

Redefining Postgraduate Research Supervisor Allocation as a Way of Improving Students' Commitment towards the Research Project

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Abstract: *Research supervision is a crucial part of postgraduate research and training; however, the processes of supervisor allocation have received less attention in academic research. This paper interrogated the procedures followed in allocation of supervisors with the purpose of assessing students' participation since students are major actors in the research supervision process. Six institutions were purposively selected from founding countries of East African community. Furthermore, documents including postgraduate handbook, supervision policy guidelines, supervision selection, allocation and appointment regulations were selected and accessed from institutional websites. Documents were reviewed and analyzed thematically. Findings revealed none or less involvement of students, students' perspectives and students' preferences in the allocation of supervisors. Documents further portrayed none or less pre-allocation engagements or consultations with prospective supervisors before appointment. In this case, literature confirmed challenges that emerge from less participation of key actors in supervisor allocation. The paper recommends for incorporation of students' participation, perspectives and preferences before the allocation of supervisors to them.*

Keywords: Postgraduate Research, Students' Commitment, Supervisor Allocation

Introduction

Postgraduate education offers an opportunity for intensively engaging in research since research is a core component at this level of education. Mainly, research is a key requirement at Doctoral and masters' levels. Higher level of independence is also expected to be demonstrated among postgraduate students and graduates. Global education systems acknowledges postgraduate education as the key higher education investment where skills and professionalism can be attained by citizens at a higher level to address social, economic and healthy related challenges that emerge in local, national and international contexts (Chugh et al., 2022; Luis et al., 2022; Schlögl et al., 2022; Reich et al., 2022; Atibuni, 2021). Research supervision plays a crucial role in realising set programmes' targets (Ngulube & Ukwoma, 2019; Grossman & Crowther, 2015; McMorland et al., 2003). In this paper, we analyse the stages, situations and processes under which supervisors are allocated to students in East African context.

Supervisor allocation is the first step in research process after the completion of classwork for both course work and research postgraduate programmes. Similarly, some universities require students to get supervisors first before they can express their interests in joining them. In other cases, the availability of the supervisor determines the decision of the candidate being admitted especially in a doctoral programme. However, the processes of allocating supervisors tend to be overlooked especially in situations a programme is offered by both research and course work. According to Ives and Rowley (2005), in most cases predetermined rules and regulations of supervisor allocation puts less consideration to students and supervisors participation. Whereas in parts of the world where research supervision has taken tremendous steps, students participation in supervisor selection has received much attention (Ives & Rowley, 2005; Pyhältö et al., 2015). Hence, we highlight issues pertaining supervisor allocations by interrogating documented processes of selected universities in East African region as well as the available related literature.

Review of Related Literature

Lindgreen et al (2002, P⁵) discusses circumstances that resulted to three students dropping out of a PhD. In a first case the one student thought that the supervisor allocated was knowledgeable in the preferred area of interest, another one could not link up with the allocated supervisor then the last one was not satisfied with

the management of the supervision process, these students perhaps were not involved in the supervisor allocation process (Lindgreen et al., 2002). Similarly it was revealed that students whose voices are heard in supervisors allocation appreciate the choices given and feel more committed and satisfied (Ives & Rowley, 2005).

According to Marder et al. (2021), students led supervisor selection and allocation gives students an opportunity to critically synthesis supervisors before a decision could be taken. Students could take time to critic the competences, warmth, research alignment as well as institutional attributes before they can choose them as supervisors. This could mean that the student has a chance to select a supervisor with preferences. Similarly, the allocation of supervisors that considers both students and supervisors preferences in regard to the research project is considered to be helpful (Sanchez-Anguix et al., 2019; Salami & Mamman, 2016). In fact, Salami and Mamman (2016), reveals that allocation of supervisors without factoring in students preferences may lead to assigning supervisors to students with parallel research interests including those they do not enjoy working with together. Yet, support offered to students during the supervision is vital in facilitating the flourishing of the research project (Manyike, 2017; Marder et al., 2021; Sampson et al., 2016; van Biljon & de Villiers, 2016)

It becomes ironical if students are not in fit supervisory experience with their supervisors which may stretch from allocation stages. Findings from Pyhältö et al. (2015), the fit between supervisors and students expectations, perceptions ground the supervisory relationships and experience to students satisfaction. In this sense a problem comes in when one set(Student) is matched to another set (Supervisor) when both have no preference or one has preference and the other does not (Sanchez-Anguix et al., 2015 chapter in a Book - Omatu et al., 2015). Sanchez-Anguix et al (2015) argues that it is imperative that two main actors in research supervision(a student and a supervisor) are solely part of the allocation processes. The same authors point on another important aspect which is usually ignored i.e. the supervisors load within the department. Sanchez-Anguix et al (2015) notes that supervision problems are inevitable when the allocated supervisor has a heavy workload.

Interestingly, even in situations where there is an opportunity for students to select supervisors themselves, (Datta et al., 2009) reveals that problems emerge due to lack a predefined criteria students can follow. The irritating scenario is when demotivation and depression of students emerges from supervisor allocation and selection itself. To solve such problems , Datta et al (2009) revealed acceptability and quality aspects should be evaluated by the main actors who are the student and the supervisor before a decision is taken. This finding is supported in studies that followed like (Marder et al., 2021; Sanchez-Anguix et al., 2019; Lear, 2018; Manyike, 2017). Unfortunately, the participation of actors in supervisor allocation is not well defined by most institutions especially in East African region. This paper reviews guidelines of supervisor allocation in selected universities of East Africa to bridge this gap.

Methodology

This paper applied qualitative research, a documentary review method and thematic analysis technique (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Precisely, documentary review research method refers to reviews and analysis of documents containing the information being sought on a particular phenomenon(Ahmed, 201; Bowen, 2017). This method was applicable given the availability of postgraduate handbooks, postgraduate rules and regulations and other documents both in print and online (on institutional websites) that could denote supervisor allocation process in selected universities within the region. Thematic analysis was applied in identifying, analysing and interpreting partners emerging from the documents gathered(Braun & Clarke, 2006; Ahmed, 2017).

Purposive sampling was used to select documents and institutions of higher learning from the founding countries of East African Community. Two universities were selected from each country basing on universities ranking in a particular country, that is, the best two universities according to country's universities ranking. Similarly, postgraduate handbooks, research policy papers or research supervision guidelines were selected virtually from each selected university as summarised in the table below.

SN	Country	Universities selected	Documents accessed
1	Kenya	University of Nairobi	Research Policy
		Moi University	Postgraduate rules and regulations
2	Uganda	Makerere University	Postgraduate Handbook and PhD supervision guidelines
		Mbarara University	Postgraduate Hand book
3	Tanzania	University of Dar-es-salam	Postgraduate regulations
		University of Dodoma	Graduate Studies Regulations and Guidelines

Source: Researcher Construct, 2022

Findings and Discussion

After the collection and selection of documents from all selected universities, thorough reading, coding and thematic analysis was done to ascertain the processes of supervisor allocation by the selected universities as discussed below.

Research Requirement for Admission of Postgraduate Students

Selected universities have slightly different procedures in regard to admission of postgraduate students especially doctoral students.

University	Master	PhD	Source
University of Nairobi	No research requirement	Proposal for Programmes offered by research No research requirements for programmes offered by coursework and research.	University of Nairobi Postgraduate information booklet 2015
Moi University	No research requirement	No research requirement for admission	Moi University Graduate rules and regulations 2019
Makerere	No research requirement	Proposal required for full admission.	Makerere University Postgraduate Handbook 2013
Mbarara University	No research requirement	Concept paper	Mbarara University Postgraduate handbook 2017
University of Dar-es-salam	No research requirement	No research requirement for admission	University of Dar-es-salam postgraduate handbook 2018
University of Dodoma	No research requirement for admission	No research requirement for admission	University of Dodoma Graduate rules and Regulations, 2017

Source: Researcher Construct, 2022

Few universities require PhD students to have a research proposal or synopsis before they can be admitted. This serves to test their competences in research depending on a particular programme applied for. The rest of the universities require students to get engaged in research after being admitted or registered for respective programmes. Importantly, all universities selected for this paper recognises the need for engagement in research although at different levels. This consequently hints on the supervision processes. Although noted criteria seem to have been working for quite long period of time, one wonders on how perspectives of students are catered for in the admission process. According to Chari and Potvin (2019; Hagedorn & Nora, 1996) taking students' perspectives into account in the admissions process is paramount. This could lead to setting a basis in the assignment of supervisors in situations where students are not involved at all.

Research Supervision

In all selected universities, research supervision is integral part of postgraduate training. A clear distinction is drawn on the supervision of master programmes as well as doctoral programmes. Furthermore, all universities describe the supervisor as a mentor and a guide of the student in research processes, university structural processes and introduce the student into a broader academic community. It is important to note that

all institutions have a structured and clear research supervision processes although the participation of supervisees comes in at later stages.

On a negative side, research supervision has faced several challenges, for instance Makerere University reports cases where the supervision load can go to between 10 PhD and 20 masters' students at a specific time yet the university guidelines require each supervisor to have 3PhD and 5masters students at a time. This related to less attention given to some students (Makerere University Directorate of Research and Graduate Training, 2016). Similarly, assignment of supervisors without competence in the proposed area was taken with caution. This draws us to the main question of this paper on how supervisors are allocated to postgraduate students.

Supervisor Allocation

The sampled universities had slightly different procedures in the allocation of supervisors to students. In all selected universities, supervisor factors like area of expertise, competence in proposed area, availability, membership to the university as well as workload were noted to be important in identification and allocation of supervisors. The table breaks down supervisor allocation main procedure for selected universities

S/N	University	Supervisor allocation procedure
1	University of Nairobi	➤ The department identifies the supervisor and makes recommendations to School/ College board for appointment.
2.	Moi University	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Supervisor is suggested by the department ➤ School Graduate studies committee certify the recommended supervisor ➤ Board School of graduate studies reviews suggested supervisors and recommends for senate approval ➤ Senate approves and then appointment is done.
3	Makerere University	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Respective college /school board identifies supervisor ➤ The recommendation is made to the Directorate of Research and Graduate Training (DRGT) for appointment
4	Mbarara University	➤ Department committee with the input of a student identifies and nominates the supervisor for appointment by DRGT
5	University of Dar-es-salam	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Heads of respective departments recommends supervisors to the departmental committee ➤ The programme offering College/School/Institute Committee/Board approves approve supervisors and send appointment reports to the SPSC
6.	University of Dodoma	➤ The supervisor is identified and assigned by the department or school

Source: Researcher Construct, 2022

This paper brings to light how students are left out in the process of supervisor selection and allocation. In table 3 above, it is revealed that only one university formally recognises the input of the student in supervisor selection and allocation process. Other universities seem to follow suggestions from line departments as well as schools. Literature reveals that supervisors' roles go beyond just focusing research project. Other support services like mentorship and partnership are expected to be experienced during the process (Manyike, 2017; Marder et al., 2021; Pyhältö et al., 2015; van Biljon & de Villiers, 2016).

Ignoring students at preliminary stage of allocation processes hinders the acceptability and quality aspects, students critical synthesis of supervisors before a decision taken and their voices are not heard despite the commendable contribution these aspects provide to increasing students commitment (Marder et al. 2021; Ives & Rowley, 2005; Datta et al 2009). Furthermore, most of selected universities contradicts with (Ives & Rowley, 2005) who reveals that students participation of students in selection of supervisors increases their satisfaction. Giving students an opportunity to participate in supervisor allocation particularly choosing supervisors for themselves pose a likelihood of establishing constructive basis for supervisor selection which in turn leads to good working relationships and progress (Manyike, 2017; Ives & Rowley, 2005) . However, it is also possible for students to base on personal reasons to select supervisors, which definitely becomes a threat to the academic journey. Cases of choosing supervisors on a personal basis were noted in (Ives & Rowley, 2005) with the end result of struggles in research progress.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Student voices and preferences are less reflected in allocation of supervisors' procedure in the selected universities of East Africa. Based on the value of student's involvement portrayed in literature and high cases of students' low completion registered in the region alluded by Eyangu et al. (2014), this paper recommends a supervisor allocation process that provides for both the supervisor and the student voice especially in the early stages of the research journey.

The supervisor selection and allocation processes ignored pre-allocation engagements with prospective supervisors. It is ironical that reviewed processes encourage supervisors to decline appointment when they feel not competent to supervise certain project. This could be handled at the preliminary stages prior to appointment to avoid wastage of time and delays in students' support. This recommendation is drawn due to the fact that in most universities, supervisor appointment goes through multiple processes of which some require meetings of respective boards, schools or even senate. Such processes take reasonable time, which in turn delay the research process.

Supervision load is also less considered in many schools/faculties across all selected universities. Whereas all selected universities' guidelines recommended supervision of 3 Ph.D. and 5 Master degree students, literature reviewed some supervisors having been allocated 10 PhD to 20 Masters at a one given time. This has been associated with poor attention given to students. The paper recommends clear implementation of supervision load guidelines and utilisation of alternatives like sourcing for supervisors outside the institution.

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