research skills contributed to non-completion among postgraduate students.

Conclusion

The study indicated no significant relationship between psychological distress and non-completion among the postgraduate students in the two selected universities in Kenya. Though the study found out that non-completion and psychological distress were prevalent among postgraduate students, the study did not find the relationship between the two. The results might be because students, who underwent psychological distress, did not let those issues get in the way of their studies. Secondly, it could be because other factors greatly influenced non-completion a part from psychological distress.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, it is recommended that universities should provide various approaches for postgraduate students so that they may choose those that favor their schedules. The university administration should also have committees that handle non-completion issues and advise students with dropping out or deferment problems accordingly. The universities

should as well develop and implement postgraduate policies that track postgraduate journey of respective students.

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