THE PHD JOURNEY AT ADDIS ABABA UNIVERSITY: STUDY DELAYS, CAUSES, AND COPING MECHANISMS

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ABSTRACT

Aim/Purpose	This study was conducted to examine the rate of delay, explanatory causes, and coping strategies of PhD candidates at Addis Ababa University, Ethiopia's premier university, over the last ten years.
Background	Delayed graduation is a common theme in doctoral education around the world. It continues to draw the concern of governments, universities, and the candidates themselves, calling for different forms of intervention. Addressing these challenges is key to resolving the many obstacles into doctoral education.
Methodology	Ten-year archival data consisting of 1,711 PhD students and in-depth interviews with ten PhD candidates were used as data-generation tools. The data collection focused on progression patterns, reasons for study delays, and the coping mechanisms used by doctoral students when they face challenges. While the candidates were interviewed to narrate their lived experience pertinent to the objectives of the study, the archival data regarding the PhD students were collected from the Registrar Office of the University under study.
Contribution	Amid an ongoing global debate about best practices in doctoral education, the research on study delays contributes not only to filling the existing empirical gap in the area but also in identifying factors, for example, related to financial matters, family commitment, and student-supervisor rapport, that help address the challenges faced and improving the provision of doctoral education.
Findings	The findings of this study revealed that the cumulative average completion time for a PhD study was 6.19 years— over two years more than the four years given as the optimum duration for completing a PhD program. The institutional pattern of delays over the last ten years indicates that doctoral students are requiring more and more years to complete their PhDs. The study further revealed

	that completing a PhD in time is a process that can be influenced by many interacting factors, which include student commitment and preparation, favourable academic and research environment, and positive student-supervisor rapport.
Recommendations for Practitioners	It is important for practitioners and higher education institutions to find ways to improve the on-time completion of doctoral programmes in order to minimise the continued financial, emotional, and opportunity costs the higher education sector is currently incurring.
Recommendations for Researchers	The fact that this study was limited to a single institution by itself warrants more studies about time-to-degree in PhD programs and causes for study delays as well as studies about successful interventions in doctoral education. Future research should particularly explore the nature of the advisor/advisee relationship and other critical factors that appear to have a significant role in addressing the challenges of study delay.
Impact on Society	The expansion of PhD programmes is an encouraging development in Ethiopia. The findings of this study may help improve completion rates of doctoral students and reduce program duration, which would have significant implication to minimise the ensuing financial, emotional, and opportunity costs involved at individual, national, and institutional levels.
Future Research	Given the growing number of universities in Ethiopia and their possible diversity, PhD students' profiles, backgrounds, and expectations, more research is needed to examine how this diversity may impact doctoral students' progression and persistence.
Keywords	PhD studies, doctoral education, PhD study delay, delayed graduation, Addis Ababa university

INTRODUCTION

Doctoral studies not only represent a cost-effective means for universities to enhance their research output, but they are also an investment in the research capacity of a country's future. In many parts of the world the major reasons for initiating doctoral programs pertain to augmenting the number of qualified researchers that contribute to the economic development of a country and its active participation in the global knowledge society. However, along with high attrition rate and dropouts, study delays in doctoral education appear to be the most common challenges that derail such ambitions.

Delayed graduation is a common theme in doctoral education around the world (Akparep et al., 2017; Geven et al., 2018). It continues to draw the concern of governments, universities, and the candidates themselves, calling for different forms of intervention (Bourke et al., 2004; Lindsay, 2015). Completion of PhD programmes in the required timeframe is dependent on many interacting factors, which include institutional or environmental factors, supervision-related factors, and factors related to individual PhD student characteristics (Wright & Cochrane, 2000). Addressing these challenges is key to resolving the many obstacles into doctoral education. However, despite its increasing importance and the various investigations about the different dimensions of doctoral education, research on study delays appears to have received little attention and policy directions (Lindsay, 2015; Miller, 2013). One major explanation for this prevalent gap over the last few decades has been the lack of systematic, routine data collection processes established within graduate schools, programs, and records offices (Bair & Haworth, 2004).

In the developing world, past achievements as regards running PhD programs have been dismally low. Arguably, the best performer in the African continent, South Africa, is said to have graduated only 30,000 PhDs in 112 years, that is from 1898 to 2010 (Herman, 2015). The situation in Ethiopia

has been far worse. During the entire 20th century, Ethiopia has managed to train and graduate only 4,000 PhD students both within and outside the country (Yigezu, 2013). Fortunately, and similar to the developed world, the importance of doctoral studies is receiving significant attention across the continent over the last few decades as exhibited in the increase of universities offering doctoral programs, enrolled doctoral candidates, and new programs initiated. However, the sector still continues to be burdened with a high level of attrition, dropouts, and study delays that have become a threat to doctoral training at continental level (Barasa & Omulando, 2018).

In the Ethiopian context, national policy directions and sectoral needs have driven the growth of PhD programs especially over the last decade (Molla & Cuthbert, 2016; Tamrat & Fetene, 2021). Concurrent with global and regional trends, the policy directions set by the government also reflect the demand for more doctoral education as a consequence of which the number of universities running PhD programs is increasingly on the rise. However, one major challenge in this area has been the information gap as regards the success rate of PhD candidates. Notwithstanding the lack of empirical evidence on the persistence and attrition rate of doctoral students, information does not exist about the level of study delays experienced in the doctoral programs of Ethiopian universities which justifies the need for this particular study.

LITERATURE REVIEW

PhD training enjoys special currency in academia and higher education policy circles due to its potential to respond to the broader demands of economic development, driving scientific output, innovation, technology transfer, and the creation of knowledge society which is critical to such developments (British Council, 2018; Cloete et al., 2015). Arguably, the value of doctoral studies is more pronounced in developing countries that are increasingly recognizing its particular benefits in terms of addressing their critical challenges and future ambitions. The drive toward increasing the production of more PhD holders in the context of developing countries is often dictated by factors related to the need to improve their higher education systems, develop knowledge that will address local problems, and produce skilled graduates that serve in university teaching and leadership positions (British Council, 2018; Cross & Backhouse, 2014; Molla & Cuthbert, 2016). This has enticed many governments to embark on various initiatives that help them to build their PhD capacity.

Despite the increasing efforts in this direction, PhD training in the developing world is beset by a multitude of challenges that include inadequate policy environments, quality and equity concerns, socio-economic relevance, structural and funding deficiencies, and inadequate provision (British Council, 2018; Cloete et al., 2015; Cross & Backhouse, 2014; Molla & Cuthbert, 2016). At the level of individual candidates, the progression, retention, and completion rate of doctoral education is also affected by factors that relate to integration and socialization patterns, nature of the research project, the level of distress experienced, availability of supervisory and peer support, and other related factors (Cross & Backhouse, 2014; Byers et al., 2014; El-Ghoroury et al., 2012; Pyhältö et al., 2012). This study is informed by a need to examine the variety of challenges that account for study delays and the coping strategies doctoral candidates use.

Research into reasons that account for study delays of PhD degrees remains sparse. Most African universities do not even record such statistics (Cross & Backhouse, 2014). The limited empirical evidence on study delays suggests that, despite maintaining a national PhD duration of three or four years in many countries, the majority of PhD candidates take much longer to complete their doctoral programs (Akparep et al., 2017; van de Schoot et al., 2013). The median time to a PhD degree can vary from country to country but studies in general show that, on average, most students who receive their PhDs achieve them between year 5 and 7 (King, 2008). In American graduate schools PhD completion can take 7.5 years after enrolment—a figure that has shown little change over the last three decades (Geven et al., 2018). In the Netherlands, despite the commonly prescribed time of four years, only 10% manage to finish their PhD within that time, the average completion time for most graduates being five years (van de Schoot et al., 2013). Van de Schoot et al. sum the trend well when

they observe, "While many countries maintain a notional PhD duration of three or four years …, in reality, PhD candidates often take much longer to complete their doctoral studies" (2013, p. 1).

Despite the limited empirical information available, PhD study delays show similar patterns across the developing world. Waruru (2019), for instance, suggests that it takes up to six years to complete a PhD programme in many African universities, with most of the candidates being involved in active teaching as opposed to engaging in full-time research—a situation which makes it more difficult to complete the studies on time. When it comes to specific countries, Kenya has set a national benchmark for doctoral graduation to ensure that 20% of the students graduate within the stipulated time of three years. However, the national average from the higher education institutions is currently at 11%, and the average time to completion is six years but can extend up to eight years (Barasa & Omulando, 2018; Mbogo et al, 2020). In the Easternand Southern Africa region, examination of PhD theses alone can take between six months and two years severely affecting graduation rates (Yigezu, 2013).

There are a multitude of factors that account for PhD study delays. Almoustapha & Uddin (2017) note that the role of the adviser, student features, funding, family engagement, research, and psychological obstacles provide a holistic picture of factors that influence the PhD degree progress. Miller (2013) emphasises the importance of academic assistance that includes research conferences, writing workshops and library/computer seminars, financial problems, and pressures as key to the completion of PhD studies on time. The investigation by Pyhältö et al (2012) indicated that problems were mainly related to general working processes, domain-specific expertise, supervision and the scholarly community, and resources. Byers et al. (2014) similarly found that the majority of doctoral students were challenged with multiple roles that were simultaneously imposed on each student (i.e., family obligations, social relationship, and work responsibilities). Add to that rigorous program standards that required high levels of academic skills affecting their progression and completion rates. El-Ghoroury et al.'s (2012) study further revealed that students' challenges were mostly related to academic responsibilities and pressures, finances or debt, anxiety, and poor work/school life balance.

Van de Schoot et al. (2013) acknowledge the challenges of disentangling factors that explain variation in time-to-degree but contend that most of the factors that contribute to study delays can be generalized into three major categories: (1) institutional or environmental factors, including field of study, departmental research climate, and resources and facilities available to the project; (2) the nature and quality of supervision, entailing both the frequency of meetings as well as the support of research colleagues; (3) and characteristics of the PhD candidate including gender, ethnicity, age, having children, marital status, satisfaction with the project, academic achievement, and expectations about the project. Research conducted in the context of Africa suggests similar observations. Mbogo et al. (2020) found that the challenges of most PhD students are related to supervisors' lack of adequate knowledge, poor interpersonal relationship with students, heavy supervisor workload and additional responsibilities, shortage of qualified supervisors, non-enforcement of supervisory regulations, and resource constraints. Barasa and Omulando (2018) similarly contend that the problems of completion are related to several factors including inadequate institutional support, lack of research facilities and equipment, students' personal life and work circumstances, funding constraints, shortage, and heavy workload of qualified supervisors.

The consequences of study delay often extend far beyond the doctoral candidate and have implications for institutions, faculty, and society at large (Akparep et al., 2017; van de Schoot et al., 2013). Research evidence suggests that, from the students' point of view, study delays can be a waste of time, damaging to self-esteem, and a hindrance to improved opportunities for employment opportunities. For departments and universities, long time to degree would mean inefficient use of spaces and facilities and loss of opportunities. Elongated doctoral journeys can also incur cost to advisors in terms of emotional investment, time, and effort. For society, doctoral program noncompletion results in lower productivity and competitiveness. A related possible impact of PhD study delay is its

implication for attrition. Studies indicate that the longer a student stays in graduate school, the greater the likelihood of that student will not graduate (Miller, 2013).

Despite the many challenges doctoral students face, their perseverance to continue their studies is often explained by a variety of coping mechanisms they develop. According to Pyhältö et al. (2012) the major coping strategies used by doctoral candidates relate to friends' and family's support, talking to a classmate, regular exercise, and hobbies. El-Ghoroury et al. (2012) also listed social support from friends, family, and classmates as a most frequent strategy used by graduate students to manage their challenges. Factors like emotional support from family members have also been identified as critical factors needed to persist and succeed (Maher et al., 2004). Aside from strategies used by doctoral candidates, a study by Viđak et al (2017) indicated that institutional interventions such as the implementation of progress reports, stricter regulations, selection criteria based on producing a feasible research plan, interdisciplinarity, education in complementary skills, and focus on developing a research plan can be associated with higher graduation rates and significantly reduced time to degree in a PhD program.

Against the above background, this study seeks to bridge the existing research gap in Ethiopia through a close examination of PhD students' delay at Addis Ababa University (AAU), Ethiopia's premier university. Archival data and in-depth interviews were used to identify factors that account for time-to-degree, the causes for delay and the coping strategies used by doctoral candidates to shorten their study period.

STUDY CONTEXT

This study was conducted at Addis Ababa University, Ethiopia's flagship university and major PhD provider in the country. Established in 1950 as the University College of Addis Ababa, Addis Ababa University, is the oldest institution in Ethiopia. Since its inception, the University has served as the leading centre in teaching-learning, research, and community services.

Until recently, the launching of government sponsored masters and PhD programs in Ethiopia were for the most part AAU driven (Gebremariam, 2010). In fact, the history of post graduate education in Ethiopia begins in October 1978 – the year when AAU's first School of Graduate Studies was launched with the introduction of six master's programs in Linguistics, Literature, Teaching English as a Foreign Language, Biology, Chemistry, and Geology. The School evolved as a response to the demands of providing sufficient qualified personnel to meet the needs of higher education; providing higher level manpower for the rest of the economy; and building up local expertise in the various fields of Science and Technology and Agriculture, Medicine and Social sciences. In 1979, the then Alemaya College (now Haramaya University), which was under Addis Ababa University, initiated graduate programs in Agronomy, Animal science, Plant Science, Agricultural Economics, and Horticulture (AAU Until 1984). Graduate education in Ethiopia continued to be exclusively offered by Addis Ababa University – the only full-fledged university the country had until Haramaya grew into a full-fledged university in 1987 and began running its postgraduate programs independently. Although different faculties/colleges were entrusted with the task of running such programs with a gradual increase in the number of programs, overall enrolment did not show any significant growth in the first decade after the establishment of the Schools of Graduate studies both at AAU and Alemaya University of Agriculture (AUA). Both AAU and AUA remained the only two universities running postgraduate programs until the beginning of 2000 after which many other public universities were established began running postgraduate programs.

New policy directions, such as the successive educational sector development programs and especially of the Higher Education Building Program that served as its major component and initiatives like the White Paper on Conversion Plan (2008), have served as the key pointers in paving the way for more public universities to open new PhD programs and further boost the growth of PhD programs. The increasing demand from the newly established public universities for trained staff with

higher degrees (master's and PhDs) and the growing need for a highly trained labour force are the major factors driving the growth of PhD training in Ethiopian universities. The growth of PhD enrolment over the last ten years could especially be attributed to this new development and policy direction (Tamrat & Fetene, 2021).

The government has been using various strategies to achieve the targets set for PhD production. These include strengthening local PhD training through expansion of in-house capacity, developing partnerships with other universities with foreign partners, and encouraging joint PhD programmes and scholarships with foreign universities and through funding schemes supported by international agencies such as the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) (Nega & Kassaye, 2018). Despite the overall growth of postgraduate enrolment in Ethiopia, the PhD share still remains limited. In 2017/18 only 3,994 (5.2%) of the total number of students enrolled in post graduate programs attended doctoral programme.

Limited studies have been made to examine the nature of PhD programs offered in Ethiopia and the reasons that impede its growth. While a few focus on tracing the development of graduate studies in Ethiopia and its nature (Gebremariam, 2010; Yigezu, 2013), others identify challenges of PhD provision (Nega & Kassaye, 2018; Tamrat & Fetene, 2021; Tefera & Dessie, 2014). The major findings from these studies suggest that the issue of funding, research infrastructure and facilities, poor facilities and resources, shortage of laboratory and learning materials, shortage of ICT materials and support services, insufficient space in the libraries, lack of office or working space for PhD students, poor supervision, and lack of special provisions for learners with disabilities are major challenges of postgraduate programs across all universities in Ethiopia. This study aims to add to this growing body of literature by examining the particular issue of PhD study delay at one of Ethiopia's public universities.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The overall objective of this study was to explore the completion rate of PhD programs and examine the factors that affect degree completion time at Addis Ababa University. The research was guided by the following research questions:

a) How long does the PhD study take on average at Addis Ababa University and does this show variation among the constituent colleges of the university?

b) What are the factors that account for late PhD degree completion?

c) What coping mechanisms do PhD students employ to complete their PhD studies on time?

METHODOLOGY

This qualitative case study was conducted in Addis Ababa University (AAU), the oldest and the largest University Ethiopia. The university was purposively chosen as our research site because it is the pioneering institute in offering graduate programmes including PhD studies. It also has by far the largest PhD programmes in the country. The study was informed by the method of phenomenology. Ten volunteer PhD candidates were interviewed to narrate their lived experience pertinent to the objectives of the study. Semi-structured interviewing was the principal data collection technique employed. The interviewees were drawn from four colleges of the university (College of Social Sciences, College of Education & Behavioral Studies, College of Development Studies, and College of Humanities, Language Studies & Communication) which were selected based on convenience sampling. Participation was voluntary. Since participating in this study was time consuming (e.g., participants had to participate in an in-depth interview on average for an hour and quarter) and somewhat taxing/worrying (e.g., interviewees had to reflect on their rapport with their supervisors and about their commitment and efficiency), finding enthusiastic participants was at first not easy. A snowball sampling technique was thus used to select most of the participants. While six of the participants were

recruited via three volunteer PhD students, the other four were recruited by the research participants themselves. It could be said that the section of the colleges was determined by the willingness of the students to be interviewed. The selection of the colleges was not, therefore, representative and that could be considered as one of the limitations of the study. The interviews focused on progressions, reasons for delay, and coping mechanisms used by doctoral students when they faced challenges.

All the interviews were audiotaped with the consent of the interviewees. All the participants were given the choice to be interviewed in English (the language of instruction) or Amharic (the official working language) and most preferred the latter. Primarily, each of the ten interviews were transcribed in the language they were conducted. The interviews conducted in Amharic had to be translated into English for ease of analysis. To maintain uniformity of style, one of the authors did the translation while the other author went through the translations to ensure that the original and the translated versions matched. The English translations of the Amharic tape transcripts were not given to respondents for confirmation because the respondents felt that the task of comparing the two versions would be rather overwhelming and that could be considered as another limitation of the study. Once the transcriptions and translations were over, we went through the transcribed material repeatedly before classifying, coding, and categorizing the transcriptions. That resulted in identification of a number of overarching themes and sub-themes (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). The identification of the themes was informed by grounded theory, i.e., sub-themes and themes emerging from the data, and not pre-imposed (Holstein & Gubrium,1994). The information obtained was analysed and combined into themes used to formulate the discussions and conclusions of the study.

Archival data about 1711 students who completed their studies in the last ten years were also collected from the Registrar Office of the University in order to determine the rate of study delay at all constituent colleges of the university. This procedure necessitated using the concept of elapsed time to degree (ETTD), which is regarded as a simple and more useful measure, to calculate completion time for PhD studies. ETTD is calculated as the time from first enrolment in the PhD degree to completion of the degree (Bourke et al., 2004). The expected duration of a PhD study is calculated as equal to the pre-determined end date minus the pre-determined starting date, whereas the actual duration is computed as equal to the actual end date minus the actual starting date, the difference between the two providing what is called 'delay' (van de Schoot et al., 2013).

RESULTS

The major findings of this study are presented below following the research objectives set earlier. While the first subsection offers an analysis of the descriptive data obtained from the archives of Addis Ababa University, the remaining subsections address issues related to causes of study delays and student coping mechanisms obtained during the semi- structured interviews, in that order.

TIME TO PHD COMPLETION

Under optimum conditions, the duration for completing a PhD program in AAU is 4 years. However, it is not uncommon for students not to defend their proposals, let alone complete their dissertations, within 4 years. A close look at the responses of the interviewees and the archival data reveals that only a limited number of students complete their studies within that duration. As shown in Table 1, the duration of stay among 276 students who completed their PhD studies in 2020 in 16 different colleges/faculties range from a surprisingly 2 years to 13 years. More telling, however, is the cumulative average of students' duration of their study, which is 6.19. The figure indicates, on average, students overstay for more than 2 years. It is also worth noting that in 3 of the colleges (College of Law and governance, Ethiopian Institute of Architecture Building Construction of Development, and Ethiopian Institute of Biotechnology) the average year of completion is 7 or more years. The college that required the least average year of duration of stay (4.82) is the College of Health Sciences. This appears to suggest a lengthy completion period for PhD programs in the social science and humanities as compared to the sciences.

Table 1. PhD Graduates of 2020: Duration of their stay

Faculty /college	Number of Graduates	Duration of stay		
		Min.	Max.	Ave
College of Natural& Computer Sciences	68	4	8	6.07
College of Law and Governance Studies	5	6	8	7.33
College of Humanities, Language Studies and Journalism & Communication	63	4	12	6.48
College of Development Studies	17	5	7	5.94
College of Health Sciences	25	2	9	4.82
College of Veterinary Medicine and Agriculture	6	4	6	5.00
Ethiopian Institute of Architecture Building Construction and Development	6	5	8	7
Addis Ababa Institute of Technology	8	6	7	6.5
College of Business and Economics	13	4	8	6.13
College of Education and Behavioral Studies	26	5	13	6.80
College of Social Sciences	15	4	9	6.69
Aklilu Lemma Institute of Pathobiology	3	5	6	5.60
Institute of Peace & Security Studies	7	4	7	5.16
Ethiopian Institute of Water Resources	9	3	10	6.44
Ethiopian Institute of Biotechnology	2	7	7	7
Entoto Observatory and Research Center	3	6	6	6
Total	276	4.62	8.19	6.19

Source: Data compiled from AAU Registrar's office

A close look at data in the four colleges from which the 10 interviewees were drawn (see Table 2) gives a clearer picture. The cumulative average of stay for 121 students who graduated in the year 2020 was close to 6½ years (Mean= 6.47)—a figure larger than the cumulative average reported for all the colleges, which is 6.19. That means, students in the 4 colleges who graduated in 2020, on average, overstayed for 2½ years. Though there were students who completed their studies within 4 years,

there were also students who stayed 12 to 13 in the College of Humanities, Language studies and Journalism and Communication and College of Education & Behavioral Studies, respectively.

Table 2. PhD Graduates of 2020: Duration of their stay in selected colleges

Faculty /college	Number of Graduates	Duration of stay		
		Min.	Max.	Ave
College of Humanities, Language Studies and Journalism & Communication	63	4	12	6.48
College of Development Studies	17	5	7	5.94
College of Education and Behavioral Studies	26	5	13	6.80
College of Social Sciences	15	4	9	6.69
Total	121	4.5	10.25	6.47

Source: Data compiled from AAU Registrar's office

In addition to examining PhD completion rate of students among the recent graduates, the trend over the last ten academic years (2011-2020) was also explored. Overall, though not consistent, the data in Table 3 indicate that students are requiring more and more years of study to complete their PhD studies. On average, graduates in the year 2011 required encouragingly 4.72 years to complete their PhD studies. Those who completed their studies in the year 2020, however, needed an average of 6.19 years. A comparison between the recent three years (2018-2020) and the earliest three years (2014-2016) also shows an increasing trend. Those who graduated in the years 2018, 2019, and 2020 stayed in their programs for an average of 6.15, 6.03, and 6.19 years, respectively. Contrary to that, students who finished their programs in 2011, 2012, and 2013 required average years of 4.72, 5.03, and 5.19, respectively. The average maximum years taken to complete the PhD programs are also higher in the recent three years ranging from 7.67 (in the year 2019) to 8.19 (in 2020). In the years 2011-2012 the average maximum years taken by students ranged from 6.27 to 6.60. Given the University's claim that the quality of its professors and the resources needed to run PhD programs is improving, the increasing trend of study delays is quite alarming. This conundrum requires further investigation.

Table 3. Trends of Duration of PhD Study over ten years (2011-2020)

Year of graduation	Total Number of Graduates across Colleges	Duration of stay: Cumulative average		
		Min.	Max.	Ave.
2020	276	4.62	8.19	6.19
2019	239	4.8	7.67	6.03
2018	256	4.64	8.00	6.15
2017	204	4.6	7.2	5.77
2016	248	4.08	6.77	5.29

Year of graduation	Total Number of Graduates across Colleges	Duration of stay: Cumulative average		
		Min.	Max.	Ave.
2015	171	4.69	6.54	5.62
2014	140	4.67	6.67	5.59
2013	102	4.19	8.81	5.19
2012	61	3.86	6.6	5.03
2011	14	3.55	6.27	4.72
Total	**1711**			

Source: Data compiled from AAU Registrar's office

CAUSES OF STUDY DELAYS

Respondents offered various reasons for their study delay. The major reasons that came out in the study relate to students' own commitment and preparation, financial difficulties, the academic and research environment, and supervisor-student rapport.

Student commitment and unpreparedness

A lot of points were raised by interviewees in relation to students' lack of commitment. Most of the students come from regional universities where they have to return upon completion of their studies, but they are not motivated to complete their program in time and go back to the sponsoring universities. The idea of going back to home universities, respondents say, is quite discomforting due to social unrest which has become common throughout the country after the recent change of government. Though the capital where AAU is located is not totally immune, it is considered as relatively safer. "The region where I come from is insecure," says a participant, "so I deliberately drag my feet until the region is safe enough [for me to go back]" (Interviewee A).

Students' unpreparedness for the kind of rigor that developing the thesis proposal and writing the dissertation requires is reported to be another factor behind a study delay. According to some participants, the unpreparedness of the students begins right at the entry level. "There are large groups of students infiltrating into the program with inadequate experience and inadequate skill," a participant complains (Interviewee E). Due to the lax screening mechanism, students who are not fit for PhD programs struggle a lot in the dissertation writing, the interviewee argues, despite managing to complete the course with minimum grades.

Respondents note that students have "easy ride" when it comes to completing coursework, but they struggle when asked to produce an original proposal or dissertation. Some participants (e.g., Interviewee A; Interviewee C; Interviewee I) are unhappy that most of what they do in the course work does not prepare them for writing the dissertation. In the words of Interviewee A, "What I do for course work is a kind of hit and run." He says he is not made to relate whatever he does to the writing of his dissertation. Interviewee C concurs. When asked to write his proposal, he felt he had to start from scratch. The concept note he was asked to develop while joining the program is left behind. And papers written for different courses are 'lost'/forgotten in the process.

Financial challenges and family responsibility

It appears that, more than anything else, financial reasons force PhD students' overstay in their PhD programs. To start with, the monthly salary increments candidates get following their PhD

completion (Birr 3339 = USD 82.33) is not that attractive; they only get a little addition to their already meagre salary. If they stayed in the capital before completing their studies, they could engage in many part-time jobs and earn additional money. "Instead of completing your studies and returning there [in your home university], you make the most out of your stay while you are here," confesses a PhD candidate, "You can benefit a lot doing two or more jobs" (Interviewee B). Another participant from the Department of Curriculum Studies agrees. "Addis offers a lot of job opportunities," says he. "So, students make lot of money and they intentionally overstay here" (Interviewee C). It can be seen that students' engagement in part time jobs has a direct impact on the quality of their work. For example, one candidate admits to having produced a shoddy proposal not because she didn't have the competence but because she didn't give the required attention to her studies as she was moonlighting too much at NGOs where she offered consultancy and training services. And there is another PhD student who comes from a peripheral university and does not want to go back there upon completion. So, he deliberately drags his feet (Interviewee B).

The interviews further revealed that students' engagement in moonlighting has largely to do with their family commitment. Even though PhD students obtain their salary while pursuing their studies, they complain a lot about its inadequacy. Because they have to leave part of their family in their home universities, they are obliged to share their income. Their situation is worsened by the expensiveness of life in the metropolitan city. And to make ends meet, students work as lecturers, research assistants, and trainers where the opportunity arises. That in turn is reported to be affecting the progress of their studies in general and the completion of dissertations in particular:

> I haven't completed my study as per my initial schedule. One of the reasons for taking a very long time is because I have family [to support]. And that is true of most of the PhD students. Many of us join PhD programs after forming family. So, honestly speaking, I was involved in additional part-time jobs to meet my financial demands. I was doing both. I mean I was pursuing my study and simultaneously engaged in part time jobs to generate additional income. I must admit this has an adverse impact on the quality of my study; it also elongates the time you need to complete your studies. (Interviewee B)

Another respondent agrees:

> PhD students definitely do struggle financially when joining the program. The very reason for this is that most of us have families including school aged children who relocate with us. It means, we have a lot of costs including house rent, school fees, basic needs, transportation, and education expenses of the candidate. We all know the cost of house rent and additional food items in Addis [the capital city] is too expensive to be covered by a salary of an ordinary university teacher. If the husband or wife of the PhD student is jobless, life will be a nightmare. That will bring a huge stress on the candidates and can definitely affect their success in the program. One of my colleagues used to say to unmarried students thinking of getting married, "Please don't. You have already an ugly marriage [the PhD study] here". (Interviewee F)

Speaking of the hardship his fellow PhD students encounter, another respondent has also this to say:

> Personally, my wife is employed and brings income to the family. She has supported me in many ways. But I know many students who struggle lot particularly when their families have to solely rely on their income. Because they suffer a lot, they are forced to look for other alternative sources of income. They do a lot of part-time jobs and that affects the quality of the program and the research. (Interviewee D)

It was, in fact, bachelor PhD students who were reported to be completing their studies in time (Interviewee G; Interviewee E). Unsurprisingly, almost all the participants admit that quality is compromised when students fail to adequately commit themselves to their studies and busy themselves doing a great deal of moonlighting.

Academic and research environment

Some students feel that the research climate in their respective departments is much below their expectations. When they joined PhD programs, they expected that they would be busy attending seminars and papers presented by faculty and fellow PhD students. They are, however, disillusioned discovering that such activities are quite negligible. A student of social work who just defended his proposal, for example, complains:

> As a PhD student, I thought I would be overwhelmed with seminars, public lectures and debates. I had a feeling that I would be busy attending this and that seminar. But when these things were missing from the scene, I was disillusioned. I would [thus]like to stress the need to make the atmosphere smell academics. (Interviewee H)

Other participants agree. Other than talks occasionally presented by professors invited as external examiners to PhD candidates, department seminars are either rare or non-existent. The role of supervisors in encouraging/involving PhD students in seminars and conferences is equally bleak. Some students even acknowledge that they have become paradoxically inactive after joining PhD programs. A PhD student from the Department of History recounts his experience at length:

> Interestingly, before I joined the PhD program, I used to present papers in conferences held in my university and elsewhere. But I have never presented a paper after joining the PhD program. As part of the course requirement, we presented papers and take part in seminar presentations every semester for the first two years. … Other than that, I have never presented a paper for a conference. And I can give various reasons for this. First, I devote my time to the course work hoping to score good grades. And I would say our department is demanding in that regard. I know there are departments that administer pen and pencil exams and let the students finish courses. In our case, it is 100% paper presentation. In that sense, I would like to acknowledge the commitment of our professors. They have helped us develop our capacity in writing papers. Even then, personally, I didn't exert an effort. Nor did I get any encouragement and incentive from our department. (Interviewee A)

Participants from other departments also complain about obtaining neither incentives from their departments nor encouragement from their supervisors regarding conference participation. A literature student, for example, recalls that two of his abstracts were chosen for international conferences but he was not able to present the papers because he was not given financial support. In one of these cases, let alone giving financial support, the participant says, the Department Chair even questioned the very idea of presenting papers in international venue angrily asking, "What's the need to go there?" (Interviewee C). Though the participation of PhD students in conferences and seminars is generally barren, the study revealed that there were students who had the opportunity to co-present papers with their professors in situations where expatriates are involved as guest professors or co-supervisors. A participant from the Department of Comparative Education proudly reports, "Two of my papers were accepted for international conference in Sweden. … Actually, my friend's paper was also accepted. … So, the provision is there; and the financial aid is there. We are also encouraged to publish with our advisors" (Interviewee G). Another participant from the Department of Curriculum also excitedly recalls a rewarding experience where he and his classmates co-presented a paper with a Fulbright professor in a conference hosted by a local university (Hawassa University). Although students had to cover their own expenses, they value the experience and feel that it was very gratifying. "When I presented a paper with those Americans," says the participant, "I was very pleased" (Interviewee B).

The kind of support/advice that PhD students are given regarding funding opportunities is also almost nil. When participants are asked if they ever obtain advice on how to secure grants, most express surprise. Here is a typical response:

> Listen, are you telling me that there are advisors who do that? Even the questions are surprising to me. I mean if there are professors like this, then we won't even need to talk about

problems of advising. In a situation where you find advisors who don't give feedback on proposal submitted to them two months ago, how can you expect such a commitment? How can they advise you about publishing and training? So, I would say such commitment is simply non-existent. (Interviewee A)

Other participants agree. Most of the PhD students interviewed, in fact, believe that supervisors are well placed to give advice on such matters because most are educated abroad and have the information and the network. However, students add, the supervisors lack the willingness and the commitment to help their advisees. One of the participants, in fact, recalls that one of the professors teaching his friends at AAU was hired by a regional university to give training on how to seek grants and the training was well received. At the same time, the participant adds, this same professor has never given similar assistance to his own students at AAU. Other participants also complain that professors are even unwilling to write support letters to their students who are trying to secure grants on their own. "Why do you need additional grant in the first place, they would challenge us?" says a participant (Interviewee J). The experience of one PhD student, who has reported that he has benefited from a three-month study visit abroad thanks to his supervisor, can be considered as an exception. He says he has gained tremendous experience from the visit in terms of developing his proposal, using search engines for downloading relevant articles, attending seminars and workshops, and with respect to creating links with fellow PhD students in his field. "Thanks to my advisor," says the participant, "I was able to meet experienced people willing to share their rich experience with me. But I was the only student who had that opportunity" (Interviewee B).

There is great demand by the PhD students for additional trainings, but support given by way of providing additional relevant trainings is not encouraging. In most cases, it is non-existent, and in the few cases when available, it is haphazard and unplanned. Almost all the participants underline that courses they take in their respective PhD programs are inadequate in preparing them for the rigorous dissertation writing process. A respondent remarks:

Well, the department offers courses on methodology in general, but I don't think that is sufficient. Nor do I believe that the course is offered by a professional. In sum, I'd say we have not received any [additional] training either by the department or by the university at large. (Interviewee A)

Understandably, participants say they would have liked to take trainings on reviewing related literature, writing proposals, qualitative and quantitative analysis software, getting published, and securing dissertation grants. But there appear to be very limited opportunities where demands for additional training were addressed. Even where there are some signs of using the expertise of guest professors and external examiners, the practice tends to be rather haphazard and not well thought out. As whole, it was learnt that additional trainings were either rare, not institutionalized, or unplanned.

Supervisor-student rapport

The results of this study revealed that the supervisor-student rapport at AAU begins from the time advisors are assigned to doctoral students. Different departments have different modalities of running the PhD program and assigning advisors. For instance, in Educational Planning & Management Department (EdPM) students have two dissertation supervisors: internal and external (external to the department and the country). While PhD students are made to choose their own internal advisors, they do not have similar liberty regarding their external supervisors. It is the external advisors who choose who to work with after examining/reviewing a number of synopses sent to them. The practice in the Department Comparative Education, which is more of a joint program, is different both in terms of course offering and supervision. Courses are jointly offered by the host department and a partnering department from Sweden. Advisement is also joint. Contrary to that, PhD students from the Department of Curriculum Studies & Teacher Education have only one supervisor and have no say on the assignment. It is the Department that assigns supervisors to students.

Interestingly, the students do not seem to be happy about it. The following remark by a respondent is quite telling:

> I haven't chosen my supervisor. He was assigned for me. [But] that has to be revised. It has to be investigated, assessed and improved. As I told you, even in the same college, some are getting advisors out of the country. But ours are just assigned for us. (Interviewee D)

When it comes to student-supervisor rapport, the findings of this study show mixed results. Doctoral students recognize the importance of their supervisors providing ongoing, relevant, constructive, and timely feedback and feedback which is meaningful and encouraging (Lindsay, 2015). Though few, there are professors who are humane, collegial, and encouraging. As pointed out by a couple of respondents, it is usually the relatively younger professors that exhibit such positive dispositions. A respondent says, "Maybe that has to do with the faculty being young," (Interviewee H). As a whole though, the rapport between advisors and students is rather scary. The frightening relationship starts with the way the management treats students. When students dare to fight for their rights assuming they would be treated as colleagues, they are often silenced. In the words of one participant (Interviewee C), "You are students, act as a student" was what they were told when appealing against a mistreatment. There are also cases where students go extra length to avoid contacts with their professors. "This is a university," says a student of history, "where you change your route when you see your advisor from a distance to avoid contact" (Interviewee A). When asked to tell the reason about this hierarchical relationship between professors and students, even at PhD level, respondents say it has to do with culture. On that regard, what a respondent says is quite telling: "Actually, I tend to associate this with some sort of culture we have; the culture we were bought up in. The kind of autocratic, domineering culture we belong to. … If you [as a professor] are too much autocratic, the people that you are supervising will fail; you frustrate. Even people might not come back to you [as advisees]."

Consistent with other studies (e.g., Bireda, 2015), supervisors lack of commitment and timely feedback were also found to be a cause for delaying dissertation completion. In the eyes of the respondents, supervisors lack of commitment is manifested in many ways. One has to do with the type of feedback they offer. Students feel that the kind of feedback given to them is rather intimidating. They believe their supervisors are perfectionists. Since they often get criticisms like, "How can you make such a silly error at this level?" (Interviewee J), students say they are too scared to take risks. Paradoxically enough, there are advisors who tell students to slow down saying 'Why rush? Stay longer and polish it well' when students exhibit drive and energy (Interviewee I). Such advisors give students the impression that the quality of their work is weighed on the length of time they spend. Contrary to that, there are supervisors who do not push their advisees hard enough when they feel their advisees will not be able to meet their expectations.

Students also complain that they are not given timely feedback. A participant, for example, decries, "For certain courses, we are required to conduct empirical studies, but we are not given timely feedback. We obtain feedback after a semester or even after a year. There are also times when we are not given feedback at all" (Interviewee D). Students contend that advisors fail to offer feedback in time because they are overstretched doing consultancy works and advising too many students for financial reasons. (The more advisees supervisors have, the more they are paid.) Students sympathize with their professors for taking these many extra assignments for they feel they are not paid well. At the same time, they feel the major reason for their delay and at times the dropping out of students from the PhD program is their professors' failure to provide timely feedback. Linked with delayed feedback is supervisors' failure to provide feedback at different stages of the dissertation. While students expect to receive feedback on their methodology before they move to the results section, supervisors tell them to bring them the entire dissertation, and they find the process rather frustrating.

Encouragingly though, the rapport among PhD students is stated to be rather cordial. As opposed to what happens in the undergraduate programs, where students compete with one another because

higher grades are associated with better employments (e.g., students with best grades are employed as a graduate assistant in universities), in PhD programs students are sympathetic to one another. They share resources and information. For example, students with access to libraries outside the country share passwords so that they can download articles central to their dissertation. It is also from senior PhD students they obtain information about funding opportunities and tips for handling their supervisors. "Actually, we find funding information," says a participant, "from our seniors who have won some grants" (Interviewee H). In a word, their relationship is cooperative and not competitive. This tendency to turn to fellow PhD students for assistance while encountering academic challenges is consistent with the findings of other studies (e.g., Byers et al., 2014) in which PhD students were found to rely on each other by sharing experiences, empathy, and encouragement.

STUDENT COPING MECHANISMS AND SURVIVAL STRATEGIES

The third objective of this study was gauging the survival strategies of PhD students when they face challenges as regards their study delay. Even though there is a consensus among participants that students generally lack the commitment to complete their studies and thereby overstay, it was understood that some students, though a few in number, have the discipline and the coping strategies that enable them to finish in time. One coping mechanism such students use is creating smooth relationship with their supervisors (e.g., by being very respectful or by serving them as research assistants). Some of these relationships are interpreted as deliberate moves to win the sympathy of advisors and are interpreted negatively by other students. For example, in the eyes of some students, PhD students trying to please their professors by rendering some assistance are regarded as too close and in some cases as some kind of apple polishers. However, it is often the case that in their attempt to create positive rapport, doctoral students assist their supervisors with their research and publication endeavours by assisting them in the various stages of the process, thereby enticing supervisors to be more helpful. In this regard, a remark by a candidate who has recently defended his proposal is quite telling:

> Actually, there are some shrewd students who do a lot for their supervisors to make the relationship smooth. They collect data for them. They mark exam papers for them. By the way, I myself have been smart in this regard though I don't know where that would take me. Because you don't want to suffer more, you try to make things smooth. (Interviewee A)

Other coping strategies employed by successful candidates are efficient use of library resources, wise use of income, or academic mechanisms. Efficient utilization of resources has often to do with library materials. As reported by almost all the participants, the internet connection in AAU is quite slow or unreliable often due to power outage. By way of offsetting this shortcoming, some students (e.g., Interviewee D) use prestigious local libraries (e.g., UNECA library) to download articles and books where the Internet is fast and reliable. Others find resources in richer libraries during their short visit abroad. There are also students who ask friends studying in Europe or the US to email them key articles. Tailoring papers produced during coursework to the dissertation is another academic mechanism successful PhD students use to shorten their stay. Such students make sure that papers they write for their courses are linked with their dissertation topic so that they will not have to start all over again while writing their dissertation proposal and eventually their dissertations. Creative use of YouTube is another academic related coping mechanism used for bridging the training gap they have. Interviewee D, for instance, says he has taught himself how to analyse his data using training sessions uploaded on YouTube.

In relation to wise use of income, it was learnt that some students make sure that they live with their family so that their income is undivided. So, instead of leaving their family members behind in towns where their sponsoring universities are located, they bring their family with them and 'settle' in the nearby towns where life is cheaper (particularly where house rent is more reasonable) than that of the capital. Commuting to Addis from these small towns, they save money. Some go to the extent of saving enough money before joining the PhD program. These students say they are spared from doing

part time jobs and are able to exclusively focus on their studies which helps them to complete their studies on time. The experience of a participant is quite revealing/illustrative:

> Personally, I don't engage in part-time jobs because I live with my family. Because I commute from Ambo (120km from Addis), I don't pay for house rent. Actually, from the outset, we have been informed by the department to avoid too much part-time jobs if we are to produce quality work and finish the program in time, but only few of us heed to this advice. (Interviewee G)

DISCUSSION

This study sought to examine delays in completion of PhD programs at Addis Ababa University, the factors that affect delays and students' coping mechanisms using archival data drawn from the Registrar Office of AAU, and semi- structured interviews held with 10 volunteer doctoral students. The findings revealed that the pursuits of doctoral programs at the sample university were shown to have been affected by some of the factors that were identified in the study. The findings also showed that, despite wide ranging national and institutional aspirations and commitments toward augmenting the number of PhD holders, only a limited number of students finish their PhD studies during the prescribed time.

In the present investigation, it emerged that the cumulative average time for completion of a PhD study at Addis Ababa University is 6.19 years, indicating an overstay of more than two years. The PhD study completion trend over the last 10 years also shows that doctoral students are taking more and more years to complete their studies. Arguably, this suggests that the problem is worsening and has not yet received the attention it deserves. This is in concert with findings in other contexts where study delays are shown to be the most common manifestations of doctoral programs (Akparep et al., 2017; El-Ghoroury et al., 2012; Hwang et al., 2015; Lindsay, 2015; Pyhältö et al., 2012; van de Schoot et al., 2013). Reviewing the situation in various doctoral programs in the US, Hwang et al. (2015), for example, note that PhD students complete their studies within seven to 10 years. In UK, PhD students, particularly those categorized as part-time students, take an average of seven years to complete their studies (Lindsay, 2015). As astutely observed by van de Schoot et al., "While many countries maintain a notional PhD duration of three or four years … in reality, PhD candidates often take much longer to complete their doctoral studies" (2013, p. 1).

The study also identified the factors that contributed to study delays as lack of student commitment and unpreparedness, financial challenges and family responsibility, academic and research environment, and poor supervisor student rapport. In this regard, this investigation replicates the findings of similar studies in other contexts where the role of these factors in affecting study progress was outlined, including the African continent (Almoustapha & Uddin, 2017; Miller, 2013; van de Schoot et al., 2013).

The findings of this study also provide insights into the coping strategies used by doctoral students as they face adversities. Prior studies on the coping strategies used by doctoral students identified factors related to supervision, resources, academic responsibilities and pressures, finances or debt, anxiety, and poor work/school life balance, family obligations, social relationship, and work responsibilities as affecting the progression and completion rates of doctoral students (Byers et al., 2014; El-Ghoroury et al., 2012; Pyhältö et al., 2012). This research similarly indicated that doctoral students used coping strategies such as creating smooth relationship with their supervisors, turning to fellow PhD students for help, efficient use of available resources within and outside their institution, and wise use of their income.

CONCLUSION

The central objective of this study was to determine, through archival data and empirical materials garnered from doctoral students, the rate of study delays, the factors that affect delays and the

coping strategies employed. The findings provide valuable insights toward understanding the provision of doctoral studies in Ethiopia and the possible strategies that should be designed to mitigate challenges.

The study indicated that from the many factors that students enumerated as reasons for delaying their study completion, financial problems and family responsibility stand out, suggesting a variety of possible damages in terms of the real costs of time, effort, opportunity costs, emotional and financial investments, and other resources. It should be noted that this research has also demonstrated success stories in terms of doctoral students that use a variety of coping mechanisms in order to complete their studies in relatively shorter periods. Capitalizing on these mechanisms more widely and systematically might be useful.

On a more general level, the study highlighted the existence of a wide gap between the desire to expand PhD education and the rate of completion in Ethiopia. While the expansion of postgraduate programs continues unabated in the country, there appear to be limited efforts in terms of exploring major challenges and reforming graduate education across the higher education sector. The many interacting factors, such as student commitment and preparation, the nature of academic and research environment, and the supervisor-student rapport, that were found to influence study progress and the strategies used by doctoral candidates to shorten their stay at the university demand the need for addressing the challenge in a more systematic and organized way. The solution to many of the challenges identified may not be necessarily promoting the expansion of doctoral programs but rather creating a more conducive environment in which student engagement and preparedness is enhanced, more appropriate schemes of earning additional income and developing their research skills are developed, and a more vibrant student support and supervisory scheme is introduced. Research (e.g., Barasa & Omulando, 2018) indicates that such planned interventions have the capacity to improve graduation probabilities and to reduce time by introducing subtle and deliberate changes in doctoral programs.

Although the findings of this study can provide various insights, the fact that it was based on a single institution indicates the limitation in the generalizability of its findings. Given the growing number of universities in Ethiopia and their possible diversity, PhD students' profiles, backgrounds, and expectations, more research is needed to examine how this diversity may impact doctoral students' progression and persistence at a national level. Future research should particularly explore the nature of student engagement, preparedness, the advisor-advisee relationship, and other critical factors that appear to have a significant role in addressing the challenges of study delay.

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