A PROPOSED SUPERVISORY FRAMEWORK FOR THE TIMELY COMPLETION OF DOCTORAL RESEARCH DEGREES

Godfrey Uzonwanne¹, Francis Uzonwanne², Onyeka Uzonwanne³

Chester Business School, University of Chester, United Kingdom¹,
Department of Psychology, Redeemer’s University, Nigeria²
School of Law, De Montfort University, Leicester, United Kingdom³

(g.uzonwanne@chester.ac.uk)

ABSTRACT

This study presents a perspective for the effective supervision of doctoral research degrees to ensure timely completion within the three year period traditionally allocated for doctoral research degrees. The study employed a survey methodology to gather empirical data from doctoral research supervisors and doctoral research students. A sample of thirty research supervisors and thirty research students were interviewed (fifteen supervisors and fifteen students in the United Kingdom and fifteen supervisors and fifteen students in Nigeria) to seek their views on how they perceive that an effective supervision process should flow from start to completion within a target completion time of three years. The views gathered demonstrated a variety of styles and opinion not only in relation to doctoral supervision but also in relation to expectations on the duration of the entire process. As an outcome of this survey, the authors proposed a framework targeted at standardizing the supervisory process of doctoral research to ensure timely completion as well as manage expectations across the student-supervisor borderline.

Keywords: Completion rate, supervisory framework, doctoral research process, supervisor’s role.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

The programme of study following which a doctoral degree is awarded varies not only from one country to another but more so from one educational institution to another within the same country (Park 2005). Park highlights that the changing nature of what a PhD is, necessitates the need to standardize the doctoral research process, the supervisory process and the product of the entire process with a view to creating national benchmarks for the assessment of PhDs.

A traditional PhD programme process starts from a simple enquiry from a prospective candidate via a written letter or an email to enquire broadly about availability of spaces on the doctoral programme of a specified department within the University of choice. This is then followed by a response from a designated officer within the University advising the prospective candidate to send in a formal application supported by a detailed research proposal for consideration by the graduate school. When the application is received, the graduate school then forwards it to the preferred specialist department most capable of handling the enquiry and short-listing process. The application is received by the faculty’s/department’s director of doctoral programmes who sends out a message of interest to likely supervisors within the area of interest specified by the prospective candidate. Upon receipt of the message, prospective supervisors will indicate their interest or decline as the case may be.

Following a review of documents submitted and a positive show of interest from suitable members of academic staff, the director will then put together a potential supervisory team assigning the roles of director of studies, second supervisor and third supervisor to prospective members of the team before going ahead to arrange with the prospective candidate to have either a face to face, Skype or telephone interview depending on proximity, to enable the supervisory team get a better feel of the candidates knowledge of the subject area, his/her reason/desire for wanting to engage in doctoral research, ability to complete the programme within the specified time frame, sources of fund and a host of other signals that will culminate in giving a sharper indication of the candidates propensity to eventually complete the programme of study if offered a place on it.

If the director of the doctoral programme and the potential supervisory team are reasonably satisfied with the outcome of the interview, they will then forward a recommendation to the graduate school to offer the candidate a place on the programme. The graduate school will then proceed to offer the applicant a place on the programme subject to the
satisfaction of certain other administrative conditions such as receipt of two satisfactory academic references, evidence of funds for tuition and boarding during the programme, presentation (for viewing) of originals or certified true copies of originals of all relevant certificates etc.

Upon receipt of an offer to study for the degree of PhD direct or MPhil/PhD, the candidate commences to register for the programme on a pre-agreed date. Traditionally, most candidates without prior research experience are admitted to MPhil/PhD rather than a direct PhD. The entire PhD programme is divided into nine manageable segments as follows: the registration phase, transfer from MPhil to PhD, transfer to writing up, the intention to submit, submission, the viva voce, corrections, final submission and award of the degree.

As indicated above, the doctoral research process is stratified into segments with the completion of each segment representing a step closer to attainment of the ultimate goal. The literature on timely completion of the doctoral degree process recognizes several limitations on the timely completion of the process. See studies such as Booth and Satchell (1995), Wright and Cochrane (2000), Siegfried and Stock (2001), Ours and Ridder (2003), Park (2005), Rodwell and Neumann (2008), Glocker (2011) to mention a few. These limitations are however mostly student centred, focussing mainly on the ability of the student to complete the requirements of the research degree. This study however focuses more critically on the role of the supervisor in providing the enabling environment required to facilitate the progress of the research student.

The three most recurring student centred reasons associated with the untimely completion or outright failure to complete the research degree are academic ability on the path of the student, lack of direction/focus on the path of the student and financial difficulties leading to social and academic constraints.

Booth and Satchel (1995) using a competing risk model carried out a cutting edge study of completion rates across various disciplines and across both the male and female gender and came up with significant findings. After controlling for funding, they concluded that doctoral research students in the sciences (across both genders) had a higher propensity to complete their degree programmes relative to their colleagues in the social sciences and in the Arts. Reasons for this were narrowed down to science PhDs being associated with more group work and closer supervision than social sciences and art PhDs which tend to be more individualistic and less

The focus of this article is to develop a supervisory framework that will enable supervisory teams as well as research students capture these nine stages within a time frame of three years to ensure not only timely completion but also the definite completion of the doctoral research degree process. This article is novel in its attempt to capture and standardize the process of the doctoral degree from the perspective of the supervisory team. The novelty also extends to the presentation of a framework that adds value not only to the supervisory process but also to the broader student experience. The framework will ensure that the quality of a PhD degree is standardized across various contexts thereby minimizing the ambiguity associated with supervisory rigor across various countries and institutions. This article contributes substantially to the HEFCE quality standards for research training programmes (see Metcalfe, Quinton and Green, 2002).

2.0 THEORETICAL FOUNDATION

supported in terms of supervision. They further posit that academic ability on the path of the student evidenced by the class of the undergraduate degree acquired by the student had no significant effect on completion by male students but had a significant impact on completion by female students. In terms of focus, they observed that part-time versus full-time registration as well as engagement in paid employment had no significant effect on completion for female students but had a very negative effect on completion for male students.

Wright and Cochrane (2000) support the findings of Booth and Satchell (1995) in terms of the varying completion rates across disciplines but argue against the gender related completion rates demonstrating evidence of timely completion across both genders in the sciences, social sciences and arts. They also argue that a significant factor affecting completion rate was the age and maturity of the research student with completions more likely with mature students who tended to have a clearer academic focus than their younger and relatively inexperienced counterparts. Further evidence is provided in Rodwell and Neumann (2008) who argue that matured and working students often register on a part-time basis had a higher propensity for timely completion than their younger full-time counterparts.

Glocker (2011) demonstrates that the volume and type of financial support a student receives during the doctoral programme is a significant factor in the timely completion of the programme. Glocker distinguishes between the impact on completion of an equal amount of student aid and parental support available to a student, emphasising that students financed by aid tend to have a higher completion rate than students with the same amount of finance from their parents. An earlier study by Singell (2003)
however argues that the evidence on aid suggests that the type of aid is a more significant factor in measuring retention and completion rates. Singell’s argument is based on the distinction between merit based aid and needs based aid which is similar to the parental and institutional distinction presented in Glocker (2011). Singell concludes that aid repayment conditions (controlling for student motivation) play a significant role in determining retention and completion levels.

3.0 METHOD AND DATA
3.1 Research Design
The study followed a survey methodology by employing semi-structured interviews to investigate the views of respondents around the key issues identified in literature as being the factors associated with the rate of completion of doctoral degrees. The interview tool leveraged on the views expressed in literature about the possible reason of better supervision for faster completion rates in the sciences as opposed to the social science and arts to probe deeper into supervisory styles and views. The surveys were conducted across six universities in total. Three of these universities were located in the United Kingdom and the other three in Nigeria. Thirty respondents were interviewed in each context (fifteen supervisors and fifteen students each). The choice of respondents was random to ensure a wide variety of views across a broad spectrum of respondents. Rodwell and Neumann (2008) adopted a similar survey method to investigate predictors of timely doctoral degree completions by attendance.

3.2 Measures
Respondents were chosen equally across both the male and female gender and across the age bracket of 25-45 years old. A mix of both full-time and part-time students was used in both contexts in an attempt to spread views across relevant classes of respondents. The study was conducted across supervisors and students in the arts, social sciences and law only as the study focused primarily on developing a supervisory framework for research completion in these disciplines where completion rate has been identified in literature as being demanding. The semi-structured interview focused on the relevance of gender, availability and type of funding, maturity of student, mode of registration and structure of supervision as possible factors affecting the timely completion of doctoral research degrees. The interviews were conducted by broadly asking the respondents to comment on each of the issues, allowing a free flowing discussion from the respondent. At the end of the discussion on each specific issue, the respondents were asked to summarise their views in one specific sentence before moving on to the next issue for discussion. Answers given by the respondents were initially analysed on a context basis and then the overall answers in both context were compared for similarities and distinctions.

3.2 Results
The findings gathered were broadly consistent with existing literature except for some context specific emphasis on gender differences and availability of funding. Respondents in the UK tended not to accept the view as specified in literature that completion rates could be gender segregated while respondents in Nigeria felt that this was a reasonable assumption due to social issues affecting the female gender such as pregnancy and childbirth. Respondents in Nigeria were of the view that availability of funding rather than the source of funding was a more significant factor. They were of the view that they were more likely to complete their studies if funded by parents/family rather than government sources as they had a higher commitment to family than to institutional sources. This is in stark contrast to Singell (2003). In the UK, respondents were of the view that funding source was a relevant factor and this was tied into the maturity and mode of registration factors. The general view across both context is that matured students tended to be either self-funded or institutionally-funded while younger students were more likely to be family-funded and/or institutionally-funded. Matured students irrespective of gender, therefore had the tendency to be more focused on their studies as the decision to pursue a doctoral degree was often a self-conscious one rather than an imposed one. Matured students according to the survey were also often engaged in work and family and so were deemed to be more likely to engage in part-time studies.

The issue of loose supervision was strongly contested by all the research supervisors interviewed in the three Nigerian universities and about two-thirds of their counterparts interviewed in the three UK universities. Only four of the thirty research supervisors interviewed across both context felt that research students in the arts, social sciences and law required more guidance in providing some structure to the doctoral research process. All the students interviewed across all six universities felt (to varying degrees) that the supervisors level of engagement in terms of the provision of structure (rather than detail) would be a strong contributory factor in the timely completion of their doctoral studies.
One supervisor interviewed in the UK stated that “the wealth of experience gained by the doctoral student is gained through allowing the student explore in the first year or two until they eventually find their feet; putting a structure in place to guide them from one stage of the research to another ultimately robs them of that experience”. A contrary view from a research student however states “the nightmare about the doctoral research programme is within the first two years when you can neither tell the difference between your right or your left, you have no clue as to what you are doing or whether or not you are doing a PhD! That’s when most students drop out and only the strong hearted continue...”. See Hockey (1994) for further insights into the first year experience of a PhD student.

The broad argument from the supervisor’s point of view is indeed that the doctoral research process is an individual task embarked upon by the research student. One of the key roles of a doctoral research supervisor is specified as the provision of guidance to the research student; see Sheehan (1993), Holloway and Walker (2000) and Gill and Burnard (2008) for further engagement with this view.

---

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Criteria Affecting Completion</th>
<th>Average Response of Respondents In United Kingdom Universities</th>
<th>Average Response of Respondents In Nigerian Universities</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gender Differences</td>
<td>Felt that this had no impact on timely completion.</td>
<td>Felt that this may have an impact on timely completion due to pregnancy and childbirth associated with the female gender.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Availability and Type of Funding</td>
<td>Felt that the availability of funding was a vital issue however student aid recipients would have a higher tendency for timely completion.</td>
<td>Felt that the availability of funding was a vital issue however family support aid recipients would have a higher tendency for timely completion.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age/Maturity of Research Student</td>
<td>Were of the view that age was not a strongly significant factor in most cases preferring to view determination of the particular individual as being more significant than age/maturity. Maturity was tied to availability of self-funding which invariably meant sharper focus.</td>
<td>Felt that matured students tended to be more focused and less distracted as the doctoral degree was better suited to matured students who had some practical working experience.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mode of Registration (Full/Part-Time)</td>
<td>Felt that mode of registration was irrelevant as most part-time registration was a means of saving on full-time fees. Mode of registration was closely associated with maturity and availability of funding.</td>
<td>Felt that part-time students had a higher propensity to drift away from the programme than full-time students.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Structured/Unstructured Supervision</td>
<td>Most of the supervisors in this group felt that an unstructured approach was more beneficial to the student while all the students preferred a structured approach to varying degrees of structure.</td>
<td>All the supervisors in this group felt that an unstructured approach was more beneficial to the student while all the students preferred a structured approach to varying degrees of structure.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table: Summary of views expressed by the respondents.

4.0 A PROPOSED SUPERVISORY FRAMEWORK FOR DOCTORAL SUPERVISION

The following section outlines the key landmarks in the doctoral research degree process and goes on to propose a supervisory framework to manage the entire process from start to finish. The framework is built around a three year completion target.

4.1 The Research Degree Process Leading to the Award of a PhD

As indicated earlier on in this study, the doctoral research process is stratified into segments with the completion of each segment, bringing the doctoral research student closer to the award of the degree. Highlighting the various stages involved to the research student, in the view of the authors, is an indispensible supervisory tool to ensure not only focus on the goal to be achieved at each stage, but
also timely completion of the research degree. The framework to be proposed is therefore based on a doctoral degree process following the stages outlined below.

4.1.1 The MPhil/PhD Registration phase
Traditionally, MPhil/PhD students are required to complete a six month registration phase within the first six months of commencing the programme. At the end of the six month period, the candidate is expected to submit an enhanced proposal demonstrating a sharper focus and deeper understanding of the research literature. This proposal after being certified by an internal referee is passed through a higher degree committee that is charged with the task of reviewing several aspects of the proposal such as language proficiency, depth of the content, engagement with literature, practicality of the proposed methodology, ethical considerations, security issues, suitability of the chosen subject/topic for doctoral research etc. The committee if satisfied will then approve the candidate’s formal registration onto the MPhil/PhD programme.

Getting the naïve/new student to this stage is largely the responsibility of the supervisory team who are responsible for giving the candidate a suitable initiation into the world of academic research. Should the student fail to present a suitable proposal for review by the research degree committee, this will primarily be considered a supervisory failure as the supervisors who are the experts (at this stage) may have failed to provide the required early stage guidance required by the student. If evidence of appropriate supervision is in place, then other student centred issues such as academic competence, emotional stability and other personal issues may be responsible and need to be investigated. Hockey (1994) presents a breakdown of likely problems and scenarios faced by first year PhD students which may compromise their ability to adjust to the research degree environment.

In order to ensure that the candidate is well initiated into the programme of study, the supervisory team must mandatorily set close knit supervisory targets within an identified work flow framework to monitor progress and direct emphasis towards the requirements for registration. Supervisory meetings spaced one month apart in the first six months were judged by the survey respondents to be highly beneficial.

4.1.2 Transfer from MPhil/PhD status to full PhD registration status
Following successful registration, the candidate is expected to apply for an upgrade from MPhil/PhD status to full PhD status within twelve to eighteen months from the time of initial commencement of the doctoral programme. Various universities apply different levels of emphasis to the level of work an MPhil/PhD student must have attained before being allowed to apply for a successful upgrade to full PhD status. Typically, at this stage, candidates are expected to have a detailed understanding of the literature review/theoretical framework in their chosen field, a detailed methodological approach for the investigation of the identified doctoral problem at hand and a reasonable assurance of data sources. Emphasis on what may be considered a reasonable assurance of data sources would vary from one institution to the other. Some institutions may require a simple written assurance from the data source guaranteeing access while others may require that the candidate be in full possession of all the required data.

Following the initiation process that is required of the supervisors within the first six months, successful registration indicates that the doctoral student has found his feet and is prepared for a more demanding phase of independent research work within an agreed framework towards upgrade to full PhD status (See Gurr 2001 for further views on independent work with regards to student needs and supervisory styles). The agreed framework will normally be tailored to guidelines specified by the university for upgrade such as the theoretical framework, methodology and data sources highlighted above. While this stage of the research is largely based on the student’s motivation which according to literature sources is built on factors arising directly from both the student and supervisor, there is a strong need to emphasize independent research on the path of the student. This message should be sent out under two broad signals. The first is to clearly outline the requirements of this stage to the student and the second is to indicate to the student the need to work independently by increasing the time frame between supervisory meetings from one to possibly two and a half or three months. It is no gainsay that the quality of supervision (and not the frequency of supervision) is a strong motivating factor which keeps the research student focused on the ultimate goal of final completion, submission, examination and award.

A candidate who successfully upgrades to full PhD status after twelve months from the time of initial commencement of the programme is definitely on track to a three year completion target. Needless to say, the candidate who upgrades after eighteen months is also on track to a three year completion but with a tighter schedule to run with. The upgrade follows different styles across different institutions. Some institutions require that actual work done is submitted to a doctoral research committee for review and analysis following which the candidate may or may not be subjected to an upgrade viva voce. The upgrade viva if deemed necessary is conducted by a team of academics completely
independent of the supervisory team but resident within the department of study with a possible inclusion of an academic from another department within the university who is not a subject expert but is experienced in the process, structure and emphasis required of doctoral research. Other institutions may require that the candidate submit only a report attested to by an internal referee detailing the extent of work done to date. If the extent in the report is found to be satisfactory, the candidate is subsequently upgraded.

In both cases, if the candidate fails to present an adequate defence of his/her research to date as well as future anticipated direction, then the candidate may be referred to re-apply for another upgrade in approximately six months. Successful upgrade is a major milestone towards completion of the degree programme.

The upgrade viva voce process according to views from colleagues is tantamount to a witch hunting process as academics in favour of a laid back supervisory style involving student adventure and beating around the bush (until they eventually find their feet) often find that students are unable to present an adequate defence of the research agenda within a twelve month period of initial commencement. Students who have hitherto received tight supervision in the process guided by a specified target set flow chart or framework (as opposed to content guidance) in the first six months will most likely be well prepared for the upgrade viva voce as they will have slong been on track with the requirements as opposed to being lost in the wilderness of academia.

4.1.3 The Phase running up to Upgrade to ‘Writing Up’ Status
In order to remain on target for a three year completion, the ideal time to apply for writing-up would be approximately twenty four months after the initial commencement of the doctoral programme leaving twelve months to tighten arguments and prepare final drafts. To qualify for writing up the student needs to have completed drafts of the literature review, methodology, data analysis, and presentation and discussion chapters. At this stage, the student if successfully upgraded to writing-up has one year to tighten arguments, update the literature review, refine the analysis, write/update the introduction and write the conclusion and recommendation. The approval to proceed to writing up is normally less formal than the upgrade from MPhil/PhD to PhD. This approval is normally given subject to the director of studies confirming that within a twelve month period from the date of the approval that the thesis would be complete and ready to present for examination. During the writing up year, the supervisory team must set close targets and increase the monitoring of the students progress in order to ensure that the final thesis produced is brought to the standard in terms of content and presentation required for the award of a doctoral degree within the allocated twelve month period. The writing up period across various universities would normally range from six months to twelve months. Murray (2002) gives further guidance on the writing up of a doctoral thesis.

The writing up stage involves an intense amount of analytical rigour and refinement of original arguments as this stage leads to the production of the final document that will be examined by an external examiner who is a seasoned expert in the field of study.

4.1.4 Presentation of the Thesis for Examination
At a pre-agreed time (agreed with the supervisory team), the student notifies the graduate school of his/her intention to submit his/her doctoral thesis. This will normally be a minimum of about three months to the date of intended submission. This time frame is required to allow the graduate school contact and review the profile of potential external examiners of adequate competence both in subject knowledge and skilled in the examination of doctoral thesis.

Upon agreement with the supervisory team that the thesis is reasonably ready for examination the student submits the thesis to the graduate school. Two copies of the thesis would normally be required for submission at this stage bound in soft copy. The graduate school then appoints an external examiner and a copy of the thesis is sent to the examiner. A minimum period of three to six weeks is required for the external examiner to study the thesis and confirm a date for the examination of the thesis. The thesis is normally expected to be examined within twelve weeks of the date of submission. The department were the research was conducted and supervised would normally appoint an internal examiner who would receive a copy of the completed thesis from the graduate school. The internal examiner will not be a member of the supervisory team that supervised the thesis under examination.

4.1.5 The Viva Voce
The examination of a doctoral thesis is normally conducted in a process referred to as a viva voce. The viva process is led by the external examiner who is the chief examiner and is supported by an internal examiner who is a member of staff of the department where the student conducted the doctoral research. The director of studies may also be present to take notes but may not contribute otherwise to the viva voce process. During the viva process, the student is quizzed orally on the content of the thesis around specific areas such as reason for the study, depth of
knowledge of existing literature, choice of research design, choice of research method, authenticity of findings, contribution to knowledge etc and a host of other issues built around the doctoral research. Pearce (2005) and Carter (2008) provide further guidance on how to examine a doctoral thesis. A typical viva examination may last from forty five minutes to several hours depending on the intensity of the examination, the size, quality and complexity of the thesis. This is normally a very nerve racking stage for the student who is at the receiving end and whose work of at least three years duration is under critical examination (Burnham 1994).

After both examiners are adequately satisfied that a fair examination has been conducted, the student is asked to leave the room while the examiners and the director of studies deliberate on the answers and explanations offered by the student. While the thesis is not expected to be a perfect document, it is expected to demonstrate a reasonable degree of sophistication, rigour and analysis. When the examiners have jointly reached a verdict, they proceed to invite the researcher back into the room to discuss the verdict.

Several verdicts are available to the examiners depending on how they perceived the student to have responded to their enquiry as well as the overall quality of the thesis. The verdicts include ‘Award With No Corrections’, ‘Award Subject to Minor Corrections’, ‘Award Subject to Major Corrections Without a Further Viva’, ‘Award Subject to Major Corrections With a Further Viva’, ‘Award an MPhil’, ‘Award an MPhil, Subject to Minor Corrections’, ‘No Award’. The research student is informed of this verdict and the graduate school is advised in writing of the examiner’s recommendation.

It is rare that a doctoral degree is awarded without further corrections. It is however common that the award is subject to minor or major corrections with no further viva and sometimes major corrections with a further viva. The other categories while they are known to occur are relatively uncommon and may be directly arrogated to either supervisory failures resulting in the production and submission of a poor thesis or an external examiner with an axe to grind.

Minor corrections are traditionally expected to be completed within one month while major corrections with no further viva are expected to be completed within six months. Major corrections with another viva however are expected to be re-submitted for examination within twelve months.

4.1.6 The Award
After the graduate school is reasonably satisfied that the thesis was examined under fair conditions and that the corrections have been completed following which the final copy of the thesis has been submitted, the candidate is then formally advised in writing of the decision of the university to award the degree of doctor of philosophy in the specific field of endeavour the research was conducted in. The final decision to award or not to award the degree rests with the academic board of the graduate school irrespective of the recommendation of the examiners of the thesis.

A graduation ceremony follows at a specified future date.

4.2 A Proposed Supervisory Framework
Ours and Ridder (2003) argue that the role of the supervisor in ensuring timely completion by their research students is of the essence. They further highlight that research active supervisors are often best positioned to ensure that their students remain on track to timely completion. Gatfield (2005) provides an analysis of various supervisory management styles associated with supervision of PhD programmes in the United Kingdom. The supervisory framework proposed below is one that the authors believe will provide not only some structure but also standardize the doctoral research degree process outlined above.

The supervisory research framework following the process outlined above, is covered under three time bound action plans. Each action plan spans one calendar year. While the internal time boundaries for completion of the activities within each action plan framework are flexible, it must be emphasized that the external (three year) time boundaries are rigid and must be adhered to.

4.2.1 Action Plan One (Literature Review and Research Design)
Under this action plan, four main activities are identified. The first step is to prepare a research flowchart identifying time frames for each activity from start to completion of the study within and external time boundary of three years. To fail to plan is often the quickest path to planning to fail. While this activity appears to be simple and straightforward, the success of the entire process depends heavily on its successful execution. The second step under action plan one is to carry out a literature review in order to become familiar with the current stock of knowledge in the designated area of academic research. The research supervisor has a vital role to play at this stage in demonstrating to the student simple techniques of roving through the vast body of academic literature. The role of the supervisor will not only ensure that the student is able to identify the relevant sources of literature but will also ensure that the skill of synthesizing literature, a necessary academic tool is developed early in the research process. Knowing what to do as identified in the
survey, is a vital tool to keep the research student focused and on track. The third step after a successful navigation of the literature is to develop a theoretical framework of the literature search, gathering views under specific arguments/schools of thought. At this point, the research student is therefore in a position to define the research aims, objectives, research context and research question. With the research questions clearly outlined and a familiarity with the literature developed, the research student can now move on to the fourth step of action plan one which is to develop a proposed methodology following findings from the literature review. This stage should be completed in approximately twelve months from the initial start date. At this point, the student is ready to be upgraded from MPhil/PhD to full PhD status.

4.2.2 Action Plan Two (Data Collection and Analysis)
Under this action plan, three critical activities are identified. The first step here is for the student to proceed to gather the required data. With a firm grasp of the theory and methodological approach covered in the first year, the general details of the study such as likely data heads, data sources etc. would be deemed to be sufficiently in place at this stage. The second step under action plan two would be to carry out an analysis of the collected data and then move on to the third step where the results are presented and discussed. Action plan two is expected to last one full calendar year. During this time which is arguably the most demanding period of the research, the student who is expected to work more independently will be confronted with changing situations and expectations for which the supervisor would be expected to provide support and guidance. A student who has successfully completed this stage should be upgraded to the ‘writing up’ stage. The ‘writing up’ status should be clearly communicated as the ‘last lap’ in the race to ensure that the student is prepared in all ramifications for the increased rigor and intensity that would result in a thesis worthy of examination within the next twelve month period.

4.2.1 Action Plan Three (Writing Up)
This action plan involves two key steps. The first step is to summarize the findings of the study and write a conclusion and recommendation as well as identify specific contribution(s) to knowledge. The second step which involves intense rigor involves general writing up, tightening up of arguments, refining of analysis, fine tuning of arguments etc. During this third action plan which also runs for one calendar year, the student must notify the graduate school of their intention to submit.

These tight guidelines and turning points must be enforced by the supervisory team. Where there is sufficient evidence that deadlines are constantly not being met, then the supervisors must examine the reasons and deal with them appropriately to return the student back on track to timely completion.

5.0 A CRITIQUE OF THE PROCESS
Like every process known to man, the process reviewed above has its benefit as well as flaws. One criticism faced by the UK PhD process is the intensity and rigour faced by research students compared to PhD’s in other countries such as the United States which are mainly based on class work followed by the submission of a dissertation rather than a thesis. The argument for independent research followed by the presentation of a thesis as practiced in the United Kingdom is arguably a better scope for original contribution to knowledge by the outlined research supervisory framework.

Critiques of the framework for supervisory guidance for the doctoral programme often argue that the strength in doctoral research emerges from allowing the student ample room to make mistakes by beating around the bush in search of a direction. The argument for this lax supervisory method is that when such a student eventually finds the right direction they will have become adequately matured for doctoral research. The view of this study is completely contrary to this, more so, to the extreme. Maturity is a thing of the individual and is not one of the attributes a doctoral graduate is expected to have, at least not as a direct consequence of the research process as many non-doctoral degree holders possess the personal attribute of maturity. A doctoral degree programme strives to produce graduates who have a sufficient depth of knowledge in a niche area of human endeavour such that their expertise can cumulatively lead to geometric increases in economic growth. How much PhD’s contribute to economic growth relative to the cost of training them is another school of debate altogether. Having said this, from the point of view of the extremely high cost of training a single PhD, it can be argued that it makes economic sense to ensure that doctoral students are allowed independence of judgement with a monitored but general framework of activities expected to lead to the timely completion of the doctoral programme.

An international student who spends three years in the United Kingdom on a tight financial budget studying for a PhD will spend a minimum of sixty thousand pounds sterling to complete the degree in exactly three years. Going over three years on the programme is therefore an act of poor financial judgement. The few fortunate enough to have a sponsor often have sponsors imposing a three year sponsorship time limit on them.

During the upgrade process, the need for a viva also subject to critique. Some colleagues interviewed feel that this viva amounts to harassment of the student at such an early stage of their research training. There are however several overwhelming benefits attached
to it, the most compelling being that it prepares the student for the future viva by an external examiner and also compels the student to focus more on rigorous analysis and deeper research. A counter argument to this is that it may contribute to a high rate of withdrawals as students rattled by the process may back off from going ahead with the programme. A less likely benefit of the process, is that it is a training ground for inexperienced academics within the department to train towards becoming credible external examiners themselves.

6.0 CONCLUSION

The foregoing framework is simply a system of check and balances designed to assign completion marks to each stage of the doctoral research process. The wealth of the framework is that it stratifies the hitherto lengthy process of doctoral research by breaking it down into manageable segments making the entire process more friendly and hence easier to deal with.

This article has drawn on a few sources of academic literature as well as semi-structured surveys with academic colleagues and research students to examine the factors likely to militate against the timely completion of the doctoral research degree. Amongst other factors identified in literature, the central issue of the active role of a supervisor in setting an agenda/framework early in the research process was highlighted by the survey as being fundamental to the timely and efficient completion of PhD programmes.

The study recommends that very tight supervision be maintained in the first and third years and in the second year, the student should be given a free hand or room for independent work within the guidelines of the initially set framework.

In summary, this essay has brought the entire process of the doctoral degree programme from initial enquiry to the final award under one spotlight.

7.0 REFERENCE LIST


