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Institutional Policy Support and Doctoral Studies Completion at the University of Nairobi, Kenya

Adan Ali Abdi*, Phylisters Daizy Matula, Dorothy Ndunge Kyalo & Susan Yego Chepkonga
Department of Educational Management, Policy and Curriculum Studies, University of Nairobi, Nairobi, Kenya
* Corresponding author. Email: abdikheir82@gmail.com ; phylisters.daisy@uonbi.ac.ke ;
dorothy.ndunge@uonbi.ac.ke ; syego@uonbi.ac.ke

Abstract

Doctoral education underpins a nation's capacity for knowledge production, yet completion rates remain low: fewer than 30% of doctoral candidates in Kenya complete their studies, and fewer than 11% of those in public universities do so. This study examined whether institutional policy support is related to doctoral studies completion at the University of Nairobi, the oldest and largest public university in Kenya. A descriptive survey design was adopted within a convergent mixed-methods approach, triangulating the views of doctoral graduates, supervisors, and faculty deans. From a target population of 1,839 (1,183 supervisors, 646 graduates, and 10 deans), Taro Yamane's (1967) formula yielded a sample of 329 questionnaire respondents (182 supervisors and 147 graduates), selected through stratified random sampling; the 10 deans were purposively selected for interviews. An overall response rate of 76.7% was achieved (260 of 339 questionnaires, plus 8 of 10 dean interviews). The Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin measure and Bartlett's test of sphericity supported construct validity, and Cronbach's alpha ($\geq .70$) confirmed internal consistency. Quantitative data were analysed in SPSS 25 using descriptive statistics and simple linear regression; qualitative data were analysed thematically in NVivo 15. Institutional policy support was not a statistically significant predictor of completion for either graduates ($\beta = .035$, $p = .727$) or supervisors ($\beta = .064$, $p = .417$), although both relationships were positive. Both groups nonetheless rated policy support highly (grand means of 3.95 and 4.34 on a five-point scale). This combination suggests that policy frameworks exist but do not, by themselves, distinguish completion outcomes; the qualitative strand attributed this gap to a distinction between policy existence and policy enactment. Policy enactment should be tested as a moderating condition in future research across Kenyan universities.

Keywords: Doctoral studies completion; Institutional policy support; Higher education governance; Mixed methods research

1. Introduction

Doctoral education is the highest level of academic training and one of the principal drivers of knowledge creation and innovation. Its graduates inform universities, research systems, public policy, and broader socio-economic development. Completion, however, remains a weak point: high attrition rates and long times-to-degree call into question institutional efficiency and the sustainability of research systems (Alves et al., 2024; Van Rooij et al., 2021; Williams et al., 2023).

Globally, fewer than two-thirds of doctoral candidates complete within the expected timelines. Longitudinal evidence indicates that less than half (50%) complete within ten years in the United States, particularly in the social sciences and humanities (Wollast et al., 2023). European systems generally perform better, though with wide variability: completion rates average around 55% (European University Association, 2023) and fall as low as 40% in some fields. These trends suggest that institutional design has a stronger influence on doctoral attrition than individual student effort.



This is corroborated by recent developments in European policy. In the European Higher Education Area, Marti and Peneasu (2025) report that doctoral education has become increasingly institutionalised, driven by the expansion of formal doctoral schools, an increasingly structured supervisory system, and a rising share of academic staff holding doctorates; the number of doctoral schools alone has grown by 42% since 2014. Despite these parallels, significant differences persist across institutions, disciplines, and student profiles, suggesting that reform alone does not guarantee equitable success.

In Africa, completion challenges are structural in nature: growth in enrolment has outpaced the development of supervisory capacity, research infrastructure, and institutional coordination. Mwangi and Ochieng (2023) report that completion of doctoral degrees at African public universities stands at just 32%, while Kimani et al. (2022) identify well-coordinated management-support systems as a key predictor of higher completion rates. Both studies, however, make limited use of descriptive statistics and offer few insights into the pathways connecting support to completion.

Completion rates also vary considerably across Southern Africa. South Africa's doctoral system achieves a completion rate of approximately 65%, supported by structured doctoral schools, a national research-funding mechanism, and clearly defined supervisory duties, although disparities linked to institutional history persist (Council on Higher Education, 2023). Botswana, by contrast, recorded a completion rate of just 17% in 2018 (Joseph & Kalabamu, 2018). This considerable gap around 65% compared with 17% suggests that the maturity and scale of a country's doctoral system matter more than regional location.

These challenges are mirrored in East Africa, where rapid programme expansion has outpaced funding, research infrastructure, and supervisory capacity. In Kenya, doctoral enrolment has risen in response to demand for qualified academic staff, yet completion remains low: according to the Commission for University Education (2023), only 11% of those who enrol in doctoral programmes complete within the expected timeframe, indicating systemic challenges in doctoral governance.

Kenyan studies point to several drivers of completion. Matheka et al. (2020), for instance, suggest that institutional conditions shape doctoral trajectories more than self-efficacy or motivation. Funding further compounds the problem: many candidates are self-funded and lack access to scholarships, which can lengthen completion time and increase attrition risk (Barasa & Omulando, 2018; Mbogo et al., 2020; Netanda et al., 2019). Such studies, however, often overlook the interaction between funding, supervision quality, and research infrastructure.

The University of Nairobi, Kenya's oldest and largest public university, plays a pivotal role in doctoral training and has introduced measures such as standardised admissions and the partial digitisation of postgraduate administration (Motanya et al., 2023). Even so, completion rates remain low, suggesting institutional barriers that limit graduates' contribution to national development.

Institutional policy is central to this picture. Rather than a mere administrative backdrop, policy functions as a mechanism that shapes candidates' progression through supervision, assessment, registration, funding, research ethics, and timelines (Hill & Conceição, 2020). National evidence sharpens this claim: Momanyi (2022) attributes Kenya's persistently low completion, despite rising enrolment, to weak governance; inconsistent supervision policy, uneven digital access, and poor accommodation of part-time candidates and, crucially, distinguishes policy existence from policy enactment, arguing that documented regulations without coordinated implementation, monitoring, and accountability do little for completion. Rong'uno (2016) advances this empirically in Kenyan public universities, showing that policy incoherence surfaces as divergent supervisory expectations, non-standardised timelines, and fragmented administrative procedures, while Motanya et al. (2023) similarly link unclear policies on supervisor allocation, thesis submission, and funding disbursement to completion delays across four Kenyan universities.

Comparative work points to useful benchmarks. Breitenbach (2023) identifies milestone-based progression, supervisor-accountability frameworks, and structured onboarding as enabling instruments, while cautioning against informal mentorship cultures that rely on personal discretion rather than institutional standards. Lim et al. (2019) provide a systems-theoretic foundation, treating doctoral education as a relationship among supervisory, assessment, and resource subsystems coordinated by policy, with evidence that mismatches between subsystems produce delay and attrition. At the University of Nairobi, these insights pose an empirical conundrum: the university has a substantial



doctoral policy framework yet limited uptake in completion, suggesting that policy effectiveness depends not only on design but also on the uniformity of its application, the clarity of its communication, and candidates' perception and experience of it dimensions rarely examined in large, decentralised universities where departmental autonomy can hinder implementation. This study addresses that gap.

The study was grounded in General Systems Theory (von Bertalanffy, 1968) and Tinto's (1993) theory of student integration. General Systems Theory conceives of the university as a system of interdependent subsystems held together by wholeness, feedback, and equilibrium, such that disruptions in any one subsystem including institutional policy propagate through the doctoral process; consistent completion therefore depends on the integrated operation of the whole system rather than on any single part. Tinto's student integration theory, although originally developed to explain undergraduate persistence, has since been extended to doctoral attrition: it holds that persistence depends on academic and social integration intellectual immersion combined with relational support and shifts attention away from presumed student deficits towards institutional practices in supervision, feedback, and peer interaction. Because Tinto's theory was developed at the level of the individual student, its application here to institutional policy required explicit translation across levels of analysis, a tension the discussion revisits when interpreting the qualitative findings. Together, the two theories frame doctoral studies completion as a function of systemic coherence among institutional supports rather than as an individual achievement.

The conceptual framework treats institutional policy support as the independent variable and doctoral studies completion as the dependent variable. Institutional policy support is operationalised through the study environment, student selection, funding, mentorship, the supervision process, and quality-assurance measures. Doctoral studies completion is operationalised through graduation rate, student satisfaction, dropout (attrition) rate, and completed mentorship. The teaching-and-learning process was treated as the operating context within which policy support acts on completion (see Figure 1).

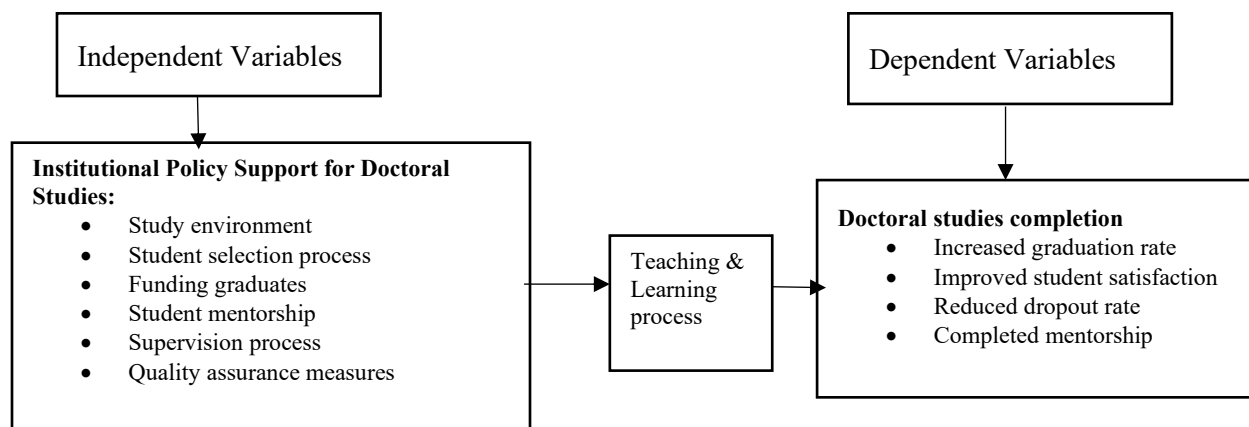


Figure 1. Conceptual framework linking institutional policy support to doctoral studies completion

Despite a three-year completion mandate, fewer than 11% of doctoral candidates complete their degrees in Kenya, with consequences for research productivity and the use of institutional resources. Insufficient supervision, restricted access to research materials, funding constraints, and administrative procedures all slow doctoral progress in public universities, and the University of Nairobi is no exception. What remains unclear is how institutional policy support specifically relates to completion at this institution. Existing studies are largely descriptive and rarely isolate the policy dimension, leaving a gap in the evidence on how institutional structures might be optimised. This study addresses that gap by examining the relationship between institutional policy support and doctoral studies completion at the University of Nairobi, with a view to informing policy and practice.

The study was guided by the following objective and hypothesis:



RO: The study assessed the relationship between institutional policy support and doctoral studies completion at the University of Nairobi.

H0: There is no statistically significant relationship between institutional policy support and doctoral studies completion at the University of Nairobi.

2. Research Methods

The study adopted a descriptive survey design within a convergent mixed-methods approach, collecting both quantitative and qualitative data to explore the relationship between institutional policy support and doctoral studies completion at the University of Nairobi (Creswell & Creswell, 2009; Trochim, 2020). The quantitative strand estimated the policy–completion relationship, while the qualitative strand, based on dean interviews and document analysis, contextualised and corroborated the quantitative results.

The target population is the entire group of people who possess the characteristics in which a study is interested (Alvi, 2016; Martínez-Mesa et al., 2016). It comprised all doctoral supervisors and doctoral graduates from the University of Nairobi, and all faculty deans between 2018 and 2023 who met the inclusion criteria for this study. University administrative records listed 1,183 supervisors, 646 doctoral graduates, and 10 deans, giving a total target population of 1,839.

Supervisors and graduates were sampled proportionate to faculty, using stratified random sampling, to support generalisability and avoid bias. The 10 deans were selected purposively for their administrative oversight of doctoral programmes. The sample size for questionnaire respondents was estimated using Taro Yamane’s (1967) formula:

$$n = N / [1 + N(e)^2]$$

where n is the sample size, N is the population, and e is the margin of error (± 0.05). Substituting the population:

$$n = 1,839 / [1 + 1,839(0.05)^2]$$

$$n = 1,839 / 5.5975$$

$$n = 328.53$$

$$n \approx 329$$

Table 1: Sampling Frame and Proportional Sample Distribution by Faculty

Faculty	Supervisors (pop.)	Graduates (pop.)	Total pop.	Supervisor sample	Graduate sample	Total sample
Agriculture	86	72	158	13	16	29
Veterinary	104	22	126	16	5	21
Built Env. & Design	85	10	95	13	2	15
Engineering	93	22	115	14	5	19
Science & Technology	241	137	378	37	31	68
Education	59	93	152	9	21	30
Medicine	355	55	410	55	13	68
Arts & Social Sciences	21	76	97	3	17	20
Business	82	145	227	13	34	47
Law	57	14	71	9	3	12
Total	1,183	646	1,829	182	147	329

Note. Deans (n = 10) were sampled purposively and are not included in the survey frame.



Three instruments were used. A structured questionnaire captured supervisors' and graduates' perceptions of policy support and completion on a five-point Likert scale. A semi-structured interview guide captured deans' views on institutional support and completion. A document-analysis guide examined university publications on doctoral support, allowing institutional records to be set against participants' reported experiences. A pilot study involving 33 participants (10% of the total sample of 339) informed item refinement (Lowe, 2019), and methodological triangulation integrated the three data sources.

Construct factorability was assessed using the Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin (KMO) measure and Bartlett's test of sphericity (Table 2). KMO values were .597 for graduates and .668 for supervisors, and both Bartlett's tests were significant ($p < .001$), indicating that the correlation matrices were suitable for principal component analysis. Under conventional guidelines (Kaiser, 1974), the graduate value of .597 falls marginally below the .60 threshold typically associated with an acceptable solution; given the significant Bartlett's test and acceptable item loadings, however, the factor solution was retained, and this limitation is acknowledged.

Table 2: KMO and Bartlett's Test of Sphericity

Index	Doctoral graduates	Doctoral supervisors
Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin measure	.597	.668
Bartlett's test — approx. χ^2	3081.201	5784.756
Bartlett's test — df	1225	1431
Bartlett's test — Sig.	< .001	< .001

Internal consistency was assessed using Cronbach's alpha, with a criterion of $\geq .70$ (Hair et al., 2017). All constructs exceeded the threshold (Table 3); items falling below the threshold were removed before the main analysis.

Table 3: Reliability Statistics (Cronbach's $\alpha \geq .70$)

Construct	Graduates — items	Graduates (α)	Supervisors — items	Supervisors (α)
Institutional policy support	10	.780	10	.817
Doctoral studies completion	5	.845	7	.778

Regression assumptions were checked before estimation. The histogram of standardised residuals approximated a normal distribution ($M = 3.08$, $SD = 0.96$) and indicated no systematic bias, and the normal P–P plot showed residuals tracking the diagonal, supporting linearity. Given the sample size, the central limit theorem renders minor departures from normality inconsequential for inference. Content validity was established through expert review and the pilot study; construct validity was supported by principal component analysis (loading threshold .50) alongside the KMO and Bartlett results.

After obtaining an institutional introduction letter and a research permit from the National Commission for Science, Technology and Innovation (NACOSTI), questionnaires were administered to supervisors and graduates by drop-and-pick, with an email option for those not reachable in person, and follow-ups for incomplete returns. Dean interviews, scheduled two weeks in advance, lasted 30–45 minutes and were complemented by documentary data from annual university reports on doctoral enrolment and graduation.

Questionnaire data were coded, cleaned, and analysed in SPSS 25 using frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations; simple linear regression was used to test the hypothesis. NVivo 15 was used for thematic analysis of the interview data. The regression model was specified as follows:

$$Y = \beta_0 + \beta_1 X_1 + \varepsilon$$

where Y is doctoral studies completion, X_1 is institutional policy support, β_0 is the intercept, β_1 is the slope coefficient, and ε is the error term. A model was estimated separately for graduates and supervisors.



Ethical clearance was obtained from the University of Nairobi and NACOSTI. Participation was voluntary and based on informed consent, with confidentiality assured and the right to withdraw respected. Data were anonymised and stored securely, results were made available to participants on request, and integrity checks, including plagiarism screening, were carried out.

3. Analysis Result

3.1 Response Rate

The questionnaire was administered to 339 respondents (147 graduates and 182 supervisors), and 10 dean interviews were scheduled. An overall response rate of 76.7% was achieved, comprising 107 graduate questionnaires, 145 supervisor questionnaires, and 8 dean interviews (260 of 339 questionnaires returned, plus 8 of 10 interviews completed). A response rate above 70% is considered good for survey research but can be difficult to achieve among doctoral populations owing to survey fatigue and confidentiality concerns (Taherdoost & Madanchian, 2025).

Table 4: Response Rate by Respondent Category

Respondent category	Administered	Returned	Return rate
Doctoral graduates	147	107	72.8%
Doctoral supervisors	182	145	79.7%
Deans	10	8	80.0%
Total	339	260	76.7%

3.2 Respondent Profile

Among the 107 graduate respondents, 67 (62.6%) were male and 40 (37.4%) were female; among the 145 supervisors, 79 (54.5%) were male and 66 (45.5%) were female (Table 5). The narrower gap among supervisors than among graduates suggests a gradual trend towards greater gender parity in doctoral-level leadership, although significant obstacles remain for women seeking to enrol in and advance through doctoral programmes.

Table 5: Gender Distribution of Respondents

Gender	Graduates (n)	Graduates (%)	Supervisors (n)	Supervisors (%)
Male	67	62.6%	79	54.5%
Female	40	37.4%	66	45.5%
Total	107	100.0%	145	100.0%

3.3 Descriptive Statistics

Institutional policies were rated highly by both groups, with scores above the scale midpoint (Table 6). Graduate item means ranged from 3.77 to 4.09 (grand M = 3.95, SD = 0.74), and supervisor means ranged from 4.09 to 4.52 (grand M = 4.34, SD = 0.63). Supervisors rated every dimension more highly than graduates did. Supervisors gave the highest ratings to policy execution (M = 4.52) and to quality assurance and policy access (M = 4.48), while graduates gave the lowest ratings to mentorship policy (M = 3.77) and study-environment policy (M = 3.78). Graduates' consistently lower ratings for mentorship and study environment, set against supervisors' higher ratings for policy execution, point to a discrepancy between policy as designed and policy as experienced.



Table 6: Perceptions of Institutional Policy Support and Doctoral Studies Completion

Statement	Grad. M	Grad. SD	Sup. M	Sup. SD
Policies on study environments affect completion	3.78	0.73	4.09	0.65
Selection system affects academic achievement	3.85	0.79	4.14	0.64
Mentorship policy's structure doctoral learning	3.77	0.62	4.20	0.62
Funding policies support financial security	3.90	0.75	4.26	0.66
Supervision procedures shape academic work	3.91	0.80	4.39	0.60
Quality-assurance policies improve support	4.02	0.81	4.48	0.61
Candidates have access to relevant policy	4.09	0.78	4.48	0.60
Supervisor training determines research quality	4.05	0.69	4.37	0.62
Programme-quality policies influence progress	4.06	0.67	4.44	0.60
University executes its doctoral policies	4.04	0.80	4.52	0.65
Grand mean	3.95	0.74	4.34	0.63

Note. Five-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree). Graduates n = 107; supervisors n = 145.

3.4 Regression Analysis and Hypothesis Test

The relationship between institutional policy support and doctoral studies completion was estimated using simple linear regression. In the supervisor model, policy support was a weak, non-significant predictor ($B = 0.081$, $SE = 0.099$, $\beta = .064$, $t = 0.81$, $p = .417$). In the graduate model, it was likewise non-significant ($B = 0.067$, $SE = 0.192$, $\beta = .035$, $t = 0.35$, $p = .727$). Both coefficients were small and positive, indicating that institutional policy support, as measured, had limited predictive power for completion in either group. The regression coefficients are presented in Table 7.

Table 7: Regression Coefficients for Institutional Policy Support Predicting Doctoral Studies Completion

Group	Predictor	B	SE B	β	t	p
Supervisors	(Constant)	1.717	0.801	—	2.143	.034
Supervisors	Policy support	0.081	0.099	.064	0.814	.417
Graduates	(Constant)	0.855	1.042	—	0.820	.414
Graduates	Policy support	0.067	0.192	.035	0.350	.727

Note. B = unstandardised coefficient; SE B = standard error; β = standardised coefficient; t = t-statistic; p = significance.

For both models, p was greater than .05 (two-tailed); the null hypothesis was therefore not rejected (supervisors, $p = .417$; graduates, $p = .727$). The results support the hypothesis that there is no statistically significant relationship between institutional policy support and doctoral completion for either the supervisor or the graduate model at the University of Nairobi. The standardised coefficients were close to zero in both groups ($\beta = .064$ and $\beta = .035$), contributing little to the prediction of completion.

This pattern is best understood in terms of the indicators that make up the construct: study environment, student selection, funding, mentorship, supervision, and quality-assurance measures. In the descriptive results, all six indicators were rated consistently high and within a narrow range by both groups, leaving the composite measure with limited variance. A predictor that varies little across respondents has limited statistical capacity to differentiate completion outcomes, so the near-zero coefficients reflect uniformly favourable perceptions of these indicators rather than evidence that policy support is unrelated to completion. In other words, candidates and supervisors regarded the policy environment across selection, funding, supervision, mentorship, and quality assurance as broadly adequate, and it is this uniformity, not the absence of policy, that explains the weak predictive relationship.



3.5 Qualitative Findings

The interviews with key informants help explain a result the quantitative strand could not resolve on its own: institutional policy was rated highly yet showed no statistical relationship with doctoral studies completion. Deans accounted for this by distinguishing the existence of supportive policy from its effect in practice, noting that candidates benefit from only part of the existing framework and pointing to specific provisions that delay completion. The most frequently raised concern was the requirement to publish before graduation:

“In my opinion, the current policy regarding the doctoral programme is unfair towards candidates, since I feel that they should be able to publish two articles after graduating.” (Dean 07, personal communication, August 2025)

Others were more positive about supervisory governance, noting mechanisms to address problems as they arise:

“The system is generally good, with appropriate processes for addressing problems as they arise, such as the re-assignment of candidates to alternative supervisors when problems arise.” (Dean 08, personal communication, August 2025)

The interviews reveal a tension between quality parameters and feasibility: quality requirements for doctoral education, including a compulsory publication requirement, can prolong doctoral studies. Deans proposed that revisiting the timing of such requirements would be more realistic, consistent with the survey finding that policy was not a factor in completion.

3.6 Supervisors’ Viewpoints on Institutional Strategies

Supervisors most frequently identified research-skills capacity and policy/institutional support (both 27 responses) as the strategies that most positively facilitated completion, followed by progress monitoring (22) and funding (18) (Table 8). Other strategies were nominated less frequently: disability support (13), digital-platform integration (13), student engagement (11), international exchange (9), and career development (5).

Table 8: Supervisor-Recommended Strategies for Enhancing Doctoral Studies Completion

Strategy	n	%
Capacity building in research skills and tools	27	18.6
Policy and institutional support	27	18.6
Student progress monitoring	22	15.2
Financial and research funding support	18	12.4
Integration of digital platforms	13	9.0
Support for candidates with disabilities	13	9.0
Student engagement and motivation	11	7.6
International exposure via exchange programmes	9	6.2
Employment and career opportunities	5	3.4
Total	145	100.0

Note. Each supervisor nominated a single top strategy (not a multiple-response item); percentages are based on n = 145 and sum to 100%.

3.7 Integration of Quantitative and Qualitative Findings

The convergent design allowed the two strands to be integrated for comparability. They converge on a central result: both groups indicated that institutional policy at the University of Nairobi was present and broadly endorsed, yet did not differentiate completion. The regression returned negligible, non-significant coefficients in both models ($\beta = .064$ and $\beta = .035$), and the deans independently characterised policy as existing but limited in practical effect, one explicitly linking this view to the survey finding that policy was not a determinant of completion. This agreement is therefore not merely statistical coincidence; the qualitative accounts reach the same conclusion by a different route.



The strands diverge in what they make visible. The survey recorded uniformly high ratings across all six policy indicators, a pattern that, taken alone, implies a well-functioning policy environment. The interviews complicate this picture by surfacing specific dysfunctions the aggregate ratings conceal, most notably the pre-graduation publication requirement, which deans identified as a source of delay. This divergence is informative rather than contradictory: it locates a limitation of the quantitative instrument, which measured the perceived adequacy of policy as designed rather than the friction generated when policy is enacted.

The strands also complement one another. The quantitative analysis established an overall pattern policy support as experienced was not predictive of completion across the sampled population but could not explain why a highly rated construct had negligible predictive value. The qualitative analysis supplies that explanation: provisions that candidates regard as legitimate policy can be adequate in principle while also prolonging time to degree, so high perceived adequacy alongside low predictive power is not contradictory once policy enactment is separated from policy existence. Together, the two strands suggest a meta-inference that completion is attributable less to a missing or weak policy than to the operation of specific provisions. This remains an inference rather than a demonstrated mechanism, drawn from eight interviews, and represents a best estimate based on the combined evidence.

3.8 Implications for the Theoretical and Conceptual Frameworks

The integrated findings speak directly to General Systems Theory. The strands illustrate the kind of subsystem misalignment the theory anticipates: an input from the quality-assurance subsystem, intended to raise doctoral standards, produces a delaying effect in the completion subsystem. That a single well-intentioned provision can work against the outcome it was meant to protect supports the theory's premise that doctoral outcomes depend on coherence among subsystems rather than on the strength of any one of them. Tinto's integration theory is similarly engaged: the reassignment mechanism described by Dean 08 represents institutional support for academic integration, whereas the publication barrier represents a structural impediment to persistence; the coexistence of both within the same policy framework shows that formal policy adequacy does not guarantee the integration the theory treats as decisive for completion. For the conceptual framework, the results question the direct policy-to-completion path it specifies. The relationship was assumed to be linear, but the combined evidence indicates that it is conditioned by enactment and feasibility. The framework therefore suggests that policy enactment be modelled as a moderating condition rather than folded into a single perceived-adequacy construct a measurement implication, since perceived adequacy alone produced the restricted variance that limited the present analysis.

4. Discussion

The study investigated whether institutional policy support predicts doctoral studies completion at the University of Nairobi. The coefficients were positive but non-significant in both groups. This null finding was not rejected, but it becomes more informative when read alongside the descriptive results. The predictor had little variance, as perceived policy adequacy was uniformly high, with grand means of 3.95 and 4.34 and standard deviations of 0.6–0.8. Where variability is limited, the regression slope is pulled towards zero, and a relationship may go undetected even where one exists in the broader population. The findings should therefore be read not as evidence of a small effect, but as a measure of restricted variance limiting what the regression could detect.

This result supports Momanyi's (2022) distinction between the existence of policy and its enactment. The data do not indicate whether policies are implemented consistently, and therefore cannot speak directly to their impact on completion rates. Graduates rated mentorship and study-environment policy lower than supervisors did, again pointing to a discrepancy between the two groups' experience of these dimensions; the deans' comments on the publication requirement illustrate how a single well-intentioned provision can work against the timeline it was meant to protect, consistent with Rong'uno's (2016) observation that such policy incoherence occurs unevenly across the institution. Together, these strands suggest that completion is constrained not by an absence of policy, but by uneven implementation and the fit between policy and candidates' circumstances consistent with the systems-theoretic premise that outcomes depend more on coherence among subsystems than on the strength of any single one (Lim et al., 2019; von Bertalanffy, 1968).

The findings have practical implications. Where general policy frameworks are already perceived as sufficient, further gains in completion are more likely to come from targeted, responsive mechanisms such as implementation monitoring, milestone-based progress tracking, and provisions for part-time and professional candidates than from



additional policy formulation. This points to a shift in the reform agenda from policy development towards policy implementation and tailoring.

4.1 Limitations

Three limitations bound the interpretation of these findings. First, the survey sampled doctoral graduates who had already completed their studies; the design therefore captures completion retrospectively and through perception, rather than tracking candidates who withdrew, so the results speak to the conditions surrounding completion rather than to the determinants of attrition. Second, ratings of institutional policy support showed limited variance, which constrains the sensitivity of the regression; the non-significant coefficient indicates the absence of a detectable linear effect within this sample, not evidence that policy support is unrelated to completion. Third, the analysis modelled policy support as a single predictor and did not estimate its interactions with supervision, funding, and research infrastructure; systems theory anticipates such interdependencies and identifies them as a clear direction for subsequent multivariate work.

5. Conclusions

No statistically significant relationship was found between institutional policy support and doctoral studies completion for either graduates or supervisors; this null result should not be read as evidence that policy is irrelevant to completion. Both groups rated existing policy as broadly adequate, and this pairing of uniformly high perceived adequacy with negligible predictive power is the study's central contribution. Where policy frameworks are already perceived as sufficient, their presence has little remaining capacity to differentiate who completes, and the limited variance in these perceptions constrains any measurable effect. The pattern is consistent with the view that completion depends less on whether policy exists than on how consistently it is enacted and adapted, although enactment was not directly measured here and warrants dedicated study. For institutional practice, the findings point away from further policy formulation and towards responsive, well-monitored implementation suited to a diverse doctoral population. For research, they invite multivariate and cross-institutional designs that test policy enactment as a moderating condition alongside supervision, funding, and infrastructure.

6. Recommendations

6.1 For Institutional Practice in Higher Education

1. Prioritise policy enactment over policy expansion by strengthening implementation monitoring and accountability, given that existing policy was perceived as broadly adequate yet did not predict doctoral studies completion. Responsibility: Directorate of Postgraduate Studies. Timeframe: within one academic year.
2. Review the timing and feasibility of the pre-graduation publication requirement, which deans identified as a constraint on timely completion. Responsibility: Senate, through the Postgraduate Studies Committee. Timeframe: within one academic year.
3. Reinforce mentorship and study-environment provisions, which doctoral candidates rated lowest among all policy dimensions. Responsibility: Faculties, in collaboration with the Directorate of Postgraduate Studies. Timeframe: ongoing, reviewed annually.

6.2 For Future Research

1. Test policy enactment, as distinct from policy existence, as a moderating condition across universities in Kenya. Responsibility: future researchers. Timeframe: within the next two to three years.
2. Sample current candidates alongside graduates to address the survivorship limitation inherent in a graduate-only design. Responsibility: future researchers. Timeframe: next study cycle.
3. Future models of policy support should integrate other dimensions, including supervision, funding, and research infrastructure, to capture the subsystem interactions that a systems account of completion would predict. Responsibility: future researchers. Timeframe: within the next two to three years.

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