

An Examination of the Completion Rate of Masters Programs at Makerere University Business School

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Abstract

This study was carried out to examine the completion rate for masters' degree programs at Makerere University Business School. We investigated the delay in research, teaching schedules, administrative processes and students' own challenges as possible limitations. The study relied on opinion from former students on possible strategies which can be put in place to improve completion. The study examined the masters of Business Administration (MBA) and the Msc. Accounting and Finance (Ms.AF). The study was cross sectional and used both qualitative and quantitative data. A sample size of 211 students was used covering those who had completed their masters within a two-year period and those who were not able to complete in the same period. Findings revealed that the completion rate of masters program was still very low. Delay in returning the research comments both by external examiners and the Graduate and Research Centre office was found to be the major cause, among others. This finding had support in the literature. The study recommends to management to improve the research and teaching environment.

Keywords

Master of Business Administration, Master of Accounting and Finance, Graduate Study, Research, Teaching, Business School, MBA Completion, Higher Degrees, Uganda

1. Background

Programme completion and timely graduation have become increasingly important policy issues for many universities and governments (Murphy & Welch, 1993). Graduation rate is one of the aspects that measure institu-

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tion's effectiveness (Hebel, 1999). Students' completion rate is the ratio of the total number of students successfully completing in the last year of their programme in a given year to the total number of students of official graduation in the population (World Bank, 2004). Not completing a programme on time increases the cost of doing it due to the hidden costs which are always incurred by both the students and the university. For instance, students are charged extension fees, while university's resources like libraries and research supervisors become overused due to the backlog of students who must be cleared to be able to graduate (Makerere University Higher Degrees joining instructions, 2004; Tetty, 2010). However, for one to complete a master's program on time, there is need for him/her to manage research activities properly. The motivation of this study was to examine the completion rates at Makerere University Business School following anecdotal evidences that many students were delaying on their master's programs. We needed to draw empirical conclusions on the phenomena.

Many stakeholders have attached delay in completion of postgraduate courses to the research course unit as it influences one's ability to complete the program. In many cases, however, students and university management do not give it much attention. Makerere University Business School (MUBS) was established in 1997 by Makerere University (MUK) Establishment of Constituent Colleges' Order, with the mandate of offering business and management education to its clients, undertaking research and overseeing the Uganda Colleges of Commerce (UCCs). By 2009, there have been twelve masters' programmes run by MUBS, of which MBA (Master of Business Administration) and MsAF (Master of Science in Accounting and Finance) degrees are the pioneer programs. The MBA constitutes the greatest number of students (Makerere University Business School Annual Report, 2004/05). The Graduate and Research Centre (GRC) is the Faculty in MUBS which is responsible for overseeing the graduate programs of the school through teaching, research and publications (Makerere University Business School Strategic Plan, 2008/09). Ensuring timely completion of graduate students is one of the objectives of GRC. In line with the above GRC objective, at the 128th meeting of the Senate of Makerere University held in May 2007, the guidelines for Masters programs were reviewed. It was agreed that masters students should complete their programmes in two years time. This was re-echoed in the 89th GRC Higher Degrees Committee meeting which agreed that masters students should be engaged in series of research seminars at the beginning of Semester II of every academic year to enable them to appreciate the key research concepts as well as the new graduate research policy (Minutes of the 89th School Higher Degrees Committee, 2008).

MBA as a professional management degree programme admits students from differing academic backgrounds including business, management, sciences, arts, and humanities; whereas MsAF admits students from strictly a business and management background. Anecdotal evidence indicates that students without prior experience in research face more challenges in adoption to research and require extra effort to cope with the research demands. Although most students complete their course work on time, they take longer than expected to graduate because of not completing their research projects (Makerere University Business School, 2003, Minutes of the 79th and 80th Management committee). MUBS in a bid to improve the completion rate of masters students came up with strategies like increase in the number of research supervisors for masters' programmes, conducting series of research seminars for both postgraduate students and research supervisors, training of research supervisors, creation of research sub-committees to quicken the proposal review process and availing research guidelines to students (Minutes of the 89th School Higher Degrees Committee Meeting, 2008, Nassali, 2008). Similarly, in an effort to address the delay and speed the process of completion among postgraduate students, Makerere University introduced plan B type of research in 2001 besides the research dissertation. Plan B adopts a problem solving approach, based on applying/developing appropriate management instruments and is aimed at providing practical solution to an identified organizational problem. The findings should be of practical relevance and value to managers and organizations.

However, despite these efforts aimed at improving timely completion rate of postgraduate students, evidence shown in **Table 1** indicates that the completion rate is still low among the postgraduate students. An analysis of the completion rate of the masters students from the Graduate & Research Centre (GRC) database (2010) shows that on average, students on MBA who complete their programme on time stands at 13.8%, while for MsAF it is even much lower standing at 9.2%. On average masters students take four years to complete it and graduate as against the average of two years prescribed by most universities (Buckley & Hooley, 1988, Haksever & Manisali, 2000).

2. Synthesis of Related Literature

To develop insights into the problem of completion rate in masters programs we reviewed works of various

Table 1. Admission and completion rate for two selected programs.

Programme	MBA			Ms.AF		
	Academic Year (AY)	Admitted	Graduated	Completion rate (%)	Admitted	Graduated
2001/02	86	15	17.4	38	6	15.8
2002/03	71	13	18.3	33	3	9.1
2003/04	126	14	11.1	43	5	11.6
2004/05	122	12	9.8	67	4	6.0
2005/06	117	16	13.7	56	5	8.9
2006/07	128	15	11.7	53	7	13.2
2007/08	68	10	14.7	46	0	0

Source: Graduate and Research Centre.

scholars on the subject. There was a limitation of scarce literature from the local environment on masters programs; we benefitted from [Wamala et al. \(2012\)](#) and [Wamala & Oonyu \(2012\)](#). They studied the extended candidature plus non completion of a PhD and the completion time dynamics for masters students at Makerere University. They provide rich insights on the local context regarding the current study. [Buckley & Hooley \(1988\)](#) posited that a report by the Council of graduate schools in the USA gave the median period of a doctoral degree as 7.6 years against the minimum of four, masters degrees at 4 years instead of 2 years prescribed by most universities. [Haksever and Manisali \(2000\)](#) confirmed a similar position in their study of PhD supervision in the UK.

[Buttery, Richter, & Filho \(2005\)](#) stated that postgraduate education is a fundamental component of University life. However, concern has been increasing in recent years over the proportion of research students who fail to submit a thesis after a period of public or industrial support. One underlying cause cited for poor completion rates is, along with the problems of a personal nature, the documented dissatisfaction by students with the research experience and industry with the research outcome. [Ssegawa & Rwelamila \(2009\)](#) explained that low completion rate and long completion periods for research-based degrees have received considerable attention from scholars. The lack of hands-on skills in the research process on the part of students especially in the early part stages (research definition and design) and hence the need for a facilitative framework has been cited as the major challenge to research students. [Smallwood \(2004\)](#) emphasized the issue of low completion rate among undergraduates in the US noting that timely completion is a social asset. The deeper root of low completion rates is examined by Lovitts from a personal experience; she left two doctoral programs before finishing a third one, in sociology, at the University of Maryland in 1996 ([Lovitts, 1996](#); [Lovitts, 2001](#) in [Gardner 2008](#)). The reasons seem to be diverse and may not be attributed to a single factor. The low completion rate translates into high costs for the sponsors and the institution. Studies in US have further indicated that completion rates varied across the major disciplines, with humanities recording the highest compared to natural sciences ([Gardner, 2008](#)). The high completion rate in sciences was attributed to the manner in which students interact and bond as a faculty research community especially through laboratory sessions, as opposed to the research isolation found in humanities.

The reasons for the low completion rate of postgraduate programmes may be grouped into three major themes namely student deficiencies, inappropriate supervision process and inappropriate research environment. Studies have examined factors ranging from personal, academic and financial with no standard finding of which seems to influence completion ahead of the others ([Gardener, 2008](#); [Berelson, 1960](#) in [Gardner, 2008](#); [Wamala et al. 2012](#)).

Excellent research depends on the combination of research facilities and a high quality, well-trained research workforce. It is important for Universities to continuously offer trainings to research supervisors and students for quality output to be achieved. The case for supervisor training has been made although not clearly emphasized ([Skerritt and Roche, 1994](#); [Anderson & Freeman, 1977](#); [Hegarty & Johnston, 2008](#)). Nevertheless some Universities (such as the University of Aalborg and the University of South Australia) have decided upon a compulsory training for all new PhD supervisors by providing duty statements, codes of practice and progress monitoring. Previous studies have noted indicators of supervisor effectiveness and supported independently by other re-

searchers over the years. For example, the importance of academic standing was highlighted by Moses (1994) and supervisory competence by Skerritt and Roche (1994), ESRC (2001), and Zhao (2003). Supervisor effectiveness is therefore, judged basing on the various indicators of supervisory style, competence, attitude and intellectual standing.

The main challenges in the research process among postgraduate students are articulated by Skerritt and Ryan (1994), as inadequate supervision in terms of experience, commitment, and time, emotional and psychological problems, students' intellectual and social isolation, their insecurity as to standards and lack of confidence in their ability to complete their theses within the specified time. This may lead to communication problems between supervisor and student. The role of the supervisor should therefore be like a super form of teaching and critical conversation (Knowles, 1999) and mentorship (Taylor, 1995). Supervisor motives may incorporate knowledge attainment, joint publications and recognition (self-esteem), each motive carrying different expectations of students (Hockey, 1996).

3. Methodology

The study focused on academic years from 2001/02. These were years for which concerns on completion delays scaled up in the public arena. The data that were readily available for our analysis were for a population of 468 students who were admitted in the academic years 2005/06, 2006/07 and 2007/08. The study used a cross sectional design. Two programs were selected namely Master of Business Administration (MBA) and Master of Science in Accounting and Finance (Ms.AF) because they have been run at the Business school for relatively a longer period of time than other programs. A proportionate sample of 211 was drawn using tables generated by Bartlett et al. (2001) comprising 141 MBA and 70 Ms.AF. Primary data was collected using a questionnaire constructed on a five point Likert type scale. The items covered the views on their delays and proposals for improvement. These were developed after reviewing the literature. We used expert validity on the instrument before using it for data collection. 110 usable questionnaires were received back giving a response rate of 52%. Secondary data was obtained from various records at the Graduate Resource center. Completion rate was based on the measures by Hebel (1999) of completion against enrollment. Analysis techniques were accomplished using SPSS.

4. Results

Year of Admission and Year of Completion

The results in Table 1 below and Figure 1 show the distribution of the respondents in terms of year of admission. Their completion was due within two years of the academic year of their admission respectively.

The results in Table 2 as depicted also in Figure 1 show that majority of the students on MBA and Ms.AF did not complete their program on time. On average, 86.2% of the MBA students did not complete while Ms.AF over 90.8% were still on the program after the two year period. Further analysis revealed that on average students took four years to complete their programmes. It is important to note that from records the Ms.AF have one year for class work and there after engage in research in the second year of their enrollment. On the other hand the MBA are engaged in class work for three semesters before beginning the dissertation project. The results indicated that the completion rate dropped sharply from 2001 before rising again in 2005. That of Ms.AF dropped suddenly again to zero while the MBA has maintained some rise.

5. Views on Challenges Students Face

The survey enlisted the respondent views on challenges that students face during their study time as affecting their ability to complete the program on time. The highest agreement in the factors was related to lack of proper guidance in research. They faced difficulty in problem identification, literature review and choice of methodology and supervision related reasons. The other challenges included were related to job demands, health, family and funding.

The respondents noted that there are a number of factors that contribute to the low completion rate of masters students in MUBS. The findings show that delay in returning the comments of the research reports by the external examiners is viewed to be the major cause for low completion rate. This is indicated by the mean of 3.97 and



Figure 1. Graphical view of the completion rate for masters programs.

Table 2. Views on why students do not complete their studies on time.

Items rated as reasons for delayed completion	Mean range
High incidence	
Delay in returning the comments of the research reports by the external examiners	3.80 - 3.97
Personal weakness on the part of the student when it comes to research process	
Job workload and related responsibilities	
Transfers at work places to up-country stations	
Lack of commitment to research on the part of the students	
Slow process of reviewing proposals by supervisors/reviewers	
Delay in calling for viva voce meetings	
Moderate incidence	
Having two supervisors slows down the research progress	3.70 - 3.75
Slow process of giving feedback of the Committee to students	
Hectic study schedules during the semester sessions	
Getting better jobs and promotions at work in the course of the masters studies	
Low incidence	
Family Responsibilities	3.50 - 3.66
Relaxed University policies on enforcing completion requirements	
Lack of funds on the part of the students	
Health related problems	
Undependable supervisors	

a standard deviation of 0.87. It implies that delay in returning research comments to students lead to prolonged study period which eventually contribute to high backlog of students failing to complete their programmes on time. The results also show that lack of commitment to research by postgraduate students is a major cause for low completion. The study also revealed that lack of facilities like reliable internet and the study environment not being conducive contribute to low completion rate. The factor of supervisors was also widely mentioned; either not being supportive or where they are two not agreeing easily on the students work. Other factors were in the real domain of the students such as family responsibility, work responsibilities, funding and health, which all contributed to the low completion rate in the selected programs.

6. Approaches Adopted by MUBS to Improve Completion Rate

The study assessed the approaches adopted by the Graduate Resource center in attempt to improve the situation. We sought views of the respondents. The findings are in [Table 3](#).

The table shows the views on the different approaches adopted by MUBS Graduate and Research Centre to improve the completion rate. The study noted that a number of strategies were adopted to try and improve the situation. The major one was introduction of type B research which does not involve academic rigor but is problem based. Those who do plan B research are not examined through the viva voce. Their dissertations are not sent to external examiners, the hitherto known stage contributing to the delays. GRC also started briefing students on the different types of research, subcommittees for plan A and plan B were set up so as to quicken the proposal review process. However, the findings from this study show that, these strategies have not improved the completion rate yet since they had been in place for a short term by the time of this study. For example the mean of 2.54 and standard deviation of 0.92 shows that respondents disagreed with the view that proposals are reviewed quickly. On a positive note, the respondents agreed that previous students' dissertations are available in the library for students doing research dissertations as indicated by a mean of 3.79. Respondents also agreed with the statement that research guidelines (booklets) had been availed to masters' students to facilitate the research process. The views on other approaches still provide strong reservations on how effective they will contribute to improving the situation.

Proposals for Improvement

The study sought views from the respondents on what more could be done by the school to improve completion

Table 3. Views on why students do not complete their studies on time.

Items	Mean range	SD
Previous students' dissertations have been availed in the library for students doing research. Research booklets have been availed to students of all the masters programs. Students have been briefed about type A & B type of research.	3.79	0.98
Students have been briefed about the penalties for failure to complete masters on time. Students have been guided about the possible supervisors in their areas of specialization.	3.18	1.13
Seminars are conducted for supervisors to update them of changes in research guidelines. Relevant research text books are available in the library for students doing research. Seminars are conducted for students to guide them in research/dissertation writing.	3.02	0.89
Comments are availed to students immediately after the proposal review meetings. Proposals are reviewed immediately after submission to Graduate and Research Centre.	2.54	0.92

Table 4. Suggestions for improving completion rate by MUBS masters students.

Item	Suggested strategies for improving the completion rate of masters programmes at MUBS
Research assessment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increase on the number of external examiners. • Subcommittees to approve students' proposals should be revitalized. • Set deadlines and penalties for students who fail to complete on time. • Train students on data analysis packages so as to enable students understand their research work better. • Review masters programme structures and merge some course units to create time for research. • Viva voce should be held promptly whenever external supervisors send reports. • Supervisor—student ratio be improved to handle the increasing number of masters students.
Library facilities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Upload all the previous students' research on the database for easy access. • Up-to-date research books should be availed in the library. • Subscribe to the online international journals to access research articles. • Improve on the internet connectivity, availability and speed.
Teaching	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improve on the teaching facilities for masters students. • Improve on the class room facilities for masters programmes. • Organize special classes/recess semester for finalists with retakes. • Improve on the institutional structure between Makerere University and Makerere University Business School.

rates among postgraduate students.

We did not focus on what the students should do in their domain. The results are clustered under key items as in **Table 4**.

7. Conclusion and Management Implications

The findings on completion rate of Masters Program in MUBS have far reaching academic and management implications. The study reveals that in general, completion among postgraduate students is very low. This finding concurs with previous studies of Buckley & Hooley (1988). The low completion rate is a challenge to MUBS image, graduates status and is straining to both students and the School. This has an implication of over stretching facilities and staff and low spirit to students. The challenges that were identified are manageable although some of them might be financially demanding. On its part, the school should streamline the research process. The available facilities should be appropriately used to enable those students who are keen to complete doing so in time. Strict guidelines will definitely change attitude of candidates who have taken policy laxity to their advantage. The existing staff capacity is capable of handling the workload; they need to be motivated to work within the existing functional facilities. On their part, students should be able to handle the challenges in their realm, like self motivation, family and work related demands. With the increasing computer usage in the country, students should find it easier to search for relevant materials, typeset their work and communicate with supervisors. Lack of relevant research skills is still a problem that should squarely be handled by management. There is no way the school will stand to be counted with academic staff who lack such skills and cannot help masters students. The skills of collecting and interpreting information and using knowledge in all its forms are a priority in a society. This is a profound knowledge base for higher education.

The efforts by the GRC so far have been commendable. There is a need for consistency and follow up. The implication of this holdup is making the students who were very serious with their research relax and lose the momentum. The observation by scholars that excellent research depends on the combination of outstanding research facilities and a high quality, well-trained research workforce is important in our conclusion. It is imperative for MUBS to continuously allocate resources and improve management of research for quality output.

We recommend more analytical studies to assess attitudes of both lecturers and students towards research and examine efficiency in managing the research function. The study may have been limited by methodological factors especially sampling approach.

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