

**GUEST EDITORIAL****The Long and Arduous Journey of Pursuing Graduate Studies in Kenya:  
My experience****Benard Oloo<sup>1</sup>**

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## Introduction

The Kenyan government through the Commission of University Education (CUE) envisages that Kenyan universities will be at the cutting edge of research and development and to help the country respond to its research and developmental challenges [1]. Over the years, University education in Kenya has seen tremendous expansion in terms of student enrollment and access [2]. Kenya is rated among the top countries in the region with a vigorous research ecosystem with over 35,000 researchers spread across different research institutions [3]. Kenya is ranked fourth after South Africa, Egypt, and Nigeria in knowledge generation in the region [4,5]. The Kenyan government established the National Research Fund (NRF) in 2014 to facilitate research for the advancement of science, to manage and mobilize funds for research, and to promote multidisciplinary approaches in solving the country's research and development agenda [6]. There has also been considerable growth in private sector investment in higher education with private universities growing to almost outnumber public universities [7]. According to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO)'s statistics, tertiary enrollment across Africa is just a meagre 12% and this is much lower for graduate studies (which is below 10 %). The PhD ratio though having increased from 0.2% in the early 2000s, to 0.7 % in 2017, stood at a meagre 1.3% by 2016 according to CUE. This number of PhD enrollment is still almost insignificant compared to the country's need for PhD qualified and competent lecturers and researchers [2, 6].

## The unique case of where there is a will but a broken way

For decades graduate school education has been one of the most underfunded aspects of Education in Kenya. In the last decade, increased availability of scholarships and research funding has been witnessed through different initiatives. These include initiatives such as the World Bank's Africa Higher Education Centers of Excellence (CESAAM) projects and Regional Universities Forum for Capacity Building in Agriculture (RUFORUM) projects. Such initiatives have expanded the scholarship base and facilitated the much-needed graduate school funding [9,10]. Choosing to undertake graduate studies in Kenya offers a rigorous academic endeavor. In most cases, graduate studies combine both course work and research with a thesis report as the final output. Most PhDs in Kenya are designed to open doors for a career in industry, academia, or research. The PhD study in Kenya offers an excellent opportunity to combine high-quality education with adventure as well as cultural and intellectual growth [11]. Kenya recognizes the urgent need to increase its PhD training capacity not only to meet the teaching needs for graduate studies but also to address the national research agenda [12]. Despite these laudable steps, these initiatives are like a drop in the ocean in comparison to the needed resources. Kenya graduate school studies need an injection of adequate resources to not only ensure more enrollment but also quality postgraduate education and supervision, which has been most elusive [13]. Every indication is that the Government and stakeholders are keen to ensure a robust graduate study ecosystem for the advancement of the development agenda of the country [14]. However, the current reality is that most graduate students drop out or take too long to graduate even after paying hefty tuition fees and battling numerous frustrations along the way [13]. In this editorial, I draw from personal experience with graduate studies in Kenya and

share thoughts on why we need more resources and expertise to spur graduate studies in Kenya.

The Kenyan landscape of higher education and to a large extent Africa is strewn with many disheartening stories of dreams that died, of destinies delayed, and of ambitions crushed due to the myriad of challenges that bedevil graduate education in Kenya. Barasa and Omulandoh [6], in a report funded by DAAD and the British Council in 2018, reported that a whopping 89% of all students that enroll in PhD programmes fail to graduate. It has also been reported that the average age of PhD graduates in Kenya is between 50-60 years and the average of the time spent in graduate school is more than six years as opposed to the official three years [15]. Amutabi and Mboya reported that only one in 10 of the students who join Graduate studies finally graduate with the degree they register for. Unfortunately, that the scenario is far from changing for the better; even many years later. The lack of progress in reversing the fortunes is a clear indication of a 'broken way' in delivering a great graduate school experience [17] [16].

### **The caliber of African public university students**

I am Kenyan educated from my undergraduate in Food Science and Technology to PhD level in Food Science at Egerton University. Studying in Kenya offered me the advantage of tackling the most relevant research challenges, the course work is robust, broad, and multidisciplinary. My graduate studies started at Egerton University with an MSc in Food Science in 2008 but ended up taking me across the globe for a stint in South Africa at the Durban University of Technology, Wageningen University in the Netherlands and Dublin, Ireland, and to Michigan State University in the United States. My overseas experiences varied from attending conferences to giving various oral and poster presentations, to attending short courses, and academic fellowships. One thing evident, is that though students who graduate in overseas universities finish in half the time their counterparts in Kenya and other universities in Africa take, the work rate, level of knowledge and skill, and academic acumens of the students seemed the same across the globe. What remains clear, however, is that in all respects most post-graduate students overseas were extremely focused on their studies, had narrower focal areas of research, and robust supervisory support. They also had adequate and good-quality research infrastructure (laboratory and technical staff support). This factor allowed the students to go deeper and faster in their chosen thematic areas and were therefore to complete their work faster [18]. The effectiveness of PhD supervision is one of the top factors influencing the success rate of PhD studies [19]. The lackluster performance of PhD student graduation rates in Kenya may directly be due to this problem, among others.

### **A gradual wind of change**

When I began my PhD studies in 2014, the department I was enrolled in hardly had any running projects at the time. Furthermore, the limited projects had shoe-string budgets that could be used to support only parts of graduate studies. One had to choose to either request financial support for tuition fee, or for a research project, and without a stipend. When I joined the graduate school, there was a relevant project to which I was attached but the project could only cover partial funding of the research. Tuition and stipend were not covered. This small financial boost enabled me to conduct initial work on my

PhD and even publish my first peer-reviewed article and present findings at the 2016 International Union of Food Science and Technology (IUFOST) Congress in Dublin, Ireland. That was a record time and perhaps I should have applied to graduate then. It seemed I was on track and things were looking up to allow me to finish my PhD in a record 3 years. It was during this trip to Dublin that one of my mentors Prof. Ruth Oniang'o connected me to a professor at Durban University of Technology (DUT) in South Africa. I later joined Prof. Eric Amonsou in DUT where I furthered my research work after failing to secure a laboratory with appropriate facilities here in Kenya. Later, I made an application for the National Commission for Science, Technology and Innovation (NACOSTI) and was awarded. This funding meant to cover part of my analysis in a state-of-the-art facility in South Africa. My experience with the NACOSTI, now NRF, funding was that it provides a great opportunity and a substantial amount that can jump-start graduate school research. However, the incessant delays due to the failure of the exchequer to remit the funds on time to NRF is a serious threat to the success of this noble institution. In a few cases, there was total collapse of funding after initial tranches are paid out to researchers. This is a matter that must be addressed to enable more students to benefit from NRF funding [20]. Finally, the amount of money allocated to PhD studies, a maximum of USD 12,000, is hardly enough for science-based PhD studies. The stakeholder should perhaps consider raising this markup to benefit more students more adequately.

In graduate studies, failure to secure funding either for research or tuition is one of the most frustrating experiences. Graduate school studies in Kenya and especially the PhD is very expensive. The average tuition fee costs over USD 10,000, without living expenses, and research. In my estimation and based on the field of study, research and project funding may be three to four times this required tuition. This may be seen to mean that graduate school is designed for either the rich whose parents will support them or those who have to be engaged in part-time work. Part-time lecturing jobs used to come in handy for graduate students but from 2016 or thereabouts, universities now take up to five years to pay for the services of part-time lecturers. This problem has continued to deteriorate and as of now many public universities owe about seven years of unpaid salaries to part-time lecturers. This has left most graduate students living like peasants [21]. I was among those who had to find a job on the side. Working while also pursuing your graduate studies causes divided attention. Unless one is extremely disciplined and well-resourced financially, it can result in frustration and delay [22]. This was the case in my situation. But this is not the only reason for delay and frustrations in pursuing graduate studies. There are also protocols and bureaucratic systems that cause delay especially with procurement of necessary research materials. The institutional delays happen both at the proposal and even at the thesis submission level. The timeline remains the prerogative of the institution and this adds to the frustration [13]. Whereas the universities have put in place a timeline of three months for thesis or proposal examination, they are really at the mercy of the examiners especially external who often may be overwhelmed with the nature of work or in a few incidences are demoralized given that in a few cases some had not received the small supervisory cheques for several years. In few incidences, malice has been reported as professors delay the PhD students they view as future competitors [22]. Some reforms

have been made in this respect yet the prevailing results are a far cry from the envisaged significant changes [27].

### **Earning a PhD on the way to retirement**

Based on empirical data, the average PhD graduate in Kenya is 50-60 years old [15]. When the average of PhD students is in the 50–60 years age bracket, it means that they hardly have 10 years to recoup the investment before retirement. This implies the country loses significantly from the investment it makes toward earning that PhD degree [23]. Furthermore, due to the law of diminishing returns, a majority of people at this age have spent up most of their energies and are unlikely to venture rigorously into new fields of research. On the contrary, the average age of PhD graduates is 26-28 years old in most developed countries. For example, the average PhD graduate is 26-28 years in the UK and 33 years in the USA. This lateness contributes to the most important problem of graduate studies in Kenya, which is inadequate human resource in academics. The lack of adequate and qualified academics is the most limiting factor in graduate school studies. In many cases, supervisors end up with more students than they can comfortably supervise [22]. In 2019, there was an uproar and public outcry and backlash when some universities graduated 118 PhDs with a lecturer supervising up to 10 graduate students in some cases. These supervisors had to do this in addition to supervising master's students and teaching undergraduates and performing other administrative responsibilities [24]. The result was the CUE issuing a threat to recall 118 PhDs conferred by JKUAT and mandating the university to review the awards [25]. The uproar was great but failed to interrogate the root cause, which was because the academic staff in Kenyan universities are very pressed and overworked [13]. At the same time graduate students' supervision does not carry with it equal compensation. The reward whether for post-graduate studies supervision or for publishing academic work, does not make economic sense in Kenya [6]. For example, in some institutions, the graduate supervision which averages six years pays Kes 7,000 (approximately 70 USD) to the supervisors. Concerning publishing, a few years, back and for a short window, Egerton university through the Division of Research and Extension operated a fund that allowed them to refund for publications that were up to Kes 20,000 equivalent of 200USD. Only local, and low-impact factor journals were charging these amounts. The impact of this meant that there were limited opportunities for researchers to have their work in highly-regarded journals. As if the limited resources were not bad enough, these resources dwindled and eventually dried out in 2018. The graduate students are literally on their own to publish unless they are supported heavily by their research projects. In South Africa, there is a very clear reward system for the publication of any papers and there were criteria for identifying and rewarding top academics measured by their level of publication, the number of papers, and the amount of funds they attracted to the university. The appreciation went beyond verbal recognition to tangible financial award. The academic journey for the professors in Kenya at this level is frustrating [4]. It can be correctly stated that the graduate school education in Kenya is sustained mostly by the goodwill of the good professors who carry out their duties diligently and most of the time almost for free.

Great graduate school experience should ideally consist of the availability of adequate and qualified staff who are also well enumerated and motivated. It should also avail

structured high-quality supervision, adequate, and functional laboratory equipment for experimentation. Finally, it necessitates adequate technical (laboratory analysis) support, and strict adherence to deadlines. For students, adequate support through scholarships, and stipends should be provided. The case in Kenya shows a decline in financial support base for graduate studies and this has impacted significantly the quality of graduate education [26].

### **Investing in the professors of tomorrow and academic staff succession planning**

Most universities are understaffed and there is a huge gap between the age of the academic staff in universities in Kenya [2]. There is no evidence of succession planning for academic human resource transition. Most professors, therefore, retire without having honed a replacement [5]. In most cases, retirement for professors is agony because of lack of medical cover and other similar emoluments [27]. The government has from time-to-time frozen employment and hence most young, academically gifted students are not crafted, mentored, and retained in the system. This is also because the universities do not provide scholarships, and or where that is provided, the universities do not guarantee academic appointments even for trainee positions [28]. This has to change if Kenyan universities are to nurture and provide continuity of high calibre academic staff. Unfortunately, even if they began now, the next 20 years may see a huge gap being realized as old renowned professors retire when their replacements are only being employed [6].

### **Conclusion**

Kenya through CUE recognizes the vital role that university and graduate studies is poised to play not only a pivotal role toward meeting the training of required academicians but also toward shaping and addressing the development agenda [2]. Yet, there are challenges in graduate education *vis*: low enrollment, massive dropouts, undue delays, inadequate supervision among others. Unless these challenges are addressed, they will keep Kenyan graduate studies at a disadvantage [6]. Unless resources are availed and expertise improved; this threatens to be another area where Kenya and Africa are quickly flying the academic and research plane right into the ground. As the world becomes globalized and flat and competition intensifies for graduate students all over the world, Africa will continue its struggle to attract top academic talent. With that struggle will come the danger of Kenya losing out on the knowledge economy. This is especially so since the countries and or universities one graduates from, allow one to form lasting allegiances. As for me, I am most grateful to God, my supervisors, Egerton University and the many organizations that have supported my academic journey this far. I have since received my letter of completion and now just awaiting the award of the PhD degree in the next Graduation Ceremony. This will be the day when I get conferred the degree by Egerton University, no matter how many obstacles I get along the way.

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