

## **Student-Supervisor Interactions in Affecting Postgraduate Students' Timely Completion of Studies at the Open University of Tanzania**

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### **Abstract**

This study investigated student-supervisor interactions in affecting postgraduate students' timely completion of studies at the open university of Tanzania. The study was guided by the Zone of Proximal Development Theory by Levy Vygotsky (1978). A convergent design under a mixed research methods approach was employed. The target population of the study consisted of 989 postgraduate students, 133 research supervisors, 4 Faculty Deans, and 1 Director of Postgraduate Studies. The study employed stratified random sampling technique, multistage sampling technique, and purposive sampling technique to select a sample of 242 respondents. Data collection instruments included questionnaires, interview guides, and document analysis guides. The research instruments were validated by research experts, and Cronbach Alpha was used to ensure the reliability of Likert scale items in the questionnaires. Triangulation and peer debriefing were employed to ensure the reliability of qualitative instruments. Descriptive statistics were used to analyze the quantitative data, while thematic analysis was applied to analyze the qualitative data. The findings indicated that student-supervisor interactions to high extent affect postgraduate students' timely completion of studies at the Open University of Tanzania. The study concluded that ineffective student-supervisor interactions experience during research supervision process affects postgraduate students' timely completion of studies. Factor for student-supervisor interactions should be enhanced in order to promote postgraduate students' timely completion of studies.

**Keywords:** Supervisory interactions, postgraduate students, timely completion, research supervision, research supervisors

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## 1. Introduction

Postgraduate education is considered a vital discipline due to its contribution to the acquisition of new knowledge. The need for postgraduate education has led to an increase in the demand for higher education. This demand has prompted universities worldwide to attract more students into postgraduate programs (Ghatak et al., 2021). However, evidence from the literature shows that most postgraduate students, both at the master's and doctoral levels, take longer than the stipulated time to complete their studies due to ineffective supervision (Nouri et al., 2019; Sarwar et al., 2018; Mugendi&Githae, 2021). The delay in completing studies is undesirable and detrimental to universities and students as it leads to psychological and social stress, wastage of valuable resources, and loss of competitive advantages for universities and candidates (Nnebedum&Obdelayuegbe, 2021; Mbogo et al., 2020). To avoid delays in the completion of studies and the associated consequences, higher learning institutions are encouraged to promote effective postgraduate research supervision.

Delay in the completion of studies in universities has been experienced in different countries. In Italy, data shows that more than 40% of students experience some sort of delay in completing their studies (Aina&Pastore, 2020). Similarly, in the United Kingdom, the completion of doctoral studies continues to be a challenge, with a significant proportion of students not completing their studies on time or not completing them at all (Whitehouse, 2019). Nnebedum and Obuegbe (2021) reported that most postgraduate students in Nigerian universities rarely complete their studies within the provided time. Mahlangu (2021) and Ungadi (2021), in their studies in South African universities, found that master's and PhD students often extend their study time beyond the minimum stipulated duration. A similar situation has been observed in Kenya, where the number of students enrolled in various postgraduate studies is greater than the number of those completing their studies (Mugendi&Githae, 2021; Mbogo et al., 2020). Like in other countries, Tanzania also faces a similar challenge, with most of its students experiencing delays in completing their postgraduate programs (TCU, 2018; Magali, 2019; Mkwizu, 2019; Amani et al., 2022). The findings of these studies demonstrate that low completion of studies among postgraduate students is a serious issue across different contexts.

The delay in the completion of studies has also been a problem for students at the Open University of Tanzania. The number of students who successfully complete their studies in various postgraduate programs at the Open University of Tanzania is low compared to the number of enrolled students (Magali, 2019; OUT, 2021; OUT Graduation Booklet, 2021). The delay in the completion of studies among postgraduate students in higher learning institutions in Tanzania has been observed to affect the development plans of both universities and students. In order to address the issue of delay in the completion of studies for postgraduate students in Tanzanian higher learning institutions, TCU (2019), among other strategies, has directed all universities in Tanzania to establish regulations and guidelines that clarify the roles of students and supervisors in relation to postgraduate programs. Despite the initiatives taken, the delay in the completion of studies among postgraduate students persists.

Quality supervision is among the fundamental solutions for the timely completion of studies for postgraduate students (Nyamubi, 2021). Student-supervisor interaction is the cornerstone of quality, efficient, and effective postgraduate research supervision, leading to timely completion of studies. Due to the nature of the Open University of Tanzania, where students and supervisors are geographically separated, the interaction between master's and PhD students and their supervisors should be thoroughly studied, as their research outputs contribute to new knowledge

and determine students' completion of studies. However, the extent to which student-supervisor interactions affect the timely completion of studies among postgraduate students at the Open University of Tanzania is not clearly known. Therefore, it was necessary to investigate the extent to which student-supervisor interactions affect the timely completion of studies among postgraduate students at the Open University of Tanzania.

## **2. Statement of the Problem**

Postgraduate students who enroll in higher learning institutions wish to complete their studies within the minimum time stipulated. Studies and reports show that majority of postgraduate students who enrolled in the masters and PhD degree at the Open University of Tanzania take long time to complete their studies (Magali, 2019; OUT, 2021; OUT Graduation Booklet, 2021). Delay in completion of studies among postgraduate students raised concerns to educational stakeholders as it lead to resources competition among students, increased stress, and negatively affect students and university competitive advantages. Studies have been conducted to investigate the effects of the delay in the completion of studies among postgraduate students in the Tanzanian context (Magali, 2019; Nyamubi, 2021; Amani et al., 2022), but they have not exactly linked the aspect of student-supervisor interactions with the delay in the completion of studies among students at the Open University of Tanzania. Therefore, the current study was conducted to investigate the impact of student-supervisor interactions on the timely completion of studies among postgraduate students at the Open University of Tanzania.

## **3. Research Question**

To what extent do student-supervisor interactions affect timely completion of studies among postgraduate students at the Open University of Tanzania?

## **4. Significance of the Study**

The findings of this study are expected to have practical significance for all stakeholders involved in postgraduate research supervision. The study findings might benefit universities, which are the institutions that prepare postgraduate students who will occupy different positions in the country. The study may also help staff and other education stakeholders involved in the supervision of postgraduate theses and dissertations to understand how student-supervisor interactions can affect students' timely completion of studies. Moreover, the study findings may inform policymakers in the Ministry of Education, Science, and Technology; the Tanzania Commission for Universities, and the Open University of Tanzania to formulate policies that guide effective student-supervisor interactions in Open and Distance Learning institutions in Tanzania. Since students and supervisors are geographically separated, specific policies on administering ODL research supervision are necessary for the effective and timely completion of studies among postgraduate students.

Furthermore, the study findings can contribute to the existing body of knowledge regarding the of student-supervisor interactions and their impact on postgraduate students' timely completion of studies in Open and Distance Learning settings. Creswell and Creswell (2018) argue that conducting research in education is important as it uncovers new facts and provides suggestions for improving phenomena. In this regard, the study findings contribute to the theory that relates to student-supervisor interactions and their influence on timely completion of studies.

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## 5. Theoretical Framework

This study was guided by the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) theory by Lev Vygotsky (1978). The foundation of the ZPD theory is that a learner's ability to successfully complete a task depends on the assistance of a more capable person, which is generally referred to as assisted learning. According to Vygotsky (1978), the learning of an individual occurs through social interactions with skilled individuals. The main idea of the theory is that a person with more knowledge can enhance the learning of another individual by guiding them through tasks that are above their capabilities. The ZPD demonstrates the difference between what a learner can do without support and what can be achieved with the support and guidance of a skilled person through interactions.

Zone of Proximal Development theory encourages collaboration and cooperation between learners and more knowledgeable others. In ZPD, learners can benefit from the feedback and guidance received from their peers or teachers. ZPD can also help to build learners' confidence by providing them with appropriate support and guidance. Moreover, the theory emphasizes that social interactions between learners and more knowledgeable others is the key feature of success. The theory further explained some of the important roles played by teachers and instructors especially on how peer-to-peer or student-supervisors' interactions can play an important role in skill development among learners.

Moreover, it has to be pointed out that Zone of Proximal Development theory does not apply to all social or cultural groups. For example, people with learning difficulties or with social disorders may not be able to learn effectively through social interactions unless more and longer support is provided to them. This means the theory is not suitable to people with special needs because their ability to interact is limited.

ZPD theory explains how postgraduate students may succeed when they receive support through interactions with people with more experience, knowledge and skills than them. In this case research supervisors are referred to individuals with more knowledge than postgraduate students. In the entire process of research supervision, postgraduate students interact with their research supervisors in order to receive assistance and guidance related to research writing. Supervisors work in close relationship with the student throughout the research writing process. The interactions between students and supervisors that exist during dissertation development are vital for the accomplishment thesis writing. Vygotsky observed that interaction with knowledgeable people as an effective way of developing skills and strategies necessary for developing new understandings.

## 6. Review of Empirical Literature

This section contains review of empirical literatures on the effect of student-supervisor supervisory interactions on timely completion of studies

Matin and Khan (2017) conducted study in Bangladesh to explore the common problems facing postgraduate students during thesis work on timely completion of studies. A cross sectional descriptive study was conducted in 20 different colleges and institutes in Bangladesh. A total of 133 postgraduate students, 46 research supervisors were selected using purposive sampling technique. Questionnaires were used to collect data from postgraduate students and research supervisors. Study findings revealed that financial challenges and inadequate or irregular meetings between students and supervisors were among the problems that were faced by postgraduate students in completing their studies on time. The reviewed study has offered

valuable contribution to the body of knowledge on problem of thesis supervision; however it is important to conduct similar study in Tanzanian context especially at the Open University of Tanzania that operates in the ODL mode. The findings of the reviewed study largely focused on the irregular meetings between students and supervisors, but the current study was extended to explore the effects of job and family responsibilities on student's-supervisor's interactions as related to postgraduate students delay in completion of studies. Furthermore, the use of questionnaire as the sole means of data collection might compromise the validity of the study findings. Therefore the current study triangulated the data collection instruments by employing questionnaires, interviews and documents analysis schedule. In addition, the use of purposive sampling technique in the quantitative study raised questions on compatibility with the cross sectional descriptive study, hence the current study employed stratified sampling, multistage sampling techniques and purposive sampling technique.

Rasool et al (2022) conducted study in China to explore the effects of online supervisory feedback on the students'-supervisors' communication during the COVID-19. The study used qualitative design and purposive sampling technique was used to obtain the sample of 45 respondents. Open ended interview was used to collect data from PhD students and research supervisors. The findings revealed that online supervision problems especially for students who are not familiar with online technologies and those who lack access to computers have been negatively affecting progress on writing their dissertation. Although the reviewed study has offered valuable information with regard to the effect of online supervisory interaction on students' research writing, similar study was conducted in the Tanzanian context because of different technological background between the two countries. Since the study findings show that the online feedback that students receives from supervisors negatively influence postgraduate research writing, less have been explained with regard to its effect on student-supervisor supervisory interactions. Moreover, since the previous study relied on the data from PhD students and research supervisors alone it raised concerns on the validity of the findings. Triangulation especially, diversified respondents and varieties of data collection instruments have increased the validity of the study findings.

Manyike (2017) conducted a study to explore Postgraduate supervision at an Open and Distance Learning (ODL) institution in South Africa. The study specifically aimed at investigating supervisory challenges at the University of South Africa (UNISA) which is among the major ODL institutions in South Africa. Purposive sampling technique was used to obtain ten research supervisors with different experiences in supervising postgraduate students. Open and closed ended questionnaires were used to collect data for the study. Findings revealed that students and supervisors in UNISA were not involved in the selection of the supervisors as a result they did not know what each was capable of, and what their needs were. Since the study added valuable information onto supervisory issues in the ODL institutions, a similar study with a large sample size needed to be conducted in the Tanzanian context to explore more information regarding the supervisory challenges on student-supervisor interactions. The findings of the previous study raised questions on validity and reliability because it solely relied the data from research supervisors and employed questionnaires for data collection, in order to enrich data and ensure validity and reliability the study the current study triangulated the respondents by including postgraduate students, Director of Postgraduate Studies, Faculty Deans and employed varieties of data collection instruments namely questionnaires, interview guide and document analysis schedule.



Bahtilla (2022) conducted a study to explore the effects of timely supervisory feedback on effective student-supervisor interactions in relation to timely completion of studies among postgraduates' students. The study adopted exploratory case study design under the qualitative methodology. The sample size of 66 research supervisors from two universities in Cameroon was included. A semi structured interview was used to collect data from the respondents. Data was analyzed thematically. The study findings revealed that heavy workload in the office, delayed submission of documents by students and students' failure to work on supervisors' comments affected student-supervisor interactions. The reviewed study was recognized for adding value to the body of knowledge of supervisor feedback on timely completion of studies; however similar study was conducted in Tanzanian context to enrich body of knowledge. The findings of the previous study concentrated with students' related challenges and left aside supervisors' related challenges. The current study filled up this gap by extending the responses to supervisors' related challenges, Faculty Deans and Director of Postgraduate student in order to have thorough understanding of the topic. Moreover, the use of interview as the sole means of data collection instrument might limit the reliability of study findings; therefore, the current study filled the gap by triangulation where varieties of data collection instruments and diversified categories of respondents were employed.

Rugut (2019) conducted a study in South Africa that aimed at exploring the nature of the student-supervisor relationship in the completion of educational doctoral studies in two African universities in South Africa and Kenya. The study used case study design under the qualitative approach. Convenient and purposive sampling techniques were used to select ten students from the two universities who completed doctoral degree within the last five years. Semi structured interview was used to collect data and the data were analyzed by using thematic approach. The findings revealed that misunderstandings between supervisors and students during supervisory process affected supervisory interaction and eventually led to delay in completion of studies. Since the previous study relied on the data from postgraduate students who completed studies, information on students who continues with the studies would be missing. To fill the gap, the current study involved postgraduate students who were still pursuing their postgraduate studies but delayed in completion of studies. Moreover, the study employed a variety of data collection instruments; and appropriate sampling techniques in order to ensure validity and reliability of the study findings.

Malunda et al. (2021) conducted a study in Uganda to investigate research supervision as a key factor in the progression of graduate students in public higher learning institutions in Uganda. A cross-sectional survey design was used to conduct the study, and a total of 336 participants comprising master's students, research supervisors, and heads of graduate schools were selected using random, convenient, and purposive sampling techniques. Questionnaires were used to collect data from master's students, while interviews were used to collect data from research supervisors and heads of graduate schools. Regression analysis and content analysis were used to analyze the data. The findings revealed that delayed feedback during the research supervision process affected supervisory interactions and timely completion of studies. The study provided insights into the issues pertaining to postgraduate research supervision progression by students in Ugandan public universities; however, there were several limitations that should be considered when interpreting the results. Since the previous study used only questionnaires to collect data from master's students and interviews to collect data from research supervisors and heads of graduate schools, there might have been limited depth and quality of the data collected, as

important information might have been left out by respondents. Moreover, the study focused only on public higher learning institutions in Uganda, so the results might not be generalizable to other contexts or countries with different higher education systems. To fill this knowledge gap, the current study was conducted to investigate research supervision practices for timely completion of studies among postgraduate students at the Open University of Tanzania. The current study used a convergent design that allowed the use of a variety of data collection instruments and sampling techniques. The study also used diversified respondents to guarantee the validity and reliability of the findings.

Mkhai (2023) conducted a study in Tanzania to examine the causes of slow completion rates among postgraduate students of the Information Studies Program at the University of Dar es Salaam. The study used both quantitative and qualitative approaches, and a sample of 61 respondents was involved, comprising 56 postgraduate students and 5 research supervisors. Data were collected using questionnaires and interview guides. The study findings revealed that the majority of students took more than the university-stipulated time to complete their studies. The reviewed study has provided understanding on the causes of slow completion among postgraduate students; however, there were limitations that should be considered when interpreting the results. The sample size of 61 respondents (56 postgraduate students and 5 lecturers) used in the previous study might not have been sufficient to draw meaningful conclusions; therefore, a larger sample size could have increased the validity of the study. The use of questionnaires and interviews to collect data from postgraduate students and lecturers, respectively, might not have been sufficient instruments for data collection because the instruments might have challenged the capturing of complex issues involved in slow completion of studies among postgraduate students. Therefore, the current study employed a convergent design that granted the possibility of using a variety of data collection instruments and sampling techniques.

## **7. Research Methodology**

This study employed a convergent design under mixed methods approach. The target population of the study was 1,127 individuals that comprised of 989 postgraduate students, 133 research supervisors, 4 Faculty Deans and 1 Director of Postgraduate Studies. Stratified random sampling technique, multistage sampling technique and purposive sampling technique were used to select a sample of 242 individuals that comprised of 197 postgraduate students, 40 research supervisors, 4 Faculty Deans, and 1 Director of Postgraduate Studies. Postgraduate students who were involved in this study included 162 masters students and 35 PhD students. Questionnaires, interview guides and document analysis schedule were used to collect data from the respondents. Instruments were validated by research experts and the reliability of the Likert scale items were ensured through Cronbach's Alpha Coefficient that gave an output of 0.782 and 0.750 for students and supervisors respectively. Moreover, triangulation and peer debriefing were used to ensure reliability of qualitative instruments. Quantitative data were analyzed by using descriptive statistics (frequencies, percentages & means) while qualitative data were analyzed by using thematic analysis where data were transcribed; familiarized, coded, themes were developed, and finally presented, interpreted, and discussed.

## 8. Findings and Discussion

This section provides results of the study findings on student-supervisor interactions in enhancing postgraduate students' timely completion of studies at the Open University of Tanzania. To obtain required data, postgraduate students and research supervisors were provided with a five-point Likert scale to rate the extent scale with the statement provided. Table 1 shows the combined responses of postgraduate students and research supervisors on students-supervisor interactions in enhancing postgraduate students' timely completion of studies at the Open University of Tanzania.

*Table 1. Postgraduate students and supervisors responses on the factors affecting student-supervisor interactions on postgraduate students' research supervision (n=219)*

| S/<br>N | Statement  | Respondents | VLE |     | LE |     | S |      | HE |     | VHE |     | Mean |
|---------|--|-------------|-----|-----|----|-----|---|------|----|-----|-----|-----|------|
|         |  |             | f   | %   | F  | %   | f | %    | f  | %   | F   | %   |      |
| 1       | Job/family responsibilities affect students supervisor interactions                      | Students    | 1   | 10. | 3  | 17. | 8 | 4.5  | 7  | 43. | 4   | 24. | 3.55 |
|         |  | Supervisors | 8   | 1   | 1  | 3   |   | %    | 8  | 6   | 4   | 6   |      |
|         |  |             | 4   | 10. | 4  | 10. | 2 | 5.0  | 1  | 35. | 1   | 40. | 3.85 |
|         |  |             |     | 0   |    | 0   |   |      | 4  | 0   | 6   | 0   |      |
| 2       | Students delay with the document affect Interaction                                      | Supervisors | 1   | 10. | 1  | 10. | 9 | 5.0  | 5  | 30. | 8   | 44. | 3.89 |
|         |  |             | 8   | 1   | 8  | 1   |   |      | 4  | 2   | 0   | 7   |      |
| 3       | Supervisors delay with the documents affect supervisory interactions                     | Students    | 9   | 5.0 | 1  | 7.8 | 9 | 5.0  | 7  | 41. | 7   | 40. | 4.04 |
|         |  |             |     |     | 4  |     |   |      | 5  | 9   | 2   | 2   |      |
| 4       | Geographical distance between me and my students(s) affects our supervisory interactions | Students    | 1   | 10. | 1  | 10. | 7 | 3.9  | 7  | 41. | 6   | 33. | 3.78 |
|         |  | Supervisors | 8   | 0   | 9  | 6   |   |      | 5  | 9   | 0   | 5   |      |
|         |  |             | 0   | 0   | 1  | 2.5 | 5 | 12.5 | 2  | 57. | 1   | 27. | 4.10 |
|         |  |             |     |     |    |     |   |      | 3  | 5   | 1   | 5   |      |
| 5       | Students/supervisors unwelcoming behaviours affects students-supervisors interactions    | Students    | 9   | 5.0 | 1  | 9.5 | 9 | 5.0  | 7  | 39. | 7   | 40. | 4.01 |
|         |  | Supervisors |     |     | 7  |     |   |      | 1  | 7   | 3   | 8   |      |
|         |  |             | 3   | 7.5 | 5  | 12. | 2 | 5.0  | 1  | 45. | 1   | 30. | 3.77 |
|         |  |             |     |     |    | 5   |   |      | 8  | 0   | 2   | 0   |      |
| 6       | Online learning platforms limits our supervisory interactions                            | Students    | 4   | 24. | 8  | 50. | 9 | 5.1  | 1  | 10. | 1   | 10. | 2.30 |
|         |  | Supervisors | 4   | 7   | 9  | 0   |   |      | 8  | 1   | 8   | 1   |      |
|         |  |             | 1   | 25. | 1  | 37. | 3 | 7.5  | 5  | 12. | 7   | 17. | 2.60 |
|         |  |             | 0   | 0   | 5  | 5   |   |      |    | 5   |     | 5   |      |



|    |  |             |   |      |   |      |   |      |   |     |   |     |      |
|----|--|-------------|---|------|---|------|---|------|---|-----|---|-----|------|
| 7  | Financial difficulties hamper students-supervisor academic interactions                              | Students    | 9 | 5.0  | 1 | 10.  | 1 | 10.1 | 8 | 44. | 5 | 30. | 3.84 |
|    |  | Supervisors | 0 | 0    | 2 | 5.0  | 2 | 5.0  | 2 | 55. | 1 | 35. | 4.10 |
| 8  | The use of online supervision affect our supervisory interactions                                    | Students    | 1 | 6.1  | 1 | 9.5  | 7 | 3.9  | 7 | 39. | 7 | 40. | 3.99 |
|    |  | Supervisors | 2 | 5.0  | 4 | 10.  | 2 | 5.0  | 2 | 60. | 8 | 20. | 3.80 |
| 9  | Being allocated with the supervisor/students I never meet before affect our supervisory interactions | Students    | 9 | 5.0  | 9 | 5.0  | 9 | 5.0  | 9 | 54. | 5 | 30. | 4.00 |
|    |  | Supervisors | 4 | 10.0 | 6 | 15.0 | 2 | 5.0  | 8 | 20. | 2 | 50. | 3.85 |
| 10 | The mismatch of students' and supervisors' area of specialization affect interactions                | Students    | 9 | 5.0  | 1 | 10.  | 9 | 5.0  | 5 | 29. | 9 | 50. | 4.10 |
|    |  | Supervisors | 0 | 0    | 1 | 2.5  | 2 | 5.0  | 1 | 42. | 2 | 50. | 4.37 |

**Source: Field Data (2023)**

**Key:** 1=Very Low Extent (VLE), 2=Low Extent (LE), 3= Sometimes (S), 4= High Extent (HE), 5= Very High Extent (VHE)

Data in Table 4.4 shows that, majority and greater majority (68.2% and 75.0%) of postgraduate students and research supervisors respectively rated to high extent and very high extent that job/family responsibilities affect student-supervisor supervisory interactions in the Open University of Tanzania. Regarding the mean scores, postgraduate students and research supervisors responded with the mean scores of 3.55 and 3.85 respectively. The mean scores show that job/family responsibilities affect student-supervisor supervisory interactions. This implies that supervisory interactions of the majority of postgraduate students and research supervisors were negatively affected by their engagement in job and family responsibilities. Involvement in family or job responsibilities consume time that might be used in performing academic duties such as writing their dissertation, searching for the literatures, or making consultations with supervisors. Since performing academic duties requires mental concentration, postgraduate students' engagement with non-academic activities might affect their research writing and supervisory activities. When Director of Postgraduate Studies (DPS) was interviewed had this to say:

Most of our students are in-service students and are occupied with job and family responsibilities something that interferes with their studies. Sometimes students fail to attend academic sessions like face to face because of family and job responsibilities. Failure of students to attend important academic sessions due to their engagements on the job and family responsibilities affect their timely completion of studies (*Personal communication, January 10, 2023*).

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An interview with the Dean Faculty A affirmed that:

Due to the nature of our university, most of our students pursue their degree programmes without study leave. Lack of study leave limits our students' smooth progress in their academics because majority are spending most of their time in their working places something that affect their studies. Sometimes students fail to access university services because they visit OUT office late hours (*Personal communication, January 6, 2023*).

The responses from the DPS and Dean of Faculty imply that postgraduate students are involved in family or job responsibilities that interfere with their academic progress. Due to their involvement in such duties sometimes students postpone some academic activities which affect their timely completion of studies. The findings of the current study are in line with the study conducted by Behtilla (2022) in Cameroon who found out that job and family responsibilities negatively affect student-supervisor interactions in the research supervision process. Also a study conducted by Ates (2021) in Turkey revealed that involvement in family responsibilities affect students' academic achievements. Engaging in family and job responsibilities such as routinely taking care of household chores, attending social gathering might affect postgraduate academic progress. For a student to succeed the research writing more time should be spared for academic activities than non-academic activities. Moreover, the findings reflect the idea of Tinto's Theory of interactionist (1993) which contends that inability of individual student to resolve educational and occupational objectives tends to affect student's academic journey. Therefore, the correlation of the findings of the current study with those of previous literatures indicates that job or family responsibilities to high extent negatively affect student-supervisor supervisory interactions.

With regard to the delay with the draft document on supervisory interactions majority (74.9% and 82.1%) of postgraduate students and research supervisors showed to high extent and very high extent that delay with the documents affect student-supervisor supervisory interactions at the Open University of Tanzania. Postgraduate students and research supervisors responded with the mean scores of 3.89 and 4.04 respectively. The mean scores show that delaying with the draft documents affected student-supervisor interactions. This indicates that supervisory interactions of the majority of postgraduate students and research supervisors were affected by the delay of the draft documents from supervisors or students. The delay of students/supervisor in working on the draft document could be due to being overloaded with responsibilities, lack of commitment or failure of students to comprehend the comments given by their supervisors.

Reviewed minutes of meetings between OUT research supervisors and the office of postgraduate studies indicated that the Directorate of Postgraduate Studies in collaboration with supervisors to closely work with all postgraduate students who tend to disappear and stay with the comments for long time. This shows that once students are given comments by their supervisors they don't resubmit the documents on time.

When the DPS was interviewed on the matter, she reported as follows:

Students and supervisors delaying with the draft documents has been a challenge in supervisory interactions. Students stay with draft documents for long without giving feedback to the supervisors. There are complaints from students that their supervisors take too long to work on their documents (*Personal communication, January 10, 2023*).

An interview with the Dean of Faculty C added that:

Students delaying with the documents have been a serious problem at the Open University of Tanzania. Some students stay with the documents for more than three months without working on the comments. Delaying with the document affect

supervision progress because if a student takes too long with the document the moment he/she gives it to you, it will be difficult for you to recall where you ended last time (*Personal communication, January 13, 2023*).

Data from DPS and Faculty Dean indicate that students and supervisors delay with the document. This implies that there is a problem of delaying with the documents for long time which leads to failure in provision of timely feedback to students and supervisors. Students staying with the document for a long time could be due to difficulty in comprehending the comments given, lack of interest to work on the document or being occupied with other obligations. Generally, failure of either students or supervisors to submit the documents on time affects supervisory interactions. It is important for the two parties to ensure that they don't spend too much with the documents unnecessarily so that the supervisory activities progress. Once the document is delayed in the hands of either supervisors or students it might lead to the delay in completion of studies because the duration of studies is fixed. The findings of the current study concurred with the study conducted in Ugandan higher learning institutions by Malunda et al. (2021) who revealed that delayed and poor feedback during research supervision process affected supervisory interactions and timely completion of studies. Moreover, another study conducted by Mbogo et al. (2020) in Kenya found out that the delay of the documents from both supervisors and students was among the factors for the delay in completion of studies among students in Public and Private Universities in Kenya. Timely feedbacks help students/supervisors to work on the comments on time, create a sense of being valued while delayed feedback may interfere with the decision making regarding to comments given. Matching of the findings of the current study with the reviewed literatures prove that delay in providing supervisory feedback to students/supervisors negatively affected timely completion of studies among postgraduate students.

On the effect of geographical distance between supervisors and students on supervisory interactions, data from Table 4.4 shows that, majority (75.4% and 85.0%) of postgraduate students and research supervisors rated to high extent and very high extent that geographical distance between supervisors and students affect supervisory interactions. Moreover, postgraduate students and research supervisors responded with the mean scores of 3.78 and 4.10 respectively. The mean scores show that, geographical distance between supervisors and students negatively affected their supervisory interactions. This finding implies that supervisory interactions of the majority postgraduate students and research supervisors to high extent are negatively affected by the geographical distance between them. The geographical separation might limit students/supervisors face to face meeting for consultations, or access to resources necessary for research writing.

Further triangulation of the findings regarding the geographical distance between students and supervisors were done through interview with DPS who had this to explain:

At the Open University of Tanzania the geographical separation between students and supervisors is inevitable. This separation limits students' face to face meeting with their colleagues; meeting with their supervisors or even accessing university services at the regional centres. The use of only online communication limits effective student-supervisor supervisory interactions (*Personal communication, January 10, 2023*).

An interview with Dean of Faculty B reported that:

Most of our students live in the places which is distant from the OUT offices where supervisors and other staff are located. Due to the nature and operations of OUT, it is

common for a student lives in the northern zone of Tanzania to be allocated to a supervisor whose working station is in the southern zone of Tanzania. Therefore this distance between students and supervisors may affect supervisory interactions (*Personal communication, January 9, 2023*).

The responses from the interview with the DPS and Faculty Dean suggest that the existing geographical distance between postgraduate students and their supervisors affected their supervisory interactions. The existing distance limits students' meeting with their supervisors for face to face discussions on the matters pertaining to research writing and supervision. The findings of the current study coincided with the study conducted by Masenya (2021) in South Africa which revealed that students who conduct research projects in a distance learning program have insufficient access to the University face-to-face instruction which leads to limited interactions with university services. The spatial and temporal distance together with the disconnection between the supervisors and students has negatively affected supervisory interactions. The findings are in line with the Moore Theory of Transactional Distance (1997) which contends that geographical distance between learner and instructor cause psychological and communication misunderstandings between the two parties that affect the actual teaching and learning. Therefore the distance between students and supervisors of the Open University of Tanzania limits student-supervisor interactions which in turn affect the exchange of ideas. The findings of the current study with the reviewed theory and previous studies indicate that the existing geographical separation between postgraduate students and research supervisors negatively affected students' timely completion of studies.

Also data in Table 4.4 indicates that, majority (80.5%) of postgraduate students rated to high extent and very high extent the use of online supervision affect student-supervisor supervisory interactions. Moreover, postgraduate students responded with the mean score of 3.99. This implies that the use of online supervision affect student-supervisor supervisory interactions. This implies that majority of postgraduate students showed that the use of online supervision negatively affects their supervisory interactions. The use of online supervision limits postgraduate students who are not skilled in using ICT based formats like track changes. The effect might be due to students' lack of requisite knowledge of ICT, and lack of access to computers or being reluctant to use the new technology. In-depth interview conducted with the Dean of Faculty C revealed that some students face challenges to work on the online supervision formats, and this was the comments:

It is true that some of our students are not familiar with the use of online supervision systems which is commonly applied by supervisors in the Open and Distance Learning systems. Some students do not know what to do with the online comments given by their supervisors ending up confused something that lead to the delay in completion of studies (*Personal communication, January 13, 2023*).

The Dean of Faculty B admitted by saying that:

Some of our students are not familiar with the use of ICT in facilitating learning. Most of our students pursued their degree programmes in the conventional university where pen and paper supervisory communication was the common approach. So using online supervision in most of their supervisory interactions is something new to them (*Personal communication, January 9, 2023*).

Data from the Faculty Deans show that, some of postgraduate students at the Open University of Tanzania they are not able to work on the comments given through online format like track changes. Online supervision is predominant mode used by supervisors that students and supervisors in the Open and Distance learning systems. Students' inability to work on online systems might be caused by lack of computer skills, poor knowledge on the use of the system or inaccessibility to ICT devices in their localities. The findings of the current study concurred with a study conducted by Rasool (2022) in China who revealed that lack of skills of online supervision among lecturers negatively affected postgraduate students' progress in writing dissertations and research supervision. Another study conducted by Gumbo (2019) in South Africa observed that lack of skills of working with online documents affected effective research supervision. The consistence of the findings of the current study with reviewed literatures proves that the use of online supervision procedures affects postgraduate students' timely completion of their studies. Moreover, data in Table 4.4 show that majority (85.0%) of postgraduate students indicated to high extent and very high extent their supervisory interactions were affected by being allocated to research supervisors who they had never met before. Postgraduate students responded with the mean score of 4.0. This findings imply that supervisory interactions of the majority of postgraduate students are affected by being allocated to the supervisors they had never met before. At the Open University students do not propose research supervisors instead students are allocated to the supervisors without being consulted. The supervisory interactions might be affected because at the beginning of supervisory journey students and supervisors should know the interest of each other. This was confirmed by the DPS who said that:

There is a problem when students are allocated to the supervisors who they have never met before. At the Open University of Tanzania students do not propose the supervisors; instead, allocation of supervisors depends on the matching of students' topic and supervisors' area of specialization. Therefore it is possible for a student to be allocated a supervisor who he/she doesn't know; therefore it requires time for them to familiarize.  
(*Personal communication, January 10, 2023*).

Responses from the DPS show that, the procedures to allocate students to supervisors without their involvement affected their interactions. Once a student is allocated to a supervisor who he/she doesn't know the two parties (supervisors and students) need time for familiarization. The time for familiarization has implications on the overall study time; hence the timely completion of studies is affected. These findings concur with the study that was conducted by Ives and Rowley (2020) in Australia who revealed that students who felt involved in supervisor selection tend to develop good interpersonal working relationships with the supervisors and are likely to make good progress. Another study conducted in Russia by and Navrouzoglou (2022) revealed that a matching approach of supervisors and students allows interaction and expression of interest that could significantly enhance student engagement and satisfaction with dissertation supervision. The agreement of the findings of the current study and the reviewed literatures signifies that the tendency of the university allocating supervisors to students without their involvement affects supervisory interactions negatively.

Furthermore, data in Table 4.4 show other attributes and their corresponding mean scores that negatively affected supervisory interactions and caused delay in completion of studies among postgraduate students at the Open University of Tanzania. Factors such as financial difficulties and the mismatch of students and supervisors' areas of specialization had the mean scores of 3.97 and 4.23 respectively. However, on the Students/supervisors unwelcoming behaviours



affect students-supervisors interactions, a small mean score 2.15 was observed which did not affect students' timely completion of studies.

## 9. Conclusion

Based on the above findings the study concluded that:

Ineffective supervisory interactions that postgraduate students experienced to high extent negatively affected their timely completion of studies. It was further concluded that the similar supervisory interactions that exhibited at the regional centres and the headquarters of negatively affected timely completion of studies among postgraduate students.

## 10. Recommendation

The study recommended that factors contribution to improved supervisory interactions among postgraduate students and research supervisors at the Open University of Tanzania should be enhanced in order to promote timely completion of studies among postgraduate students at Open University of Tanzania.

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