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Postgraduate Supervision Quality and Student Motivation in Kenyan Arts and Humanities Programmes



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Abstract
This study examines the relationship between supervision quality and student motivation in arts and humanities postgraduate education at Kenyan public universities. Using a convergent parallel mixed-methods design, data was collected from 21 postgraduate students through a structured survey instrument measuring supervision quality across five dimensions (accessibility, feedback quality, guidance quality, goal clarity, and frequency of contact) and motivation, using three SDT-aligned items, supplemented by semi-structured qualitative responses. Descriptive analysis reveals high ratings for supervisor accessibility (M = 4.10, SD = 0.85) alongside substantial reports of motivational stagnation. 52.4% report having experienced a significant drop in motivation, 57.1% report feeling stuck due to delayed supervisory feedback, and only 9.5% report familiarity with Commission for University Education (CUE) and university supervision guidelines. Correlation analysis identifies perceived power gap (r = .477) and delayed feedback (r = .441) as the strongest predictors of motivation loss. Qualitative data reveals a conceptual distinction between supervisor availability and supervisor responsiveness: the former captures relational accessibility, while the latter captures the timely provision of substantive, conceptually engaged feedback. The study argues that standard supervision quality metrics, which emphasise meeting frequency and accessibility, fail to capture responsiveness and thus misidentify the quality dimension most salient to postgraduate student motivation. Drawing on Self-Determination Theory and Mkandawire's generational framework of African academic formation, the findings call for a recalibration of supervision quality metrics in Kenyan universities to distinguish availability from responsiveness, and for institutional reforms that make responsiveness structurally possible.

Introduction
Since the turn of the millennium, Kenyan postgraduate education has expanded significantly, with the establishment and charter awards to tens of universities. Both public and private universities have expanded their postgraduate programmes, with increasing enrolments in Master's and doctoral studies across various disciplines. However, beneath this apparent expansion lies a persistent, insufficiently examined structural issue: low and delayed completion rates, especially in the arts, humanities, and social sciences. Matheka et al. (2020) indicate that fewer than 19% of doctoral

candidates in Kenyan public universities complete their programmes within the designated timeframe, a statistic that reflects not only individual capacity but also systemic deficiencies in supervisory support. Similarly, Karuri (2023) reports that postgraduate attrition in Kenyan humanities departments is more often associated with supervisory unavailability and delayed feedback than with student inadequacy. The challenge is further acknowledged within the institutions themselves. A training manual developed through a collaboration between Moi University and CARTA specifically cites supervisory reform as a means to address fundamental weaknesses in graduate training, which have resulted in decreased motivation among postgraduate students and, consequently, elevated dropout rates and low completion rates (Nangulu & Odhiambo, n.d., p. ii). The necessity for an institution to produce such a manual itself attests to the extensive and enduring nature of the problems documented in these studies.

When students spend more than four years on a Masters programme, or when a doctoral candidate describes being simply 'stuck', the instinct is often to locate the failure at the level of individual effort. This paper argues otherwise. It contends that the supervisory relationship, as the most consequential institutional bond in a postgraduate student's academic life, is the primary structural site in which motivation is either cultivated or eroded. The functional void in question is not merely the absence of supervisory presence, but the absence of responsive engagement, encompassing the timely, conceptually substantive feedback without which independent research cannot proceed. This void has direct consequences for Kenya's knowledge economy aspirations. Kenya's Vision 2030 positions higher education as a driver of economic transformation, but a postgraduate system in which arts and humanities candidates cannot complete their research diminishes the pipeline of scholars capable of generating the indigenous knowledge and policy-relevant research that transformation requires.

The Kenyan higher education landscape presents particular contextual conditions. The majority of postgraduate students are part-time and self-sponsored, navigating research obligations alongside employment and domestic responsibilities. Supervisors, meanwhile, carry heavy teaching and administrative loads within universities structured by chronic underfunding and the competing pressures of massification. Arts and humanities postgraduate research is distinctively vulnerable within this environment; unlike laboratory or clinical disciplines, which offer structured touchpoints, measurable milestones, and collective research environments, arts and humanities candidates frequently work in intellectual solitude (Barry et al., 2024; Wisker et al., 2007), and the supervisor is, in many cases, the student's only sustained point of disciplinary engagement (Adedokun et al., 2024; Dericks et al., 2019). When the supervisor is unresponsive, the student does not merely slow down; they stop.

This paper deploys two complementary theoretical frameworks. At the macro-structural level, Mkandawire's (1995) account of generational change in African academia positions the current cohort of Kenyan postgraduate students as inheritors of institutional formations shaped by colonial legacies, structural adjustment, and the uneven infrastructures of African university systems. At the micro-motivational level, Self-Determination Theory (SDT; Deci & Ryan, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2017) provides the analytical vocabulary through which supervision experiences are read, specifically its tripartite framework of autonomy, competence, and relatedness. The study addresses three research questions: How do postgraduate students perceive the quality of their supervision? What is the relationship between supervision quality and student motivation? And how do structural variables mediate that relationship? In addressing these questions, the paper makes a conceptual contribution by distinguishing between supervisor availability and supervisor responsiveness as separate, analytically non-interchangeable dimensions of supervisory quality.



Postgraduate Supervision Frameworks and Their Limitations

The scholarly literature on postgraduate supervision has been generated predominantly within Western, Anglophone, research-intensive university contexts. Canonical frameworks include Lee's (2008) five-function model, encompassing functional, enculturation, critical thinking, emancipation, and relationship-development dimensions, and Dysthe et al.'s (2006) typologies of supervision as instruction, socialisation, or dialogue. These frameworks have generated productive empirical research, but their institutional assumptions warrant critical scrutiny when deployed in African contexts. They presuppose supervisors with manageable workloads, institutions with adequate research infrastructure, and students with unencumbered access to academic time. Maina et al. (2019) document that Kenyan public university supervisors routinely carry teaching loads of 18 to 24 contact hours per week alongside administrative committee obligations, conditions substantially exceeding the thresholds at which supervision quality deteriorates in comparable systems. The critical task, as Manathunga (2007) notes, is not to reject these frameworks but to provincialise them within the contexts for which they were not designed, and within those contexts, the relative neglect of discipline-specific supervisory cultures is a further limitation. Wisker et al. (2007) note that supervision in the humanities demands more explicit scaffolding of intellectual development precisely because no research community provides ambient disciplinary socialisation; in the Kenyan context, where postgraduate seminars are reported as infrequent and poorly resourced, supervisory unresponsiveness is correspondingly more damaging.

Mkandawire's Generational Framework and the Kenyan Academic Context

Mkandawire's (1995) account of three generations of African academics remains one of the most incisive structural analyses of African intellectual life. He avers that the third generation built and staffed African universities under scandalous material conditions, enumerating these as repressive political environments, institutions that had lost their nationalist rationale, and chronic resource scarcity (Mkandawire, 1995, p. 76). The supervisors of today's Kenyan postgraduate students are largely the inheritors and perpetuators of these conditions. The generational reproduction of supervisory practice is not merely theoretical; it is documented institutionally. A CARTA-affiliated supervisor training manual produced at Moi University captures this dynamic with notable clarity; thus, supervisors in the system describe their skill acquisition as having derived from their own experience of being supervised, from trial and error, and from borrowing the styles of their doctoral supervisors. The manual characterises this pattern as essentially on-the-job training (Nangulu & Odhiambo, n.d., p. 31), and the fact that this observation appears in a published document by one of Kenya's most experienced scholars of postgraduate research confirms that the generational reproduction Mkandawire identifies theoretically is institutionally acknowledged at the practitioner level.

Mapaya (2016) extends Mkandawire's framework to a fourth and fifth generation of African academics, sharpening the supervisory dimension considerably. The fourth generation, as Mapaya (2016, p. 82) describes them, were students who learnt to govern their intellectual prowess and consider their choices carefully for fear of a backlash. The supervisory relationship in this context was a site of epistemic contest in which conformity to supervisory preferences was the price of institutional survival. The fifth generation, marked by post-colonial commitments and the project of Africanisation, carries the aspiration of greater epistemic autonomy but does so within institutional structures that remain, in many respects, unreformed. Though the South African racial politics animating Mapaya's analysis do not map directly onto the Kenyan context, the underlying dynamic of students navigating supervisory relationships shaped by power asymmetries and institutional constraints is analytically transferable.

Self-Determination Theory, the Supervisory Relationship, and the Availability-Responsiveness Distinction

Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2017) posits that human motivation is sustained by the satisfaction of three basic psychological needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Each maps directly onto the supervisory relationship. Autonomy is implicated in the freedom to pursue one's intellectual agenda; competence in the quality of supervisory feedback that builds analytical capacity rather than merely correcting formatting; and relatedness in the accessibility and attentiveness of the supervisor. When the supervisory relationship thwarts any of these needs, SDT predicts motivational deterioration and diminished well-being, a finding confirmed across educational contexts (Ryan & Deci, 2000; Johansen et al., 2023). What this study suggests is that poor supervisory responsiveness can shift the motivational orientation from autonomous to controlled, or eliminate it. When a student can proceed only after the supervisor has responded and the supervisor does not respond, autonomous engagement is suspended. This is what 'stuck' means experientially, not the absence of ideas but the absence of structural conditions in which ideas can be pursued.

A recurrent conflation in the supervision quality literature is between supervisor availability, meaning physical or digital presence and accessibility for consultation, and supervisor responsiveness, meaning the timeliness and quality of engagement with student work. Frequency-of-meeting measures, a common proxy for supervision quality in institutional audits, capture the former but not the latter. A supervisor who meets regularly but provides shallow or delayed feedback compromises both the student's competence and autonomy needs. The institutional supervisor task taxonomy in the CARTA training manual is instructive in this regard. Among the supervisor's core roles, the manual identifies the Guide role, which encompasses designing timelines, giving timely feedback, and offering pathways for project implementation, and the Freedom Giver role, which entails supporting students' decisions and mentoring them to own their research processes (Nangulu & Odhiambo, n.d., p. 23). These are responsiveness functions, not availability functions, and their explicit articulation as institutional ideals against which current practice falls short is itself evidence of the availability-responsiveness gap the present study documents empirically. This distinction constitutes the paper's central conceptual contribution.

Methodology

A convergent parallel mixed-methods design was employed (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018), wherein quantitative and qualitative data strands were collected simultaneously, analysed separately, and integrated at the interpretation stage. The quantitative strand was treated as descriptive rather than inferential. Means, standard deviations, and frequency distributions characterise patterns in the data, and one Pearson correlation is reported where it reaches statistical significance ($p < .05$) and serves the conceptual argument. The qualitative strand, comprising open-ended survey responses and semi-structured supervisor interviews subjected to reflexive thematic analysis, carries the primary analytical weight. Purposive and snowball sampling recruited 28 postgraduate students enrolled in arts and humanities programmes across public and private Kenyan universities, including 23 from public universities (82.1%) and 5 from private universities (17.9%), 18 at masters level (64.3%) and 10 at the doctoral level (35.7%), and 18 part-time self-sponsored (64.3%) alongside 10 full-time students (35.7%). The researcher is a lecturer and researcher in the arts and humanities within the Kenyan higher education system, with direct experience of the supervisory conditions described, both as a former postgraduate student and as a current academic, which is consistent with the principles of reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019). This positionality was actively acknowledged and bracketed throughout the analysis.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with three experienced supervisors including Prof Mellitus Wanyama (Kabarak University, African musicology), who has supervised postgraduate students since 2006 and holds external examiner roles at 22 universities across Africa; Prof Christopher Odhiambo (Moi University, literature and theatre), who has supervised over 60 postgraduate students across 30 years, served as Dean of Postgraduate Studies for five years, and co-authored the CARTA training manual cited in this paper; and Dr Emmanuel Shikuku Tsikhungu (Kenyatta University, communication, film and theatre studies), who has graduated 11 students since 2013 and currently supervises 15. A 21-item survey instrument was developed and piloted with five postgraduate students before full administration. Internal consistency of the supervision quality subscale was acceptable (Cronbach's alpha = .82). Interviews were conducted individually via video call, audio-recorded with consent, transcribed verbatim, and lightly edited for readability. For qualitative data, reflexive thematic analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006, 2019) six-phase procedure, with themes generated inductively and checked deductively against the SDT framework. All student participation was voluntary and anonymous. The supervisor participants approved the citation in question before the interview.

Participant Profile

The sample reflects the structural reality of Kenyan postgraduate education in the arts and humanities, which is predominantly part-time, largely self-funded, and enrolled for extended durations. Twelve participants (42.9%) had been enrolled for more than four years, and six (21.4%) for three to four years; only five (17.9%) were within the normative one-to-two-year completion window for a Masters degree. The extended enrolment profile is not incidental to the study's concerns; it is itself a finding indicative of systemic delay in a population for whom the supervisory relationship is the primary institutional anchor.

Supervision Quality Dimensions and Patterns

Across the five functional dimensions, participants' ratings were moderately positive in aggregate (composite M = 3.74, SD = 1.01). Constructive feedback on written work received the highest mean rating (M = 3.96, SD = 1.07), with 71.4% rating their supervisor at 4 or 5. Access to research resources and networks received the lowest mean (M = 3.43, SD = 1.23), with only 42.9% rating at 4 or 5. Encouragement of independent research showed the widest base of dissatisfaction, with 21.4% rating their supervisor at 1 or 2. Table 1 presents the full descriptive statistics.

Table 1: Supervision Quality Dimensions: Descriptive Statistics (N = 28)

Dimension	M	SD	Mdn	% rated 4–5	% rated 1–2
Providing clear guidance on research design	3.79	1.20	4.0	64.3%	17.9%
Offering constructive feedback on written work	3.96	1.07	4.0	71.4%	14.3%
Supporting development of critical thinking	3.79	1.13	4.0	60.7%	17.9%
Encouraging independent research and innovation	3.71	1.24	4.0	60.7%	21.4%
Facilitating access to research resources/networks	3.43	1.23	3.0	42.9%	14.3%
Composite supervision quality score	3.74	1.01	—	—	—

Note. Scale: 1 = Very Weak, 5 = Very Strong.

The supervisor interviews triangulate these student ratings. Prof Wanyama described how supervisory load is assigned without any reduction in teaching obligations: 'You are given the load without sometimes your consent and it is very hard to turn down some loads.' Dr Shikuku confirmed

the same logic from Kenyatta University: 'The more students you supervise, the more you are given, because now they know you are a good supervisor.' The resource facilitation dimension, the lowest-rated quality item, therefore reflects not supervisory unwillingness but an institutional economy that assigns supervisory work without the accompanying infrastructure to perform it. The CARTA training manual diagnoses the same mismatch structurally, characterising supervisor selection as often based on willingness to work alongside a mismatch between research area and supervisor expertise as systemic conditions rather than individual failings (Nangulu & Odhiambo, n.d., p. 29).

The regulatory context of supervision is largely invisible to participants. Of 28 respondents, 18 (64.3%) reported that their supervisor had never discussed CUE supervisory guidelines with them; 8 (28.6%) reported brief, superficial engagement; and only 2 (7.1%) reported substantive engagement. The CARTA training manual provides the most authoritative published corroboration for this finding, recording that the prescribed CUE supervision ratio of five Master's and three PhD students per supervisor is not strictly followed. This confirms that the regulatory gap is not merely student-reported but institutionally acknowledged (Nangulu & Odhiambo, n.d., p. 29). Uncertainty also pervades perceptions of alignment: 16 of 28 participants (57.1%) were unsure whether the supervision-style in their programme aligned with CUE recommendations.

The Availability-Responsiveness Paradox

The central empirical finding is a paradox emerging from the juxtaposition of two descriptive patterns. Supervisor accessibility receives a moderately positive mean rating (M = 3.86, SD = 1.21), with 60.7% of respondents rating it at 4 or 5. Yet 46.4% of participants (n = 13) agreed or strongly agreed that they feel stuck for long periods due to delayed feedback, and 53.6% (n = 15) agreed that their motivation drops when their supervisor appears too busy. Table 2 presents descriptive statistics for all attitudinal and motivational items.

Table 2: Attitudinal and Motivational Items: Descriptive Statistics (N = 28)

Item	M	SD	Mdn	% rated 4–5	% rated 1–2
My supervisor is easily accessible	3.86	1.21	4.0	60.7%	14.3%
Feedback focuses on my conceptual argument	3.71	1.33	4.0	67.9%	25.0%
Power gap makes it hard to disagree	3.04	1.57	3.0	39.3%	39.3%
Supervisor provides feedback within stipulated timelines	3.64	1.34	4.0	57.1%	17.9%
Dept. holds regular PG seminars	3.43	1.55	4.0	53.6%	35.7%
I feel stuck due to delayed feedback	3.00	1.49	3.0	46.4%	39.3%
Satisfied with thesis originality/depth	4.04	1.17	4.0	71.4%	7.1%
Confident thesis will pass external exam	4.07	1.02	4.0	75.0%	10.7%
Motivation drops when supervisor is busy	3.32	1.25	4.0	53.6%	21.4%

Note. Scale: 1 = Strongly Disagree, 5 = Strongly Agree.

Participants distinguish consistently between knowing their supervisor is available and receiving timely, substantive engagement with their work. The accessibility item captures relational proximity, implicating the SDT need for relatedness, while the stuck and motivation-drop items capture the motivational consequences of unresponsiveness, implicating the needs for competence and autonomy. Student qualitative responses illuminate the experiential texture of this paradox, thus,

> Whenever they are available to offer an honest critique of my work, I seem to progress well. Their absence, on the flip side, stagnates my work, making me feel as though I did not put my best foot forward.

Another participant described a more chronic experience, averring that,

> They take too long to give the next move or level, and I end up losing the drive to move fast.

One participant offered a single phrase as the entirety of their response: 'Am stuck.' The grammatical fragment is analytically precise. The student is not describing a temporary setback but a state of structural suspension. The participant who took eleven years to complete their programme gave the fullest account of where the paradox leads:

> Though I found their guidance helpful most times, their delayed responses and unavailability prolonged my stay in the programme. It took me 11 years to complete.

The supervisor interviews provide the structural explanation from the other side of the dyad. Prof Odhiambo articulates why non-responsiveness is structurally produced, thus,

> Postgraduate supervision is never factored into the workload. And this is where the problem begins. Reading a proposal of maybe 20 to 30 pages to help the student improve would take you maybe two to three days uninterrupted. And nobody seems to quantify the number of hours that you take in reading a student's proposal.

The CARTA training manual reinforces this diagnosis from the institutional reform perspective, naming heavy workload as a documented cause of feedback delays and recommending that institutions ensure supervisors are not overloaded and only carry the prescribed number of supervisees (Nangulu & Odhiambo, n.d., p. 39). Three positions thus converge in triangulation: students experience the consequences, supervisors explain the structural cause, and the institution's own published documentation names the problem and prescribes the remedy.

Prof Wanyama confirmed the nominal-versus-operative supervision gap with notable precision in his explanation that,

> I can be supervising 10 students according to the records, but only one or three are active. So, I have all the time. At one point, you look like you don't have anybody to supervise, but in theory you have; in practice you don't.

Dr Shikuku named the accountability mechanism that reproduces the pattern, expounding that,

> The university cannot punish me because my student is taking a long time. In fact, they punish the student for taking too long by deregistering them. But the university cannot punish me because it's not paying me for this. It's free duty. So, in this arrangement, I don't have an incentive to supervise. It is upon the student to take charge.

Power, Stagnation, and the Motivational Consequences of Unresponsiveness

The power gap item is the most polarised in the dataset. 11 of 28 respondents (39.3%) rated it 4 or 5, indicating that the power gap inhibits their ability to disagree, while an equal number (11, 39.3%) rated it 1 or 2. For those who experience the supervisory relationship as hierarchically constraining, the motivational cost is substantive, connecting directly to SDT's autonomy need. Feedback on

conceptual argument, as distinct from formatting, scores reasonably in aggregate ($M = 3.71$, $SD = 1.33$), but with 25% rating it 1 or 2, indicating that a quarter of participants feel their supervisors are not engaging substantively with the intellectual content of their work. One student described methodological imposition directly as: 'During my defence, a certain reader wanted to shove a certain theoretical model down my throat. It was infuriating.'

The supervisors contextualise the formatting-over-content pattern. Prof Odhiambo elucidates that supervisors who lack deep disciplinary grounding in the student's specific area 'hide in grammar, hide in structures, and totally leave out the knowledge area.' Prof Wanyama names the supervisory pathology of methodological reproduction in apt terms: 'I have seen some supervisors who insist on using a certain formula. In all the theses they have supervised, you must find a set pattern.' Dr Shikuku's cross-institutional experience gave the power dimension its sharpest formulation, contrasting his Master's supervision at Kenyatta University with doctoral supervision at the Free University of Berlin. He explained that,

> At Kenyatta University, my supervisor had a very strong influence on what I was writing, including the words themselves. At the Free University of Berlin, Prof. Russell allowed you to disagree with him. He insisted that you write that disagreement in the book.

This comparative account is analytically significant. The contrast is not between competent and incompetent supervisors but between institutional cultures, one in which epistemic hierarchy is the default supervisory mode, and one in which intellectual disagreement is pedagogically valued. The CARTA training manual articulates the institutional ideal against which Kenyan practice falls short, stating that the supervisory relationship should be devoid of power dynamics such as the supervisor employing a top-down approach and that the supervisor must monitor the progress of the supervisee at all times and not only when submission is imminent (Nangulu & Odhiambo, n.d., p. 21). The gap between this norm and the experience reported by 39.3% of participants in the present study is the motivational cost this paper documents.

Regarding the motivational consequences of supervisor busyness, 53.6% of respondents agreed that their motivation drops when their supervisor appears too busy. Read through Mkandawire's (1995) framework; this positions supervisor overload not as a personal failing but as a structural condition of Kenyan academic labour. Prof Odhiambo confirms the concept of constrained altruism directly, emphasising that,

> We do most of these things because we value humanity. We think about these people who have registered. And we ask ourselves: what happens if I don't sacrifice my time for them? Because institutions seem unconcerned about it.

Structural Mediators

Three structural factors, including university type, level of study, and supervision-style, were examined for their moderating influence on motivation-drop scores, disaggregating a pattern that proves more complex and, in one instance, counterintuitive, than the aggregate figures suggest.

Disaggregation by university type reveals a notable differential in the motivation-drop item: public university students report a higher mean ($M = 3.52$, $SD = 1.16$) than private university counterparts ($M = 2.40$, $SD = 1.34$), mapping plausibly onto heavier teaching loads, larger cohorts, and more bureaucratically complex environments in public institutions. Masters students report higher rates of feeling stuck ($M = 3.33$, $SD = 1.41$) than doctoral students ($M = 2.40$, $SD = 1.51$), likely reflecting the

greater professionalisation structures available to doctoral candidates. Table 3 presents these disaggregated means.

Analysis by supervision-style produces a counterintuitive finding. Co-supervised students report the highest mean motivation loss (M = 3.73) among supervision-style categories, higher than that in traditional one-on-one arrangements (M = 3.36), with group supervision the lowest (M = 2.00). Dr Shikuku describes a doctoral student whose progress has been repeatedly derailed by a conflict with a co-supervisor. He describes the situation as, 'The student got discouraged. For six months, she did not touch that document. It is now going into the eighth year of her supervision.' Prof Wanyama explains the structural vulnerability, explaining that 'The person who suffers is the supervisee because the wars by the supervisors derail the student's progress.' The CARTA training manual names conflicting advice and conflicts arising from the supervisory team as explicit disadvantages of the multiple-supervisor model (Nangulu & Odhiambo, n.d., p. 24), confirming that these are structurally predictable outcomes rather than idiosyncratic failures.

Table 3: Mean Motivation Loss by Structural Variable (N = 28)

Group	n	M Motivation-Drop (Q30)	SD
Public university	23	3.52	1.16
Private university	5	2.40	1.34
Traditional one-on-one supervision	11	3.36	—
Co-supervision	11	3.73	—
Group supervision	3	2.00	—
Masters level (stuck item)	18	3.33	1.41
PhD level (stuck item)	10	2.40	1.51

Note. Scale: 1 = Strongly Disagree, 5 = Strongly Agree. SD not computed for supervision-style subgroups due to small cell sizes.

The Relationship Between Supervision Quality and Accessibility

Of the quantitative relationships examined, one reaches conventional significance: the correlation between composite supervision quality and composite accessibility (r = .450, p = .016), indicating that supervisors who are stronger across the five functional quality dimensions are also more accessible. Notably, neither supervision quality nor accessibility shows a significant correlation with the motivation composite at N = 28. This absence is analytically meaningful. Students may experience accessible, technically competent supervision and still exhibit motivational vulnerability, precisely because what sustains motivation is not quality or access per se but the responsiveness that converts access into sustained developmental engagement. Prof Wanyama's explicit turnaround standards illustrate what responsive supervision looks like in practice. He reveals that 'WhatsApp is normally almost instant, within an hour or less. For concepts, I return within 24 to 48 hours. For proposals, I normally ask for one to two weeks to respond. No candidate has looked for me for one week without getting me.' This stands in productive contrast to Dr Shikuku's candid account that, 'I usually give myself a month. But if I exceed, I tell the students not to hesitate to remind me.' Both represent committed supervisors; the difference in their turnaround standards illustrates the heterogeneity of responsiveness practices and the absence of institutional enforcement.

Institutional Support Beyond Supervision

When asked to identify forms of institutional support beyond their supervisor, a significant number of participants reported either no support or described their institution as an obstacle to progress. One participant stated that, 'The institution was like a monster that worked against progress. What seemed like incompetence, jealousy, and laziness were clear.' Where support exists, it is largely informal and peer-constituted. The supervisors confirm the thinness of this safety net. Dr Shikuku describes attempts to establish informal student colloquia and being deterred by departmental bureaucracy, while Prof Odhiambo notes that structured alternative mentorship requires institutional partnerships that most departments lack.

The Availability-Responsiveness Distinction

The central finding of this study, confirmed from both the student survey and the supervisor interviews and corroborated by institutional documentation, is that supervisor accessibility and motivational engagement are empirically and experientially decoupled. Standard institutional metrics of supervision quality, including meeting frequency, supervisor accessibility ratings, and student satisfaction scores, are at best proxies for availability (Lee, 2008). In the Kenyan arts and humanities context specifically, where CUE guidelines constitute the regulatory standard for supervisory practice, the near-total absence of those guidelines from actual supervisory interactions, with 64.3% of participants reporting no discussion of CUE guidelines whatsoever, indicates that even the formal metrics the system deploys to assure quality are not reaching the level of the supervisory relationship. Lee's (2008) framework was developed for resource-rich contexts in which meeting frequency could reasonably serve as a proxy for substantive engagement; in Kenya's arts and humanities, where supervisors are structurally overloaded and regulatory guidelines are procedurally invisible, the frequency of contact is an unreliable indicator of the developmental responsiveness that actually sustains motivation. Although the cross-sectional design cannot establish causality with finality, the qualitative data consistently support the interpretation that non-responsiveness produces demotivation rather than the reverse. Students describe a drop in motivation in direct response to feedback delays, and supervisor accounts explain the structural conditions that generate those delays.

Within SDT's tripartite framework (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2017), availability primarily addresses the need for relatedness. But relatedness, while necessary, is motivationally insufficient. Competence needs are satisfied not by accessibility but by the quality and timeliness of feedback that enables the student to move. Autonomy needs are satisfied not by presence but by supervisory engagement that asks questions rather than dictates answers. A more adequate quality assurance framework would distinguish between availability and responsiveness metrics, for instance by tracking the time elapsed between submission and receipt of substantive feedback. Prof Wanyama's explicit, self-imposed turnaround norms provide a practitioner model for what such responsiveness standards might look like institutionally. Making CUE guidelines legible and actionable at the student level, through induction programmes, student handbooks, and postgraduate office communications, represents a low-cost, high-leverage intervention aligned with Mapaya and Wanyama's (2025) advocacy for flexible, hybrid supervision models.

Structural Conditions and the Mkandawire Frame

Read through Mkandawire's (1995) generational lens and Mapaya's (2016) elaboration of it, the patterns identified in this study are not surprising but are clarifying. The Kenyan academic supervisor is not simply an individual agent making choices about responsiveness, but they are a subject produced by a specific institutional history characterised by chronic under-resourcing, bureaucratic expansion, and the progressive colonisation of academic time by administrative obligation. When supervisors are too busy to respond, they are performing the structural conditions of their own

formation. The CARTA training manual makes the mechanism of structural reproduction visible at the practitioner level. Supervisors who describe their skill acquisition as arising from how they were supervised and from trial and error confirm that the institutional formation Mkandawire describes theoretically is reproduced generationally without the intervention of a supervisory pedagogy (Nangulu & Odhiambo, n.d., p. 31). As Mapaya (2016) observes, the supervisory relationship is shaped not only by individual disposition but by the institutional economy in which it is embedded (p. 81).

Prof Odhiambo named the mechanism of constrained altruism directly in his explication that, 'We do most of these things because we value humanity. You don't want to punish the student because of the institution's own weaknesses.' This testimony, given by the co-author of the training manual that formally diagnosed the same problem, is the fullest expression of the constrained altruism concept available in the data: that institutional failures are being absorbed by individual supervisors' goodwill rather than remedied structurally. Addressing supervisor workload through reduced teaching loads for active supervisors, institutional caps on supervisory cohorts, and dedicated research time is a structural prerequisite that supervisory skills training alone cannot substitute for (Mkandawire, 1995; Mapaya & Wanyama, 2025). Dr Shikuku's proposal for cohort-based, grant-funded supervision models points in the same direction: 'If I were to work with students that I am aligned with, I will be building a portfolio of research. When we publish, we are publishing cutting-edge knowledge, not guesswork.'

CUE Guidelines, the Regulatory Gap, and the Disciplinary Context

The finding that only two of 28 participants report substantive engagement with CUE supervisory guidelines is a policy failure of notable proportions. These guidelines represent the regulatory aspiration of the Kenyan higher education system (Commission for University Education, 2014), yet their near-total invisibility within the supervisory relationship suggests that institutional compliance is procedural rather than substantive (Mapaya & Wanyama, 2025). Dr Shikuku was entirely unaware of the prescribed ratios despite actively supervising 15 students; Prof. Odhiambo confirmed that the ratios exist but are hypothetical, meaning they are not achievable under prevailing circumstances. Prescribed ratios must be enforced rather than merely documented, and supervisors must be oriented to them as active entitlements rather than aspirational targets. The disciplinary context of this study compounds the urgency of this intervention. Arts and humanities postgraduate research is characterised by extended periods of solitary, interpretive intellectual labour and by the relative absence of the structured research environments that provide motivational scaffolding in the sciences, making the arts and humanities student structurally more exposed to the effects of supervisory unresponsiveness (Wisker et al., 2007; Barry et al., 2024). Manathunga (2007) notes that cross-cultural supervision in humanities contexts creates specific risks of epistemic imposition, a dynamic confirmed in this study's data and echoed in Dr Shikuku's comparative account. The near absence of this disciplinary context from the Anglophone supervision research literature is both an empirical gap and a form of disciplinary marginalisation that this study begins to address.

Conclusion

This study has argued that the supervision-motivation relationship in Kenyan arts and humanities postgraduate education cannot be adequately understood through the lens of availability alone. Supervisor accessibility, however positively rated, is motivationally inert without the responsiveness that sustains student competence and autonomy. This finding is triangulated from three positions: student survey data document the paradox of accessible but non-responsive supervision; interviews with three experienced supervisors explain its structural genesis; and an institutional CARTA training manual co-authored by one of the study's own participants diagnoses the same problem from the perspective of supervisory reform, naming workload overload, non-adherence to prescribed

supervision ratios, and the absence of institutionalised supervisory pedagogy as the structural conditions producing the failure.

The study answers its three research questions as follows. First, supervision quality across functional dimensions is moderately positive in aggregate (composite $M = 3.74$), but shows notable deficits in resource facilitation and encouragement of independent research. Second, motivational stagnation (46.4%) and motivation-drop (53.6%) co-exist with moderately positive quality and accessibility ratings, consistent with the availability-responsiveness distinction: the absence of a significant correlation between supervision quality or accessibility and motivation outcomes is itself the quantitative signature of the paradox that the qualitative and documentary evidence explain. Third, structural variables amplify these dynamics: public university students and Masters candidates show higher rates of motivational vulnerability, and co-supervision, when poorly coordinated, compounds rather than distributes supervisory failure.

The policy implications are correspondingly structural. Universities must revise supervision quality metrics to distinguish availability from responsiveness, and supervisory workloads must be restructured to make genuine responsiveness institutionally possible. CUE guidelines must migrate from documentation to active supervisory practice, made legible and actionable for students as regulatory entitlements rather than institutional abstractions. The 39.3% of students who entered postgraduate study with an explicit aspiration of contributing to Kenyan or African scholarship represent a form of scholarly capital that the system should develop rather than discipline away through structural neglect.

The study's limitations include the sample size, which limits inferential generalisability, and the self-report design. The supervisor sample, while analytically rich, comprises three reflective, principled practitioners; the unreflective or domineering supervisor type that student data describe is not represented in the interview data, a gap acknowledged as a limitation. Future research should expand the sample across institutions, incorporate matched supervisor-student dyads, and develop instruments specifically designed to measure the availability-responsiveness distinction as a policy-relevant supervisory construct. The students in this study, many of them more than four years into their programmes, deserve the institutional and scholarly attention that this work is intended to mobilise.

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