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Nature of Supervision and Duration of Producing Ph.D Degrees in Nigerian Universities

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Abstract

The recent demand for Ph.D degrees across all disciplines necessitates a careful examination of the role of the supervisor in Ph.D production in Nigerian universities. The reason is not far from the fact that the supply of high-quality Ph.D graduates depends on the quality of supervision received from the supervisor during the Ph.D programme. The supervisor plays a crucial role in the quality of a student's doctoral research experience and their academic outcomes. On this note, this paper assessed the effects of quality supervision on the duration of completing a Ph.D degree programme across Nigerian universities. The data for the study were collected using methods ranging from in-depth interviews, administration of structured questionnaires as well as existing documents. 282 Ph.D students were sampled for questionnaire administration and 10 key informant interviews were conducted across 16 sample universities in Nigeria. The findings, thus, established a correlation between the nature of supervision and the time Ph.D students spend on programme. The paper also reveals that Ph.D students can complete their programme within the stipulated duration if they receive adequate attention and support from their supervisors. The paper recommends that each University develops a progress tracking book between the Ph.D students and the departments on one hand and between the supervisors and students on the other hand.

Keywords: Ph.D student, Supervisor, supervision, University, Ph.D programme

Introduction

Doctoral education has currently become an engine that drives global economic development. This development has increased the demand for Ph.D graduates in all academic disciplines. The Ph.D graduates are expected to be experts in their areas of specialization, contribute to the reproduction of new Ph.D students, and provide innovative solutions to societal problems via the knowledge acquired.

Meanwhile, the supply of high-quality Ph.D graduates depends on the quality of supervision the students receive during the Ph.D programme. The supervisor plays a crucial role in the quality of a student's doctoral research experience and academic outcomes. The supervisor is expected to be an expert in the academic research area of interest. Thus, supervisors are people with vast experience and records in research and publications as well as those engaged in interdisciplinary academic activities. With these qualities and acquired skills and experiences, supervisors can offer competent advice and guidance to his/her Ph.D students at every stage of their research (Ndayambaje, 2018).

Thus, Renske, et al (2015) posit that the search for excellence in doctoral supervision is predicated on the reasonable and widely held belief that the quality of the research student's experience and

the outcomes of their period of study are related, in a significant way, to the quality of the supervision received. On the quality of Ph.D supervision, Ndayambaje, (2018) observed that a recent increase in the demand for Ph.D that resulted in an increase in the number of Ph.D students for supervision affected the supervisor's level of commitment and quality of the Ph.D work. The more the number of students under a single supervisor, the less quality time and attention will be given to the student's work. In this situation, the Ph.D students, according to Ndayambaje (2018) are often allocated to supervisors with little knowledge of the research focus and appropriate methods for data collection.

Since the main goal of graduate supervision, regardless of academic discipline, is to help students complete their degrees in a timely and educationally sound manner, the style and quality of supervision are significantly important. In other words, the effective supervision of research students has been recognized as a critical aspect of the Ph.D programme's success (Frischer & Larsson, 2000). On this note, Seagram, Gould, and Pyke (1998) posit that the supervisor-student relationship is a key factor in the success or failure of students' studies or research work. Dutze (2010) believed that despite a shortage in the supply of Ph.D graduates in Nigeria, the process of producing them is also worrisome as many Ph.D students spend more than the specified period before completion of the programme. It is against this background that this study seeks to assess the effect of the nature of supervision on the duration of completing a Ph.D degree programme across public universities in Nigeria.

Statement of the Problem

The increasing demand for highly qualified academics and researchers in Nigeria underscores the significance of doctoral programmes. However, the duration and quality of Ph.D. programmes in Nigerian universities remains a subject of concern. The prolonged duration of these programmes, often exceeding the stipulated timeframe and the perceived lack of rigorous supervision can hinder academic progress and delay the production of qualified scholars. This study aims to investigate the nature of supervision and the duration of Ph.D. programmes in Nigerian universities to identify factors influencing these aspects and propose recommendations for improvement.

Research Question:

1. What is the nature of supervision practices in Ph.D. programmes in Nigerian universities?

Literature Review

Supervisors remain significant to the production of Ph.D degree holders and the most vital resource the University provides to support the Ph.D students during the programme (Magreth, Harrieth, John & Shaaban, 2012). Thus, the success of the Ph.D programme depends on the quality of research supervision. The supervisors at this level of education are expected to provide advice as well as guidance to students in planning their research to develop their knowledge in specific areas and equip them with the required skills to become independent researchers. This positive relationship between supervision and the performance of a supervisee was established in the works of Ankoma- Sey and Maina, (2016); Ayandoja, Aina, and Idowu, (2017).

Since the supervisor is critical in determining the success of the Ph.D programme, Heath (2002) argues that the supervisor needs to provide his time, expertise, and support to foster the candidate's research skills and to see that the candidate produces a standard and acceptable thesis. The interpersonal working relationships between supervisor and Ph.D student were further linked with progress and student satisfaction by Ives and Rowlet (2005).

Ph.D supervisors are expected to perform the responsibility of guiding the students on the selection of researchable topics; the supervisors

must be sufficiently familiar with the field of research and ready to accept the responsibility of supervision. The supervisor is expected to be accessible to the student for academic and research progress consultation and discussion of the students. Also, the supervisor should regularly respond with constructive suggestions to the written work submitted by the student and approve the same if found satisfactory before the postgraduate committee evaluates the work (Magreth, Harrieth, John & Shaaban, 2012). Supervisors are equally expected to ensure that the research environment is safe, healthy, and free from harassment, discrimination, and conflict for their supervisees. Where there is more than one supervisor, the lead supervisor needs to harmonize different expectations of co-supervisors to achieve consensus and resolve their differences.

Zoysa (2007) discovered that a lack of supervisory support was one of the many reasons some students dropped out of their respective programmes. According to Meerah (2010), the kind of supervision is one of the primary aspects that determine a student's success. According to Arabaci and Ersozlu (2010), teacher mentoring skills have a significant impact on students' performance. The influence is particularly noticeable in supervisors' advising and guidance styles, as well as sharing experiences and serving as a role model for students. They further reaffirm this, citing supervisors' mentoring abilities as a key influencing factor in postgraduate students' education. They concluded that postgraduate students' perceptions of their supervisor's mentoring skills are above average and that female supervisors' mentoring skills are superior to male supervisors'. Another descriptive study by Mutula (2009) found that inadequate supervision has a significant impact on students' performance and that the quality of supervision is influenced by the supervisor's research expertise. According to Noor and Barudi (2017), better supervision leads to more competent and confident postgraduate research students. As a result, the supervisor's functions

(supervisory experiences and supervisory abilities) have a direct impact on postgraduate students' learning and help them become more capable of doing good research independently.

According to studies, the quality of research supervision is determined by the quality of faculty. Faculty credentials, research and publication histories, grant success, and supervision completions are all examples of quality in this context. When personnel shortages, an aging workforce, and inexperienced teachers are factored in, quality management becomes a challenge (Minnick et al. 2010). Faculty, on the other hand, has a significant impact on student achievement. When supervision quality is emphasized, it is believed that research students will be taught how to do research, submit a funding request, develop an ethics proposal, examine literature, write, analyze data, and manage a research project.

To Sheehan (1993), the supervisor is the student's primary source of instruction, support, and guidance required to complete the programme. As a result, it has been demonstrated that a good supervisor, who provides timely and appropriate supervision and recommendations, can contribute to the study's success as well as the researcher's success. Another issue is that the role of supervision as well as the motivation for supervision appears to be ambiguous. Supervisory roles are described as mentorship, and knowledge attainment (Hockey, 1996).

Supervisors, according to Moses (1994), should have at least an equivalent degree to the one the student is pursuing, and if that is not the case, they should have a strong background in research and publishing. To supervise well, Brown and Atkins (1988) argue that one must be a good researcher who can reflect on research activities and examine the information, techniques, and methods that make them effective.

Frischer and Larsson (2000) and Phillips and Pugh (2005) take a somewhat different approach, arguing that students should choose a supervisor based on whether or not the supervisor has a long track record of research and is still contributing to the advancement of his or her profession. This considers if the person has recently published research, holds research grants, and has been invited to speak at national or international conferences. As a result, an effective supervisor must meet these requirements. Spear (2000) agrees, adding that it is often enough for the supervisor to be knowledgeable in the overall field of the student's research, even if not an expert in the specific area of the thesis topic. Good supervisors must have a track record of successfully bringing through a substantial number of Ph.D candidates (Yeatman, 1995).

It can be deduced from the above that research supervisors must discuss issues of research conduct and ethics with students. He/she must assist Ph.D candidates in the process of topic selection and literature research, the theoretical framework of the study as well as methods of collecting data. The supervisor is equally expected to monitor the progress of his/her supervisee. In Africa, Maurice (n.d.) identified reasons for violence and delay in the completion of graduate degrees in African universities as follows:

The supervisor's approach to students' work is the first identified reason. This approach, according to him, is characterized with envy of their students, delayed feedback on students' work; insist on hard copies instead of soft digital, or electronic copies, and misplacement of the student's work. The second reason is inadequate skills and training to supervise graduate students. As a result, some supervisors ignored the established criteria for carrying out the research by graduate students. The next reason is that some supervisors transfer their school-day experience to the students under their supervision. They do not see anything wrong in students spending more than the expected time in the programme due to the trauma they passed through during their school days. The supervisors, in some cases, formed cartels to either fail or pass students on reasons that are not academic. In some cases, they disown their students during the defense.

War of egoism among the supervisors also creates conflict in which students become victims. Supervisors are often engaging in a war of superiority, where some feel that they are better than others. As a result of this grudge or conflict, the students often become victims and fail during the defense.

Another reason identified by Maurce (n.d.) is the mental laziness and fatigue of supervisors. These supervisors commit less to their jobs and avoid being given students to supervise. But in situations where students are assigned to them, such students might be frustrated with their weak insight and comments to improve the quality of the work.

Also, supervisors keep their students unnecessarily longer than expected to their satisfaction. They exploit their student as well as create a culture of fear in them with fewer or no opportunities to report such, especially if he/she is head of a department or a senior person in the system.

The seventh reason is the segregation and transfer of aggression. Some lecturers transfer their domestic or personal problems with their families to students. This is closely related to students' discrimination on the bases of their region, ethnicity, and status of their parents or that of the student by supervisor. These factors become parameters for supervisors to gauge and determine students under their supervision. The next reason is that some supervisors do impose their theses or dissertations on their supervisees. They expect the students under their supervision to use their work as a yardstick to determine what they should submit. Students with innovative ideas under this category of supervisors always attracted

failure as punishment for deviation. Similarly, some supervisors are equally guilty of following the recommended writing manual to the letter and forgetting to give directions on content. This type of supervisor spend more time in marking grammar, commas, and full-stops to the extent that students cannot make reasonable progress on time.

The big scholar syndrome is another problem that is affecting graduate students in African universities. Supervisors do insist that students must cite or quote their work which in most cases is below academic standards. Similarly, some supervisors align with either Anglophiles or Francophiles, or Western scholars, therefore any book or journal published in Africa is useless and not academic enough to them. These categories of supervisors are shortsighted in their academic mentorship by imposing ideas on their graduate students.

On the part of the Ph.D student according to Phillips and Pugh (2005), it has been documented that students can influence the selection of their supervisors. The first step is to establish whether their supervisor has a record of research as well as an ongoing contribution to the discipline. To establish this step, the student needs to be guided by the following questions: Has he/she published research papers recently? Does he/she hold research grants or contracts? Is the lab efficiently organized? Is he/she invited to deliver lectures at conferences both home and abroad?

The next step is to consider whether the supervisor has the type of relationship you want. The reason is that some students need to frequently see their supervisor for support and reassurance while others prefer to see them when the need arises. Meanwhile, the latter want freedom, they want to think about the work and make mistakes at an early stage of the work before consulting their supervisors for guidance. In this situation, the supervisor is expected to guide this category of student on what to do next. On this note, the student needs to settle for a supervisor that is suitable for him/her.

Methodology
This study adopts a sequencing of approaches predicated on the survey research design. This enables the researchers to assess the nature of supervision and its effects on Ph.D production in Nigerian universities using varied data collection methods including in-depth interviews and the administration of structured questionnaires. The study also collected and reviewed relevant documents.

Study Area
This study is focused on public universities in Nigeria that commenced Ph.D programmes before or since 1999. This is meant to enable the researchers to adequately interrogate Ph.D production vis-à-vis the nature of supervision in selected universities across a significant period. Hence, the study covered public universities with Ph.D programmes before or since 1999 from the 6 geo-political zones in the country.

Target Population
The target population of this study comprises Ph.D students in public universities in Nigeria who had spent, at least, two years on their Ph.D studies. Other population categories are academics with at least three years of supervisory experience at the Ph.D level and deans of postgraduate schools.

Sample Size and Sampling Techniques
The total sample size of the study comprised 282 Ph.D students drawn from 16 universities across Nigeria. Based on the study's selection criteria, 38 public universities were eligible for selection. Thus, the sample size was drawn from 16 universities randomly selected from the 38 eligible ones with adequate spread across the 6 geo-political zones and generation of universities – first, second, third, and fourth generations (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Sampled Universities
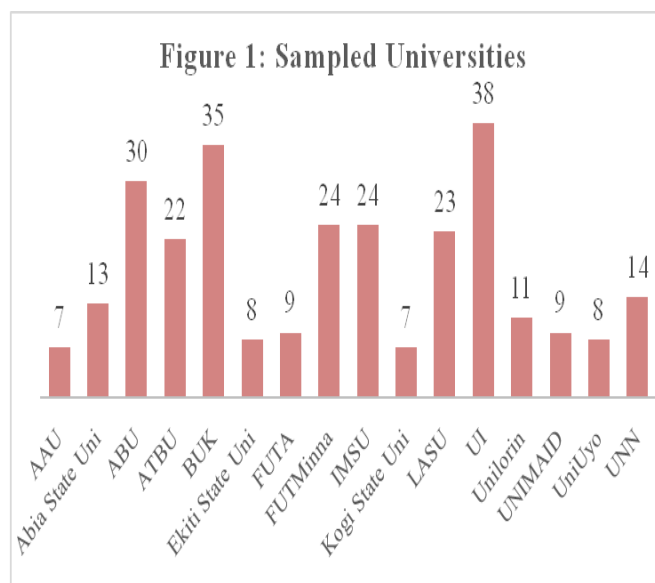
The study adopts a multi-stage sampling technique to facilitate a seamless selection of the research subjects for the survey. This comprises four-stage sampling procedures. The first stage involved the selection of public universities that have been approved by the National Universities Commission to run Ph.D programmes before or since 1999. Only 38 public universities, as mentioned earlier, met this criterion. Hence, they were classified based on their years of establishment from first to fourth-generation universities. In the second stage, 16 universities were selected proportionally from across the four generations of universities (38 in total) that met the selection criteria. The third stage involved the selection of three faculties from the 16 universities. This gives a total of 48 faculties. The fourth stage involved the selection of two departments from each selected faculty. In total, 96 departments from the 16 universities were selected. Finally, Ph.D students were randomly selected from the departments. For the qualitative data, 10 key informants comprising students, supervisors, and Deans of Postgraduate Schools from the selected universities were selected purposively.

Methods of Data Collection and Analysis

The quantitative data were collected using a questionnaire deployed on Kobo tool kits.

Interview and focus group guides were used for the qualitative data collection.

The quantitative data were analyzed using Excel to run simple frequency distributions as well as multiple linear regression analysis, while content analysis was adopted to analyze the qualitative data and therefore used to complement the quantitative data.

Findings

Discussion of major findings

There are variations in Ph.D supervision across different individual supervisors, departments, and universities. These variations usually account for the quality of dissertations and the actual duration of the programme. Ultimately, the nature of supervision is influenced by certain guidelines, policies, or norms that are commonly held and applied in the process, albeit sometimes sparingly. Thus, the sparse application of extant supervision guidelines, where they exist, makes it difficult for students to identify with such guidelines. For example, 31% of the students in this study were not aware of any regulations that required them to meet with their supervisors within a specific period (see Figure 2).

Figure 2: Are there regulations requiring students to meet with their supervisors?
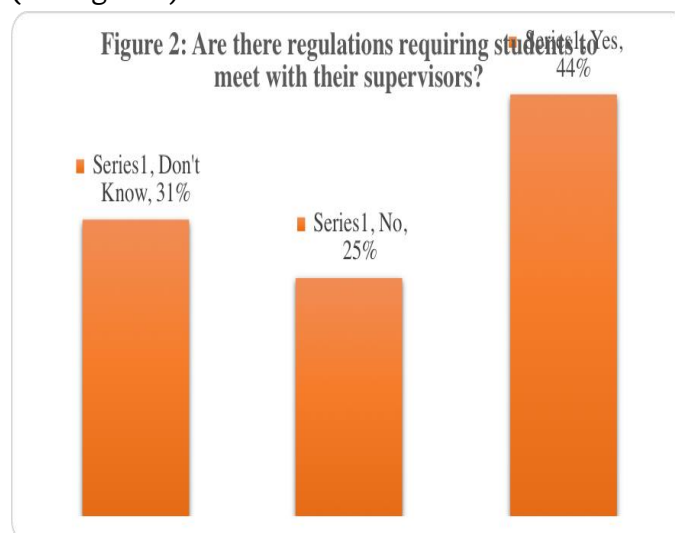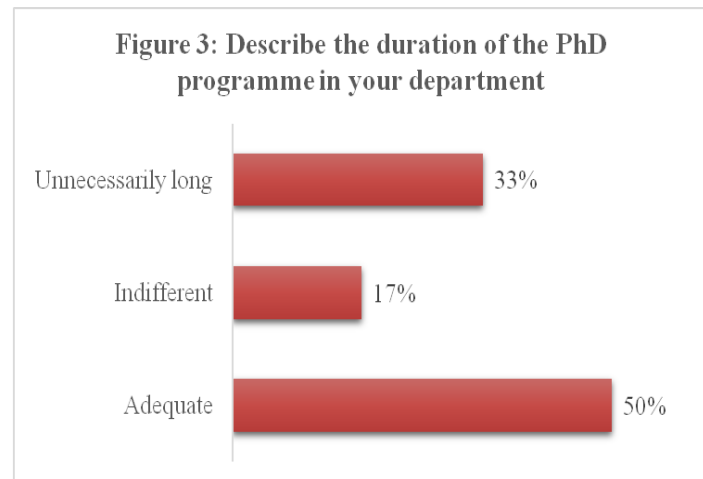
Only a quarter of the students believed that their departments do not have regulations that mandate students to meet with their supervisors a specific number of times within a defined period, even as

44% of them said they have such regulations in place. Lack of awareness or the poor enforcement of such regulations, where they exist, only suggests that Ph.D supervision in Nigerian public universities is done largely at the behest of the supervisors and this sometimes results in unnecessarily extending the study beyond the statutory period.

Hence, half of the respondents in this study believed that the duration of a Ph.D programme in their departments is adequate. On the other hand, half of them were either indifferent or believed that the duration was unnecessarily long (see Figure 3). In Nigerian public universities, Ph.Ds are run for between 3 and 5 years, however, this study reveals that, on average, students spend 6 years on the programme. Also, the study shows that the average completion time in three-quarters of Nigerian universities exceeds the minimum period. Put slightly differently, it is only in a quarter of Nigerian public universities that Ph.D candidates complete their programme, on average, within three years. This, ultimately, suggests that many Ph.D candidates in Nigerian universities stay on their programme for a longer period than they should. A key informant from Ambrose Alli University remarked as follows, "Personally when I did my Ph.D in LASU I spent 6 years, 2 years were cancelled due to the strike of the school. So, the issue of strike affects the duration but between 3 to 4 years, some people should be able to complete their program." To add a bit more context to the duration of Ph.D programmes in Nigeria, a key informant from the Ahmadu Bello University stated as follows:

> …the average we say is 36 months and 5 years maximum. What I notice is under this, you also have the possibility of readmission where the student exceeds the 5 years but has genuine grounds, when the candidate exceeds the maximum period of extension, you may have a readmission which may give the candidate maybe a year or 2 years to complete the programme.

Figure 3: Describe the duration of the PhD programme in your department

Unnecessarily long — 33%
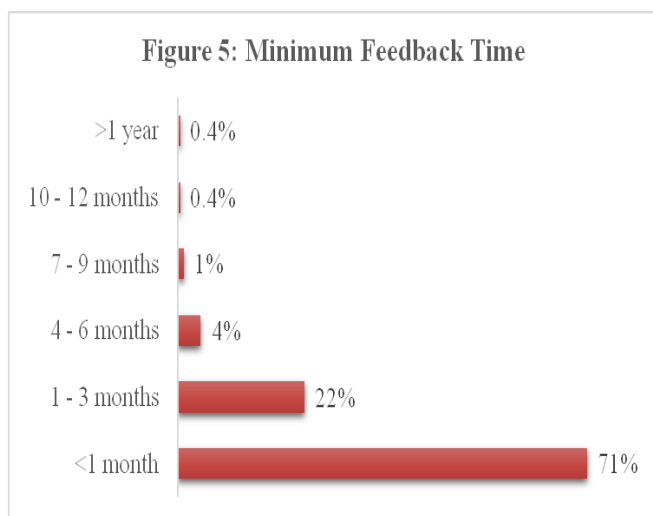Indifferent — 17%
Adequate — 50%

The actual duration of the programme has, in a way, affected the level of satisfaction students derive from it, especially regarding how the programme runs in their departments. Figure 4 shows that 55% of the students were either not satisfied or indifferent with how the programme is run in their departments, an indication that a lot needs to be done to improve how the programme is run.

Figure 4: Satisfied with the way PhD is run in your Department?

11%
46%
44%

■ Indifferent ■ No ■ Yes
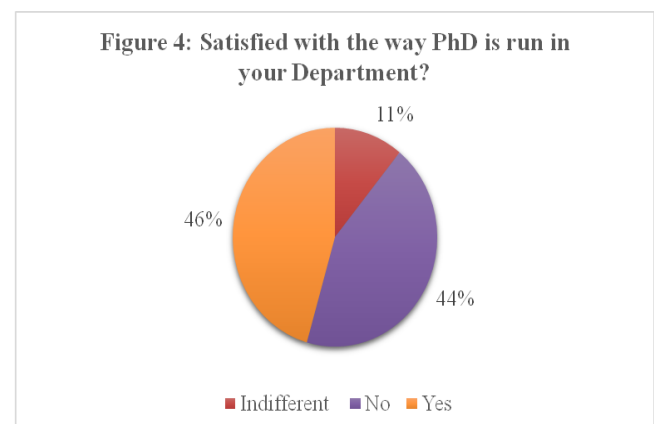
Regardless of students' level of satisfaction, it appears, as shown in Figure 5, that the feedback time many students get from their supervisors after submitting their work is relatively impressive. Over 70% of the students get feedback from their supervisors in less than a month after making submissions. Overall, this has had little impact on the duration of the programme suggesting that other factors may have also contributed to the

elongation of the actual duration of the programme.

Figure 5: Minimum Feedback Time

>1 year — 0.4%
10 - 12 months — 0.4%
7 - 9 months — 1%
4 - 6 months — 4%
1 - 3 months — 22%
<1 month — 71%

To have a better understanding of the factors that may have contributed to the elongation of Ph.D programmes and by extension the effect of the nature of supervision on Ph.D production, a multiple linear regression analysis was undertaken using 7 predictors as shown in Table 1. The target variable in this analysis is the "year of study" depicting the number of years students have spent on the programme, ranging from 1 to 10 years. The analysis was set out to test the following null hypothesis; H_0: The duration of a Ph.D programme in Nigeria has a zero relationship with the nature of supervision. The alternate hypothesis, on the other hand, is H_1: The nature of supervision determines the duration of Ph.D production in Nigeria.

The nature of supervision within the context of this paper includes things like the point (year) at which students were assigned supervisors, their perception of the duration of the programme, access to grant opportunities, regular meetings with supervisors, mentoring, etc.

Table 1: Regression Summary Output

Regression Statistics								
Multiple R	0.379214717							
R Square	0.143803802							
Adjusted R Square	0.121930176							
Standard Error	1.507733865							
Observations	282							

ANOVA								
	df	SS	MS	F	Significance F			
Regression	7	104.6157361	14.94511	6.574301182	3.45311E-07			
Residual	274	622.8736256	2.273261					
Total	281	727.4893617						

	Coefficients	Standard Error	t Stat	P-value	Lower 95%	Upper 95%	Lower 95.0%	Upper 95.0%
Intercept	2.178812083	0.459358768	4.74316	3.38943E-06	1.274491023	3.0831331	1.274491	3.08313314
sex	0.591337829	0.212662066	2.780646	0.005801214	0.172678605	1.0099971	0.1726786	1.00999705
satisfied_PhD_Programme	-0.260925305	0.102166771	-2.55392	0.011193517	-0.462056902	-0.0597937	-0.4620569	-0.05979371
perception_duration_of_PhD	0.34157354	0.125034106	2.731843	0.006707224	0.095423944	0.5877231	0.0954239	0.58772314
access_opportunities	-0.443296634	0.261146595	-1.6975	0.090737394	-0.957405392	0.0708121	-0.9574054	0.07081212
year_assigned_supervisor	0.322589606	0.158368696	2.036953	0.042615805	0.010815549	0.6343637	0.0108155	0.63436366
Regular_appointment	-0.468229134	0.216427272	-2.16345	0.031371259	-0.894300767	-0.0421575	-0.8943008	-0.0421575
Mentoring	0.972525345	0.229898661	4.230235	3.18624E-05	0.519933132	1.4251176	0.5199331	1.42511756

From the analysis, as shown above (Table 1), the F statistics is very small (0.000000345311) indicating a very good model which is less than 0.05 and which suggests the model's ability to predict the contributory role of the predictors. However, the model is only able to explain 12% of the variability of the target variable as shown by the Adjusted R Square which appears weak. All the predictors, except for "access opportunities", are statistically relevant as shown by their *p-values* which are less than 0.05. From the Coefficients, four predictors have positive relationships with the target variable, while three others have negative relationships. What this means using, for example, the "satisfied Ph.D Programme" predictor is that for every unit of increased satisfaction with the way Ph.D programme is run, the number of years spent on the programme is reduced by 0.3 years (roughly 4 months).

Invariably, the analysis depicts the existence of a relationship between the nature of supervision and the duration of the programme. Hence, the nature of Ph.D supervision determines largely the duration of the programme. In other words, students who are adequately mentored by their supervisors, and are easily able to access their supervisors as well as are satisfied with how the programme is run, among several other things are likely to spend less time on the programme than those who did not get

such support. Therefore, the null hypothesis which suggests a zero relationship between the nature of supervision and the duration of production of a Ph.D degree is rejected.

Furthermore, it is important to note, as stated by a key informant, that there is "a natural relationship between the nature of supervision and the production of Ph.D." Several factors account for producing a Ph.D including the average time the supervisor takes to read the student's work, the availability of the supervisor to guide the student, and the work rate of the student. Other factors may be related to the students, especially their financial status, state of health, and workload for those who are lecturers (Key informants, Ahmadu Bello University, Bayero University Kano, and University of Uyo). Other administrative bureaucracies also affect the duration of Ph.D production. For example, a student spent 16 years in a 5-year programme due to administrative ineptitude (Key informant, Lagos State University) and sometimes, the supervisors are overburdened with a workload which affects their ability to take time to attend to their Ph.D students' work as many universities continue to admit students beyond their carrying capacities (Key informant, University of Uyo).

Conclusion

This paper has established a correlation between the nature of supervision and the duration of producing Ph.D degrees in Nigerian universities. Using multiple linear regression and insights from key informants, the paper has shown that Ph.D students can complete their programmes much earlier should they receive adequate attention and support from their supervisors. However, the paper also reveals other multiple factors that account for the elongation of Ph.D programmes in many Nigerian universities, especially the public ones. Some of these factors are related to the students including their level of commitment, financial status, state of health, and workload. Overall, the supervisors play a very important role in the determination of the duration of producing a

Ph.D as many universities hardly enforce the guidelines of the process and students are left largely at the mercy of the supervisors. To address some of the issues identified in this paper, the following recommendations are worth considering:

1) Each University should develop a progress tracking book between the Ph.D students and the departments on one hand and between the supervisors and students on the other hand.
2) The Universities should imbibe the idea of regularly exposing supervisors to innovations in methodology as well as other innovations in Ph.D production through training.
3) At the departmental level, the guidelines for the selection and role of the supervisor and conduct of Ph.D students should be developed, monitored, and made available to both the supervisors and students. The department should regularly organise or recommend methodology workshops for their Ph.D students.
4) The Ph.D supervisors should assume the position of mentors and consider their supervisees as mentees.

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