



## **Perceived Value of Doctoral Programmes and its Impact on Dissertation Supervision Satisfaction in Kenyan Universities Post-COVID-19**

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This study examines the perceived value of doctoral programmes and their impact on dissertation supervision satisfaction in Kenyan universities in the post-COVID-19 era. Using a descriptive research design, data were collected through questionnaires from 63 PhD students at the dissertation stage, yielding a 90% response rate. The Advisory Working Alliance Inventory (AWAI) was applied to assess rapport, apprenticeship, and individuation in supervision relationships. Results showed that most students reported efficient rapport (67.7%) and high apprenticeship (76.9%) levels, indicating strong satisfaction with supervisory relationships. However, individuation was relatively low (41.5%), suggesting challenges in fostering autonomy. Chi-square tests revealed no significant associations between age and supervision dimensions, while gender differences were significant for identification-individuation, with female students more likely to identify with supervisors. The study concludes that doctoral supervision satisfaction is shaped by both interpersonal and institutional dynamics, influenced but not determined by demographic factors.

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### **Introduction**

The value attached to higher education in the last five centuries of the globalised Western model of education requires doctoral students to conduct original research. The value of something can be measured using performance indicators under the assumption that value can be equated to costs and benefits. However, crises can provide opportunities for self-reflection and realignment to ensure that the value attached to something is reasonable and that propositions are achieved. COVID-19 disrupted many organisational practices, and doctoral programmes in higher education were not spared.

The Commission for University Education (CUE) in Kenya establishes, enforces, and revises standards for university education. CUE, as an accreditation body, promotes higher levels of education, research, and training, reviews programmes to ensure standardisation, improves cost-effectiveness, and promotes national economic development through university education. The Commission



mandated that all university faculty personnel obtain a PhD by 2018, although this was not accomplished as expected.

Key characters in the transformation scene, when central policies are implemented at the institutional level, are supervisors with diverse backgrounds and working under different circumstances. Doctoral research is supervised by senior researchers who serve as mentors to proteges, following the model of earlier and medieval-period higher education. Dissertation supervision refers to the mentoring of a doctoral candidate conducting an independent, original study. Adequate supervision is crucial for doctoral success. COVID-19 has had devastating effects on the education sector globally. It led to the closure of universities, national lockdowns and social distancing, and a proliferation of online teaching. It also forced both lecturers and students to work and study remotely from home (Dwivedi et al., 2020).

In Kenyan universities, dissertation supervisors and supervisees usually interacted face-to-face before the pandemic. However, since the onset of COVID-19, some adopted dissertation's e-supervision. This led to an increase in the use of electronic facilities to carry out supervision since supervision of the dissertation plays a vital role in effective learning outcomes for doctoral programmes. The steps that were taken by both students and their supervisors to continue supervision activities during a time of crisis could indicate their perceived value of dissertation-writing and doctoral degrees offered in their respective institutions. This paper, therefore, seeks to investigate:

1. Students' satisfaction with dissertation supervision in the post-COVID-19 era.
2. The students' satisfaction with their universities' services.
3. The relationship between students' satisfaction with their doctoral supervision relationship in the post-COVID-19 era and their universities' services.

The hypotheses that were tested stated that:

H<sub>01</sub>. There is a relationship between students' satisfaction with the dissertation supervision relationship and some demographic factors.

H<sub>02</sub> There is a relationship between students' satisfaction with their universities' services and some demographic factors.

H<sub>03</sub> There is a relationship between students' satisfaction with their dissertation supervision relationship and their universities' services in the post-COVID-19 era.

### **Background**

Doctoral studies are widely acknowledged as difficult. According to Jones (2013), 33-70% of students who begin a PHD programme do not complete it. It is also worth noting that most people who complete their doctorates considered dropping out at some point. In the Netherlands, for example, 10% complete within the widely suggested four years, with the average completion time being five years (Vande Schoot et al., 2013). High dropout rates pose operational and financial challenges for universities, as PhD students account for a significant share of their research output (Horta, Cattaneo, & Meoli, 2018).

In Kenya, a 2019 poll conducted by the Commission for University Education revealed that just 11% of registered PHD candidates complete their studies.

This paper, therefore, seeks to investigate:

4. Students' satisfaction with dissertation supervision in the post-COVID-19 era.
5. The students' satisfaction with their universities' services.



6. The relationship between students' satisfaction with their doctoral supervision relationship in the post-COVID-19 era and their universities' services.

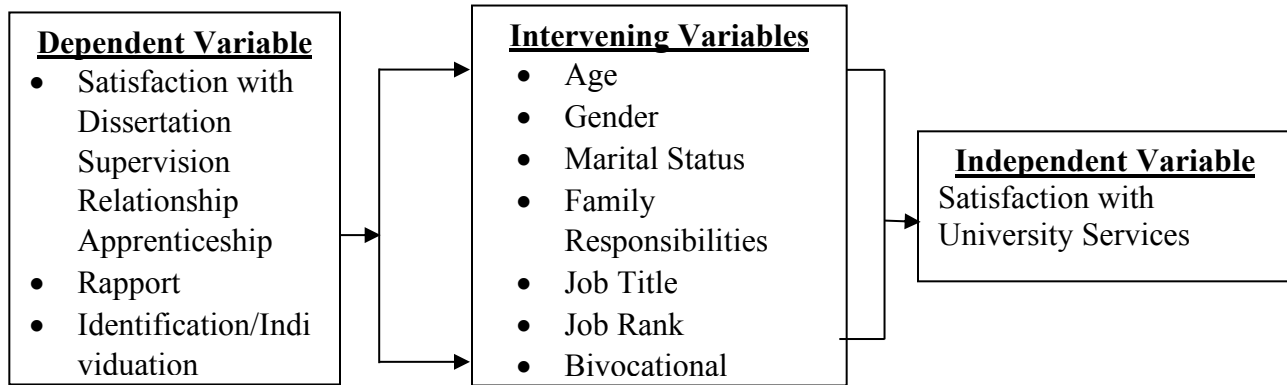


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework

This conceptual framework explores the relationship between institutional support and the quality of doctoral supervision. It points out that a student's satisfaction with university services directly influences their satisfaction with the dissertation supervision relationship. This supervision relationship is multifaceted, comprising apprenticeship elements, interpersonal rapport between supervisor and student, and the identification/individuation process. The framework acknowledges that this relationship does not exist in isolation. Various personal and professional factors influence it. Demographics like age and marital status, personal commitments like family responsibilities, and professional circumstances, including job title, rank, and bivocational status, all serve as intervening variables that may strengthen or weaken the primary relationship. This holistic approach recognises that doctoral supervision experiences are shaped not only by institutional factors but also by the unique life contexts of individual students.

### Theoretical Underpinnings

This study used three cognitive theories as its framework for considering supervision trends: Self-Determination Theory (SDT), Expectancy-Value theory, and Mentoring Enactment theory. Self-determination theory is one of the most comprehensive theories of motivation (Deci, 2009; Fernet, 2013; Legault, 2017; Russel & Bray, 2010). It suggests that people can become self-determined when their needs for competence, connection and autonomy are fulfilled. It posits that people tend to desire to grow.

Expectancy X Value theory suggests that people are motivated to engage in an activity to the extent that they expect to succeed, multiplied by the value they place on success (Wigfield & Eccles, 1992). The theory originated in a study of student achievement and was later used to examine teacher beliefs and motivations as they guide students in building knowledge (Day, 2020). This theory is suitable for this study because it examines students' success expectations in dissertation-writing.

The other theory utilised was the Mentorship enactment theory by Kalbfleisch (2002). His mentorship enactment theory posits that mentor-protégé relationships require effective communication to initiate, maintain and repair relationships towards intended outcomes. The theory grew out of studies on proactive communication and personal relationships in organisational settings. For success, specific conversational goals and communication strategies need to be employed.



In the context of dissertation supervision, the supervisor assumes the role of a mentor, and the supervisee, a protégé. The result is that both the supervisor and supervisee must successfully navigate the process of dissertation supervision. This means that, for the successful completion of the dissertation, the mentor/mentee protégé relationship must be functional.

### **Literature Underpinnings**

This paper seeks to establish the relationship between doctoral students' satisfaction with dissertation supervision and their perceived value of the doctoral programme in Kenyan universities in the post-COVID-19 era. The study examines how institutional support services influence students' satisfaction with supervision relationships and explores demographic factors that may impact these relationships during a period of significant educational disruption.

### **Effects of COVID-19 on Doctoral Students**

A study carried out by Abdul-Rahaman (2023) in Russia found that the COVID-19 pandemic had a greater influence on the health of learners and suggested that conditions may have been severe for international doctoral students, perhaps affecting their ability to complete postgraduate programmes within the typical four to five-year timeframe (Amani et al., 2022). Students and supervisors made various adjustments to ensure the dissertation supervision mandate was continued and completed (Chacha, 2021).

The success of that process depends on the nature of the relationship between the supervisor and the supervisee, on the one hand, and the students' value for the dissertation programme, on the other. For this reason, this section focuses on the relationship between these variables.

### ***Students' Satisfaction with Dissertation Supervision Relationship***

Students' satisfaction with dissertation supervision is multifaceted and can be understood through the Advisory Working Alliance Inventory Framework, which measures rapport, apprenticeship, and identification-individuation (Ewe & Ng, 2025). In the context of Kenyan universities, this framework reveals how doctoral students perceive their supervisory relationships in terms of emotional support, facilitation of professional development, and identification with supervisors as role models. Effective supervision strategies in Kenyan universities have shifted significantly post-pandemic, with blended approaches becoming increasingly prominent. This transition has required both students and supervisors to develop new communication patterns while maintaining the integrity of the mentoring relationship.

Nwosu et al. (2024) note that successful completion of postgraduate studies in East African universities depends heavily on the nature and quality of research supervision. Their findings indicate that institutions that provided robust support systems for both supervisors and students during the pandemic demonstrated higher levels of student satisfaction with the supervision process, suggesting a direct link between institutional services and supervision quality.

### ***Professionalism in Dissertation Supervision***

The higher education landscape in Kenya has experienced significant growth in doctoral programmes over the past decade, with more universities now offering PhD degrees across various disciplines. However, this expansion has been accompanied by challenges in supervision capacity and quality. Doctoral supervision in Kenyan universities has traditionally followed the apprenticeship model, with face-to-face interactions being the primary mode of engagement between supervisors and students. Infrastructure challenges, including limited access to digital resources and inconsistent internet connectivity in some regions, have historically shaped how supervision is conducted.



### ***Kenyan Higher Education Context and Doctoral Supervision***

The COVID-19 pandemic necessitated an abrupt shift to online supervision, exposing both strengths and weaknesses in existing institutional frameworks. Kenyan universities implemented varying policies regarding virtual supervision, with some institutions having more developed digital infrastructure than others. This disparity may have influenced students' satisfaction with supervision during the pandemic.

Professionalism is a key aspect of adequate dissertation supervision in higher education, especially in the post-COVID era. Supervisors should exhibit a high-level of professionalism in their interactions and relationships with students (Lorensius et al., 2022). This includes communicating in a transparent, respectful, and constructive manner. Supervisors should maintain professional boundaries while also fostering an environment of mutual respect and collaboration. Even with the increased reliance on virtual communication due to the pandemic, supervisors must ensure their feedback, guidance, and overall engagement with students remains professional and focused on facilitating the students' intellectual growth and research goals.

Additionally, supervisors must demonstrate competence in their work. This involves staying up to date with the latest developments in their field, providing informed and insightful feedback on the students' work, and guiding them skilfully through the research and writing process (Motshoane & McKenna, 2021). Particularly in the face of pandemic-related disruptions, supervisors need to be flexible and adaptable while upholding rigorous academic standards. By modelling professionalism, supervisors can help students develop the critical thinking, research, and communication skills necessary for success, both within the dissertation process and in their future careers.

Furthermore, the professional rapport between supervisor and student is crucial. Supervisors should maintain appropriate boundaries while also fostering an environment of trust, open communication, and mutual respect (Aitken et al., 2022). This dynamic is fundamental given the personal and emotional aspects of the dissertation journey, which the challenges of the post-COVID context may amplify.

### **Methodology**

In this study, the descriptive research design was used to investigate the perceived value of doctoral programmes and their impact on dissertation supervision. A convenient sample of 70 PhD students at the dissertation-writing stage was selected to complete a questionnaire to collect the required data. Convenient sampling was used based on students' accessibility. Of these, 63 responded, making a return rate of 90%. The Advisory Working Alliance Inventory (AWAI) was used to assess doctoral students' perceptions of doctoral programmes and their impact on dissertation supervision in Kenyan universities post-COVID-19.

Data were analysed using descriptive statistics, such as frequencies and percentages, to summarise the demographic data and key variables. Chi-square tests were used to determine whether students' levels of satisfaction with dissertation supervision were significantly related to rapport, apprenticeship, and individuation.

All participants in this study remained anonymous, and their identities were not revealed or associated with their responses. Moreover, confidentiality was maintained to ensure that the information provided was used strictly for academic purposes. Every respondent was duly and timely informed about the study's purpose before the questionnaire administration. In addition, the researchers ensured that informed consent was obtained by notifying the respondents of their right to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. Upon completion of the study, the completed questionnaires were securely retained.



**Results**

Table 1 presents respondents’ scores on the Advisory Working Alliance Inventory subscales to examine their satisfaction with dissertation supervision. The first subscale measures levels of rapport with the supervisor. The rapport subscale reflects the adviser’s support and encouragement of the advisee, which establishes the level of satisfaction the student receives through the emotional bond between the adviser and advisee. As indicated in Table 1, the frequency of efficient rapport was higher at 67.7% than that of low rapport at 32.3%.

*Table 1: Students’ Satisfaction with Dissertation Supervision*

Variables	AWAI Scales	Frequency	Percent
AWAI - Rapport	Low rapport	21	32.3%
	Efficient rapport	44	67.7%
AWAI-Apprenticeship	Low level of apprenticeship	15	23.1%
	High-level of apprenticeship	50	76.9%
AWAI-Identification-Individuation	Deindividuation	38	58.5%
	Individuation	27	41.5%

This implies that a significant number of respondents were satisfied with the emotional bond they had with their supervisors.

The second subscale of the instrument measures levels of apprenticeship. This reflects the degree to which the adviser facilitates the advisee’s professional development. As indicated in the Table, the frequency of high levels of apprenticeship was 76.9%, compared with 23.1% for low levels. This suggests that many respondents were satisfied with the level of supervision in facilitating their professional development, whereas a few believed otherwise. In addition, the third subscale, identification-individuation, reflects the extent to which the supervisee identifies with or seeks to individuate from his or her supervisor. Conversely, data show that more than half of the respondents (58.5%) identified with their supervisors, while the remaining (41.5%) were distinct from them.

*Table 2: Distribution of students’ levels of satisfaction with dissertation supervision (Rapport) and Key demographic factors*

Variables	Total	AWAI-Rapport		Chi-Square-Test		
		Low	Efficiency	χ <sup>2</sup>	df	Sig
Respondent’s age						
25-34 years	4 (6.3%)	2 (3.2%)	2 (3.2%)	5.534	3	.137
35-44 years	23(36.5%)	5(7.9%)	18(28.6%)			
45-54 years	22(34.9%)	11(17.5%)	11(17.5%)			
55-64 years	14 (22.2%)	3 (4.8%)	11(17.5%)			
Respondents’ gender						
Male	29 (46%)	11(17.5%)	18(28.6%)	.511	1	.475
Female	34 (54%)	10(15.9%)	24(38.1%)			

Table 2 presents the distribution of supervisees’ levels of satisfaction with dissertation supervision, using building rapport as a parameter, along with key demographic factors. Data show that respondents aged 35-44 years had a higher level of rapport with their supervisors (28.6%) than respondents aged 25-34 years (3.2%). However, the Chi-square test shows that there was no significant difference in the distribution of respondents’ age and rapport with supervisors (p = 0.137). This



suggests that the age of the supervisee does not really determine efficient rapport building with supervisors, as there was no significant relationship between the respondent’s age and rapport with supervisors. Similarly, data show that female respondents were more satisfied with an efficient emotional bond with their supervisors (38.1%) than their male counterparts (28.6%). Conversely, the statistical test indicates that there was no significant relationship between gender and satisfaction with rapport ( $p = 0.475$ ). This implies that although female respondents are likely to experience a more efficient emotional bond with supervisors than male supervisees, statistically, there was no significant relationship.

*Table 3: Distribution of students’ levels of satisfaction with dissertation supervision (Apprenticeship) and Key demographic factors*

Variables	Total	AWAI-Apprenticeship		Chi-Square-Test		
		Low level	High-level	$\chi^2$	df	Sig
Respondent’s age						
25-34 years	4 (6.3%)	1 (1.6%)	3 (4.8%)	.846	3	.838
35-44 years	23(36.5%)	4 (6.3%)	19 (30.2%)			
45-54 years	22(34.9%)	6 (9.5%)	16 (25.4%)			
55-64 years	14 (22.2%)	4 (6.3%)	10 (15.9%)			
Respondents’ gender						
Male	29 (46%)	8 (12.7%)	21 (33.3%)	.423	1	.516
Female	34 (54%)	7 (11.1%)	27 (42.9%)			

Table 3 presents the distribution of supervisees’ levels of satisfaction with dissertation supervision, using apprenticeship as a parameter, along with key demographic characteristics. This reflects the degree to which doctoral students were satisfied with how their supervisors facilitated their professional development. Data show that supervisees aged 35-44 years had higher apprenticeship levels than those aged 45-54 years (25.4%), 55-64 years (15.9%), and 25-34 years (4.8%). The chi-square test, however, shows that there was no significant relationship between respondents’ age categories and apprenticeship ( $p=0.838$ ). This suggests that doctoral students aged 35-44 years are likely to be more satisfied with professional development facilitated by supervisors; however, age and levels of apprenticeship are not statistically significant.

Regarding gender distribution, the data show that the frequency of high-level apprenticeship was higher among female doctoral students (42.9%) than among male doctoral students (33.3%). Also, the frequency of low levels of apprenticeship was higher among male doctoral students (12.7%) than among female students (11.1%). The statistical test, however, indicates that there was no significant difference in the distribution of gender and apprenticeship ( $p = 0.516$ ). This means there was no significant relationship between gender and the degree to which doctoral students were satisfied with how supervisors facilitated their professional development.



*Table 4: Distribution of students' levels of satisfaction with dissertation supervision (Individuation) and Key demographic factors*

Variables	Total	AWAI-Identification/ Individuation		Chi-Square-Test		
		Identification	individuation	χ <sup>2</sup>	df	Sig
Respondent's age						
25-34 years	4 (6.3%)	3 (4.8%)	1 (1.6%)	.605	3	.895
35-44 years	23(36.5%)	13 (20.6%)	10 (15.9%)			
45-54 years	22(34.9%)	13 (20.6%)	9 (14.3%)			
55-64 years	14 (22.2%)	9 (14.3%)	5 (7.9%)			
Respondents' Gender						
Male	29 (46%)	8 (12.7%)	21 (33.3%)	24.052	1	<.001
Female	34 (54%)	30 (47.6%)	4 (6.3%)			

Table 4 displays the distribution of respondents' level of satisfaction with dissertation supervision using identification-individuation yardsticks and key demographic characteristics. Regarding identification with supervisors, the data show that the frequency was higher among respondents aged 35-44 and 45-54 years at 20.6% each, compared with other age categories. Meanwhile, the frequency of individuation was higher among respondents aged 35-44 years (15.9%) than in the different age categories. The chi-square test indicates that there was no significant difference in the distribution of respondents' age and identification-individuation in this study ( $p = 0.895$ ). This implies that respondents' age and levels of identification-individuation with supervisors are not significantly related.

Regarding gender distribution, the data show that the frequency of identification with the supervisors was higher among female doctoral students (47.6%) than among male counterparts (12.7%). On the contrary, the frequency of individuation was higher among male respondents (33.3%) than among female respondents (6.3%). Chi-square test shows that the difference in the distribution of gender and identification-individuation was significant ( $p = 0.001$ ). This implies a substantial relationship between the two variables.

**Conclusion**

The study aimed to establish the perceived value of Doctoral Programmes and their Impact on Dissertation Supervision Satisfaction in Kenyan Universities in the post-COVID-19 era. Specifically, it sought to determine whether there is a relationship between students' satisfaction with the dissertation supervision and relevant demographic factors, namely age and gender. The findings indicate that, regarding rapport between supervisors and supervisees, a significant number of respondents are satisfied with the emotional bond between them and their supervisors. However, female supervisees are more likely than male supervisees to experience a stronger bond.

The findings also showed that, regarding apprenticeship, many respondents were satisfied with the level of support their supervisors provided for their professional development. Although supervisees aged 35-44 years are likely to be more confident in professional development facilitated by supervisors, the relationship between age and satisfaction with professional development was not significant overall. Moreover, the study did not find a significant relationship between gender and the extent to which doctoral students were satisfied with how supervisors facilitated their professional development.



Finally, the study did not find a significant relationship between age and levels of identification-individuation with the supervisors. However, concerning gender, the findings show that the frequency of identification with the supervisors was higher among female doctoral students compared to their male counterparts, which implies that there is a significant relationship between identification-individuation and gender.

Most students expressed satisfaction with supervisory rapport and apprenticeship, highlighting effective mentorship despite pandemic-related disruptions. Over half of respondents reported challenges in establishing independence from supervisors, raising concerns about long-term research autonomy. No significant relationship was found between age and supervision satisfaction. However, gender differences emerged, with female students more likely to identify closely with supervisors.

For institutions, universities must strengthen support systems to sustain high levels of satisfaction with supervision while fostering student autonomy; for supervisors, the findings underscore the importance of balancing mentorship with encouraging critical independence in doctoral work; for policymakers, results highlight the need to integrate digital supervision frameworks and structured mentoring programmes into national doctoral education standards.

The study used a relatively small convenience sample ( $n = 63$ ), limiting generalizability. Results reflect Kenyan universities and may not fully apply to other regions. The reliance on self-reported data could introduce bias.

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